

The Story of Eastbourne

Bronze and Iron Age Eastbourne

Use this box to explore and uncover the Bronze/Iron Age story of Eastbourne and the surrounding area.

Find a selection of real artefacts used and made by people in Eastbourne as well as suggested learning activities. This box also features digital files including an introduction to Eastbourne during the Bronze and Iron Ages



Bronze Age Eastbourne

Around 2500BC the mysterious art of smelting copper and working gold was brought to the British Isles and soon by combining copper with tin the age of bronze was truly born. With this new technology came changes in how we lived. Enclosed settlements of thatched roundhouses became part of the landscape, in fact a very early one was established at Belle Tout near Eastbourne around 2000BC. People started to bury their dead differently from previous generations. Most notable in the Eastbourne area are the earth mounds surrounded by ditches, known as barrows, which often cover just one individual (though they sometimes have later burials dug in to them), that are found in groups all over the Downs. It seems likely that it was a wave of migration from Continental Europe that led to these dramatic cultural and technological changes.

By the late Bronze Age, around 800BC there were more dramatic changes that left their mark on our landscape and society. In the Eastbourne area it would appear that arable farming became larger scale, there was significant trade with the Continent and some truly monumental building projects indicate access to a larger local population.

The site discovered beneath Shinewater Park, featured some of the best preserved Late Bronze Age archaeology ever discovered in Britain. Though we are still unsure of its' function and having only seen a fraction of it, the excavations in 1995 revealed timbers of a huge, carefully constructed causeway stretching across the Eastbourne Levels. This led to a platform covered in 3000 year old rubbish, evidence perhaps of settlement, feasting, religious activity, trading, or all of the above!

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Iron Age Eastbourne

The Iron Age was a time of rising populations and therefore bigger settlements. Innovations such as iron tools and ploughs meant more efficient and effective farming and changes in society led to the development of large tribal groups.

Archaeological Excavations at Pocock's Field in 2014 unearthed the largest quantity of Iron Age salt production material in Sussex, along with evidence of the people that were producing it around 2300 years ago in the Middle Iron Age. Their houses and indeed some of their graves were found among the pits and pottery used in the process keeping the ancestors at the heart of their community.

In the 1990's over 100 pits (some huge, over 2m across and almost 3m deep) dating from the Middle to Late Iron Age (150BC-50AD) were excavated at a site on St Anne's Road and many of these were interpreted as for storing grain. Only a few contained evidence of this use though, with most being filled with chalk rubble leaving little clue as to their original use. Some had deposits of pottery, human and animal bone, iron agricultural tools, rare coins and valuable quern-stones for turning grain into flour carefully placed in them. Perhaps these were offerings to the Gods in thanks for a bountiful harvest or maybe made in desperation after a particularly bad growing year.

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Contents

All of the objects in this box were found at the late Bronze Age site in Shinewater. Replica objects have been included (reaping hook, antler cheek piece and bronze axe) as the original artefacts are in the British Museum. All other objects are real Bronze Age artefacts.



Replica Reaping hook

This hook was used to cut down reeds from the marshland around the Shinewater Area. It was found at the side of the wooden trackway and would have been quite a precious object so its likely that it was put there on purpose rather than being lost. The maple wood handle was preserved in a layer of peat as well as the site staying waterlogged for 3000 years.



Replica antler cheek piece for horse bridle

This cheek piece formed part of a horse's bridle and was found at the side of the wooden trackway in Shinewater. It is possible that it fell from the bridle and was lost when being led or ridden along the trackway. Some archaeologists believe that horses become objects of status in the late Bronze Age. It is likely that only 'important' people would have ridden on horseback so this bridle piece may have been seen as a suitable offering to the Gods and buried by the wooden platform



Bronze Age pot

These pots were made from clay dug up in the shinewater area in the bronze age. You can also see small chunks of flint mixed in. These are called inclusions and are added to the clay to make it stronger and to evenly distribute heat when it was first fired on an open bonfire.



Bronze Age pottery with finger decoration around the rims

All of these pieces of pottery were parts of pots used for either storing or eating food from.

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Replica Bronze Axe

In the Bronze Age, metal axe heads had wooden handles that were fitted into a socket at the blunt end of the axe. The axe head was then secured by lashing it in place with twine or binding. Bronze axes would have been pretty difficult to casually lose making it likely that the axes and in particular, this unused one were objects ritually buried or placed in boggy ground as some form of offering. In other parts of Britain and notably in the Netherlands, axes in particular have been found deposited in boggy areas of peat

This particular axe is very similar to a type normally found in the Netherlands and Germany. This certainly indicates long distance trade, perhaps as a way to make alliances or strengthen links between communities. Perhaps this axe was one of a larger shipment and was a token of thanks or a way of sealing a deal.



Bronze Age pig tusk

There were a lot of pig remains found at the Bronze Age site in Shinewater, this could give us a clue about what the site was used for. As pigs were only used for their meat, the incredibly high number of pig bones and tusks found suggests a lot of feasting was happening when the trackway was in use. This could mean that it was used more for celebrations and festivals rather than daily living or trading.



Bronze Age Red Deer Antler

Deer antlers found in shinewater could be evidence of people eating deer or it they could have been using the antlers as a material to make handles or other objects from.



This piece of cow femur shows where Eastbourne's Bronze Age people have cut the meat off the bone.