

Life in an Iron Age Hillfort

Learning objective: To understand the daily life and defensive structures of Iron Age settlements in Britain.

Read the text carefully and answer the questions below. Use full sentences where appropriate.

Ellie the elephant loves exploring the history of Britain. She recently discovered that during the Iron Age, roughly 800 BC to 43 AD, people lived in fortified settlements called hillforts. These were built on high ground to provide a clear view of the surrounding landscape. To protect their homes, families dug deep ditches and built tall, wooden fences known as ramparts around the perimeter.

Inside the fort, families lived in roundhouses. These buildings had circular walls made of wattle and daub, and a conical roof covered in thick thatch. Life was centred on subsistence farming. People grew crops like wheat and barley and kept animals such as sheep and cattle. Iron was the most important resource; blacksmiths hammered it into tools for farming, like ploughshares, and weapons for defence. Whilst life required hard physical labour, the community worked together to survive. During the evenings, they would gather around a central hearth, sharing stories while the smoke drifted through the roof vent. Unlike the earlier Bronze Age, the Iron Age saw a significant increase in trade and the creation of tribal kingdoms, making Britain a bustling place of activity.

Word bank: Hillfort · Ramparts · Roundhouse · Iron · Subsistence · Defensive · Thatch

1. Identify two materials that were used to construct a roundhouse. (2 marks)

2. What was the main purpose of building a settlement on high ground? (2 marks)

3. Why might a blacksmith be considered one of the most important people in an Iron Age community? (3 marks)

4. Explain why the invention of iron tools might have changed how people farmed compared to earlier periods. (3 marks)

5. If you lived in an Iron Age hillfort, which job would you prefer: a farmer or a blacksmith? Justify your choice. (4 marks)

Draw: Draw a cross-section of an Iron Age hillfort, including the defensive ramparts, a roundhouse with a thatched roof, and the surrounding farmland.



Extension challenge: Compare and contrast the defensive features of an Iron Age hillfort with the way we protect our homes today. What might happen if an Iron Age community failed to maintain their ramparts? Justify your answer using evidence from the text.