PREHISTORY (BEFORE AD 43)

Prehistory is the time before written records. It’s the period of human history we know the least about, but it’s also the longest by far.

The earliest known humans arrived in these lands around 900,000 years ago. Prehistory stretches from then until the Roman invasion in AD 43. In the hundreds of thousands of years before history began, these lands underwent huge climactic, societal, political, technological and geological changes

## AGES AND AGES

To deal with the massive spans of time in this period, archaeologists traditionally divide prehistory into three main periods: the Stone, Bronze and Iron ages, named after the main technologies used at the time. And each period is subdivided – for example, the Stone Age into the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic (Old, Middle and New Stone Ages).

These terms are seen as old-fashioned by some archaeolgists, who prefer to use more specific terms like Beaker period to reflect subtle developments in society, culture and technology. But the old, broad chronological divisions are still useful.

Archaeologists are using some of the most cutting-edge technology to find out more about our distant past. Recent archaeological finds, as well as new scientific techniques, have overturned old certainties. Isotopic and DNA analysis of animal and human remains, chemical analysis of stone tools and pottery, and new ways of interpreting radiocarbon dating are all helping to challenge long-held ideas and raise new questions about this fascinating opening chapter of England’s story.

## THE EARLIEST HUMANS

In 2010 archaeologists working near Happisburgh in Norfolk uncovered flint tools dated to about 900,000 years ago. The people who used them were early humans (known as hominoids) who periodically visited Britain in warmer eras between Ice Ages.

During this time Britain wasn’t an island, but a peninsula of the European continent. What is now the river Thames ran into the North Sea at Happisburgh.

The oldest human remains so far found in England date from about 500,000 years ago, and belonged to a six-foot tall man of the species Homo heidelbergensis. Shorter, stockier Neanderthals visited Britain between 300,000 and 35,000 years ago, followed by the direct ancestors of modern humans.

Ice Age humans created the earliest known cave art in England at Creswell Crags in Derbyshire about 13,000 years ago.

## HUNTERS AND GATHERERS (9500–4000 BC)

Continuous human occupation of Britain began as the climate improved at the end of the last Ice Age. People in Britain at this time were still hunters and gatherers who made use of wild plants and animals. Although most of these people were probably nomadic, recent discoveries of buildings suggest that some had settled lifestyles.

By about 6500 BC, rising seas had inundated the land bridge with Europe, making Britain an island.

## BRONZE AGE (2300–800 BC)

In about 2300 BC the first metal weapons and jewellery began to arrive in Britain, along with a new kind of pottery known as Beaker. People were buried with these objects in individual graves, some of which were covered with round barrows. At first the metal used was copper, but by about 2200 BC bronze (an alloy of copper and tin) was being worked in Britain.

During the early Bronze Age, some people were buried in rich graves within round barrows, accompanied by exotic imported goods. These burials have been found in the area around Stonehenge, but also in Yorkshire and Derbyshire.

Often these burials were grouped in barrow cemeteries, such as [Flowerdown Barrows](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/9d19e8298b634058a2a8522a126a0d0b.aspx%22%20%5Co%20%22Flowerdown%20Barrows), Hampshire, and [Winterbourne Poor Lot Barrows](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/a419a7a434ea472bb37ff64334d50e2e.aspx), Dorset. These rich, individual burials signify a shift from the great Neolithic communal monuments.

During the middle and late Bronze Age, landscapes were divided up by great field systems and people built permanent round houses, often grouped into villages such as [Grimspound](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/f34b59e480e148cc863dfed738ffe444.aspx%22%20%5Co%20%22Grimspound) in Devon. Elsewhere, competition for land and a need for security prompted the construction of the [earliest hillforts](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/b1d938e1c81b427bb492a8914470fe71.aspx).

## IRON AGE (800 BC–AD 50)

In the early and middle Iron Age people built bigger and more elaborate hillforts like [Maiden Castle](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/2040c570f36041cbb6d31c508498bb5d.aspx) in Dorset and [Old Oswestry](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/97c00d9ee85348f7bdb1ac5aefa3980f.aspx) in Shropshire. They also began to make weapons and tools out of iron. Evidence of ritual offerings of military equipment and fine metalwork suggest the dominance of a warrior aristocracy and the emergence of tribal territories.

The late Iron Age saw the first coinage and the emergence of tribal centres such as [Lexden Earthworks](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/6867356f8b4d4510ab4d502b79301a4e.aspx%22%20%5Co%20%22Lexden%20Earthworks), Essex, and [Stanwick Iron Age Fortifications](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/6f304de9f67642fb9be0b0528aaae231.aspx%22%20%5Co%20%22Stanwick%20Iron%20Age%20Fortifications), North Yorkshire. And it’s during this period that Britain came into contact with the Roman world, as at [Silchester](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/8367caff77ca46c785691798998e1a35.aspx%22%20%5Co%20%22Silchester%20Roman%20City%20Walls%20and%20Amphitheatre), Hampshire.

And with this contact came the first written records of life on the island, from Greeks and Romans. The most famous notes were made by Julius Caesar, who raided Britain in 55–54 BC. Accounts from the period mention chariot warfare and religious leaders called Druids, who supposedly worshipped in oak groves and performed sacrifices.

Nearly a hundred years after Caesar’s raids, the emperor Claudius ordered a full scale invasion – and this time the [Romans intended to stay](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/8194eeda803d41049e67166b140ee567.aspx).

ROMANS (AD 43–C.410)

In 55–54 BC, Julius Caesar arrived on the shores of Britain, but thanks to guerrilla resistance and bad weather, his conquest was not successful. Almost 100 years later, in AD 43 the emperor Claudius launched a full-scale invasion, and Britain’s Roman era began.

The Romans stayed in Britain for almost four centuries. In some parts of the country they were met with rebellion and resistance, but in more peaceful areas cities were founded, villas constructed and a network of roads developed that can still be traced today. And in AD 122, the emperor Hadrian, visiting Britain, ordered the building of his famous wall.

## INVASION AND CONQUEST

This time the Romans enjoyed rapid military success. But gradual advance through southern England and Wales was halted in AD 60 by the rebellion of Boudicca, queen of the Iceni of East Anglia, incensed by the brutality of the conquest. The revolt was suppressed, but not before three recently founded Roman cities, Camulodunum (Colchester), [Verulamium](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/e0710f2017be4e79aff5e8941c9b0164.aspx%22%20%5Co%20%22St%20Albans%20Roman%20Wall) (St Albans) and Londinium (London), had been burned to the ground.

The advance resumed in AD 70 with the conquest of Wales and the north. The governor Agricola (AD 77–83) even succeeded in defeating the Scottish tribes at the Battle of Mons Graupius in AD 83.

Immediately after this victory, though, troops were pulled out of Britain to deal with invasions on the Danube frontier. As a result, the far north could not be held, and the army gradually fell back to the Tyne–Solway isthmus. It was here that the emperor Hadrian, visiting Britain in AD 122, ordered the building of his [famous wall](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/072759d24d8e45c49e985fc2e0bb93bf.aspx).

The emperor Antoninus Pius tried to reoccupy Scotland and built the short-lived Antonine Wall (AD 140–60). He was ultimately unsuccessful, however, and Hadrian’s Wall became the northern frontier of the province once more.

## EARLY MEDIEVAL (C.410–1066)

The six and a half centuries between the end of Roman rule and the Norman Conquest are among the most important in English history. This long period is also one of the most challenging to understand – which is why it has traditionally been labelled the ‘Dark Ages’.

Yet a kingdom of England emerged in these centuries, and with it a new ‘English’ identity and language.

## AFTER THE ROMANS

The 5th and 6th centuries are certainly wrapped in obscurity. Records are few, difficult to interpret, propagandist, or written long after the events they describe.

What is certain is that the Romans didn’t suddenly leave Britain. After 350 years of Roman rule – as long a period as separates the present day from Charles II – all Britons were, in a sense, Romans.

Tradition has it that in 410 the Emperor Honorius wrote to the British Romans instructing them to look to their own defence. While it seems likely that the letter was not sent to Britain after all, such advice would have reflected the realities of the time. Britain was no longer subject to an imperial power that could protect it.

## MEDIEVAL (1066–1485)

Duke William of Normandy’s resounding triumph over King Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 marked the dawn of a new era. The overthrow of the Saxon kingdom of England was to transform the country the Normans conquered, from how it was organised and governed to its language and customs – and perhaps most visibly today, its architecture.

This was also a period of upheaval and change, a time of revolt, civil war, devastating plague and royal unrest.

## NORMAN RULE

William and his knights, and the castles they built, transformed England and helped impose Norman rule. Norman clergy dominated the Church, and monasteries and churches were constructed in the new Romanesque or Norman style of architecture.

William’s survey of England, Domesday Book (1086), recorded a land governed by feudal ties. Every level of society was under an obligation of service to the class above. Punitive forest laws protected the royal hunting preserves, and reinforced the new regime.

## TUDORS (1485–1603)

Henry VII’s victory against Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth ended the turbulent Wars of the Roses and began the Tudor dynasty – possibly the most famous royal family in English history.

The country underwent huge changes during the reigns of three generations of Tudor monarchs. Henry VIII ushered in a new state religion, and the increasing confidence of the state coincided with the growth of a distinctively English culture.

## TWO HENRYS

Henry VII’s (r.1485–1509) victory against Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth ended the turbulent Wars of the Roses. He shored up his position by curtailing aristocratic power. Cautious and calculating, he kept the peace and built up a firm financial base – often at the expense of his subjects.

Tall, handsome and cultured, the extravagant Henry VIII (r.1509–47) was a striking contrast to his father. Art and commerce flourished during his reign. The cloth trade enriched many, but peasants lost out as more and more land was turned over to pasture.

## NO HEIRS AND A REFORMATION

From the mid-1520s Henry’s reign was overshadowed by his need for a legitimate male heir. His first wife, Katherine of Aragon, gave birth to a daughter, but no son. Desperate for a boy, Henry sought to marry Anne Boleyn, but long negotiations to obtain papal consent to a divorce failed. Henry made the decision to break with Rome. In 1533 he declared that he, not the Pope, was the head of the Church in England.

His decision initiated the [Reformation of English religion](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/953a35e11bb4489282dd2afe946730da.aspx), the most crucial event of the Tudor period. It shaped English history for centuries to come.

Along with his minister Thomas Cromwell, Henry launched the Suppression, also own as Dissolution, of the Monasteries (1536–40). Protests and revolts, such as the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536–7) in northern England, were swiftly and savagely put down. The confiscated wealth of the monasteries greatly enriched the king and many of his favoured subjects

## STUARTS (1603–1714)

The Stuart era began when James I, who was also James VI of Scotland, succeded Elizabeth I. She had died childless in 1603. James's ascention to the throne brought together the the two long-warring nations of England and Scotland.

The Stuart period witnessed intense religious and political conflicts, which shifted power from the monarchy to parliament. Meanwhile, discoveries and innovations transformed science, architecture and everyday life.

## A NEW DYNASTY

The shrewd James I (r.1603–25), who was also James VI of Scotland (and the son of Elizabeth I’s cousin Mary, Queen of Scots), successfully conjoined the two long-warring nations of England and Scotland.

Despite threats to his reign, including the Gunpowder Plot (1605), he maintained peace at home and abroad.

James’s glamorous elder son Prince Henry died in 1612, leaving his younger son, Charles I (r.1625–49), to succeed.

This sober, ceremonious monarch was devoted to the arts and to the Anglican Church, and acutely conscious of his divine right to rule.

## ROYAL DECREE AND CIVIL WAR

Impatient with parliamentary control, Charles ruled by royal decree (without Parliament) from 1629 until 1640. His subjects became increasingly exasperated by the taxes he levied on them, and by the suppression of Puritanism by William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

After the fiasco of the Bishops’ Wars with the Scots of 1639–40 (provoked by the imposition of Charles’s religious reforms), the king was forced to recall Parliament in a bid to raise money. Frustration boiled over as Charles refused to give Parliament real power in State and Church. Both sides armed themselves, and despite a widespread desire for compromise, civil war broke out in August 1642.

The civil wars and their aftermath were calamitous. They killed a far greater proportion of the populations of England, Scotland and (especially) Ireland than the First World War. Many castles were pressed into active service for the first time since the Middle Ages and many – like [Scarborough](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/8a1e928ed6b9446ca49bc3f51bf145f6.aspx)in North Yorkshire – underwent epic sieges.

## GEORGIANS (1714–1837)

When Queen Anne died in 1714 with no surviving children, the German Hanoverians were brought in to succeed her. This began the Georgian age – named after the first four Hanovarian kings, all called George.

This period saw Britain establish itself as an international power at the centre of an expanding empire, and accelerating change from the 1770s onwards made it the world’s first industrialised nation.

## BRITAIN AND ENGLAND

The union of the kingdoms of England and Scotland in 1707 created Great Britain. A new British identity was celebrated by the anthem Rule Britannia (1740), the foundation of the British Museum (1753), and the publication of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1768).

But England retained its own distinctive character during the early Georgian period. Its refined manners and fashions and its classically influenced art, literature and architecture, were juxtaposed by casual brutality, violent sports, squalor and epidemic gin drinking. Handel’s oratorios flourished alongside the debauchery depicted by his friend William Hogarth.

## HANOVERIANS AND JACOBITES

The property-owning elite controlled politics. But when Queen Anne died in 1714 with no surviving children, not everyone was pleased with the elite’s choice of monarchy. The German Hanoverians, who were distant Protestant relations of the exiled Stuarts, were brought in to succeed Anne. George I (r.1714–27), who scarcely spoke English, faced an almost immediate rebellion (1715–16) from the Jacobites, who supported the restoration of the Stuarts.

The more serious Scots Jacobite invasion of 1745, which had strong support in north-west England, reached Derby, but succeeded only in rallying widespread English support for George II (r.1727–60), and inspiring God Save the King, the world’s first national anthem.

The Battle of Culloden (1746) finally extinguished the Jacobite threat, freeing British forces and their allies to wrest Canada and India from France during the Seven Years War (1756–63). Captain James Cook claimed Australia for Britain in 1770.

Although America was lost after the bitter Revolutionary War of 1775–83, an expanding empire provided Britain with a source of raw materials and new markets for its manufactured goods.

Much of Britain’s affluence was underpinned by the Atlantic slave trade. Despite growing domestic disapproval, the trade was only abolished in 1807, and slavery itself was not made illegal until 1834.

## ‘FARMER GEORGE’

George III (r.1760–1820), the first Hanoverian king born in England, was affectionately nicknamed ‘Farmer George’ because of his interest in agriculture. Many of his richer rural subjects were busily (and profitably) improving farming methods. Meanwhile, smallholders and customary tenants were impoverished by the enclosure of land and the commercialisation of agriculture.

## 20TH CENTURY (1901–2000)

The Britain of the year 2000 was unimaginable at the end of the Victorian era in 1901.

The 20th century saw two world wars catalyse enormous social change across the country, including dramatic enhancements in health and education. The motor car stormed through town and country, transforming both, and Britain no longer ruled a third of the planet.

## INDIAN SUMMER

The brief but unexpectedly successful reign of the flamboyantly enthusiastic Edward VII (r.1901–10) is sometimes seen as an untroubled ‘Indian Summer’, an appendix to the Victorian age, with great country houses at their apogee and an ever-growing middle class.

Living conditions for the urban and rural poor, however, were often squalid and forces of radical change were already at work. The social reforms of the Liberal government of 1906–14 laid the foundations of what would become known as the welfare state.

## THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The First World War brought the front line to the civilian population. Zeppelin and aircraft raids targeted London and other towns on the east coast. Both [Whitby Abbey](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/03f405bd05fc49e78e1ee569ac2aa35d.aspx%22%20%5Co%20%22Whitby%20Abbey) and [Scarborough Castle](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/8a1e928ed6b9446ca49bc3f51bf145f6.aspx) in North Yorkshire were hit.

The wartime state extended its control over peoples’ lives in an unprecedented way, with [conscription](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/9b14d7a0fca44943b643e30366760170.aspx), increased taxation and censorship. Over 1.6 million women replaced conscripted men in the workplace. Country houses such as [Wrest Park](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/279ec81b5c554368a91697f1ddffa236.aspx), Bedfordshire, and [Osborne](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/37c15a627c65411f9b03c29c547ad800.aspx) on the Isle of Wight were used as hospitals and [convalescent homes](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/def83a2861c9423ab4182cb9bbc7062b.aspx) for wounded soldiers.

While the old order was changing and monarchies toppled throughout Europe, George V (r.1910–36) proved remarkably adept, bolstering the royal family’s popularity in war and peacetime.

## UNEASY DECADES

War ended on the Continent but broke out in Ireland, with the Anglo-Irish Wars (1919–21). Recession followed a brief post-war economic recovery. Troubled industrial relations led to the only general strike in British history in 1926. From the early 1920s the Labour Party, founded in 1900, overtook the Liberal Party in general elections.

The slump following the Wall Street Crash of 1929 hamstrung economic reconstruction and meant continuing hardship, particularly in industrial areas. Although some people managed to maintain lavish lifestyles, such as the Courtaulds at [Eltham Palace](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/6c853732507c423ba0786224f6764768.aspx%22%20%5Co%20%22Eltham%20Palace%20and%20Gardens), South London, many country house owners adjusted to reduced circumstances, as at [Belsay Hall](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/f19ac609e14f4e3f8a84e11517e4bbbc.aspx%22%20%5Co%20%22Belsay%20Hall%2C%20Castle%20and%20Gardens), Northumberland, and [Brodsworth](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/c35ec8422df045558af797b09cf3f3c9.aspx%22%20%5Co%20%22Brodsworth%20Hall%20and%20Gardens), South Yorkshire.

In the post-war territorial carve-up Britain gained mandates over a number of former German and Ottoman territories. British control now extended over more of the globe than ever before – but closer to home, Ireland was partitioned and the Irish Free State became independent in 1922.

As the 1930s progressed, so did fears of a new European war. Debate about the British government’s attempts to appease Hitler dominated the late 1930s. Long torn between decadence and duty, Edward VIII (r.1936) relinquished the throne for a divorcee, provoking a constitutional crisis and propelling his younger brother to the throne, as George VI.

## THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In 1939, Britain found itself at war with Germany for the second time in a generation. After the defeat-turned-propaganda-triumph ‘[miracle of Dunkirk](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/068c1d2c7bce4b3abeabc9ddf39bf97e.aspx)’ (planned in[Dover Castle's Secret Wartime Tunnels](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/97a4248198ac43ef9a28c2b4434da57e.aspx)) in 1940 Britain stood alone, unified behind Churchill. Victory in the Battle of Britain greatly raised morale, and subsequent blitz air raids on London, Coventry and many other towns failed to significantly lower it.

By 1943, Britain had become a junior partner in an alliance dominated by the USA and the Soviet Union. Allied bombing from British bases and the 1944 D-Day landings hastened Germany’s drawn-out defeat. The bombing of Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended the war in the Far East, and ushered in the atomic age.

## GROWING OPTIMISM

The 1945 election saw an unexpected Labour bringing with it nationalisation and Welfare State legislation which included the creation of the National Health Service.

Post-war architects and planners were confident they could raise standards of living with housing projects in Britain’s cities and in new towns. Meanwhile the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (r.1952–present), the first to be televised, prompted talk of a new Elizabethan age.

During the later 1950s and the 1960s, cars, washing machines, fridges, telephones and holidays all became increasingly affordable elements of everyday life. In 1957 Harold Macmillan could proclaim ‘prosperity such as we have never had … in the history of this country’.

## COLD AND COLONIAL WARS

Yet war was constantly in the background. Almost before the Second World War ended, Britain’s erstwhile ally the Soviet Union had become a potential enemy. in March 1946 Churchill described an Iron Curtain descending across Europe.

British troops fought in proxy wars against communism, successfully in Malaya (1948–55), less so in Korea (1950–53), as well as in postcolonial ‘emergencies’ in Kenya (1952–60), Cyprus (1955–60) and Suez (1956).

Britain became the third nation to become an atomic power in 1952 and had already deployed Civil Defence measures and installations in this era of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). [York Cold War Bunker](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/link/3c53f2a255374e7e83bc7190410b140f.aspx) was part of a later generation of these, built in 1961 just before the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. The wartime tunnels at Dover were consequently renovated and equipped to serve as a regional seat of government in the event of such a war.

## IMMIGRATION AND PRIVATISATION

By the 1960s, Commonwealth immigration from the West Indies, India and Pakistan had begun to change the racial mix, although nothing like as much as its opponents believed. Heavy industry was in decline. University education expanded significantly, and new institutions  flourished.

The post-war consensus by which both parties broadly accepted the role of the state in the economy and the centrality of the Welfare State was broken by Margaret Thatcher. After the ‘Falklands Factor’ gave her a second term in office in 1983–7, her Conservatives began to privatise national industries, starting with British Telecom.

The miners’ strike was suppressed in 1984–5, breaking the power of the unions. And though she was overthrown by her own party in 1990, the pronounced rightward swing she initiated still holds.

## A THIRD WAY

Tony Blair led a significantly re-modelled Labour Party back into power in 1997 – the first of an unprecedented three terms in office.

His post-9/11 alignment with the USA and subsequent War on Terror defined perceptions of his administration. Labour also presided over devolved administrations in Wales and Scotland, and oversaw an uneasy peace in Northern Ireland after 30 years of violence. Britain had entered a new millennium looking forward as well as back.