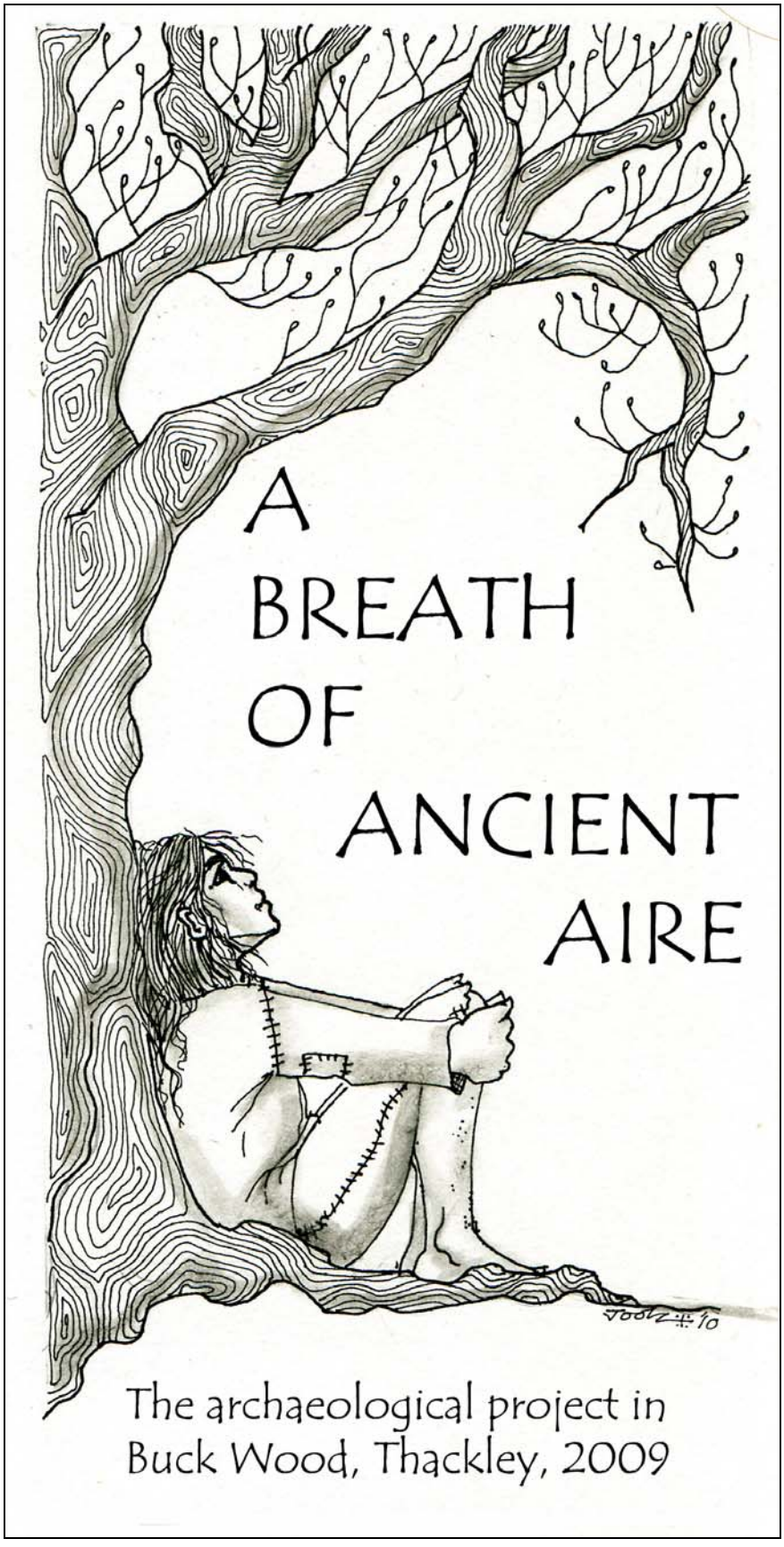
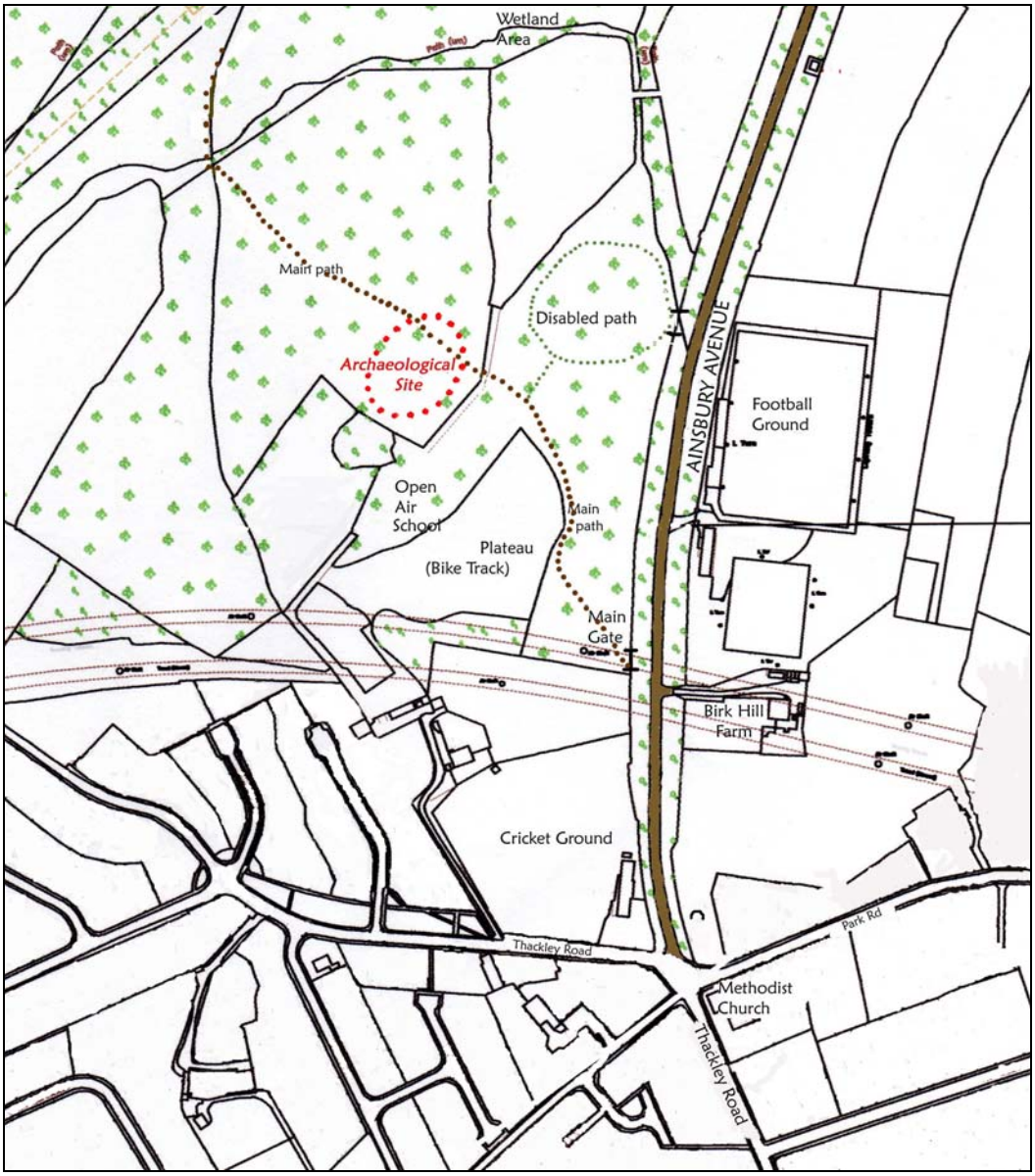
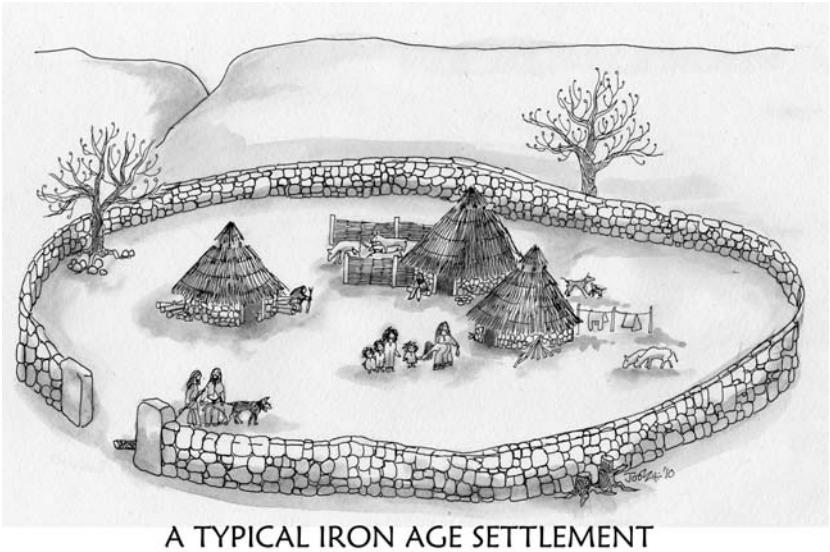
A copy of the complete report of this project is available in PDF format from the Friends of Buck Wood by emailing
friendsof_buckwood@yahoo.co.uk





INTRODUCTION

Historians have known for many years that prehistoric people inhabited the land around what is now Thackley and Buck Wood. Flint arrow heads and tools have been found along the valley bottom near the River Aire between Baildon and Thackley, lengths of old walls thought to date from thousands of years ago were to be seen until recently before they were demolished to make room for modern housing and roads, or became covered by fallen trees and tangled undergrowth in the woods around Thackley.

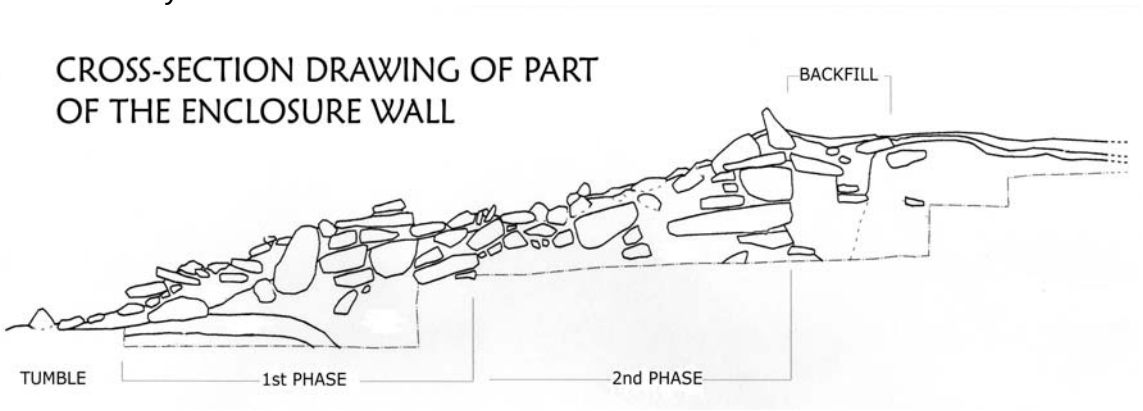


A TYPICAL IRON AGE SETTLEMENT

But until an archaeological survey of Buck Wood was commissioned by the Friends of Buck Wood in 2006, there was little known evidence for prehistoric activities in Buck Wood itself. That survey, undertaken as part of the 'Breath of Fresh Aire' project funded by the Lottery Heritage Initiative, found features which indicated that there might be the remains of a prehistoric settlement in the Wood. This encouraged the Friends to organise their 'Breath of Ancient Aire' archaeological investigation which took place throughout 2009, led by a professional archaeologist, with a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. This programme of work has revealed a site that was possibly in use from Neolithic to post-Roman times, with features of considerable significance to the archaeological-landscape of the Aire Valley and its adjacent uplands, and which adds detail to the existing picture of prehistoric activity in the region.

THE ENCLOSURE

The main purpose of the project and its surveys and digs was to discover whether there was a prehistoric enclosure in Buck Wood, as suggested in the earlier survey.

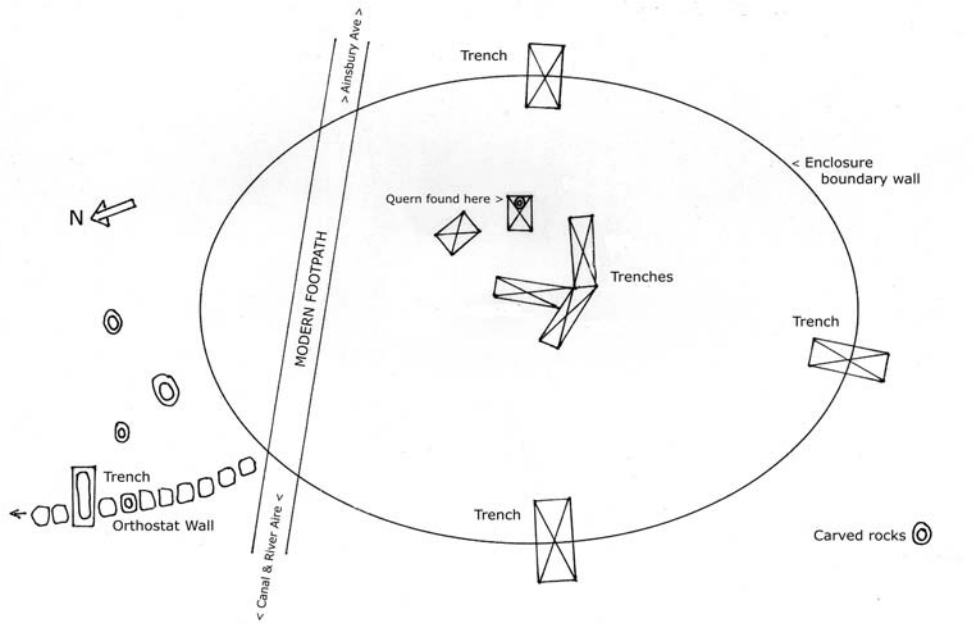


Our work showed that in past times a substantial wall had been built of local unworked stone, enclosing a natural terrace of level ground within the wood. This formed an oval enclosure, roughly 82m x 78m in size. The wall had been well-made, with inner and outer faces almost 2m apart, and a filling of rubble which included heat-affected stones. In one area the wall had collapsed and been rebuilt.There was no trace of a ditch.

RECORDING DETAILS OF A TRENCH

In the centre of the enclosure there were the remains of two circular or crescent-shaped constructions, with walls built in the same way as the enclosure walls, and, like them, incorporating large numbers of heat-affected rocks. Part of the excavated wall of these structures was 1m high, and must have been solidly built to have survived so well. The remains of a quern for grinding grain was also found within this central area, as was a single carved rock.

Leading away from the enclosure is an orthostat wall of large stones, which appears to be part of a network of such walls in the wood.



BUCK WOOD: PLAN OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE (not to scale)

Discovering and investigating the enclosure was important, because it tells us that there was an established group living there. From Neolithic times society was becoming more settled, which meant that dwellings could be more permanent, and more substantial. People began to form groups and built their houses close together, with a protective palisade around. These eventually developed into earth and stone banks, sometimes with ditches outside, or into the stone walled oval construction that we have found in Buck Wood. The huts also evolved into stone-walled circular structures, perhaps topped with timber, and with thatched roofs. Without windows the houses would have been dark, and smoky from the fires inside. The remains of circular or crescent-shaped stone walls found in the centre of the Buck Wood enclosure were possibly shelters or huts of this kind.

FINDS AT THE SITE

Early people such as those living in Buck Wood would have had very few possessions, and most of those would have been made of organic materials such as skin, wood, or plant materials. They would not have survived for long once they were discarded. Even their pottery was fragile and poorly made, and broken pieces would quickly disintegrate into the ground. We did find a few coins, but they were mostly badly eroded or fairly modern.

IMMANUEL STUDENTS DIGGING A TRENCH

FLINT

In this area flint is rare, although nodules can be found in the River Aire, which is probably why most worked flints have been found near the river, where it was most convenient to do the work. But usually it would be brought in from places where it was geologically common.

The single knapped flint found at our site in Buck Wood, high above the river, was found amongst the stones and soil used to infill the enclosure wall. This suggests that it was dropped on the ground and later picked up inadvertently when the wall was being built.

PART OF A PRHISTORIC FLINT BLADE

The flint itself appears to have a sharp cutting edge rather than the pointed end of an arrow head, and is probably part of a blade or cutting tool. It is estimated to date from the late-Neolithic to the early Bronze Age.

QUERN STONE

Quern stones were used to grind grains of wheat, barley or rye into flour to make bread and other foods.

Earlier querns were known as saddle querns, and produced flour by a rocking movement, pushing and pulling the handstone on a flat base with a crushing not a grinding action. Beehive querns made the work much easier. They consisted of two stones, one flat surface on top of the other. The hard, rough surfaces of the quern stones moving against each other ground the grains into flour.

USING A QUERN TO GRIND FLOUR

The quern found at the Buck Wood site is the lower part of a 'Beehive Quern'. The lower stone did not move; the top stone was turned around a wooden axle that passed up through the hole in its centre. A slot on the top stone was fitted with a wooden handle to turn the stone around.
The Buck Wood quern was found in the central part of the enclosure, where there may have been huts. The grinding surface has been worn smooth through use. There is a spindle-hole where it would have been held in place under the upper stone. It was probably made and used during the late Iron Age to early Roman period, around 100 BC to 150 AD.

THE BASE OF THE QUERN FOUND IN BUCK WOOD

FIRE-CRACKED STONES

The walls of the possible huts or shelters also include a proportion of heat-affected or fire-cracked stones, as do the enclosure walls. These came from within the enclosure where the people had used them previously for cooking. Also known as potboilers, these stones were either used round the fires as hearthstones, or would be placed inside pots when heated, to cook food or heat water. Pottery at the time was not made to withstand direct heat, and potboilers were an effective way round the problem. The stones exist in large numbers in the enclosure as well as in the various walls, and would have been brought up from the river bed or from lower down the valley sides where they had been shaped and deposited by glaciers.

COOKING FOOD IN THE IRON AGE

ORTHOSTAT WALLS

The most prominent of these walls stretches away from the enclosure walls for about 60m, but there are traces of it further into the Wood, possibly connecting with other orthostat walls.

These walls are made with large upstanding stones which were moved from where they naturally lay close by, to form a row of stones. Occasional stones have been carved. The walls would have been a noticeable feature of the largely treeless Iron Age landscape. The orthostat walls in Buck Wood were probably made at the same time as the enclosure walls, and may have been field or other boundaries. If, at a later date, they had additional dry stone walling built on top they could have also been used for stock control.

A SECTION OF THE MAIN ORTHOSTAT WALL

There is no definite way of dating the walls, and they may have been altered or extended at later dates. The earliest suggested date for them is the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age. It is significant that where carved rocks were built into the walls the carved surface faces upwards, as though the builders still knew that the carvings had some importance in earlier days.

CARVED ROCKS

During the period in which the Neolithic merged into the Bronze Age, an intriguing aspect of the culture of these early people began to arise: the carving of symbolic shapes and patterns on rocks.

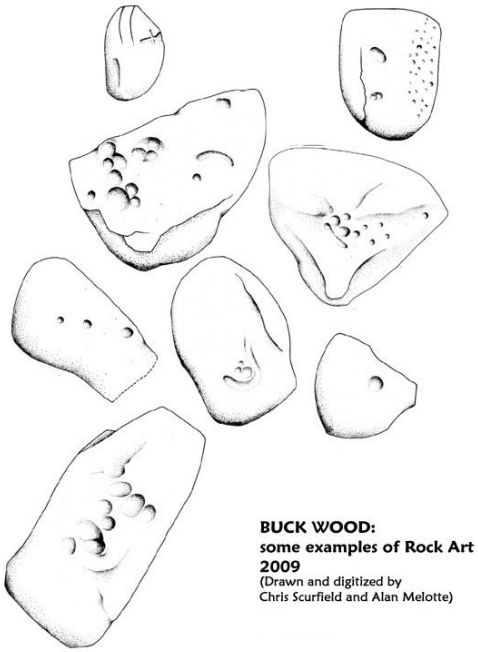
We have now identified at least ten such rocks in Buck Wood, in and around the archaeological site. Most have a pattern of hollow cups, and some also have carved lines. Some of the smaller ones have been moved and placed in nearby walls at later dates, whilst others are large and earthfast, and probably in their original location. It is difficult to be sure whether any other than the largest are in the place where they had meaning to their creators.

ONE OF BUCK WOOD'S CARVED ROCKS

This concentration of carved rocks in Buck Wood indicates that there were people from as far back as the late Neolithic to early Bronze Age established there, perhaps living at the site itself, and probably linked to or communicating with people or groups across the valley at Baildon and elsewhere. The site may have been permanently settled at this time, or at least in frequent use.

In West Yorkshire considerable numbers of such rocks have been identified and studied. Most well-known perhaps are the often ornate examples on Ilkley Moor, but there are also many on Baildon Moor and elsewhere. No-one knows why these rocks were carved. Many of them have simple arrangements of hollows or cups, sometimes with rings carved round them, hence their earlier name of 'cup-and-ring' stones. But many others have complex carved patterns including swastikas, ladders, and curving lines. They may have been brightly painted.

There have been numerous theories proposed to explain the meaning of these carved rocks. They might have had a practical purpose such as marking boundaries, or with the cups filled with oil and lit they could have signalled to other groups, or even used to light dark paths at night. It has also been suggested that they had a ritual purpose, for example using the hollowed-out cups for offering libations to the gods. Whatever their meaning, the carvings were made to last, even though now their meaning is forgotten.



CONCLUSION

We have found evidence - the flint, and, most significantly, the carved rocks, that from Neolithic times there were people in and around Buck Wood. The enclosure was bounded by substantial stone walls, and was linked to the wider landscape with a network of orthostat walls. It may have been in use throughout the Iron Age until after the Romans left Britain. The evidence that we have found, such as the quern, the heat-affected stones and the walls themselves could all relate to the Iron Age, but could have been in use or re-used at a later date too. The remains of the internal structures are also difficult to date without further investigation. Even the orthostat walls, with their early carved rocks, could have been used, extended or altered at a later date.

What we do know is that we have a site of great interest in Buck Wood, dating back to prehistoric times. We are certain that the more we investigate and explore, the more we will find, whether it is carved rocks, orthostat walls or everyday objects from the lives of the people who lived in the Wood, and who are as much a part of the history of Thackley as the mills, the old cottages and the patterns of the streets and roads we live on.

NEOLITHIC PERIOD

The Neolithic or Late Stone Age lasted from about 4000 - 2400 BC in Europe. During this period land began to be cleared of native forest, with people moving from place to place, burning woodland to provide fertile areas to grow crops. Although it is thought that Neolithic society was still mostly mobile, with few permanent buildings, settled groups or communities based around farming and stock rearing gradually developed,

Stone tools were developed during the Neolithic, mainly using flint - flakes of the flint were knapped or chipped away until sharp edges or points were left; later in the period the flints were also polished, to make the edges finer and longer lasting.

BRONZE AGE

The Bronze Age lasted from about 2500 - 500 BC in Britain, evolving from the late Neolithic as the technique of weapon and tool making from bronze spread throughout the country. It meant a gradual change into more settled communities, with groups of round houses close to fields where crops were grown and cattle kept. Boundaries between groups and settlements were increasingly important.

Many more trees would have been cleared by the people living in enclosures and elsewhere, to clear land for farming, to make cooking fires, and to heat kilns for making tools. The lower slopes of hills in this area would have been largely cleared of trees by 1800 BC, and the uplands by 1200 BC.

Trading was well developed, for the exchange of increasingly sophisticated metal work and other goods.

IRON AGE

The Iron Age reached Britain by 500 BC. The spread of ironworking was rapid: tools and weapons made from iron were harder and more durable than those of bronze, and iron was easy to smelt and more widely available. Forest clearance became more efficient with iron tools - and more widespread because wood was needed to smelt the iron.

Other advances took place during the Iron Age, such as the use of rotary querns for grinding corn, which could be safely stored in grain pits. New and improved crops were developed, alongside better farming techniques using more robust iron tools such as ploughshares and sickles. Small farming settlements became common, with networks of fields for crops and livestock.

ROMANO-BRITISH PERIOD

Following on from the Iron Age, the Romano-British period lasted from the AD 43 Roman invasion until the end of Roman occupation in AD 410. But the influence of the Romans had spread into the country from Europe before then with increasing trade links and diplomatic relations, although these influences were strongest in the south-east of England. It is unlikely that Romanisation was very noticeable in remote places. Apart from roads and fortifications in the distance, there was probably little impact or change in rural economies and settlements like that in Buck Wood.

Leaflet compiled by Dr Christine Alvin & Dr Eileen White.
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