

Iron Age Farming

On Iron Age farms the growing of crops and the keeping of animals were dependent on each other. The land where crops were grown needed to be fertilized using the dung of grazing animals to replace nutrients in the soil. This could be done by turning the animals out onto the fields after harvesting or onto fields that had been left fallow and also by collecting the dung from the byres where animals were kept over winter. Cattle and pigs would eat the stubble and churn up the ground and both sheep and cattle would graze on grasses and weeds prior to ploughing. The by-products of cereal crops were used to feed cattle during the winter. Whether arable or pastoral farming predominated in each area would depend on soil fertility and microclimates but all farmers would have grown at least some cereal crops such as wheat and barley.

Most farmers would use cattle to pull the plough although there is evidence that horses were sometimes used. Both were used as draught animals to pull carts and light waggons engaged on various tasks - carrying dung, taking harvested grain back to the farmstead and so on.

Many farming implements, including ploughs, would have been made mostly or entirely of wood. Iron spade shoes have been found in Brigantian territory but it is probable that most spades would have been made entirely of wood. As with most organic items these have disappeared completely other than in specific soil conditions such as bogs. Deer antlers were also used as digging tools - some have been recovered from a layer *above* a Roman road in Ilkley, Yorkshire.

Winter fodder for animals was essential and was probably mostly obtained from hedge and woodland leaves such as ash and elm, which would be dried and stored, and from barley grain and straw. Holly especially was used as a fodder tree.

Since winter fodder was both valuable and limited only healthy breeding stock and working animals would have been kept over the winter though

there was by no means the wholesale slaughter that is often imagined. Late autumn saw the culling of both sheep and cattle - usually young ram lambs and old ewes were the first to go.

The Farmstead

This would have been made up of several buildings inside a large fenced enclosure which was there both to keep domesticated animals in and wild animals out. There would have been a roundhouse where the farmer and his family lived and this almost certainly would have had the doorway facing south east to greet the rising sun. Inside would have been a central hearth with iron firedogs and supports for a spit and probably a small clay oven to one side. The interior would have been divided into sleeping quarters, a food storage and preparation area and a space for the loom on which would have been woven all the cloth for the family's clothes and blankets.

A second large roundhouse would have served as a barn where the animals would have been housed during the winter months. There would have been a granary built on stilts each topped with a large flat stone to deter rats and mice and to keep the grain off the damp earth. The farmer would almost certainly have kept a couple of dogs and two or three cats to keep the vermin down.

Other structures might have included chicken sheds built on top of a stout post which had a slanting pole with very narrow rungs leaning against it. The chickens could climb this but predators couldn't. There might also have been a rough shelter to use as a workplace when it was raining and also skins on stretch frames would be put here to keep the rain off.

A manure heap would have been another element of the farmyard (presumably well away from and downwind of the roundhouse!) and there would have been a midden where scraps, bones and broken pots etc would be thrown.

Another feature would probably have been a vegetable patch and a herb patch surrounded by a wattle fence to keep the chickens out.

Stacks of firewood would have been drying under the deep eaves of the two roundhouses, one stack would be the previous years coppice already dry and ready for use and the other would be the current year's wood drying out ready for the following year.

The Farming Year

Autumn - folding of animals to manure land that was to be ploughed for autumn sowing. Ploughing and weeding. Culling of animals. Butchery and the drying, smoking and/or salting of meat for the winter months.

Winter - Ploughing as long as the weather allowed. Feeding and watering livestock. Preparing seed ready for spring sowing. Woodland - coppicing, felling, collection of wood for fuel.

Spring - Ploughing preceded by manuring, creating seed beds and sowing - cereals first, then legumes (peas and beans) and finally flax when all chance of frost had passed. Lambing. Hoeing to keep down weeds.

Summer - Haymaking. Plucking of sheep. Harvesting - not only the crops in the fields but also the wild harvest of nuts, berries, fruits and possibly reeds for thatching.

The Four Seasonal Festivals of the Year

The four fold division of the year is almost certainly of great antiquity going back perhaps to the Neolithic period. Each of these festivals was connected to significant times in the agricultural year and people would have travelled considerable distances to attend these feasts - the exception probably being Imbolc when the harsh weather of late winter would have made travel difficult.

The other three festivals however would have been important social occasions when news would be exchanged, business deals done and, particularly at Lughnasadh, marriages would be arranged as well as a good time being had by all! The Brigantes, like all the people of Iron Age Britain, would have gathered together in large groups to celebrate, possibly at hilltop enclosures such as that in Ecclesall Woods.

Samhain (an old Gaelic word meaning 'summer's end') marked the beginning of winter and the end of the agricultural year. The last of the harvesting was complete and the animals would be brought in for the winter or pastured close to the farmstead having been brought down from the summer pastures.

Imbolc was celebrated in early February when the first lambs were born and the days were beginning to lengthen.

Beltaine at the beginning of May celebrated the beginning of summer when the sheep and cattle would be driven out to the summer pastures and crops would be sown.

Lughnasadh at the beginning of August marked the beginning of the all important grain harvest. The hay would already have been safely gathered and stored and this feast signified a lull before the hard work of harvesting the grain began.

Food In Iron Age Britain

Bread, porridge and stews formed the daily diet of most people in Iron Age Britain. The two most commonly grown crops were wheat (emmer wheat and spelt) and barley. Cereal crops were stored in underground pits or granaries raised above the ground on four wooden posts, the storage method used differed from one area to another. Both wheat and barley would have been ground into flour for breadmaking using a quern stone.

Celtic beans and Fat Hen (a wild plant now but probably cultivated during the Iron Age) were also common along with early types of brassicas such as parsnips. Milk was available and was used to make cheese and butter. Sheep and goats would have been milked as well as cows. Fresh meat was roasted over an open fire or boiled in a cauldron. Beef, pork and mutton were the most common meats especially pork but wild animals would also have provided some variety occasionally.

Barley not only provided flour for bread but was also malted and brewed into beer which was drunk by all members of the family.

Cooking

Most of the cooking would have been done over an open fire on the large central hearth of the roundhouse. In the summer months some cooking may well have been done outdoors as well. Water was heated using 'pot boilers' - these were stones that were heated in the fire and then dropped into the water.

This was a surprisingly effective method and was also sometimes used to cook stews and to heat milk for cheese making. This separated the curds from the whey and the curds were then strained leaving a soft cheese. A little salt was added and the cheese could also be flavoured by the addition of various herbs.

Salt

Salt production was established during the Iron Age and there is strong evidence of this along the Lincolnshire coast. Sea water was put into large clay lined tanks and the brine evaporated leaving behind lumps of salt.

What is now Lincolnshire was the territory of the Corieltauvi and the Brigantes would almost certainly have traded with them for the salt which would have been used to preserve meat for use over the winter months. An alternative source of salt for the Brigantes would have been the salt mines of the Cornovii in what is now Cheshire.

Nuts and Legumes

Celtic beans (field beans) need to be soaked overnight and then boiled for at least three hours in unsalted water to destroy the thick outer skin. The beans can then be ground like grain. Lentils and peas were also used. Peas could be dried and stored then ground and added to bread or used to thicken stews as well as being eaten fresh. Hazelnuts were almost certainly collected and stored for use in the winter.

Fruits and Vegetables

Among the wild fruits that would have been gathered were blackberries, raspberries, cherries, hawthorn berries, sloes, crabapples, elderberries, cloudberry and wild strawberries. Many of these fruits could be dried and stored for winter use.

Nettle leaves, rock samphire, sow thistle, Fat Hen, wild spinach, wild celery, chickweed, ramsons (wild garlic), marsh thistle, bistort, burdock, wild carrots and turnips were among the wild foods used though some of them would only be available if you lived in the right area and according to the season of course.

Salad vegetables included sheep's sorrel, dandelion, jack by the hedge, yarrow, young hawthorn leaves, salad burnet, wood sorrel and the flowers of clover, gorse, primrose, violets etc

Edible roots that would be stored for winter included wild parsnips, wild carrots, dandelion, pignut, and sow thistle.

Food was very much seasonal but there was probably much more variety than is generally believed.

Spinning, Weaving and Dyeing

Almost all of the clothing worn by the Brigantes and all other Iron Age tribes would have been made of wool. Once the fleece had been removed from the sheep it would have been washed and combed using bone or antler combs. The wool would then have been spun into yarn using a drop spindle weighted with a whorl of stone or baked clay. The spindle whorls are often found in an archaeological context but the wooden spindles have long since rotted away. Girls would have learned to spin at a very young age and all the women of the household would have spent many hours every day producing enough yarn to provide clothing and blankets for the household.

Dyeing

The Celtic tribes were well known for their brightly coloured clothing. The Greek author Diodorus Siculus wrote

'The way they dress is astonishing: they wear brightly coloured and embroidered shirts, with trousers called bracae and cloaks fastened at the shoulder with a brooch, heavy in winter, light in summer. These cloaks are striped or chequered in design, with the separate checks close together and in various colours.'

Among the dye plants used were woad (*isatis tinctoria*) which produced various shades of blue, weld (*reseda luteola*) which gave yellow and madder root (*rubia tinctorum*) which produced red. Other plants would also have been used including tansy (*tanacetum vulgare*) - yellow, ladies bedstraw (*galium verum*) which gave red from the roots and yellow from the leaves and flowers, dyer's greenwood (*genista tinctoria*) - yellow, and dyer's chamomile (*anthemis tinctoria*) - yellow. Various shades of each colour could be achieved and yellows could be overdyed with woad to achieve shades of green.

Weaving

The weaving loom would have been one of the most important items in the Iron Age home. Upright and made of wood there are few remains to be found other than post holes for the loom stand and a few parts of collapsed looms.

The parts that are found in almost all excavated settlements are the stone or clay loom weights that held the warp (vertical) threads taught. Another weaving tool that is often found is the weaving sword or comb which was used to beat the weft (horizontal) threads to make a very close weave.

The Gods of the Brigantes

The first thing to say about the religious beliefs and practices of the Brigantes and other Celtic tribes is that there are no records written by the people themselves. The little we actually know comes via the writings of various Greek and Roman authors (many of whom were writing a century or more after the relevant period) and from Latin inscriptions on altars and gravestones set up during the Roman occupation of Britain. Most of what is 'known' therefore is a result of inference and guesswork.

Druids

I am assuming that all the Celtic tribes, including the Brigantes, had Druids as part of their culture. Most people's idea of a Druid owes more to Hollywood films and television news broadcasts of the Summer Solstice at Stonehenge than to reality I suspect. A Druid was many things - he or she was an advisor to the tribal chieftain, a teacher, a judge and an authority on matters of ceremony and ritual among other things. What they almost certainly were *not* is priests in the sense that we understand the term today. Julius Caesar says of them:

'They have many discussions as touching the stars and their movement, the size of the universe and of the earth, the order of nature, the strength and the powers of the immortal gods, and hand down their lore to the young men.'

This implies that they are astronomers, scientists and philosophers as well.

It would appear that the nature religion of the Celts was a much more individual and personal affair than the organized religions of today and that large groups would only come together on rare and special occasions such as the Summer and Winter Solstices. It is possible that large groups would also gather at times of natural disasters - a succession of bad harvests or when disease had killed large numbers of animals or people for instance - when it might be felt that a sacrifice of some sort should be offered in order to propitiate the deities. These are the occasions when the Druids would direct the ceremonies as they had the necessary knowledge to do so.

All One Life

To the Celtic peoples every aspect of the natural world would be regarded as sacred. The best description I've found of the way the Celts related to the natural world comes from the book 'The Peaks Past and Present' by Gordon Stainforth. I can't do better than to quote it:

'With no sharp division between the natural and the supernatural, the spiritual and the physical, the sky and the earth, the whole landscape, indeed the whole cosmos, was regarded as magic through and through and filled with the spirits of people and gods. Everything was interrelated. All the gods and forces of nature, all the spirits of the living and the dead, shared one life.'

Trees

Trees held great significance for the Celtic tribes, they were regarded as an intermediary between the earth and the sky and oaks and yews in particular were greatly venerated.

Water

Springs and rivers were also venerated, each having their own particular deity. Rivers were important offering places and valuable metal objects were deposited into their waters throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages. Springs were regarded as places of healing and the votive offerings cast into them were presumably either in hopes of a cure or possibly as thanks for healing that had been given. Lakes and bogs were also important - Lindow Man being an example of a human sacrifice who was deposited in a bog although he was not connected with the Brigantes. A hugely important sacred lake was Llyn Cerrig Bach on Anglesey a place strongly associated with the Druids. Among the offerings found here was a piece that could have been Brigantian.

Liminal Places and Times

These were the places and times of year when it was possible to pass between this world and the Otherworld - a place that was as real to the Celts as the physical world that they lived in. Dusk and dawn, Samhain (November 1st) the time when summer passed into winter, Beltaine (May 1st) the time when winter passed into summer were liminal times. Liminal places included where the earth met water or the sky - the seashore, where a spring erupts from the earth, mountain tops, caves, riverbanks - all these would be special places to the Celts.

Known Deities

1. Brigantia



Relief at Birrens (Dumfries and Galloway)

Brigantia was the tutelary or guardian deity of the Brigantes tribe. She was also venerated throughout the Celtic world under names including Brighid, Brigit and Brigindo. These names all have the root 'brig' which translates as 'high one, elevated one' and also incorporates a sense of power and vigor.

Brigantia was a warrior goddess and the Romans equated her with Minerva. She also had aspects as a bringer of fertility and prosperity and was associated with poetry, healing and smithcraft. Like many Celtic goddesses Brigantia had a clear association with rivers and wells as shown by the inscription to her at Irthington, Yorkshire where she is named as Deae Nymphae Brigantiae - the plural form indicating that she was seen as a triple goddess. There are also indications that she may have been seen as a 'mother goddess'.

There are seven known inscriptions to Brigantia. An altar from Corbridge associates her with Jupiter Dolichenus and identifies her as 'Brigantia Caelestis' - 'heavenly' or 'celestial' Brigantia.

A relief at Birrens (Dumfries and Galloway) shows her as a winged female figure symbolic of Minerva Victrix. She wears a mural crown identifying her as a territorial deity and carries a spear and a globe. Around her neck is a pendant depicting Minerva's symbol of the Gorgon's Head. The inscription below makes it clear that this is the goddess Brigantia - BRIGANTIAE S AMANDUS ARCITECTUS EX IMPERIO IMP F

2. Coventina

A tutelary goddess of river and spring i.e. a deity who is a guardian or protector of a particular place or geographic feature.





Coventina's Well, Carrawburgh

Her sacred spring was/is at Brocolita now known as Carrawburgh on Hadrian's Wall. Votive offerings were made here - usually coins, pins and pearls. Over 13000 Roman coins were found in the well when it was excavated. She seems to be a goddess of healing and fertility and her name is Celtic.

At least ten inscriptions to Coventina have been found.

3. Maponus

The tutelary god of the Brigantes tribe. He was probably related to the Welsh god Mabon. He often appeared as a divine youth and was the Romano-Celtic god of music and poetry. In this capacity he would be important to the Celtic bards.

He appears on inscriptions at Brampton, Corbridge, Ribchester and Chester Holm (Vindolanda) and he is associated with Apollo in some of the dedications.



Inscription on Roman altar in crypt at Hexham Abbey. Probably originally from Corbridge.

4. Antenociticus

Known only from the northern frontier so a local deity. In 2013 a head was discovered near Binchester Fort. A similar carved head was found in Newcastle in 1862 with an inscription identifying it as Antenociticus. He also seems to have been connected with military affairs. Both heads are in the Great North Museum in Newcastle.



Head of Antenociticus found at Binchester.

Three altars to Antenociticus were found within the ruins of a small temple in the vicus of the fort of Benwell/Condercum on Hadrian's Wall.

5. Cocidius

Cocidius was worshipped in Northern Britain and the dedications and images of him are all located around Hadrian's Wall especially Bewcastle. The Romans equated him with the god Mars so Cocidius was a warrior god. He also has aspects as a hunter and arboreal deity and two dedications at Housesteads equate him with Silvanus the Roman god of forests, groves and hunting.



Image of Cocidius carved on a rockface at Yardhope, North Yorkshire.

A relief on an altar from Risingham depicts Cocidius Silvanus as a hunter holding a bow and quiver and flanked by a dog and a stag. He is both hunter and guardian of the forest and its creatures. The warrior aspect seems to be focused in the west and the hunter aspect in the east.

Cocidius has frequent dedications alone which tends to confirm that he was native to this area rather than an imported god e.g. Mithras.