

Introduction

Analysis of monumental architecture has dominated studies of the built environment in Neolithic to Early Bronze Age (EBA) England and Wales since the earliest days of archaeology, whereas the study of domestic architecture has tended to remain more limited. Equally there has been little consideration of the relationship between monumental and domestic scales of architecture, despite superficial connections frequently being made between houses and tombs on the basis of the shape of their ground plans (Bradley 2012). Given the many important social roles domestic structures have been shown to fulfil by decades of anthropological and ethnographic study, this is a notable gap in archaeological knowledge concerning the ways people were living in the Neolithic and EBA.

Broadly, domestic buildings changed in form from rectangular to round between the Neolithic and Middle Bronze Age (c.4000 – 1500 BC), a time of dramatic change in England and Wales involving the introduction and intensification of farming, the introduction of metallurgy, increased construction of large monuments, significant changes in material culture, and the arrival of new migrant populations (Olalde *et al.* 2018; Brace *et al.* 2019). Influential work has recently been carried out on the predominantly rectilinear houses of the Early Neolithic of Ireland (Smyth 2014), whilst the increase in circular structures after c.1500 BC has formed the basis for a significant body of roundhouse studies (Ghey *et al.* 2007; Pope 2007, 2015; Harding 2009). However, the development of domestic architecture in the intervening period in England and Wales has remained largely unexplored, despite the steadily increasing number of structures that have been discovered in recent decades. This chronological inconsistency is matched by geographical gaps in research, meaning that it is currently difficult to trace long-term trends in house construction that cover the whole of Britain. Many overviews of settlement during the Neolithic and Bronze Age rely on key synthetic works which are now decades old (Darvill and Thomas 1996; Armit 2003), and the grey literature relating to developer-led excavation is rarely systematically consulted (with the work of Bradley *et al.* [2016] providing a notable exception).

This gap in the literature concerning domestic architecture in England and Wales may in part be attributed to widely-held assumptions about the scarcity of Neolithic-Bronze Age houses, in particular beliefs that there are few examples of excavated houses known from the MNeo and EBA (c.3500–1500 BC), with structures from this period typically described as ephemeral and insubstantial (Parker Pearson 2009, Roberts 2013, Brophy 2015). However, MA

research carried out by this author was able to demonstrate that there are in fact over 150 examples of excavated roundhouses alone dating to between 3000–1500 BC from across Britain and Ireland, many of which were well-built structures with substantial foundations (Bullmore 2015). This research challenged existing narratives concerning settlement practices in the Neolithic and Bronze Age and suggested that they needed to be significantly updated, leading to the development of this project (Bullmore 2022).

1.1. A brief history of the study of prehistoric houses in Britain and Ireland

The scarcity of houses dating from the Neolithic to the EBA has perplexed archaeologists from the earliest days of the discipline, with monuments forming the focus of prehistoric studies rather than the “exiguous and insignificant traces” of domestic structures (Childe 1931 p.1). In earlier accounts, huts and pit-dwellings were often believed to be representative of the places where people lived in the Neolithic and EBA (Figure 1.1), exemplified by the irregular depressions and artefact scatters found at sites such as Peterborough and Winterbourne Dauntsey (Wyman Abbott and Smith 1910; Stone 1934). Early Neolithic (ENeo) causewayed enclosures were also interpreted as prehistoric ‘camps’ (Curwen 1929; Childe 1940), and it was even suggested that people may have lived in their segmented ditches (Clark 1937).

However, the assumption that the introduction of farming in the Neolithic would necessarily entail widespread sedentism led to growing expectations that well-built timber houses similar to continental examples must be out there, waiting to be discovered (Macalister 1927 p.50; Clark 1937 p.469; Hawkes and Hawkes 1947; Piggott 1954). These expectations were reinforced by the discovery of structures at a handful of sites such as Haldon and

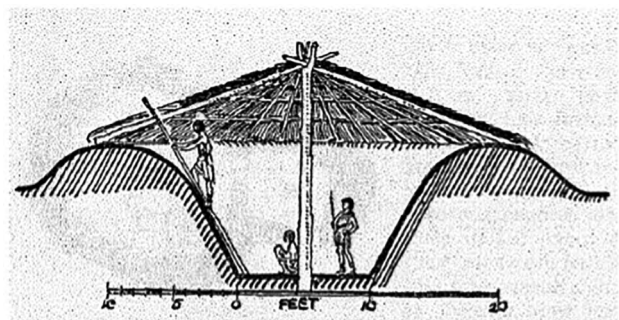


Figure 1.1. A depiction of a Neolithic ‘pit-dwelling’ (Quennell and Quennell 1922 fig.17).

Clegyr Boia (Willock 1936; Williams 1953). In contrast to these expectations for Neolithic settlement, there were early arguments for widespread pastoralism during the Bronze Age, especially in relation to the “Beaker People”, with the scarcity of houses explained through recourse to nomadism and settlement mobility (Childe 1940 pp.98–99, 1950a; Hodges 1957 p.142).

1.1.1. Growing frustrations

As the 20th century continued, there was growing frustration that Neolithic structures in particular could not be found, even when explicitly searched for (Clark *et al.* 1960; Field *et al.* 1964 p.367), with the evidence from Orkney here standing in stark contrast to the evidence from the rest of the British Isles (Childe 1931; Piggott 1954). Even with the growth of open area excavation and the professionalisation of archaeology in the second half of the century, evidence for prehistoric domestic structures was outpaced by the growing monumental record. In the face of this continued absence of evidence, there was increasing discussion of possible explanations for the scarcity of houses. It was suggested that archaeologically invisible construction techniques might be to blame, such as the use of sleeper beams or turf walling (Bradley 1970b; McInnes 1971 p.123; Kinnes 1987 p.25). Others suggested that archaeologists had been looking in the wrong places, on the uplands instead of in river valleys, where settlements could be buried beneath colluvium or alluvium (Simpson 1971; Megaw and Simpson 1979 p.86; Bell 1983), or that the land most likely to have been settled was also most likely to have suffered extensive plough damage, destroying what evidence remained (Darvill 1987). Finally, it was tentatively suggested that Neolithic and EBA houses were simply never that substantial (Megaw and Simpson 1979 p.148).

Pastoralism, either involving seasonal transhumance or complete nomadism, was still posited for Bronze Age and Beaker communities (Bradley 1972; Ashbee 1978; Burgess 1986; Darvill 1987 p.105). This allowed for a greater acceptance and exploration of a wider range of possible settlement evidence for this period, including pit sites and artefact scatters, than was often the case for Neolithic studies at this time, as archaeologists were no longer expecting to find evidence of the substantial roundhouses of later prehistory (Gibson 1982 pp.15–17).

1.1.2. Changing emphasis

From the late 1980s and 1990s, there was a distinct shift in the way settlement in the Neolithic and Bronze Age was studied and conceptualised. This shift coincided with the rise of different strands of post-processual thought (Thomas 1991; Barrett 1993). It was argued that the continued absence of houses could no longer be explained purely in terms of later erosion or destruction (Whittle 1996a p.234) or accidents of preservation (Thomas 1996 p.2). Instead it should be used as positive evidence for widespread mobility in prehistory (Thomas 1991). It was suggested

that archaeologists needed to consider more closely their preconceptions of what ‘settlement’ might look like in the Neolithic and EBA, as well as the language they used to talk about Neolithic-EBA ways of life. This led prehistorians to question whether commonly applied understandings of settlement and dwelling were appropriate for Neolithic-EBA societies (Barrett 1993 p.199; Thomas 1996; Whittle 1996b; Brück 1999b). Even the term ‘settlement’ was critiqued for carrying “connotations of fixity, permanence and domesticity that is often inappropriate to the Neolithic situation” (Pollard 2000 p.363).

As a result, studies of Neolithic-EBA settlement largely turned away from discussion of domestic structures to the consideration of prehistoric people’s lived experience of their landscape as a whole, drawing on phenomenological and dwelling approaches that became prominent in the post-processual movement (Ingold 1993; Whittle 1997a). Approaches to settlement that were linked to abstract time and Cartesian conceptions of space were criticised, with a greater focus on the temporality of human practice within a given landscape (Barrett 1993; Ingold 1993; Pollard 1999). The work of Hodder on the *domus* and *agrios* was here influential in suggesting that house-building was not intrinsic to the process of domestication in Britain and Ireland during the Neolithic (Hodder 1990). Whilst economic and settlement practices may have shaped the overarching rhythms of people’s lives, creation of ‘place’ was argued to have been achieved mostly through monumental and ritual activity and traditions of movement *through* the landscape, providing “social identities and a sense of belonging” (Pollard 1999 p.84) that were not achieved through the construction of domestic structures (Hodder 1990; Brück 1999b).

Within this framework, it was suggested that archaeologists needed to change their expectations about what kinds of Neolithic-EBA settlement would ever be found (Gibson 1992 p.42; Barclay 1996 p.75; Brück 1999b). It was argued that the appropriateness of terms such as ‘house’ and ‘household’ should be re-evaluated, as they were not self-evident concepts that could be uncritically applied to prehistoric contexts (Thomas 1996; Brück 1999b; Brück and Goodman 1999; Pollard 1999, 2000). Accounts that painted prehistoric forms of domesticity as familiar and recognisable to modern, Western conceptions of dwelling should therefore be challenged. Furthermore, it shouldn’t be assumed that known structures (such as those listed in the influential reference work by Timothy Darvill [1996]) represented normal dwelling places. These buildings were actually atypical and unusual, and hence could be interpreted as primarily undomestic in function (Thomas 1991, 1996; Topping 1996). Consequently, some archaeologists preferred to use terms such as ‘structure’ or ‘building’ which were perceived to be less culturally or conceptually loaded (Barclay 1996 p.61).

These approaches, however, tended to draw on the lack of domestic evidence from southern England in their interpretation of Neolithic-EBA settlement, and

increasingly the regional and chronological diversity in house-building practices was highlighted by those working in other areas of Britain and Ireland (Grogan 1996; Cooney 1997, 2000; Barclay 2000; Pollard 2000 pp.363–364). By 1996, over 50 Neolithic houses were known from Ireland, many of them relatively sturdy and some showing continued use of the same site over time (Grogan 1996). Therefore, whilst British discussions of settlement were moving towards theories of movement around the landscape, Irish discussions tended to emphasise the permanence of settlement sites (Grogan 1996, 2002; Cooney 1997; Cooney and Grogan 1999; Mulligan 2012). Permanent, well-founded, stone or earth and turf walled houses were also a feature of the Scottish Isles in the Neolithic, and of upland Scotland in the EBA, providing a contrast to the rest of Britain and Ireland, and demanding very different interpretations of Scottish settlement practices (Richards 1990; Terry 1995; Barclay 1996; McCullagh and Tipping 1998; Ritchie 2000). Whilst the well-known Orcadian evidence, for example, and the larger timber ‘halls’ known from Ireland, England and Scotland in the ENEo could easily be discounted as “exceptional and somehow untypical” (Pollard 2000 p.364), they in fact served as a reminder of the diversity of Neolithic settlement practices that were hard to subsume under monothetic models of settlement mobility.

1.1.3. Recent discussions and gaps in research

Since the turn of the century, more and more structures dated to the Neolithic-EBA have been found (notably in Ireland, thanks to several large infrastructure projects). This has once again changed the narrative concerning settlement. Recent scholarship more readily uses the term ‘house’ to describe many of these buildings, particularly those in Ireland, albeit with the acknowledgement that Neolithic-EBA forms of domesticity may not always be familiar to modern understandings of house and home (Smyth 2014; Brophy 2015). This renewed focus on possible houses has also prompted a return to a more multifaceted consideration of the many roles and functions a dwelling place might have fulfilled in prehistoric society (Brück 1999a; Pope 2003; Bradley 2005b; Smyth 2014; Barclay and Harris 2017).

The increasing number of rectangular structures dated to the ENEo has been a focus of recent discussions concerning dwelling in the Neolithic-EBA in Britain and Ireland (Brophy 2007; Sheridan 2013; Smyth 2013; Thomas 2013; Bradley 2013b; Smyth 2014; Brophy 2015; Barclay and Harris 2017; Ray and Thomas 2018, 2020), alongside continued investigation into the complex settlement history of the Scottish Isles from the Middle to Later Neolithic (Richards 2005; Richards and Jones 2016; Brend *et al.* 2020; Card *et al.* 2020). Both of these areas of study have been greatly aided by the increasingly fine-grained chronologies being built through Bayesian modelling of available radiocarbon determinations, allowing more nuanced discussion of the temporality of house construction for particular periods or places

(McSparron 2008; Cooney *et al.* 2011; Smyth 2014; Griffiths 2016; Davis *et al.* 2017; Bayliss *et al.* 2017a). The Grooved Ware-associated structures of the LNEo across Britain and Ireland have formed another focus of scholarship in the last two decades (Pollard 2009, 2012; Thomas 2010; Smyth 2014 chap.5; Carlin and Cooney 2017; Carlin 2019), particularly after the discovery of the settlement beneath the henge banks at Durrington Walls (Parker Pearson 2007, 2012; Chan 2009; Craig *et al.* 2015).

However, significant gaps remain in archaeological considerations of the domestic architecture of the Neolithic-EBA. Discussion of the large rectangular structures of the ENEo often overshadows consideration of other forms of building constructed during the ENEo (Sheridan 2013 p.295), particularly with the recent discoveries of multiple rectangular structures at sites such as Horton in Berkshire, and Llanfaethlu and Parc Cybi in north west Wales (Chaffey and Brook 2012; Symonds 2014; Rees and Jones 2015b, 2016b; Kenney *et al.* 2020a; Rees and Jones 2020). Similarly, beyond the continued discussion of the remarkable settlements of Orkney, Middle Neolithic (MNEo) settlement in the rest of Britain has seen little focussed investigation due to the presumed absence of evidence.

For many years there has also been only limited discussion of domestic structures dated to the Chalcolithic and EBA (with the notable exception of works such as Gibson 1982): for instance, it is striking that in a recent edited volume on the British Chalcolithic, there is almost no reference to settlement evidence (Allen *et al.* 2012). Joanna Brück’s widely cited work (1999b, 2000) on the Early-Middle Bronze Age settlement of southern England appears to have been highly influential in this regard. Brück argued not only that pastoralist economic strategies and high levels of residential mobility led to the construction of less permanent structures during the EBA, but that archaeologists were mistaken in their expectation that houses were ever the defining feature of EBA settlement. The publication of recent syntheses of Beaker-associated structures by Mike Parker Pearson (2019a) as part of the Beaker People Project (Parker Pearson 2019b) and by Alex Gibson (2019a, 2020) has redressed this imbalance somewhat, but the focus on structures associated with Beaker ceramics has again overshadowed wider evidence for settlement during the Chalcolithic – EBA.

More generally, there has been limited consideration of long-term trends in domestic architecture across Britain and Ireland as a whole, with discussion limited either to distinct geographic regions (e.g. Pope 2003; Ghey *et al.* 2007; Smyth 2014; Burrow 2020) or to specific chronological periods (e.g. Pope 2015; Carlin 2018; Gibson 2019a; Parker Pearson 2019a).

1.2. Research questions and scope of study

This study intends to address some of the gaps identified above by providing a comprehensive and up-to-date

synthesis of evidence from England and Wales focussed on answering the following research questions:

1. What is the current state of knowledge concerning houses built during the Neolithic - EBA in England and Wales?
 - How many examples have been excavated?
 - How were these houses constructed and used?
 - Are there any clear regional traditions or chronological trends in house form, use and construction type?
2. Why were rectilinear structures largely replaced by roundhouses during this period?
 - When and where did this change occur?
 - How can this widespread change be explained?
3. How were trends in architectural form linked to wider cultural, economic and social trends?
 - Do these changes in domestic architecture relate to wider aspects of the built environment, notably changes in monumental architecture?
 - Were changes in house form related to developments in subsistence strategies, the formulation, size and status of different social groups, changes in ceramic or material culture styles, or the introduction of new technologies?

1.2.1. Region of study

Due to the practicalities of data collection, the focus of this study covers England and Wales, including the Isles of Scilly and the Isle of Wight but excluding the Isle of Man. However, evidence from Scotland and Ireland has been used to inform discussion and interpretation throughout this work. The recent work by Jessica Smyth (2014) on the Neolithic houses of Ireland has proved invaluable in this regard, as has work by Rachel Pope on the roundhouses of northern England and Scotland (2003, 2007a, 2015). Work previously carried out as part of the author’s MA thesis on the roundhouses of Britain and Ireland has also been used to supplement these resources (Bullmore 2015).

As the information recorded by this study was gathered primarily from local authority Historic Environment Records (HERs), it has been further sub-divided by country and then by region according to English Heritage defined regions in England (Table 1.1) and by the regions covered by the four archaeological trusts of Wales (Table 1.2) (Cadw 2017). These regions were primarily used to structure data collection and recording rather than to inform analysis.

1.2.2. Period of study

The period of prehistory addressed by this project covers the whole of the Neolithic period in Britain and Ireland as well as the Chalcolithic and EBA, 4000 – 1500 BC. The period of study used for data collection was extended slightly up until 1400 BC into what is normally regarded as the Middle Bronze Age (starting c.1500 BC) to ensure

Table 1.1. HER regions as defined by Historic England.

Region	Historic Environment Record, Sites and Monuments Record, or Urban Archaeological Database
North West	Cheshire
	Cumbria
	Greater Manchester
	Lake District
	Lancashire
	Merseyside
North East	Durham
	Middlesbrough
	Northumberland
	Redcar and Cleveland
	Tees Archaeology
	Tyne and Wear
Yorkshire and the Humber	City of York
	Humber
	North East Lincolnshire
	North York Moors National Park
	North Yorkshire
	South Yorkshire
	West Yorkshire
	Yorkshire Dales
East Midlands	Derbyshire
	Leicester
	Leicestershire and Rutland
	Lincoln
	Lincolnshire
	Northamptonshire
	Nottingham City
	Nottinghamshire
West Midlands	Birmingham
	Coventry
	Dudley
	Herefordshire
	Sandwell
	Shropshire
	Solihull
	Staffordshire
	Stoke-on-Trent
	Warwickshire
	Wolverhampton and Walsall
	Worcester City
	Worcestershire
East of England	Bedford
	Cambridgeshire
	Central Bedfordshire

Table 1.1. (Continued)

Region	Historic Environment Record, Sites and Monuments Record, or Urban Archaeological Database
	Colchester
	Essex
	Hertfordshire
	Norfolk
	Peterborough City
	Southend
	Suffolk
London	Greater London
South East	Berkshire
	Buckinghamshire
	Chichester
	East Sussex
	Hampshire
	Isle of Wight
	Kent
	Milton Keynes
	Oxford
	Oxfordshire
	Portsmouth
	Southampton
	Surrey
	West Berkshire
	West Sussex
	Winchester
South West	Bath and North East Somerset
	Bristol City
	Cornwall and Isles of Scilly
	Dartmoor National Park
	Devon
	Dorset
	Exeter
	Exmoor National Park
	Gloucestershire
	North Somerset
	Plymouth
	Somerset
	South Gloucestershire
	Wiltshire and Swindon

that as much EBA evidence as possible was captured, but discussion focuses on the period before 1500 BC.

This broader period of study has been broken down into smaller chronological periods (Table 1.3), partly to aid analysis of long-term change, but also to reflect the periods of analysis widely in use in the study of English and Welsh prehistory. These periods are generally defined

Table 1.2. Welsh counties covered by each Welsh Archaeological Trust.

Regional Welsh Archaeological Trust	County
Clwyd-Powys	Denbighshire
	Flintshire
	Wrexham
	Powys
	Conwy
Dyfed	Pembrokeshire
	Carmarthenshire
	Ceredigion
Glamorgan-Gwent	Swansea
	Neath Port Talbot
	Rhondda Cynon Taff
	Bridgend
	Vale of Glamorgan
	Cardiff
	Merthyr Tydfil
	Caerphilly
	Blaenau Gwent
	Monmouthshire
	Torfaen
	Newport
	Gwynedd
Gwynedd	
Conwy	

Table 1.3. Chronological periods used in this study.

Period	Date Range (BC)
Early Neolithic	4000 – 3500
Middle Neolithic	3500 – 3000
Late Neolithic	3000 – 2450
Chalcolithic	2450 – 2250
Early Bronze Age	2250 – 1500

by changes in material culture (predominantly ceramic types), monumental construction, dominant subsistence strategies, and technological innovations such as the appearance/development of metallurgy. For example, the Chalcolithic is defined by the appearance of copper metallurgy, associated in Britain and Ireland with the introduction of Beaker ceramics (Allen *et al.* 2012; Parker Pearson 2019a), and the EBA is likewise defined by the development of bronze metalworking (Needham 1996, 2005; Parker Pearson 2005; Sheridan 2008).

The way these periods are defined and the agreed absolute chronology for these periods varies slightly from region to region and between different archaeologists. This study utilises the most widely agreed upon chronological divisions, particularly with reference to the archaeological

grey literature. While recent discussion has highlighted the drawbacks of using a period-based approach in comparison to the use of precise chronologies (Griffiths 2011; Crellin 2020); see also the ongoing Project TIME project at <https://project-time.blog/>), the lack of precise absolute dating evidence available for many of the structures considered by this project meant that a broader period-based approach was a more useful way to structure both data collection and site interpretation.

1.3. A note on terminology – talking about houses

As touched upon, defining exactly what a ‘house’ is in a prehistoric context is a problem that has confronted prehistorians throughout the history of the study of settlement in Britain and Ireland. Use of the term in prehistoric studies has been criticised for implying certain historically and culturally specific conceptions of the ‘domestic’, particularly as an arena of activity that can be set apart from other aspects of living, such as the sacred and the ritual (Thomas 1996; Brück 1999b, 2000; Brück and Goodman 1999). However, if the cultural loading of the term is acknowledged and explicitly addressed, this term remains the simplest way of describing the structures in which people dwelt. More recent scholarship has therefore returned to the use of the word ‘house’, whilst acknowledging that ‘everyday’ domestic activity cannot always be easily separated from other categories of behaviour (e.g. papers in Hofmann and Smyth 2013).

This is the pragmatic approach taken throughout this study - the term ‘domestic’ is thus intended as an inclusive term that covers activities associated with the way people lived from day-to-day, fundamentally incorporating activities such as the preparation and consumption of food, sleeping, and other activities necessary for human survival. It is not intended to suggest that such activities cannot overlap both spatially and conceptually with other realms of activity and understanding - as a part of human life they will have been intertwined with wider ways of conceptualising and inhabiting the world that incorporates the spiritual, economic and political.

Providing a hard and fast definition of what constitutes a ‘house’ is similarly difficult, as the idea of a ‘house’ is better understood as a somewhat nebulous concept that can enfold numerous possibilities, conceptualised in a variety of different ways by those who build and live within them (Waterson 1990; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995a; Joyce and Gillespie 2000; Crouch and Johnson 2001). Nonetheless, for the purposes of this project, the following conditions have been regarded as necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for a structure to be recognised as a domestic structure or house:

- i. An enclosed structure that can provide shelter from the elements;
- ii. A structure built by people (although this might incorporate modified natural features such as hollows

- or tree-throws, this excludes places such as caves or rock shelters);
- iii. A place where primarily quotidian activities take place, including (but not limited to) food preparation and consumption, sleep, and childcare.

A house is regarded as a structure that was purposefully constructed as a place to stay and live, a place that could offer the shelter, protection and warmth necessary for human survival. This is not intended to be a project that studies all the places that people inhabited in the Neolithic-EBA – it is limited to structures that were built with inhabitation in mind.

It should also be noted that in many parts of the following study, the more neutral terms ‘structure’ or ‘building’ have been used, but this is not because the use of the word ‘house’ is believed to be inherently problematic in prehistoric contexts. It does, however, carry with it certain expectations of permanence and solidity which are unhelpful when considering the places that may have sheltered people in the Neolithic-Bronze Age. Fundamentally, this project is interested in the structures in which people lived on a day-to-day basis, the buildings that provide a space for activities such as sleeping, food preparation, eating, craft-practices, and child-raising, among many others, providing a counterpoint to studies of monumental or ceremonial constructions. It therefore includes what are sometimes described as temporary, tent-like or ‘flimsy’ structures, which are less easily described as houses, but which still served an important function in the lives of those who built and used them. Even a lightly built stake-walled structure could have endured for many months, if not years, and could well have been regarded as a ‘home’, if only for a short period of time. Structures shouldn’t be excluded from study simply because they do not conform to modern expectations of domesticity.