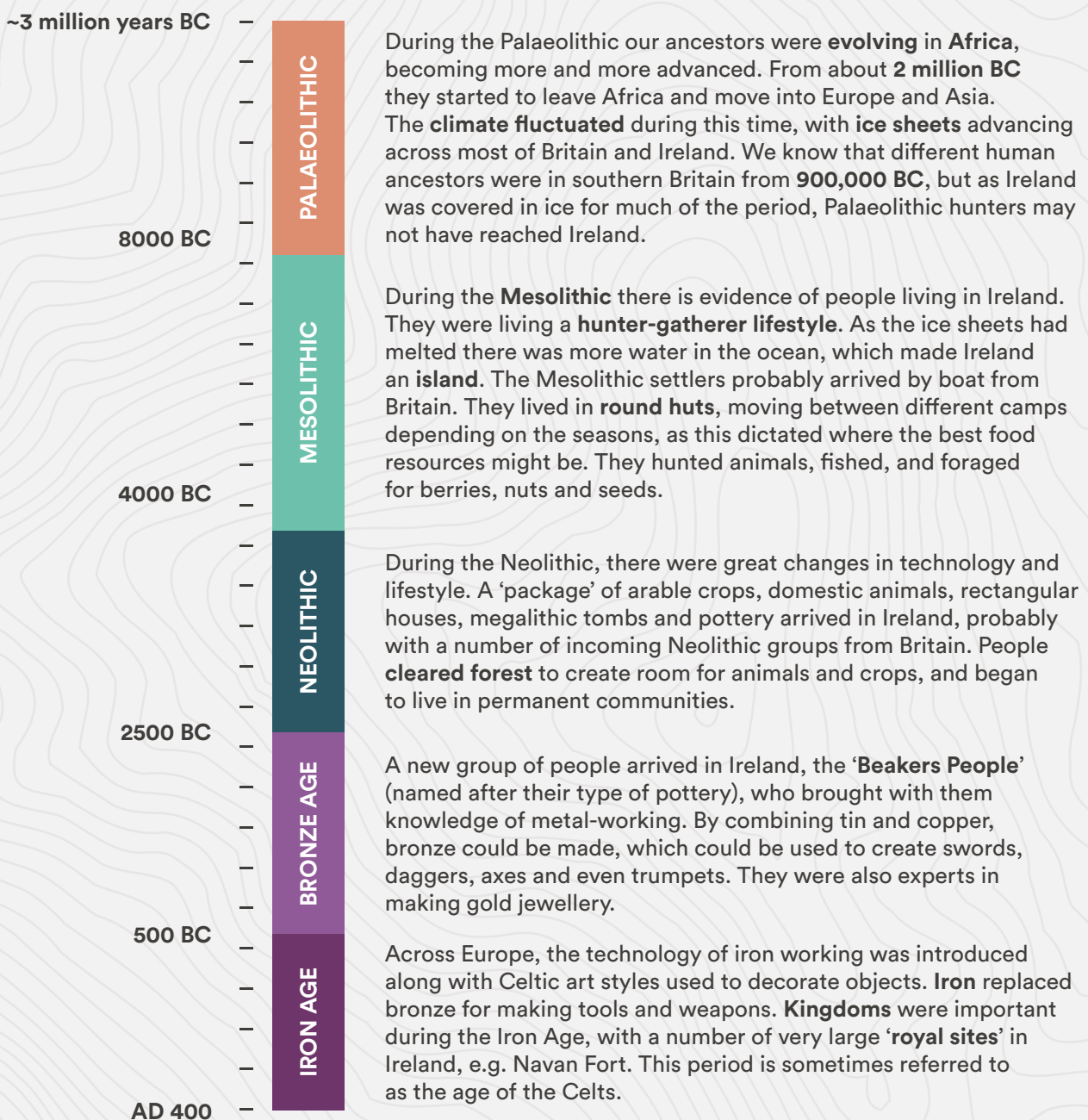# 1

What is 'prehistory'?

NATIONAL MUSEUMS NI

What is 'prehistory'?

The Neolithic period happened in a part of the past that we call **prehistory**. We call it PREhistory because during this time people did not record their lives by writing things down, and so there is no written record. **Archaeologists** investigate how people lived during this period by studying the evidence they left behind.
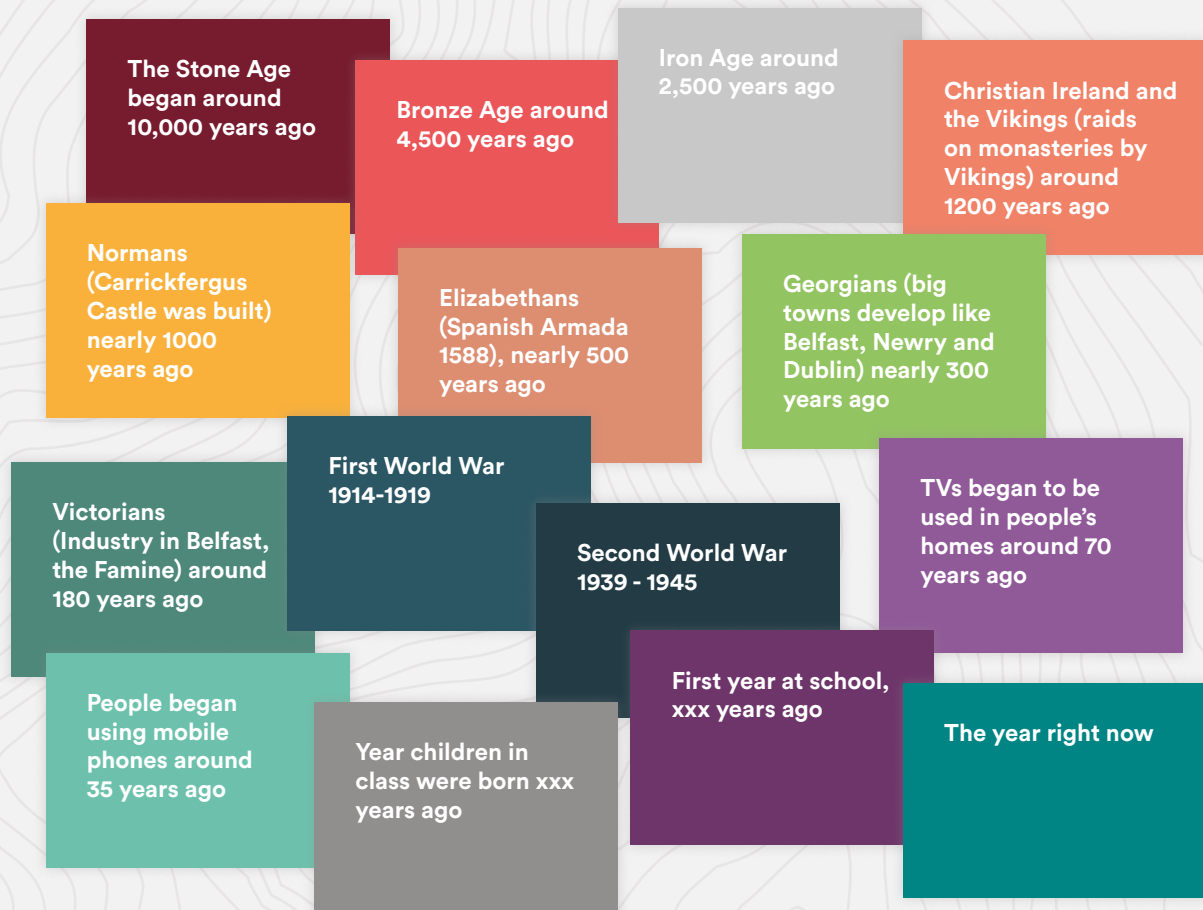
Prehistory is a very long time period, beginning around 3 million years ago. To help understand this very long time span, historians have broken it up according to the dominant **technologies** of the time - the **Stone Age**, the **Bronze Age** and the **Iron Age**. The Stone Age is further broken down into the **Palaeolithic** (Old Stone Age), **Mesolithic** (Middle Stone Age) and **Neolithic** (New Stone Age). This timeline shows the sequence of each of these time periods:

~3 million years BC	
PALAEOLITHIC	During the Palaeolithic our ancestors were **evolving** in **Africa**, becoming more and more advanced. From about **2 million BC** they started to leave Africa and move into Europe and Asia. The **climate fluctuated** during this time, with **ice sheets** advancing across most of Britain and Ireland. We know that different human ancestors were in southern Britain from **900,000 BC**, but as Ireland was covered in ice for much of the period, Palaeolithic hunters may not have reached Ireland.
8000 BC	
MESOLITHIC	During the **Mesolithic** there is evidence of people living in Ireland. They were living a **hunter-gatherer lifestyle**. As the ice sheets had melted there was more water in the ocean, which made Ireland an **island**. The Mesolithic settlers probably arrived by boat from Britain. They lived in **round huts**, moving between different camps depending on the seasons, as this dictated where the best food resources might be. They hunted animals, fished, and foraged for berries, nuts and seeds.
4000 BC	
NEOLITHIC	During the Neolithic, there were great changes in technology and lifestyle. A 'package' of arable crops, domestic animals, rectangular houses, megalithic tombs and pottery arrived in Ireland, probably with a number of incoming Neolithic groups from Britain. People **cleared forest** to create room for animals and crops, and began to live in permanent communities.
2500 BC	
BRONZE AGE	A new group of people arrived in Ireland, the '**Beakers People**' (named after their type of pottery), who brought with them knowledge of metal-working. By combining tin and copper, bronze could be made, which could be used to create swords, daggers, axes and even trumpets. They were also experts in making gold jewellery.
500 BC	
IRON AGE	Across Europe, the technology of iron working was introduced along with Celtic art styles used to decorate objects. **Iron** replaced bronze for making tools and weapons. **Kingdoms** were important during the Iron Age, with a number of very large '**royal sites**' in Ireland, e.g. Navan Fort. This period is sometimes referred to as the age of the Celts.
AD 400	

Class Timeline

To make sense of what happened in the past, it's helpful to develop an understanding of chronology. This creative timeline activity will help place events in the past in sequential order, and gain a sense of the timespan of each event.

On a series of A3 pages or cards, write down a significant time period, for example:

The Stone Age began around 10,000 years ago

Bronze Age around 4,500 years ago

Iron Age around 2,500 years ago

Christian Ireland and the Vikings (raids on monasteries by Vikings) around 1200 years ago

Normans (Carrickfergus Castle was built) nearly 1000 years ago

Elizabethans (Spanish Armada 1588), nearly 500 years ago

Georgians (big towns develop like Belfast, Newry and Dublin) nearly 300 years ago

First World War 1914-1919

Victorians (Industry in Belfast, the Famine) around 180 years ago

Second World War 1939 - 1945

TVs began to be used in people's homes around 70 years ago

People began using mobile phones around 35 years ago

Year children in class were born xxx years ago

First year at school, xxx years ago

The year right now

Ask a selection of pupils to hold the 15 cards up at the front of the class in random order so everyone can see them. The class can discuss which period was longest ago and which most recent.

Gradually fill in the remaining time periods, with the card holders moving their position in the line, until the sequence is complete and there is class agreement. You can display these cards on the wall as a timeline and ask pupils to research and illustrate a poster of their chosen period which can then be displayed alongside each card.

Discussion points

— Which period of history do we know the most about? Why?

— Which period of history do we know the least about? Why?

— People began to write and record information in Ireland around 1000 years ago. How does that help us to understand what happened in the past?

— How do we know what happened in our past before things were written down (archaeology)?

— Looking at the time line which period would the pupils most like to live in and which the least?