

3

Dig into
Ancient Ireland

Who lived in Ireland before Neolithic times?



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Early settlers

Archaeologists are not certain if Ireland was occupied during the Palaeolithic period. The first substantial evidence for the settlement of Ireland is during the **Mesolithic**. The Mesolithic period lasted for a very long time, beginning at 8000 BC and ending around 4000 BC. The people who settled in Ireland during the Mesolithic period were **hunter-gatherers** who probably came from Britain, crossing the sea in wooden canoes.

When they arrived in Ireland they concentrated their activities on waterways, which were natural routeways and provided access to a number of resources. These early settlers lived a nomadic life, moving from site to site depending on the availability of food sources.

Landscape and Ecology

The Irish landscape was very different during the Mesolithic period. The hunter-gatherer population had very little impact on the natural environment, and so Ireland was generally covered in woodland. In some areas this consisted of hazel scrub, but in others, trees such as pine, oak, elm and ash formed tall canopy woodlands.

As Ireland was separated from Britain and Europe by the sea, the range of wild animals available during the Mesolithic was relatively limited. Wild boar was the main game species. Bear and wolves lived in Ireland at this time, and the rivers contained salmon, trout and eels.

Technology

The Mesolithic settlers of Ireland were experts in using the natural materials that were available around them. The main material we have evidence for during the Mesolithic is stone. Tools were made from flint and occasionally chert, which could be **knapped** (shaped by striking it) into sharp blades.

People in the early Mesolithic used microliths – very small blades of flint. These microliths were used to make composite tools. For example, a number of microliths may have been slotted to a piece of wood to make a cutting tool or a barbed harpoon. Simple flint axes were also used.

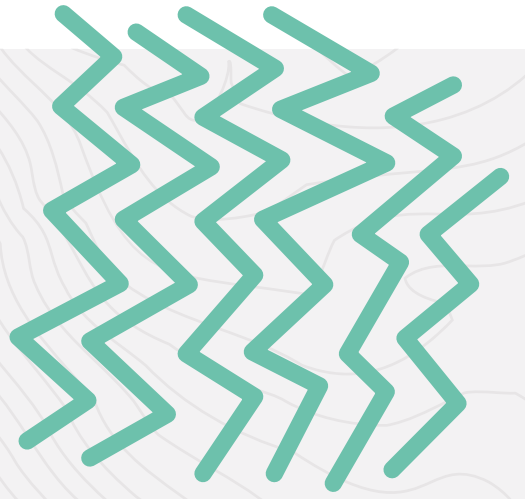


These microliths and flint axe were discovered at the Early Mesolithic site of Mount Sandel, (the wooden handles are modern). Mount Sandel is an important Mesolithic site overlooking the River Bann in Co. Derry. Evidence survives for the plants and animals eaten and for traces of the huts they lived in. This is extremely rare.

The use of microliths disappears in the Later Mesolithic, when larger tools become more common. The chipping or ‘knapping’ around the base of these flints gives them the name of butt-trimmed flakes. They are found only in Ireland and the Isle of Man. The larger lithics of the Later Mesolithic are possibly related to an increased focus on fishing.

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Butt-trimmed flakes could have been used as tools in a variety of ways attached to handles or wooden shafts as suggested above. The site of Newferry, Co. Antrim is an important late Mesolithic site.

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Butt-trimmed flakes mounted on a wooden shaft may have been used for spearing fish.

Houses

The Mesolithic is the first period in which we have evidence for houses in Ireland. The majority of this evidence comes from Mount Sandel. At Mount Sandel evidence for a number of different round huts was discovered. These huts are composed of an arc of post-holes which surround a shallow circular hollow, measuring about 6 metres in diameter. It is not clear how the huts were roofed – they may have used reeds or skins or possibly earthen walls. A hearth in the centre of the hut would have provided heat and light. The hut was probably home to an extended family group.

Outside the huts there were working areas for flint-knapping and making tools. A number of pits at the site appear to have been used for the disposal of waste, although some large pits may have been used for storage.



Model of a hut based on evidence from Mount Sandel.

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As well as hunting for wild pigs a range of smaller animals were trapped and killed including hares and a range of bird species.

Hunting and Gathering

Mesolithic people had a very different way of life from people today. Instead of farming animals and crops, they got their food from the natural environment. This involved hunting wild animals, fishing, and gathering wild plants. The main animal that was hunted was the wild pig – these can be aggressive and dangerous animals, so the Mesolithic hunters must have been very skilled. Hunting would have been carried out using spears, bows and arrows. Dogs were the only domesticated animal at this time, and may have been used to help the hunters track and chase prey.

The seasonal migration of salmon and eel would have provided a reliable source of food during the summer months. Shellfish were also collected from the sea shores. The empty shells were often piled up and formed ‘shell middens’, which give archaeologists an indication of the species that were eaten. These includes oysters, limpets, periwinkles and mussels.

The native landscape of Ireland was abundant with plants which could be eaten, including fruits, nuts, seeds and berries. The most prevalent plant on Irish Mesolithic sites is the hazelnut. It appears as though large crops of hazelnuts were collected during the autumn and were possibly stored throughout the winter.

My meso menu



In many ways the diet of hunters and gatherers of Mesolithic Ireland was what many people want to follow today: a rich varied selection of local organic fruit and vegetables, eggs, fish and meat coming from animals that live freely, low in sugar, and very little impact on the environment.

The down side was that you had to find it yourself! And because supplies were seasonal, you had to rely on what was available in spring, summer, autumn and winter. At some times of the year there could be lots of food, at other times your family could go hungry.

Look at the list of foods below and design a Meso meal for your family. They will want a **starter**, **main course** and a **pudding**!

You might not have heard of some of the plants and animals even though we can still find them in our local environment. Do some research and find out more!

Make your choices and design your menu card. Show your family and discuss with them which parts they like and how it is different to what you usually would eat.

A collection of food items presented in colored boxes, arranged in a roughly circular pattern:

- Wild pigs
- Oysters
- Mushrooms
- Hares
- Limpets
- Hazel nuts
- Hares
- Cockles
- Roots of wild onion, bracken, dandelion
- Wood pigeon
- Wild apples
- Birch sap (like maple syrup)
- Ducks
- Wild pears
- Rose hips
- Sea Bass
- Sloe berries
- Buds from Scot pine trees
- Eels
- Raspberries
- Honey
- Salmon
- Young leaves from bracken, vetch or fat hen
- Seaweeds
- Trout
- Waterlily seeds
- Eggs