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Dig into
Ancient Ireland

Who lived in Ireland during the Neolithic?



Who lived in Ireland during the Neolithic period?

The first settlers arrive

The **Neolithic lifestyle** was brought to Ireland by a **new group of settlers**. At this time Ireland was already home to a group of people living a Mesolithic hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Around **4000 BC** the evidence for the Mesolithic disappears, and instead we see evidence for the Neolithic. These new settlers in Ireland may have mixed with the native hunter-gatherers, but it is also possible that there was little interaction between them. In either case, the **Mesolithic** way of life seems to have **disappeared** very quickly.

Where did the settlers come from?

Over thousands of years the knowledge of farming spread across Europe from the Middle East, eventually reaching Britain and Ireland. This probably wasn't a large-scale movement, but consisted of multiple **migrating** groups. Transporting large numbers of animals in log boats would not have been easy, so it is likely that most of the earliest settlers probably came from Scotland, where the sea channel would have been narrowest.

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New settlers faced the challenge of building houses and clearing fields for planting crops and keeping animals secure.



Who lived in Ireland during the Neolithic period?

What did they look like?

During the Neolithic, people probably didn't look too different from us except that they were smaller in size and did not live as long. It is difficult to know how many people lived in Ireland during the Neolithic but compared to today the numbers would have been very small.

There is very little evidence in Ireland as to what their clothes looked like. We know that they had **needles** and **pins** made from bones, and **threads** from **grasses** and **sinew**, so they would have been able to make **fitted** clothing that was **weatherproof**. The clothes would have been made from softened **animal skins**, although wool cloth and linen might also have been used as sheep and flax were available. In the winter, heavier **animal furs** would have been worn for extra warmth. People also seem to have worn decorations, such as jewellery, as a number of pendants made from animal bones and teeth.

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Preparing and stretching animal skins which could have been used to make clothes.



Neolithic jewellery

Archaeologists have looked very carefully at bones from people from the Neolithic. Evidence gathered through special scientific techniques means we can say with some confidence that they looked very like us, just shorter due to their limited diet.

In fact dressed as someone from the 21st century, walking past you in the street, they would look just like anyone else. We have very limited understanding of how they went about their daily lives and what beliefs they had. Personal items found in excavation give us some clues.



Stone bead necklace from Creggandevesty, megalithic tomb, County Tyrone.



Make a necklace or bracelet

Using the stone beads found at the Ballyrenan and Creggandevesty tombs as inspiration make your own assortment of beads and string together to form a necklace or bracelet.

You could make these from **quick dry clay**, **card** and **paper** or **pasta shapes**. Paint them in the greens, greys, browns and black colours of the stone.

Leaves, feathers, flowers etc — What other materials from nature could pupils incorporate into their design?

Pupils can discuss:

- Why these elements may have been added (perfume, added colour, rarity, pleasing to look at)
- Why these elements are not found in excavation



Stone beads, flints and a piece of pottery from Ballyrenan megalithic tomb, County Tyrone.

