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Dig into
Ancient Ireland

Where did Neolithic people live?



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Living in permanent homes

Farming led to a change in the way people lived. The mobile hunter-gatherer lifestyle of the Mesolithic gave way to **permanent homes**. These were larger and more substantial than the round huts used by hunter-gatherers. Because these houses were constructed from organic materials, they have left no physical trace on the surface of the ground today. However, excavations have found evidence for these homes.

Houses

When a Neolithic house is excavated, it usually appears as a square or rectangle of **dark soil** as you can see here below. When the dark soil is removed, the trenches or post holes that once held the wooden walls of the house are revealed.

Many excavated houses have evidence for multiple rooms, which might have been used for different activities, including keeping animals.



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Neolithic houses were **well-built** structures with **timber frames**. They had upright **posts** and **walls** made of either **vertical planks** or **wattle-and-daub walls**. Wattle is a woven structure made by weaving thin branches between vertical stakes rather like a willow or hazel basket. The daub is a sticky material made of clay and chopped straw which is smeared over the wall to provide protection from the wind and rain.

Many excavated houses have evidence for **multiple rooms**, which might have been used for different activities, including keeping animals. Some houses may also have had a loft which was used for storing grain, as this would keep it dry and off the ground. The **roof**, was made from timber beams and **thatch**. The **door** typically faced away from the prevailing wind direction, as this would maximise the heat of the house.

Most houses would have had a **hearth** in the middle of the floor space, as this would provide heat and somewhere for cooking. It would also

During the day most activities would have been carried out outside.

have been a source of light, which would have been important, especially at night, when making tools and cooking. These houses probably didn't have windows, as these would cause draughts, and so they were probably very dark inside. The hearth would also have created a lot of smoke, some of which probably escaped through a smoke hole in the roof. Many houses probably had **outdoor hearths** as well, as the light quality would be better, and it would be a nice escape from the dark and smoky interior. During the day most activities would have been carried out outside, e.g. making pottery, tools, clothing; processing animal skins and meat; cutting and carving wood etc.



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Neolithic toilets?

We have very little evidence to suggest that actual toilets existed, although there is some evidence at Skara Brae, Orkney. Here, some stone-built Neolithic houses had a small chamber at the side of the building with drains leading outside, suggesting that these chambers could have been toilets.

This is the only real evidence for actual toilets, so it's possible that in other places people simply dug a small pit or maybe went to the toilet in the rivers that were usually close to settlements. One end of Neolithic houses is often believed to have been used as an animal barn, due to the high levels of droppings in the soil, but it is also possible that this area was used as a toilet area for the family living in the house!

Ritual

Although houses were clearly used as living spaces, it seems as though Neolithic people may have had some ceremonial attachment to their houses as well. A number of artefacts (including tools, bones, and pottery) have been found deposited in post-holes and pits, which might have been offerings made during the building of the house, perhaps to protect it during the owner's occupation.



Settlement clusters were probably home to an extended family group.

A number of the houses also appear to have been destroyed by fire, evidenced by the remains of burnt timbers and large spreads of charcoal. In some cases this may be due to attack from other groups (arrowheads were found near the burnt remains of a house at Ballyharry, Co. Antrim). In others it seems as though the burning was deliberate, sometimes burning the entire structure. This might have been done to cleanse the site when the group was relocating, and perhaps to represent the end of the site's occupation.

Villages

Although isolated Neolithic houses are known, there are also groups of houses. This probably occurred because of the nature of agriculture and cultivation – more people were needed to tend the land. These settlement clusters were probably home to an extended family group, all working together on the same farm.

Collections in focus

This type of round-based pottery vessel was used for storing and cooking food, although it was found in the burial chamber at Dooney's Cairn, Ballymacaldrack, Co. Antrim. Perforated holes around the rim may have allowed the pot to be suspended above a hearth. These types of pots often end up in tombs, and they were probably deposited after a ceremonial feast, or they may have contained food as offerings for the ancestors. The Dooney's Cairn pot is decorated with vertical lines, which was created by pressing cord into the wet clay.

