

birds with ordinary fowl. Their courage is legendary and at least one story tells of how a cock once attacked a fox, flew onto the fox's neck and drove his beak through his skull. Perhaps the guard theory is not so far fetched after all.

In the Early Iron Age and even in the Bronze Age, when farming became thoroughly established in this country, the domestic birds were probably the Indian Red Jungle Fowl. Thereafter we have the accepted progression to the Old English Game, with the great range of colours that have gradually evolved.

The Romans are thought to have introduced the heavier fowl of the farmyard. Columella of Gades, who lived near Rome in the first century AD, wrote an admirable work on agriculture entitled *De Re Rustica*. He devoted a chapter to the maintenance of farmyard fowl (Book VIII). The ideal bird he describes is not at all dissimilar to the Black Red with variations which could be understood as the Golden Duckwing. He advises that white birds should be avoided since they are less prolific and often 'carried off by hawks and eagles'. His description of the cock birds also conforms to the game bird pattern. He praises the natural aggression of cock birds and suggests their legs should be armed for offence 'as stakes ready for the attack'. Clearly by this time there is a great number of variations. It is quite logical to accept that a similar number of variations existed within the Celtic world.

Research at Butser is currently demonstrating that a high level of expertise in agriculture existed at that time. Farms were complex units with all the attributes one would expect. The basic agricultural economy embraced both production and service industries and was successful. The presence of fowl, whether Indian Red Jungle or Old English Game, serve to show that a level of sophistication existed which included that of competitive pleasure. Hardly the pursuits of tattooed, naked savages, saved from perdition by the Romans.

The Butser Ancient Farm Demonstration Area, distinct from the research site, is situated adjacent to the Queen Elizabeth Country Park, 3 miles south of Petersfield off the London Portsmouth trunk road (A3). This site is open to visitors daily (except Mondays) from May to September from 14.00 - 17.00 hrs. Further information can be obtained from the author.

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# THE WORLD PHEASANT ASSOCIATION



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## THE DOMESTIC FOWL OF THE IRON AGE IN BRITAIN

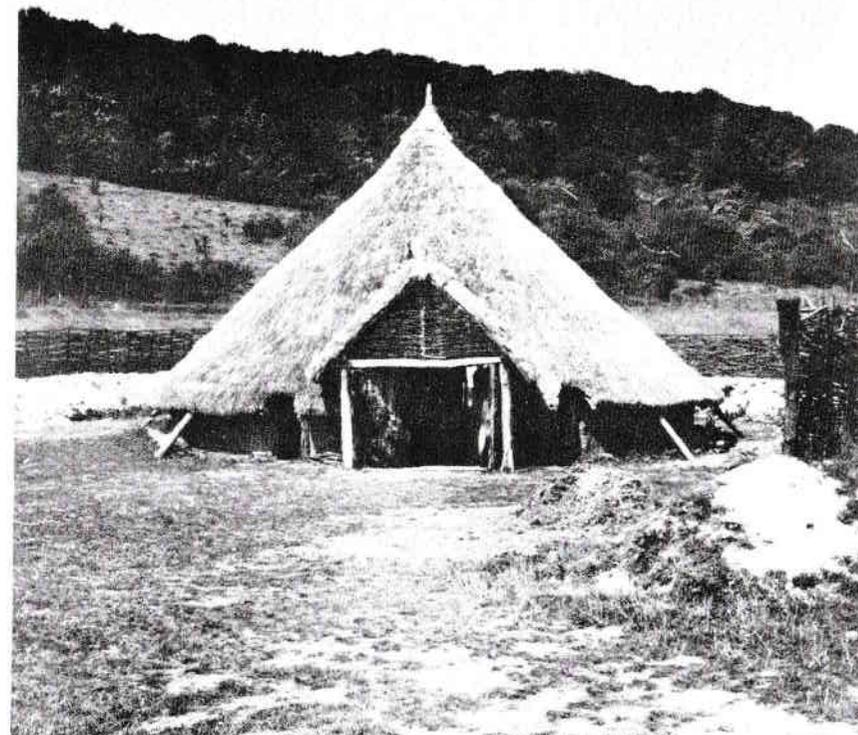
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The Iron Age, which spans the millennium before the Romans finally invaded this country in 43 AD, is arguably one of the most fascinating periods of the past. Apart from a few references to be found in the texts of the Greek and Roman writers, we rely entirely upon the excavated archaeological evidence for our information.

A large number of excavations have been carried out throughout the United Kingdom and the findings from these indicate the presence of a highly organised, multi-layered and successful society extant in these islands at that time. Magnificent gold and silver work objects have been recovered which argue for the presence of accomplished smiths, advanced ironwork including the invention of the iron-banded spoked wheel and superb cast bronze horse trappings. The treasures are but one aspect. The British building tradition in the Iron Age favoured the round-house rather than the continental long-house. The ground plans of a large number of these have been recovered, some of which were directly succeeded by Roman villas. It would seem that, in Britain, livestock were housed separately in small rectangular buildings, in contrast to the continental life style where animals often lived at one end of the house, humans at the other.

The basic economy of the Iron Age was agriculture. Again all the evidence points to a highly successful economy at this time, including an import and export trade. The principal exports were corn and leather. Hunting dogs also figured in the export manifest and were highly prized abroad. The British predilections have seemingly altered little over the millennia.

In order to discover more about this period and especially about the basic agricultural economy, a unique research project was set up in 1972. This is the Butser Ancient Farm Research Project, situated on a northern spur of Butser Hill in Hampshire. Its purpose is to reconstruct and operate a farm dating to c.300 BC, to study both prehistoric and Roman agriculture. In reality it is the first



The Pimperne House – a reconstruction of a ‘Celtic Manor House’ based directly upon an archaeological excavation at Pimperne Down in Dorset. Nearly 14 metres in diameter, a modern house could be put inside it.  
(Photo: P.J. Reynolds)

open air scientific research Laboratory of its kind. Here experiments are mounted to test the theories that are based on the archaeological evidence. The whole of the agricultural cycle embracing both animal and plant husbandry is under examination. Initial results from crop growing experiments indicate that the yields of the prehistoric cereals, Emmer (*Triticum dicoccum*) and Spelt (*Triticum spelta*) were equally as good as those achieved in the early 1900's AD. Similarly grain storage experiments have shown that the principle of the underground silo which relies on carbon dioxide gas as a preservative agent was well understood and practised. Research at Butser involves animal husbandry, and the main purpose of this paper is to discuss the presence and significance of fowl and domestic birds in this period of prehistory. Unfortunately, the bone evidence upon which we rely for the other domestic animals is comparatively rare, and those we have recovered, therefore, are probably non-representative. Undoubtedly the majority were despatched by dogs who not surprisingly do not share the human reservations about the danger of bone splinters.

Those bones we have support the generally accepted theories that Indian Red Jungle Fowl *Gallus gallus* were the first 'domesticated' birds to be brought to the British Isles. There is little doubt that the sport of cock fighting originated in India and possibly China before 1000 BC. In Persia and Greece the sport was held in high esteem and the performance of a good fighting cock was held out as an example to the soldier. It is hardly remarkable, therefore, that this sport should have reached this country well within the first millennium BC. Especially is this likely since the Celtic world extended from China in the east to Ireland in the west. One certainly doesn't have to look for a Roman introduction. Indeed when Caesar invaded these islands in 55 and 54 BC during his two abortive campaigns, he made several observations which have survived in his war diaries '*De Bello Gallico*'. He referred directly to the custom of the British who kept both geese and chickens but believed it wrong to eat them. Many of his observations were, in fact, wrong and here it would be nice to believe the first part of his statement and not the second. Since he gained his knowledge from informants this may well be the case. He could observe himself that these birds were actually kept and the second phase of the information may have been designed to allow the natives to continue keeping them.

However, it is the second part of his statement about chickens which is particularly fascinating. He records that they were kept '*animi causa*' (for sake of pleasure). Geese, while not necessarily agreeable birds, can be faithful to their owner and excellent guards. The attack upon the Capitol in Rome frustrated by the warning given by geese is the most famous such incident recorded. Domestically they have been employed in the same way for thousands of years. Undoubtedly there are large numbers of geese who have lived extraordinarily long lives and given much pleasure as property guards. Similarly there must have been even larger numbers who barely achieved maturity before their contributions of fat, flesh and feather were absorbed into the common prehistoric good. For chickens, on the other hand, guard qualities are hardly comparable. But in the cock pit, if one is to put aside modern emotions, the delight, pleasure and recreation they are said to provide is incomparable. Cynically, we could compare it with a reputedly civilised but gory boxing match, an extremely satisfying spectator sport.

To support the theory that cock fighting occurred in prehistoric Britain we have the evidence of several bronze spurs which have been discovered in excavations. If we accept that cock fighting was a part of the pleasure of Iron Age man, we must also accept that the fowl were an integral element of the farm. Inevitably the specialist breeding programme allowed for the wastage to be a food supply. It would be more likely that the cock breeding was a luxury. We should probably imagine a similar pattern to that which existed less than two centuries ago in Cornwall and elsewhere. There game birds were regularly bred along with farmyard fowl. There is another alternative purpose for keeping game

