

LIVESTOCK

Although we have a fairly comprehensive picture of the livestock of an Iron Age farm, there is still much to learn about management, fodder supplies and basic land utilisation. By actually maintaining the animals we observe the trace evidence of processes like the concentrations of seeds and pollen grains from food stores, the enhanced phosphate levels from cow byres and the requirements for food storage.



Skull of *Bos taurus*.

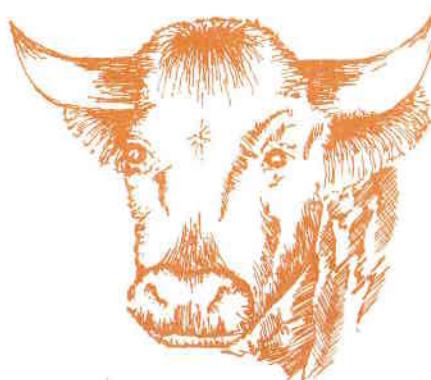


THE CELTIC EXPERIENCE

Throughout the farm area a variety of livestock is on view. Necessarily these change both in their actual location on the farm due to grazing needs and in the numbers on view simply because of requirements of the research farm the other side of Butser Hill and other sites. Although the Ancient Farm is, in fact, a research project **there are no experiments carried out on livestock.** All the livestock are kept in the best possible condition and are subject to regular inspection by the Ministry of Agriculture, the R.S.P.C.A. and our veterinary surgeons. Our reasons for keeping the range of animals are twofold. First we study the characteristics, growth patterns and their role in the farming cycle and second to show these animals, which are both rare and unusual, to the public at large. At each location on the farm a sign is placed alongside the grazing paddock indicating which animals are on view. **Please do not feed any of the livestock.**

Our understanding of the domestic livestock of the Iron Age is based primarily on the bone evidence recovered from archaeological excavations and from the rock carvings which have survived in Scandinavia and northern Italy.

Cattle. The Celtic cattle, a small, compact, sturdy beast is no longer extant except that a few relatively modern breeds maintain elements of the gene structure. The nearest modern equivalent is the medium and long-legged Dexter and the Western Highland cattle. In prehistory cattle were yoked together and used for pulling the ard, carts and other implements. In addition they were milked and ultimately, of course, provided meat.



Dexter Cow

The evidence indicates young and old animals were eaten which fits exactly the principle of keeping cattle for dairy products. A cow will only produce milk for about 8 – 10 months after calving. Our **Dexter** and **Highland** cattle similarly are trained to the yoke and we regularly use them for ploughing the fields.

Sheep. The **Soay** sheep, the direct descendant of the **Mouflon**, the feral sheep of Europe, are considered to be exactly similar to the domestic sheep of the Bronze and Iron Age in southern England and northern France. Small delicate animals, they look remarkably like goats since both male and female are horned, they run like deer and are capable of leaping nearly two metre high fences. The wool is short stapled and is shed naturally in the summer. To collect it, the shepherd has to pluck the wool from each animal. The Soay breed gave rise to slightly heavier two and four horned sheep, the **Hebridean** and the **Manx Loghtan** and finally to the **Shetland**. These breeds appear in the late Iron Age and all have to be sheared rather than plucked. Their wool is longer of staple and much softer. All these early breeds have survived the passage of time in remote areas of Scotland and the islands. The Soay sheep, for example, come from the St. Kilda group of islands off the north west coast of Scotland.

Goats. It is extremely difficult to distinguish between the bones of sheep and goat unless we have either the foot bones or the cranium. Prehistoric goats were small wiry animals and perhaps survive in the small feral groups in the south west of England and in Scotland. The so-called **Old English Goat** is the most similar breed extant today. They were certainly kept on Iron Age farms, probably for milk as well as meat. Indeed like the cattle and sheep their skins would have been an important product too. Goat skins are especially prized for making into bellows.

Pigs. There are no pigs kept at the Ancient Farm although there is very good evidence that they were kept in the Iron Age. Exactly how is unknown but probably herded like the sheep and goats both in pasture areas and woodlands. The nearest equivalent to the domestic pig of that time is the result of a cross between the European wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) and the red Tamworth Pig. Earlier experience at the farm showed that keeping these pigs is extremely difficult. The appealing striped piglets grow into powerful hairy adults which are contemptuous of most modern fencing systems. Incidentally, it is most probable that the hunting of the wild boar was a major sport in the Iron Age.

Horses. Horses were important during the Iron Age and possession of horses was possibly an indication of status. Frequently horse skulls are found which were carefully deposited in pits suggesting a ritual practice. The modern equivalent of the Celtic horse is represented by two particular breeds, the **Exmoor** pony and **Przewalski** horse of middle Europe. The most dramatic use of horses is recorded by Caesar who described the skills and tactics of four thousand charioteers.

Poultry. Chickens and Geese were certainly kept in the Iron Age. The bone evidence is extremely rare and very slight. The breed of chickens were probably mixtures of the **Indian Red Jungle Fowl** and the **Old English Game Fowl**. Caesar reports that they were kept especially 'for pleasure' and one suspects cock-fighting to be the basic reason. Perhaps the occasional roundhouse was, in fact, a cockpit. The **Greylag** were the geese of the period and doubtless were kept for a variety of reasons beyond food. Traditionally they are splendid guard creatures.

Bees. It is most probable that bees were actually kept in the Iron Age although the evidence is, as yet, inconclusive. The Romans certainly had developed beekeeping skills at the same period. The products were critically important, the beeswax for candles and particularly metalworking, the lost wax method of casting bronze, and the honey both for sweetening and for making into mead.



Old English Game Fowl