

# Life during the Iron Age

**A**round 600BC, farming practices changed significantly in Ireland with the introduction of iron. Popular history holds that a tribal group known as the Celts – who originated in central Europe, around the Alps – introduced this technology into Ireland. It is not clear whether they came as invaders, as happened in much of the rest of Europe, or if their arrival was a more gradual assimilation into the existing population. There is a scarcity of both monuments and artefacts dating to this period, hence our knowledge about the way people lived at this time is limited.

The introduction of iron manufacturing technology meant that farmers were no longer reliant on stone and bronze tools. They now had a much stronger, more durable and sharper metal to help them with their daily chores. Iron ore and bog ore are found throughout the country. This would have allowed many small communities to make their own tools and weapons rather than being dependent on acquiring copper and tin from outside sources.

Some objects, such as axe heads, were almost exact replicas of the bronze versions produced by their ancestors. Indeed bronze continued to be used in the Iron Age period but more for personal ornaments and jewellery.

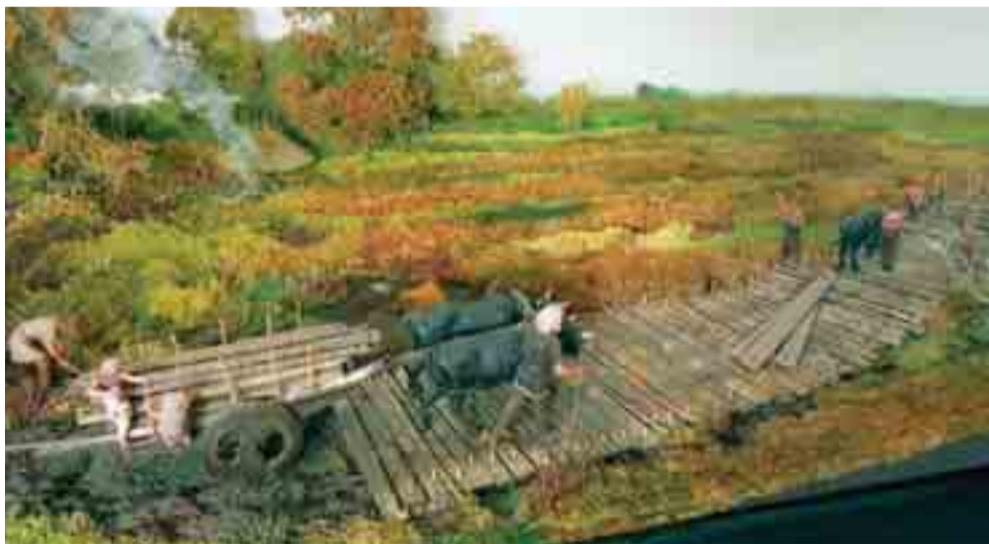
## FARMING INNOVATION

New cereals including rye and oats were introduced at this time and with them came the coulter plough and rotary quern stones. The coulter was a technical innovation introduced by the Romans to Britain. Its function was to make a vertical cut in advance of the plough-share, which then undercut the furrow made by the coulter. This made it easier to cultivate heavy soils and allowed more intensive farming in areas of Cavan, Leitrim and Monaghan.

The introduction of rotary quern stones also marked a technological advance in the processing of cereals. The earliest type of rotary quern is the beehive quern. The beehive shaped top stone had a central conical hopper to hold the grain that fed down to the grinding surface. A wooden handle would also have been inserted into this upper stone to facilitate its rotation.

A number of wooden trackways or toghers have been discovered in bogs dating to the Iron Age period. At Corlea in Longford, a substantial trackway which runs for circa 1.75km was uncovered and excavated during the 1980s. Dendrochronology (tree-ring dating) has been

This is the latest in a series of articles from the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to introduce *Farmers Journal* readers to the archaeology of Ireland and to highlight the vital role of the farming community in preserving our heritage.



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**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:**  
A section of an excavated and preserved ancient trackway in the Corlea Trackway Visitor Centre; An artist's impression of the trackway in use at Corlea, Co Longford; Ogham Stone at Derrynane Beg, Co Kerry.

able to tell us that the trees used to construct this trackway were felled in either late 148BC or early 147BC, placing it firmly in the Iron Age period. The Corlea Trackway Visitor Centre, near Kenagh in Co Longford, has a preserved section of this oak trackway on display.

## BOG BODIES

Bodies dating to the Iron Age period have also been uncovered in bogs, including Oldcroghan Man in Co Offaly and Clonycavan Man in Co Meath, both discovered in 2003 during peat cutting. The bogs provide an excellent environment for preservation and huge amounts of knowledge about the way these people lived were obtained from these remains, including details about what they ate for their final meals and the circumstances surrounding their deaths.

An exhibition of Iron Age bog



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bodies and related finds is currently on display in the National Museum of Ireland, Kildare St, Dublin 2.

The earliest recorded form of alphabet in Ireland dates to the later part of the Iron Age period and is known as ogham. Ogham was used to write the old Irish language with each letter consisting of groups of one to five parallel lines or notches cut along the side or across the edge of a stone. The inscription is in many cases a male person's name followed by his father's name, and occasionally his tribal affiliation. The stones may have functioned as memorials, grave markers or territorial markers. They are found throughout the country with the largest concentrations in Cork, Kerry and Waterford. **CL**

**NEXT WEEK**  
**THE MARVELS OF EARLY CHRISTIAN IRELAND**