

Notes for Teachers: the site, the finds and additional resources

These notes describe the site and the finds and then lists some useful web-links and visual material.

The original excavations

Glastonbury Lake Village was built on an artificial island in shallow water on the Somerset Levels during the Iron Age. It was discovered by Arthur Bulleid in 1892. Bulleid was a medical student, amateur archaeologist and the son of the founder of the Glastonbury Antiquarian Society. Having read about lake villages in Switzerland, he searched for similar sites in Somerset, leading to his discovery of a number of earth mounds, just north of Glastonbury. From then until 1907, Bulleid and a team of helpers excavated the site. In recent years archaeologists have returned to the site and have re-interpreted Bulleid's original conclusions.

When did people live in the lake village?

The dates suggested by archaeologists vary a little but not significantly. The settlement was first used between 250 and 150BC and was home to about 200 people. The occupants were forced to leave in about 50 AD, due to rising water levels caused by deterioration in the climate. This is therefore an Iron Age site. A second debate is about whether the site was occupied continuously or whether there was a break in occupation with the first settlers building square or rectangular houses and the later occupiers building roundhouses. A study of the site by Bryony Orme and John Coles (1980) suggests that as well as the buildings used as homes there were specialised areas and buildings for woodworking, pottery manufacture and working in iron, bronze and bone.

The finds

The waterlogged site preserved a wide range of objects – items of bronze, tin, lead and iron; amber, glass, jet and shale; wood, bone and antler; pottery, baked-clay, flint and stone.

Foundations: were made of brushwood and logs, filled in with rushes, bracken, peat and clay and surrounded by a wooden palisade creating a man-made island 3.5 acres in size. Settlers reached the village by dug-out canoes and across trackways of wood laid across the marshland.

Buildings: there were about 80 buildings though only a minority were in use at any one time. The base of each house was a circular clay floor. The wall of a house was made by driving a circle of posts through the floor into the foundations. The spaces between these uprights were then filled

with wattle and daub, and a thatched roof was erected, supported by a central post. Some houses had wooden floorboards. The quality of the work has led archaeologists to describe the builders as fine carpenters and the houses as skilfully constructed.

Over time, the foundations beneath a house compacted so the floor was built up again. In one house a sequence of ten floors was found. The roundhouses were between 5½ metres and 8½ metres in diameter. Some houses had solid wooden doors (though none remained), since an iron ‘latch-lifter’ and a stone with a pivot-hole were among the finds. At the centre of each house was a hearth.

Bronze and lead objects: of the 274 bronze items, most were ‘objects of personal adornment’ (rings, brooches, fasteners and a mirror) though the prize find was a bowl. There were 32 lead items, of which 13 were fishing-net sinkers.

Iron objects: of the 111 iron items, only 7 were weapons – 3 daggers (including fragments), 3 spearheads, 1 fragment of a sword. There were also iron parts of 4 snaffle-bits and 4 saws. Some of the iron tools such as knives, saws and scythes still had their wooden handles. 2 ‘currency bars’ were found but just a single coin, dating from around 100–50BC.

Amber, glass, jet and shale: 5 objects of amber and 27 of glass were found, almost all of which were beads. A lump of greenish-blue glass slag supports the suggestion that glass was made at the village. One object was made of jet, a highly polished ring or bead. There were 31 shale objects including two decorated armlets. Several rings and other items were part-finished which suggests that shale was imported and worked at the village.

Wooden objects: there was a wide array of carefully worked wooden objects including parts of tubs and cups, looms or other apparatus for making textile fabrics, ladles, parts of lathe-turned wheel-hubs and wheel-spokes for chariots or carts, a ladder with four steps, a small door, fragments of baskets, two small wooden pins found with a bronze mirror, tweezers, the tops of two spade-handles, two mallets, an oak dish or trough, and several wicker-made hurdles. A dugout canoe, of oak, was discovered by a labourer clearing the ditch of a nearby field.

Bone and antler: hundreds of bone and antler objects included 89 weaving combs and 5 dice. Three of the dice were found with 23 disc-shaped, polished pebbles, which were probably counters.

Pottery: several tons of pottery fragments were found but only half-a-dozen vessels were complete. All were probably made at or near the village. Very few pots show evidence of being wheel-made, suggesting the bulk of the pottery was built up by hand.

Other important items: loom weights and spindle whorls made of baked-clay for producing textiles; 18 saddle querns and 38 rotary querns for grinding corn for making bread.

Linked resources

Digital recreation – a distance view of village (also on SouthWest Heritage Trust) – an atmospheric reconstruction of the village from water level – while I found it hard to follow the perspective in the first minute of aerial photography thereafter this is very atmospheric, travelling along the water and then the village comes into view, creating a really powerful sense of the village.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_8BffrPiJ0

See also Louise McGinlay's website for other reconstruction images and the video above

<https://louisemcginlay.wordpress.com/portfolio/reconstructing-the-glastonbury-lake-village/>

South West Heritage Trust – photographs of recent excavations

<https://avalon-archaeology.com/archaeology-projects/glastonbury-lake-village/>

Avalon Marshes – photographs and background information

<http://avalonmarshes.org/the-avalon-marshes/heritage/glastonbury-lake-village/>

2015 excavations – for teachers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-yffdYfmTk>

The building of individual houses

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrBj0HM_IPA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llUOBK7AT8s>

Other short films on Iron Age roundhouses and life

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIeuOISbk7c>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_flj3SYjgw