

How the West was Won earliest farmers in mid Wales



“The people who inhabit this land are making some big statements. Here in Wales we have discovered one of the largest timber constructions anywhere in Europe from that age.”
Huw Edwards, BBCs
The Story of Wales



earliest farmers

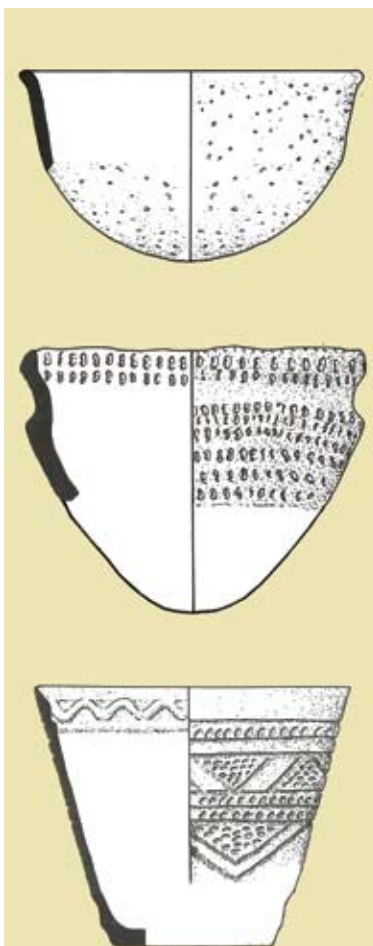
In the first episode of the recent BBC Wales series *The Story of Wales* Huw Edwards was seen walking through oak woodland as the posts of the Hindwell Neolithic palisaded enclosure sprang magically into view (see cover illustration).

Excavations by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust have shown that the palisade, with posts perhaps over 4 metres high, was built in about 2800 BC with little more than stone tools and human effort. It covered an area of about 34 hectares, making it by far the largest enclosure of this kind known in Britain. Even more remarkably, however, recent work by the Trust has shown that the site formed just part of an extensive complex of earth and timber enclosures that were built in the Walton basin, just to the east of New Radnor, throughout the Neolithic period, between about 3800 and 2500 BC.

These enclosures were being built during the period when farming was first introduced in Wales — when the raising of domesticated animals and the growing of cereal crops was taking over from a way of life that depended solely upon hunting, fishing and gathering wild fruits and plants.



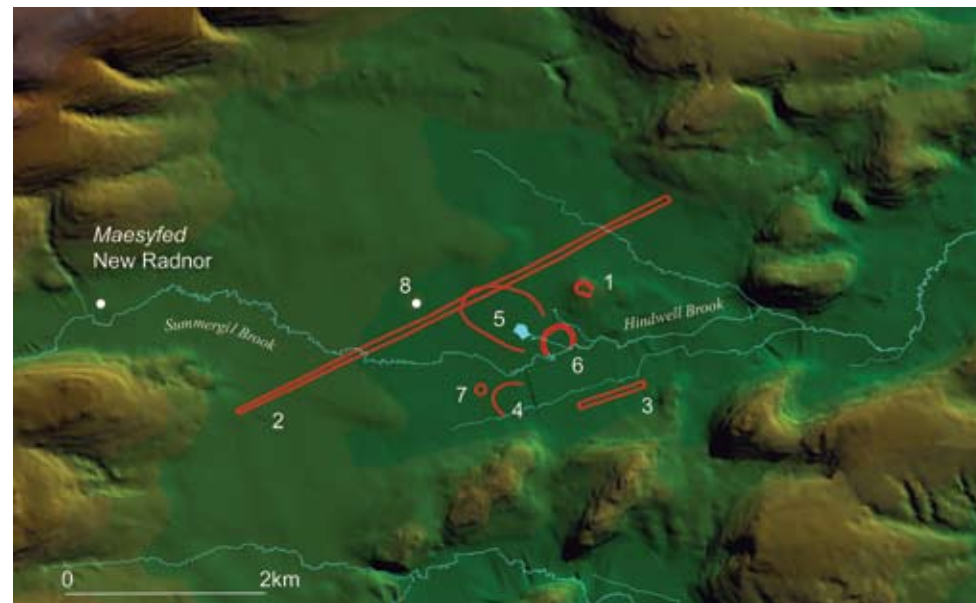
Little is now visible of the remarkable complex of Neolithic enclosures in the Walton basin. The Four Stones stone circle shown here may be later in date, and possibly belongs to the early Bronze Age.



Neolithic pots of these types were used for cooking and food storage. **Top** Earlier Neolithic plain round-bottomed bowl. **Centre** Middle Neolithic Mortlake Ware with impressed decoration, possibly imitating basketry. **Bottom** Late Neolithic Grooved Ware, with impressed and incised decoration.

tribal gatherings

In parts of Wales small farming communities are known to have built chambered tombs in which to bury their dead during the Neolithic period. Here in mid Wales a new and dramatic picture is emerging that is transforming our ideas about what society was like at this time. Thousands of tonnes of earth and timber were moved during the construction of a sequence of massive monuments which radically affected the environment. It clearly involved the coming together of hundreds if not thousands of people, at least at certain times of the year. We have still to learn what the monuments were for, but the way they cluster around the springs at the source of the Hindwell Brook hints at a religious cult focused upon sources of water. The sequence of monument types possibly reflects changing beliefs or ceremonial activities that were taking place throughout the Neolithic period.



Above The complex of Neolithic enclosures in the Walton basin. **1** Womaston causewayed enclosure. **2** Hindwell cursus. **3** Walton cursus. **4** Walton palisaded enclosure. **5** Hindwell palisaded enclosure. **6** Hindwell double-palisaded enclosure. **7** Walton Court ring-ditch. **8** Four Stones stone circle, possibly of Bronze Age date.

Flint arrowheads were used both for hunting and warfare in the Neolithic period. **Left** Earlier Neolithic leaf-shaped arrowhead. **Centre** Later Neolithic chisel arrowhead. **Right** Oblique arrowhead.

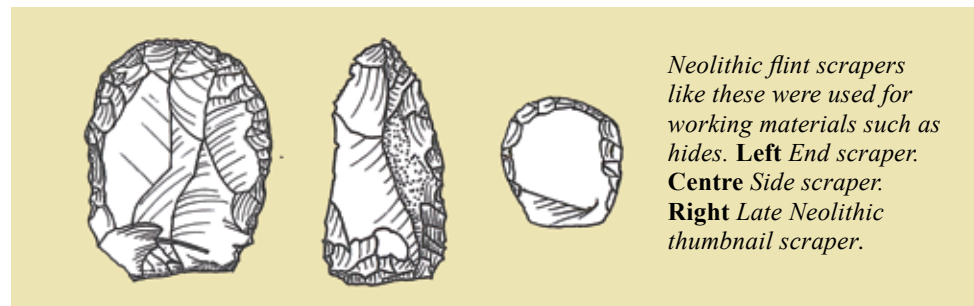
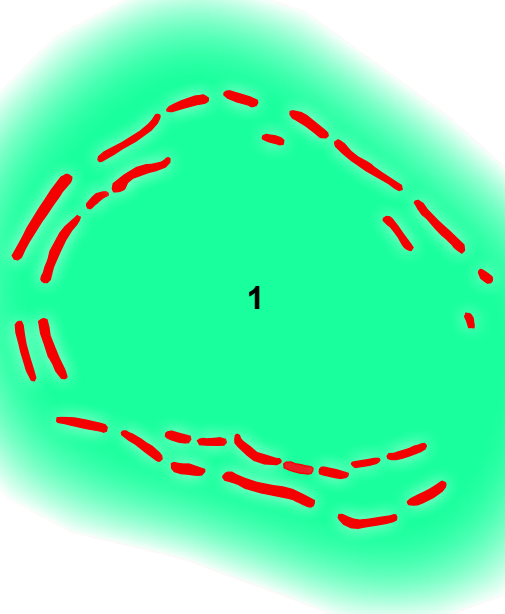


digging pits and ditches

Womaston causewayed enclosure

The Womaston causewayed enclosure is one of the earliest Neolithic sites in the Walton basin and occupies a low hillock which is one of the few prominent landmarks in the valley bottom. The enclosure is 180 metres by 130 metres across and covers an area of 1.8 hectares. It had two roughly concentric lines of interrupted ditches between about 5–14 metres apart, and has a possible entrance on the southern side where the inner ditch turns inwards. Excavations have shown that the ditch segments were about 2.5m wide and up to 2m deep, with steep sides and flat bottoms. Radiocarbon dates suggest that the enclosure was built during the period between about 3700–3300 BC. The discovery of charred cereal grains in the ditches suggests arable farming was taking place in close proximity. Similar Neolithic enclosures are known elsewhere in southern Britain and are thought to have been used for seasonal gatherings rather than as permanent settlement sites.

Below Excavation in progress on one of the ditch segments of the Womaston causewayed enclosure. Material dug from the ditches was used for building banks on the inside. The total length of the ditches was probably about 700 metres and would have involved the excavation of thousands of tonnes of gravel.



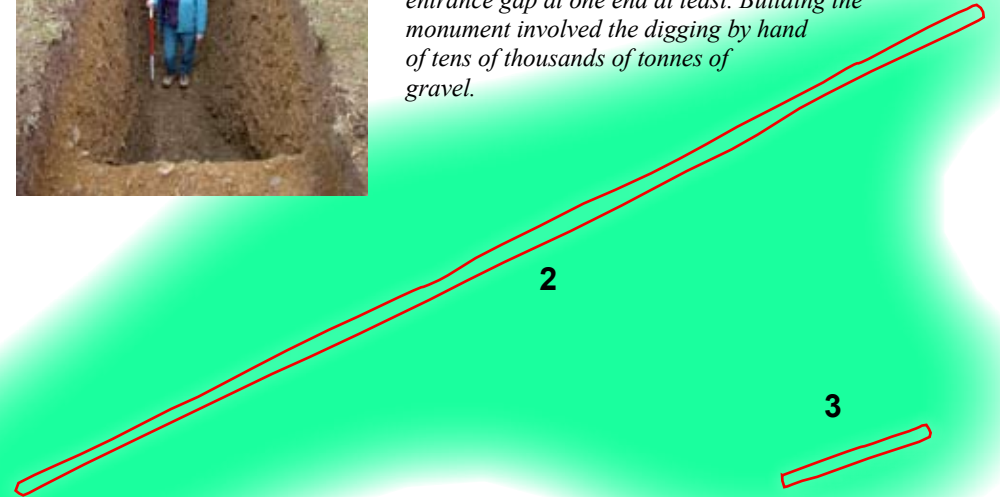
Neolithic flint scrapers like these were used for working materials such as hides. **Left** End scraper. **Centre** Side scraper. **Right** Late Neolithic thumbnail scraper.

Hindwell and Walton Green cursuses

Similar examples to these two elongated ditched enclosures are known throughout Britain. They are thought to have had a ceremonial function, perhaps as processional ways. The shorter Walton Green cursus has yet to be closely dated, but radiocarbon dates suggests that the Hindwell cursus, which is one of the longest known in Britain, belongs to the period between about 3900–3500 BC. The landscape setting of the two sites is quite different. The Walton Green cursus lies parallel to the valley side and seems to be aligned on the eastern entrance to the valley. The Hindwell cursus acts more like a barrier, dividing the valley into two. But is it significant that both appear to be roughly aligned on the direction of sunrise on Beltane (1 May)? Earth dug from the ditches was probably used to make banks on the inner side.



Left The ditch of the Hindwell cursus **2**. The cursus is 4.6 kilometres long with side ditches up to 74 metres apart, roughly squared at each end, and enclosing an area of about 27 hectares. The steep-sided ditches were up to about 4 metres wide and 2 metres deep with an entrance gap at one end at least. Building the monument involved the digging by hand of tens of thousands of tonnes of gravel.

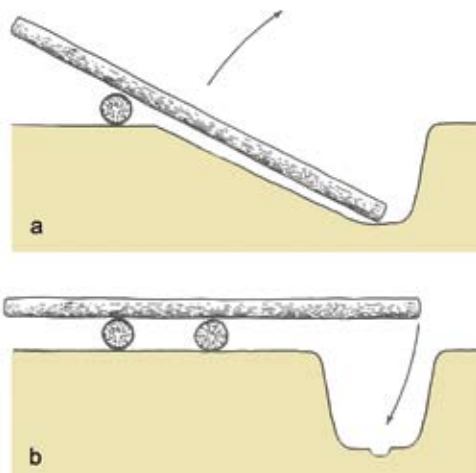


Left How the Walton Green cursus **3** may have appeared. The cursus is 673 metres long with roughly squared ends and enclosed an area of 3.6 hectares. The ditches are up to 58 metres apart and were up to 3 metres wide and 0.8 metres deep and there is evidence of an entrance gap at one end at least. Digging the ditches would have involved the excavation of thousands of tonnes of gravel.

putting up palisades

Walton and Hindwell enclosures

These three palisaded enclosures lie close together on the eastern side of the basin. They were each made of large upright timbers but had been built in slightly different ways. The Walton enclosure **4** had more widely-spaced posts set in separate pits with post ramps (see **a** to right). The Hindwell enclosure **5** was built of less widely-spaced posts set in intercutting pits, again with post-ramps. The Hindwell double-palisaded enclosure **6** was built of close-set posts set in continuous, steep-sided foundation trenches (**b**). Traces of the original posts are clearly visible in the ground where they have rotted away or been burnt. Charcoal from burnt posts indicates that the posts were of oak, possibly felled on the valley sides. For the sake of stability posts normally have to be set up to a third of their depth in the ground, which suggests that each of the palisades stood to 4 metres or more above ground level. Radiocarbon dates suggest that the three enclosures were built in the period between about 2800–2400 BC, possibly one after the other. A single entrance is known in the case of the Hindwell enclosure.



Below The Walton palisaded enclosure **4** was at least 200 metres by 280 metres across and enclosed an area of more than 5 hectares. It was built of posts up to 0.7 metres in diameter, of which at least 200 would have been needed if its plan was symmetrical. Individual post-pits like the one shown here were up to 2 metres across and 2 metres deep, with ramps up to 4 metres long to help in raising the posts.

Polished flint or stone axes were used for tree-felling and woodworking.



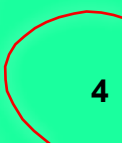
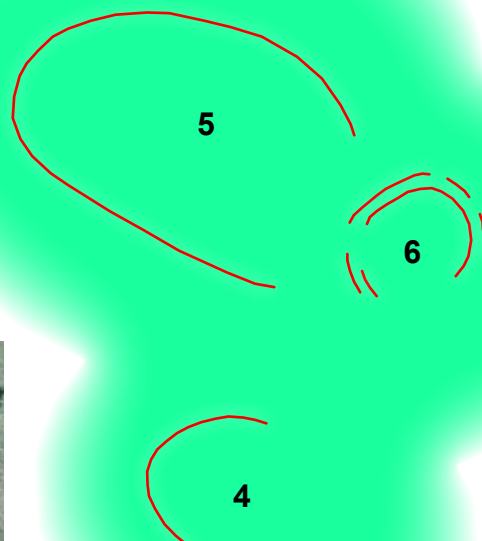
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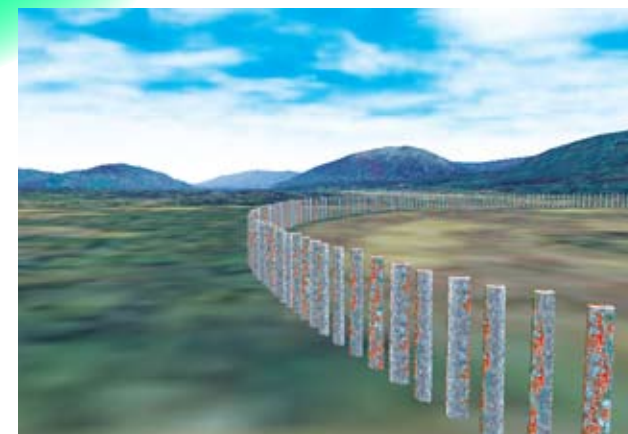
Left The Hindwell palisaded enclosure **5** was 750 metres long and up to 540 metres wide and covered an area of at least 34 hectares. The palisade is over 1800 metres long, with posts about 0.8 metres in diameter spaced about 1.6 metres centre to centre. It would have needed at least 1100 posts in addition to the digging of the intercutting foundation slots. These were up to 2 metres deep and 2 metres across, with post ramps up to 6 metres long.



Above The two palisades of the Hindwell double-palisaded enclosure **6** are about 25–30 metres apart. It measures 340 metres by 280 metres across and covers an area of about 7 hectares. The palisade trenches, originally perhaps 1850 metres in length, had held close-set posts up to 0.35–0.4m across. Construction would have required about 4500 posts in addition to the digging the more or less continuous foundation trenches, which were about 2.8 metres wide and 1.8 metres deep.



Right Impression of how the Walton palisaded enclosure may once have appeared. Like the other enclosures it is uncertain whether the posts were freestanding or made up a barrier.

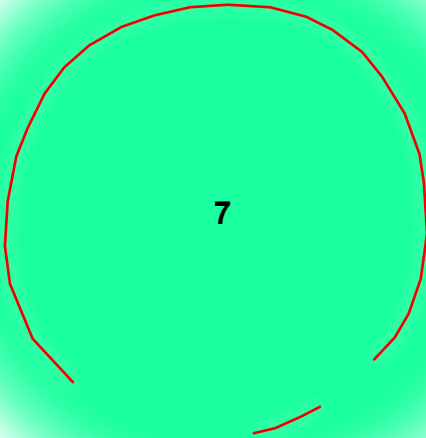


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making rings

Walton Court ring-ditch

This giant ring-ditch is just under 100 metres in diameter and has produced radiocarbon dates in the period 2569–2308 BC, suggesting that it is amongst the latest of the large monuments in the Walton basin. The ditch is about 2 metres wide and 1.5 metres deep and may have been used to construct a low inner or outer bank. It encloses an area of about 0.8 hectares and has a possible entrance on one side. The total length of the ditch was about 290 metres and would have involved the excavation of many hundreds of tonnes of gravel.



Aerial photograph of the Walton Green ring-ditch. Most of the sites in the Walton basin were first discovered from the air as none are now visible at ground level.

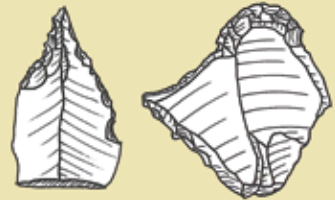
Acknowledgements: **funding**, Cadw on behalf of the Welsh Government; **images**, courtesy of CPAT, BBC Wales, Llandrindod Wells Museum, Chris Butler's *Prehistoric Flintwork*, Alex Gibson and Ann Woods's *Prehistoric Pottery for the Archaeologist*, and Alasdair Whittle's *Sacred Mound, Holy Rings*; **landowners** who kindly allowed us on to their land so that we could find out more about these remarkable sites are warmly thanked.

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Neolithic flint piercer (left) and composite tool used for both cutting and scraping (right).



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