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An Utterly Impartial History of Britain

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The Bronze Age: when the clever kids did metalwork

Historians have debated long and hard about which invaders came when, with the only consensus being that all of it occurred 'incredibly recently'. It is believed that the stone circle temple at Avebury was built by Neolithic man, but their supremacy was challenged by a stronger, larger race who originated in the Rhineland, reaching Britain in around 1,900 BC. These invaders have been dubbed the Beaker People, so called because of the pottery they brought with them. Since remains of the Beaker People have been found buried with their beakers, archaeologists believe that great significance was attached to the beakers. They were obsessed with bloody beakers; every birthday it was the same. 'You'll never guess what I've got you . . .' 'Ooh, thank you, darling, what a surprise! I'll put it with the others.' It might be that the importance of the beaker was to do with what it was used for. Alcohol was a recent discovery, and the magical powers of this drink may have had religious meaning for the Beaker People. The drinking of fermented honey would probably have been a great religious ceremony with formal sipping being executed with great reverence as they paid homage to their gods. And then half an hour later it was all, 'Oi, you spilt my beaker!' 'Oh yeah, do you want some?' 'Right, outside, you beardy bastard!' These were the people who built Stonehenge; after a long day dragging giant rocks into place you'd probably need a drink or two. Many of the stones were quarried in South Wales, 160 miles away from their destination on Salisbury Plain, and sunken stones have been found at the bottom of the Severn Estuary, which must have been the cause of a certain amount of prehistoric swearing. You spend months hacking a fourteen-foot rock out of the Welsh Hills, you drag it forty miles, and then halfway across the river Severn the bloke running the little ferry service explains that his raft wasn't quite as watertight as he'd thought. 'I'm terribly sorry, I seem to have lost your sacred stone.' 'Oh, not to worry, really. We can go back and get another one; it's no trouble.' As a piece of engineering, Stonehenge is an incredible achievement and there is something rather symmetrical about Microsoft providing a photo of Stonehenge as a standard wallpaper for the twenty-first-century computer screen. No one knows quite why it was built, but it seems sensible to presume that some ancient ceremony took place there every year, hopefully slightly more meaningful than today's annual beating up of New Age



travellers by the local riot police. The sheer scale of the monument and the logistics that must have been involved in constructing it tell us something of the society that built it. We know that they followed the movement of the stars and the planets, the presumption being that they worshipped the sun, which as religions go seems a bit 'first base', but then it was a long time ago. In fact the site was of religious significance for far longer than Christianity or Islam have existed. It is the temple of a civilization about which we know very little and so tend to presume was very simplistic. But they must have also had a fairly advanced social structure; in addition to a good number of labourers or slaves they would have needed managers, engineers, surveyors and designers. Basically they must have had a middle class. How Stonehenge managed to get planning permission with all those objections from 'The Friends of Salisbury Plain' is just another one of its ancient mysteries. By this time Britain was following the rest of Europe into the Bronze Age. It is hard to imagine that one type of metal could have so transformed life for early man; today its only use is to make the medals for British athletes at the Commonwealth Games, but back then this new alloy brought about a revolution. Bronze Age man would have treasured the strength and versatility of this new resource and there would have been much debate about the evolving process of metalwork.

'So how do you make this "bronze" stuff exactly?'

'You smelt together the ore of two different minerals – copper and tin, see?'

'I thought that made brass. Are you sure we're not living in the Brass Age?'

'Nah, brass is copper and zinc, isn't it?'

'Or is it copper and lead?'

