

# British History Series: Episode 1 - "Island on the Edge of the World"

Presented by Chris Green

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## Introduction

Chris Green kicked off the first episode of a 38-part series on British history, covering the period from the Ice Age to the internet. The series aims to provide context to Britain's rich and diverse history, moving beyond the usual focus on the Tudors and World War II.

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## Key Themes Covered

### 1. Britain's Global Impact

- Despite being just 0.5% of the world's landmass and less than 1% of its population, Britain has had a disproportionate impact on the world.
- Contributions include inventions like the steam engine, the World Wide Web, and cultural icons such as Charles Dickens, The Beatles, and J.K. Rowling.
- Britain also gave the world sports like football, cricket, and rugby, as well as legal systems like the Magna Carta.

### 2. Early Britain: From Ice Age to Island

- 200,000 years ago, Britain was connected to mainland Europe via Doggerland, a now-submerged landmass in the North Sea.
- Around 10,000 years ago, melting glaciers and rising sea levels cut Britain off from Europe, leaving hunter-gatherers stranded.
- These early inhabitants, like "Cheddar Man," had dark skin, dark hair, and blue eyes, resembling other Mesolithic hunter-gatherers in Western Europe.

### 3. Neolithic Farmers (4000 BC)

- Around 6,000 years ago, Neolithic farmers from modern-day Turkey arrived, bringing agriculture and clearing forests.
- These settlers had olive-brown skin, dark hair, and brown eyes, and lived to around 30 years old.
- They introduced farming practices and began constructing stone circles, including the early stages of Stonehenge.

### 4. The Bronze Age (2500-2000 BC)

- The "Beaker People" arrived from Central Europe, bringing bronze tools and pottery.

- They replaced 90% of the Neolithic gene pool, possibly through warfare, intermarriage, or disease.
- They extended Stonehenge and built structures like Woodhenge and Silbury Hill.

#### 5. **The Iron Age (700 BC)**

- Iron Age settlers, likely from France and Belgium, introduced iron tools, revolutionizing agriculture and warfare.
- The population grew to around 1 million, and tribes began forming, with hill forts like Maiden Castle and Oswestry Hill Fort appearing.
- These tribes, known as Celts, shared a common language (Brythonic) and culture, including intricate art and tattoos.

#### 6. **Trade and Connections**

- Despite being an "island on the edge of the world," Britain traded with Europe, importing goods like Italian red glass and French wine.
- Greek explorer Pytheas named Britain "Britannia" after circumnavigating the island around 300 BC.

#### 7. **Julius Caesar's Invasions (55-54 BC)**

- Caesar's first invasion in 55 BC was more of a PR stunt than a conquest, but he defeated British tribes on the beaches of Kent.
- In 54 BC, he returned with a larger force, but storms damaged his fleet. Despite this, he defeated a united British front led by Cassivellaunus.
- Caesar withdrew after securing tribute, but his impact was minimal, and Britain remained independent for nearly another century.

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### **Key Figures and Events**

- **Cheddar Man:** One of Britain's earliest known inhabitants, with dark skin and blue eyes.
  - **Cassivellaunus:** A tribal leader who united British tribes against Caesar.
  - **Julius Caesar:** His invasions marked the first Roman contact with Britain, but he failed to establish lasting control.
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### **Fun Facts**

- Britain's first traffic lights were installed outside the Houses of Parliament in the 19th century.

- The River Thames retains its ancient Brythonic name, surviving Roman and Anglo-Saxon influences.
  - The Beatles, Elton John, and Pink Floyd are among the top 10 best-selling artists in world history, with six of the top 10 being British.
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### **Next Week: The Romans Return**

- The series continues with the Roman conquest of Britain, the rise of Boudicca, and the resistance leader Caratacus.
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### **Questions from the Audience**

- **Q: What happened to the darker-skinned early inhabitants?**
    - A: Their DNA was likely absorbed into later populations through intermarriage or they may have died out due to warfare or disease.
  - **Q: What religions were practiced in Iron Age Britain?**
    - A: Druidical religions, focusing on the worship of natural elements and spirits, were predominant.
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**Join us next week for more fascinating insights into British history!**

*Series presented by Chris Green, 2025.*