Get into the mind of our ancient ancestors

Step outside and stand quietly and still.

Switch off your phone.

Breathe slowly and deeply.

Gradually clear your mind.

Try to forget the modern world.

Feel all of your senses.

Use your imagination to fall back through time to ancient Britain.

It’s 250,000 BC, the large stone circle at Stonehenge has just been completed. You are a farmer living in a small, ancient tribe.

What can you see?

Turn a full circle on the spot and look around you. Ignore anything modern, like buildings, pylons or vehicles. Replace them in your mind with grassland, trees, scrubland, rocks and rivers.

Imagine you are standing on this spot thousands of years ago.

Now look up. Wherever you are, and whatever time of day, look up and think like an ancient. How do you feel when you see the sun, the clouds, the moon, the stars? Imagine you are seeing them for the first time, what would you think the lights in the sky are?

Our ancient ancestors would have known the sky well. They would have understood the clouds and patterns of weather. The night sky would have been brighter and clearer than we see it today, with no pollution of the air and no light pollution from electric lights.

Think about what the sky might tell you about the time of day, and the weather to come.

How would you have lived?

Now you’ve familiarised yourself with the ancient world around you, look for what would have been important to your way of life —

• Is this a good spot to settle your family?
• Are there trees nearby for you to use to build a shelter?
• Is there undergrowth to hide in while you hunt?
• Is there a river or lake near for drinking water?
• Can you see flint to make tools?
• Is there some flat land to grow crops and graze your herds?
• Are there stones and rocks to make a stone circle for worship?

What can you smell?

Can you cut through the modern smells to the timeless, natural scents? — the earth, plants and foliage, clean air carried on the wind. This world of smells would have been very familiar to ancient people, with no modern chemicals, car exhaust, soap, shampoo or deodorant to get in the way.

If it’s hard to ignore the modern smells, put your nose close to the ground or scoop up some earth to smell (you could wear a glove for this). Do the same with the foliage around you, smelling leaves, flowers, bark and grass.

Think about the other smells they might have known: wood smoke, raw and roasting meat, berries and fruit.

How would you have felt?

You can walk in the footsteps of our ancient ancestors by visiting one of over a hundred ancient sites across the UK. Find all the details on our website, along with ancient activities to try at home and an animation with Eric as he travels through time.

bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory

Schools and groups

Find information and resources to help you explore ancient Britain with your group, including creative, hands-on activity instructions and worksheets.

bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory

Many historic sites offer free or discounted pre-booked trips to schools or groups. You can find out more on our partners’ websites:

www.english-heritage.org.uk
www.historic-scotland.gov.uk
www.cadw.wales.gov.uk

What can you hear?

Close your eyes. Ignore any modern sounds such as cars and planes. What natural sounds do you hear? Listen for the wind, the trees moving, animals, insects or flowing water. If it’s noisy where you are, cup your hands over your ears to create the muffled sound of wind in the air.

Think about the other sounds our ancient ancestors may have heard – the crackling flames from a fire… the grating sound of wheat being ground… the sharp chipping noise of tools being made and sharpened.
Britain's story begins around 12000BC with the emergence from the Ice Age and the warming of Britain. People return to the land for the first time and hunt mammals, such as reindeer and Arctic hare. They also use tools to make use of the cave networks, some of which can still be seen in Church Hole at Creswell Crags. This is Britain's oldest art. The oldest human remains were found in Boxgrove, Sussex and are around 600,000 years old. By 400,000 BC, Neanderthals had arrived in Britain, marking the end of the cold, dry period of the Ice Age when woolly mammoths roamed across most of Scotland, Wales and Northern England, leaving Britain abandoned by people.

By 300,000 BC, Continental Europe was connected to Britain, allowing people to move across the Channel. British stone tools, such as handaxes, were traded across Europe, and the first evidence of farming arrives in Britain around 9500 BC, starting the Neolithic period.

The Bronze Age begins around 2500 BC, heralding a new era of innovation and trade. Copper and bronze objects such as swords, spearheads, and daggers are produced, and metalwork becomes more advanced. New forms of ceremonial architecture are built, including Stonehenge in Wiltshire and the Ring of Brodgar in Orkney. The first timber settlements of people grow in many areas and the ‘ranch boundaries’ are put in place. Eventually tribal kingdoms develop, starting in south-east England. The hill forts are abandoned, and the Great Pyramid of Giza is built.

The Romano-British period begins around 43 AD, marked by the invasion of the Romans. They construct roads across much of England and a new era of trade and culture begins. Cities are built. The hill forts are abandoned, and the Great Pyramid of Giza is built. The Romano-British period ends around 410 AD, as the Romans withdraw from Britain.