



GALLICA

Historical & Archaeological Interpretation

World of the Ancient Britons

Iron Age Clothing



Introduction

I have been interested in the Iron Age/Celtic period of history since the BBC programme 'Living in the Past' in 1977. Since then I have worked on a number of archaeological re-constructions around Britain. Over that period I have developed a unique method of teaching school children about the past. Part of that method is to use the style of clothing worn by our ancestors. The first guide to Prehistoric Clothing I produced was for a living history society, in 1986. Since then I have gathered more information from sources around the world. This is the second edition (much upgraded), showing you an assortment of clothes for the Iron Age period, and ways of making them. The practical experience of working in iron age clothing for the last 12 years has given me an insight into the comfort and fit of the style. This booklet was born out of all the requests for information from many people wanting to make their own costumes.

G.D.Freeman

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Cover photograph – The author and his lady.

Iron Age Clothing

Background and History

The Celtic peoples of Europe are believed to be descended from an Indo-European group who spread their culture across central Asia, the whole of Europe, and as far north as Scandinavia. They were a lively extrovert people who loved decoration and bright colours and had been influenced by the Asian cultures of India. By the time this culture had reached Britain, the local tribes had developed a distinctive style of their own. The information that follows is based on archaeological evidence, Roman and Greek sculptures, and descriptions written by observers at the time.

Materials

The first cloth that was produced in pre-history was made of vegetable fibres. The earliest 'cloth' was woven grass or bark strips. This was followed by linen, which is the fibre from the stalk of flax. The earliest linen found, so far, is dated to 5,000 BC. Nettles also produce a fibre very similar to linen. Once animals were domesticated the hair and wool became accessible and the prime fibre became sheep's wool. The early sheep were coloured brown and grey, but as the sheep were bred and tamed, white wool was produced in large quantity. Most of the clothing was made of wool, and it was such good quality that it was exported to the Roman empire long before the Romans arrived in Britain! The only other material that was added to the list was the occasional imported piece of silk. The Romans comment on the Britons clothing was that it was bright and garish, with coloured* checks and stripes, and after the pale colours in the heat of the Mediterranean, the sight of the Celts must have come as a bit of a shock! The main dyes that were in use were as follows;

Red	Madder (the roots of 5 year old plants)
Yellow	Weld (the whole plant)
Blue	Woad (the fermented leaves)

** See the web site for details and instructions on dyes, and spinning threads.*

Make your own Iron Age Clothing

Patterns

By late Iron Age most clothing was made of wool. The cloth was woven using looms, and was decorated by weaving checks and stripes into the material. The checks were bold but not constructed like a modern 'tartan'. There were also various ways of weaving other than the standard 'tabby' (over-under-over-under). Some of the looms were advanced enough to produce hounds-tooth check, and herring-bone weave.

Construction

Most clothing was sewn together using a needle, and a wool or linen thread. Needles were made of bone, bronze, and iron. The seam, on all pieces found so far, is on the inside. The only exception is in the use of leather or skins, where the seam is on the outside, to maintain water-proofing. The only items which were not sewn were summer cloaks (just a piece of cloth draped on), and the peplum, which was woven as a tube.

Items of Clothing

The "do not"

Evidence for underwear is non-existent at the present time – but that does not mean it was not worn! Loin cloths are permissible (in use by the Romans).

Socks had not been invented, if you want to line your shoes use dry grass. Do not wrap your feet in pieces of cloth.

Hats. Do not wear them. The only tribes that are depicted wearing hats are the Dacians (Germans).

The "do"

What follows is a list of clothing for both sexes; patterns for constructing each item; accessories that would be carried; and jewellery worn on most occasions.

Basic Items of Clothing

Male

- Tunic - A long shirt worn on the upper body.
- Braecci - Trousers or worn on the legs.
- Belts - One to hold the trousers up, and one around the tunic.
- Pouch - Holds personal items. Hangs on the belt
- Shoes - Worn on the feet for protection.
- Cloak - Worn over the shoulders as a coat

Female

- Tunic - A long shirt worn on the upper body
- Dress - One piece full length outer garment. Can have sleeves.
- Peplum - Tubular dress without sleeves.
- Skirt - Worn round the waist to cover the legs.
- Belt - Worn around the waist.
- Pouch - Holds personal items. Hangs on the belt
- Shoes - Worn on the feet for protection.
- Cloak - Worn over the shoulders as a coat

There were two types of cloak. The first was a light weight piece of cloth that was worn draped over the shoulders in a variety of ways. It could be fastened with brooches.

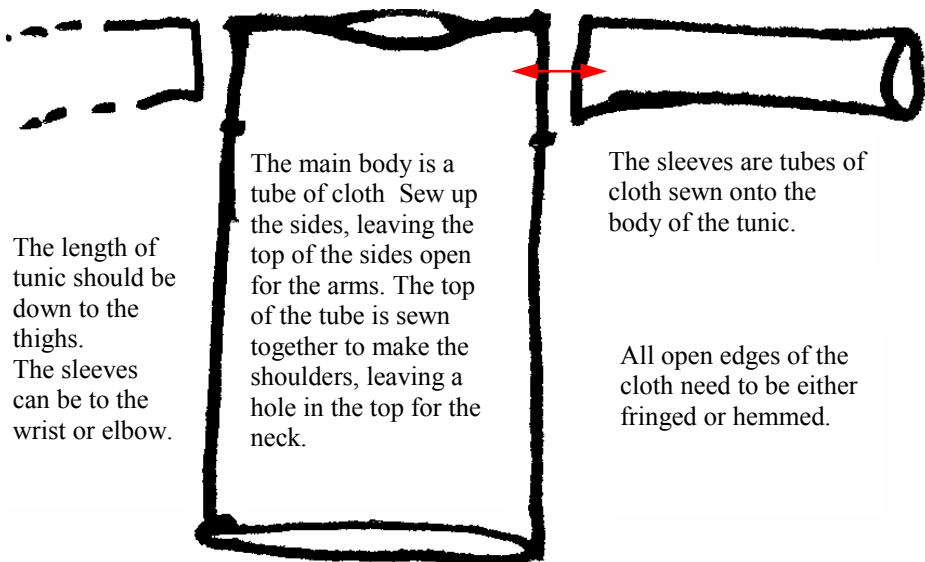
The second cloak was a heavy-weight , and had a hood. It was worn in winter to stay warm, and in rain to stay dry. There were two layers. The outer layer was a coarse wool, possibly oiled (lanolin). The inner layer was a lighter weight cloth, dyed a bright colour.

Accessories

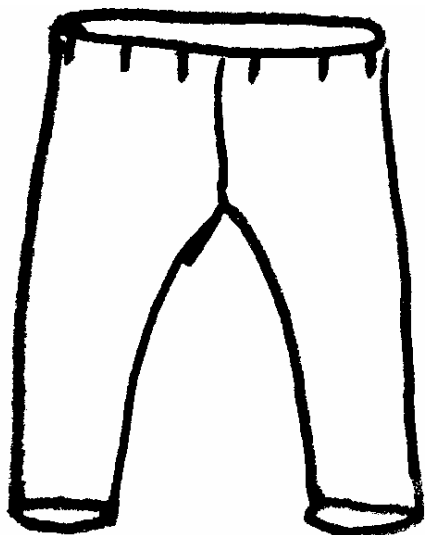
- Shoulder bags - Leather bags for carrying.
- Jewellery - Gold, silver, bronze.
- Combs - Bone, antler, wood.
- Mirrors - Bronze
- Make up - Worn by the ladies.
- Knives - Personal knives for eating with.
- Amulets - To ward off the wrath of the gods, and ghosts.

Patterns

The Tunic



Trousers



Make the trousers in two pieces. Look at an old pair of jeans for the shape, but make them baggy.

Sew each leg up and then join them together round the crotch.

Either hem a tube round the waist to take a rope or strip of leather, or, sew on belt loops (see below)

The bottom of the legs are tied in at the ankle with leather thong.





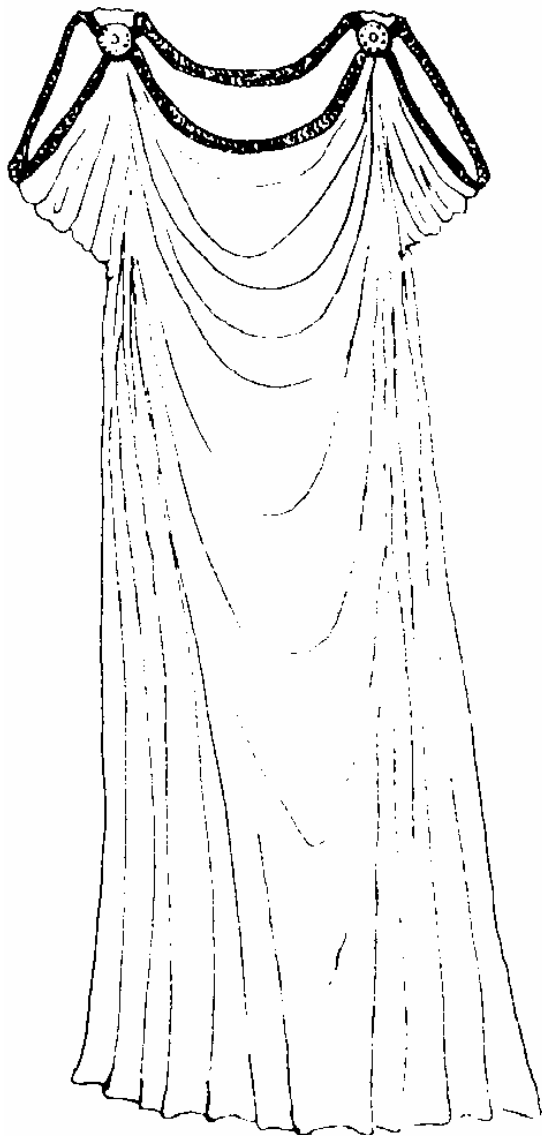
Late Ironage warrior with summer cloak

Ladies

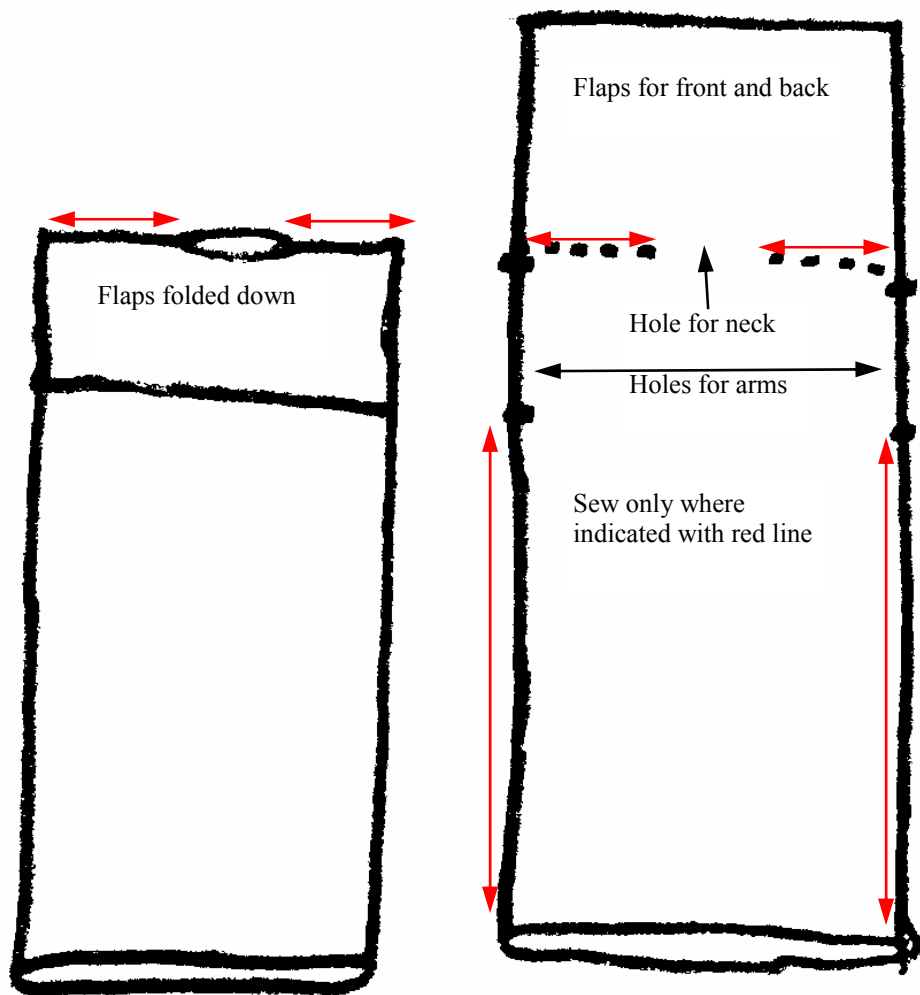
1 Make a tunic the same as for the men, and wear it with a skirt belted round the waist. The skirt should be long (to the ankles) and full.

2 wear a tunic with a peplum made as follows:

Make tube of cloth long enough to go from your shoulder to your ankle. The tube needs to be very full, one example is 9 feet around, which is a lot of cloth. Put on the tunic. Step into the tube and pull it up under the arm-pits. Lift a point from the back and a point from the front to meet on the shoulder, and pin with a brooch. Do the same on the other shoulder as is shown on the right. Leave the material draped under each arm and fasten a belt around the waist. Pull some of the length of the material up through the belt and allow it to drape over the belt.



3 This dress can be worn with or without a tunic. Again, start with a tube, but sew it as follows.



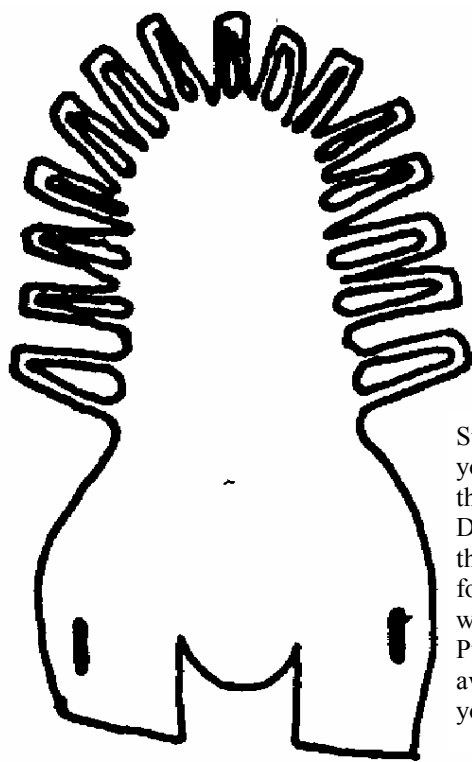
To wear this dress, put it on over your head and put your arms out through the arm holes on either side. Use belt round your waist to pull the dress in, and once again pull a bit of the length up over the belt.



A lady in tunic and overdress (peplum)

Shoes

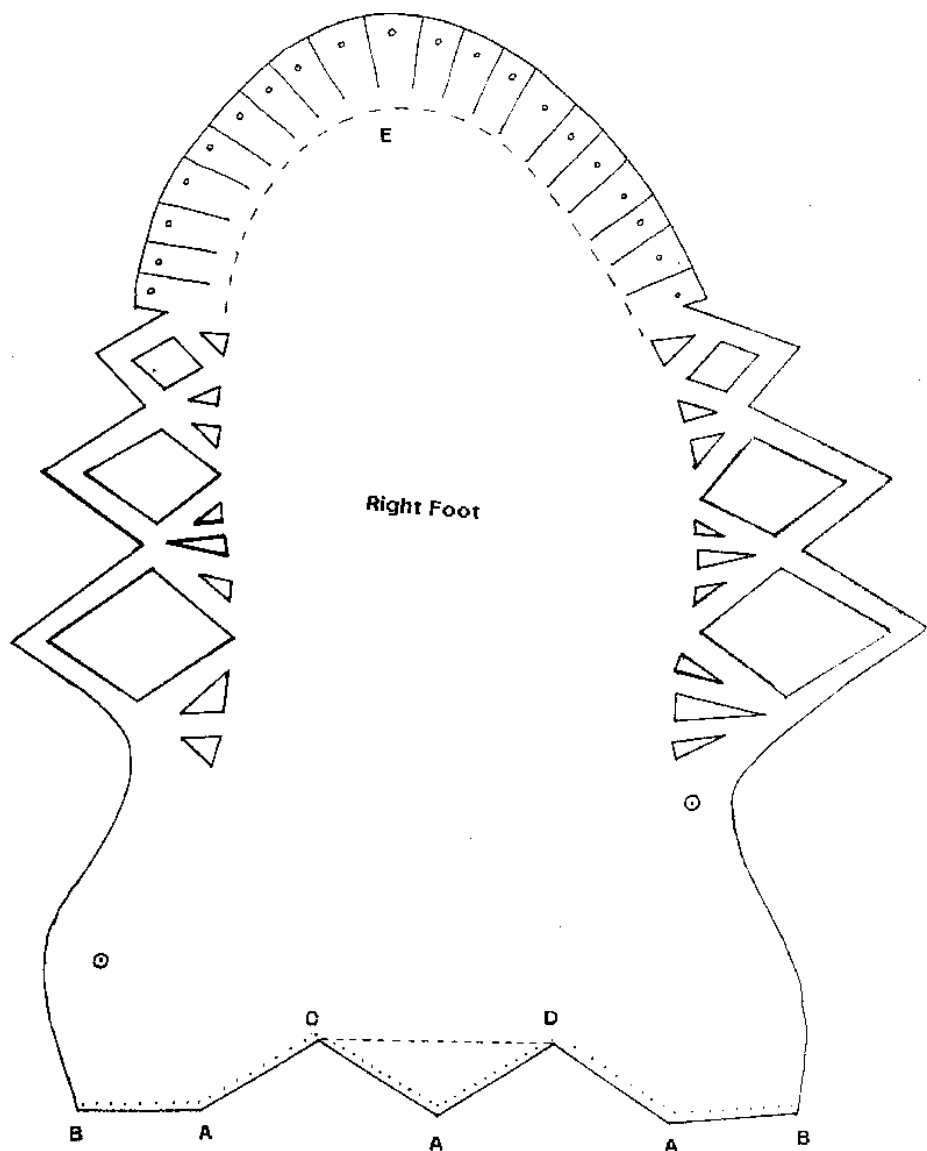
Most shoes in the Iron Age were one piece wrap around leather shoes. The design is deceptively simple, but the fit is very comfortable and they give a lot of protection to the foot on all kinds of surfaces. The surface that I have found that does most damage to the shoes is flint gravel.



Start with an outline of your foot and construct the pattern around that. Don't forget to reverse the pattern for the other foot! Sew the back up with a linen thread. Punch holes with an awl, for the needle if you need to .



When you have constructed the shoes, use a leather lace to pull them over the foot. A useful tip on the first time you wear them is to soak the shoes in water then lace them on. Wear them on your feet while they dry, and they will take up the shape of your foot.



This is a more elaborate pattern to try once you are achieving a good result with the simpler shoe. The better the quality of the leather you can find, the longer the shoes will last. The only caution is the colour – remember that early ways of tanning only produces a dark brown!

Jewellery

Most of what we call jewellery is in fact clothes fasteners. Very few pieces were worn just for decoration, most of it had a very practical purpose.

Torc

The classical piece that everyone thinks of at the first mention of 'Celtic' is a **Torc**. This is a neck ring made of gold, silver, bronze, or iron. Some of them are highly decorative, whilst some are very simple. They were only worn by high ranking members of the tribe and were a status symbol, or badge of office.

You had to be a warrior, a land owner or member of the ruling class to own and wear one

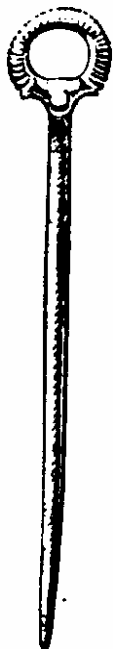


This is one of the finest collections that was found buried in the ground.

Most torcs were not as fancy as these.

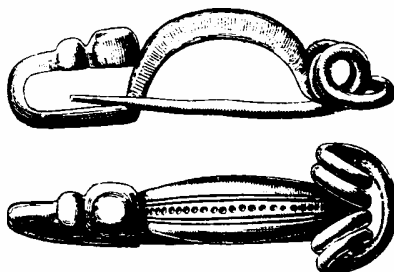
Pins

Clothes that are made without modern tailoring, need pulling in and pinning to make them fit. Over the Iron Age period a number of methods were used.



The first pins were simple straight spikes that were pushed through the cloth and held there by friction. They were made of bone or antler, with some decoration around the head.

When metals were discovered, bronze pins came into use. As the use of bronze spread, its qualities were exploited, and bent and sprung pins developed. First the Pen-annular brooch which is a ring and pin.



Bow-backed brooches were

next with curved backs to take the material, and the sharp end was held in a groove. This was the fore runner to the modern safety pin!



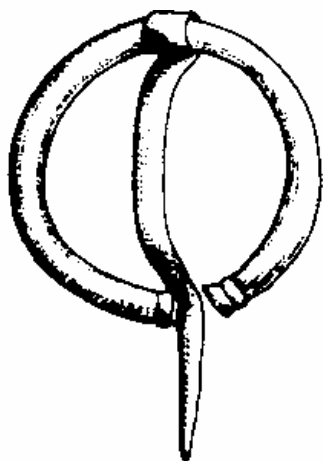
Accessories

Cloaks

There were two types of cloak worn. The first was just a large sheet of material draped around the shoulders, some times pinned to hold it in place. (See the picture of the warrior on page 8) Or it could be held by hand as in this illustration.



The second type of cloak is much more serious! The *British Cloak* as commented on by the Romans was the best in the known world. It consists of two layers, for insulation, and a hood to cover the head. The outer layer was a coarse wool, woven in checks, stripes, or twill and herring-bone weaves. The outer layer would also have been oiled, probably with lanolin. This is the natural grease, found on sheep's wool and keeps a sheep waterproof! The inner layer or lining was a smooth tight weave to keep the heat of the body in, and was probably dyed a single colour. Stone carvings that depict the cloaks show them to be long (to the ankle) and full enough to meet down the front.



It could be fastened at the neck with a penannular brooch. This works by pushing the pin through the material, then rotating the ring to lock the brooch so that it can not be pulled out. These brooches are between 3 – 10 centimetres in diameter, and are in bronze or iron. They are very rarely decorated.

Decorative jewellery

Women wore a variety of decorations. There were neck-laces, bangles, bracelets, rings, belt chains, hair ornaments and make-up



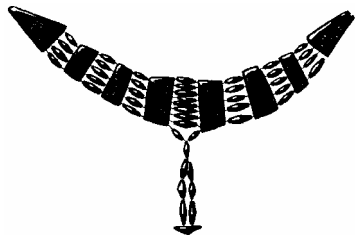
Hair was pinned, braided or knotted in number of styles, sometimes decorated with combs and small ornaments.

Examples here are from actual finds in Denmark



A number of bronze belt chains have been found, some with bells on the ends.

Edges of dresses can be decorated with braid



This neck-lace is made of jet

toes, not fingers.

Most rings were for



A simple bangle of gold

Make Up

Ladies of rank took great care over their appearance. Faces were pale to show that they did not work in the sun. Cheeks and lips were reddened with berry juice, and eye shadow applied. There is also a reference to finger nails being reddened!

Men

The only decorative pieces that men appeared to wear were bronze armlets, inset with enamels.

Hair was worn long, and lime-washed into spikes for battle. This bleached the hair and gave rise to the myth that all warriors were blonde. Moustaches were worn, as were beards (only amongst the nobility). A good figure was regarded as essential, and warriors were mocked if they put on weight – but they were also obliged to eat and drink large quantities at the feasts!

Knives

Iron-bladed knives were carried in scabbards made of leather or iron, and hung from the belt. These were personal tools for eating meat, although they were sometimes used to fight with during drunken brawls at feasts.

Pouches

Most people also had a pouch hung from their belt. This pouch contained a number of personal items, such as amulets to ward off bad spirits. They were also used to carry grooming tools, such as combs, scissors and tweezers.

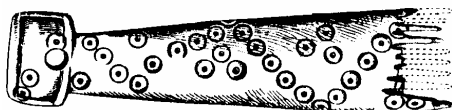


Ladies had bronze mirrors for helping in their toiletries.

Antler toggles.
Used for fastening
pouches



'Weaving' combs,
that could have been used for
combing hair.



World of the Ancient Britons

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