IN THE KNOW

Settlements

Paula Richardson

Accurate and reliable background information to underpin your geography lessons

Introduction

Settlements are places where groups of people live and work. While settlements can vary tremendously in size they often share a range of characteristics that are influenced by similarities in the landscape, the background or history shaping a settlement over time, and the resources that influence its growth. There are reasons why settlements developed as, and where, they did: without looking at the history of a place it is impossible to see how it has developed and changed over time.

Early settlements

Between the end of the last Ice Age (around 11,600 years ago) and the Norman invasion in 1066, great numbers of settlers arrived in Britain from different regions of Europe. Among them were the Celts, Romans, Anglo Saxons from Denmark, and Norsemen or Vikings from Scandinavia. The Celts and Anglo Saxons tended to create villages in places where there was a good supply of water, flat land for growing crops, a good defensive position for protection and sometimes a crossing point for a river. As these villages grew larger they could end up with too many people for the settlement's location or available resources and so some inhabitants, often younger people, would leave and develop a new settlement in another place with similar characteristics to the original. Celtic settlements were the first and most established settlements in Britain and, by the time subsequent invading peoples arrived, the Celts had formed well-established communities, living in round houses and constructing forts for defence against invaders. The Roman invasion in AD43 brought the idea of living in big towns and cities, which was a dramatic change from the Celtic and Anglo Saxon village models. These new Roman cities were laid out in a grid with a large square or forum located in the centre where people came to trade, socialise, and discuss ideas, philosophy and politics. In AD410, with its Empire on the continent under threat, Rome recalled its army; suddenly, the Roman occupation of Britain was over. However, a great deal of evidence from the Roman occupation remains today. The shape and layout of many towns stem from this period and have been preserved despite subsequent development over the centuries.

Recreated Anglo Saxon village. Photo: Midnightblueowl

FACT Chester, St Albans, Colchester, York and Cirencester are all towns that even today show evidence of their earlier Roman occupation.

Later settlements

In 1085 the Domesday Book was commissioned by William the Conqueror (leader of the Norman Conquest of England, who later became King) to record the wealth and assets of people throughout England. This record of human settlement and resources now provides us with invaluable information about Norman England.

After the Norman invasion there was a further period of stability in Britain. Population increased and life was prosperous for some (although not for everyone); at least, until the Black Death (the plague) arrived in 1348 and, records suggest, claimed the lives of over a third of the population.

A change in the climate during the Medieval period (11th-15th Centuries) caused Britain's seasons to turn wetter and colder, making crops harder to grow and leading to the abandonment of villages as their inhabitants looked elsewhere for resources and conditions to survive.

Sheep farming became the most successful economy during the Medieval period and led to the growth of wool towns such as Lavenham in Suffolk, which was to become one of the richest towns in England. Flemish weavers were encouraged to set up home in England, many settling in Norfolk and Suffolk. Others moved to the West Country, the Cotswolds, the Yorkshire Dales and Cumberland, where weaving began to flourish.

During the later Medieval period, most of the population lived in rural settlements where the primary means of subsistence was agriculture. Some villages were laid out in a 'nuclear' pattern, built around a central church or village green. Others developed in a linear pattern, with houses stretching along roads towards the market towns, where farmers would take stock to trade and buy goods they needed. Churches, abbeys and monasteries all grew in importance during the Medieval period, providing the infrastructure, tools and skills to produce a range of crafts and cottage industry products, which they sold to agricultural workers keen to buy products they could not make themselves.

In comparison to those buildings built after the Tudor Period (1485-1603) that we still see today, relatively few remain from earlier periods. Building materials used in pre-Tudor construction were often too soft and inferior to last over time and, coupled with the widespread damage and destruction caused by fires and wars over the centuries, these buildings often became derelict or were destroyed. The best evidence of such settlements is to be found in churches, castles or fortified manor houses, many of which were built of stone that was sometimes recycled from old Roman or Norman buildings. Many of Britain's towns were established during the Tudor period with a charter giving that town the right to become a borough. Rich merchants living in each borough were then given the authority to choose a mayor and hold a market on a regular basis.

Tudor buildings in Worcester. Photo: Russ Hamer

Tudor to Victorian times

Wealthier Tudor houses were usually of a sturdier construction than those belonging to common people, as were those buildings that had important functions in a town or borough, such as the cloth halls, tax offices, community buildings or even palaces. As the economy continued to grow, merchants, bankers and shop owners built themselves more elegant houses in towns and cities to reflect their more affluent lifestyles. Much of London was ready for redevelopment by this wealthy new merchant class after great swathes of the city were burnt to the ground in the Great Fire of London in 1666. With the loss of so many houses to the fire, a law was passed to ensure that houses were built of more fire-resistant materials such as brick, stone and slate from that time on.

Until the late 18th Century, Britain continued to be more of a rural economy than an urban one. Craftsmen such as coopers, wheelwrights, potters, brewers and blacksmiths served their village communities in various ways but remained firmly entrenched within the village model of settlement. This was a period of great expansion of the towns and villages. Trade links were established worldwide and the establishment of ports along the coastline, such as Bristol, Exeter, London, Plymouth and Southampton, became important to England's ability to import goods such as silks from the Far East, sugar, potatoes and tobacco from the New World, and slaves and servants from Africa and North America. Wealthy merchants built elegant country houses with landscaped parks, influenced by the ancient empires of Greece and Rome. As the difference between those with wealth and those without became more marked, the separation of the classes became more obvious – the rich landowners and merchants at one end of the scale and poor servants, labourers and workers at the other.

Victorian urban landscapes

The Victorian era was characterised by huge developments in trade and industrial expansion (known as the Industrial Revolution), and the rise of industrial towns to utilise and make products from local raw materials. Settlement patterns in England changed dramatically; people moved from their villages to new industrial towns to provide labour for the unprecedented number of factories, mines and ports being built throughout the country.

The ports of Liverpool, Bristol, Manchester, Glasgow and Hull continued to expand, and the industrial towns of the Midlands, Lancashire and Yorkshire grew at an incredibly fast rate, often without any planning control, leading to the rapid growth of large slum neighbourhoods in these towns. Overcrowding of multiple families into insufficient space and the poor quality of construction and sanitation in the rapidly built back-to-back houses was an issue in many industrial cities and towns. In stark contrast, landowners, mill owners and wealthy industrialists built large well-constructed houses or villas in good town locations, many of which still characterise our towns today.

Towns in Britain in the 20th Century

By 1900, 75% of the British population lived in urban areas. Before the First World War some towns developed suburbs, often in the form of 'garden villages', such as Port Sunlight, and may have been linked to benevolent foundations seeking to improve living conditions for their workers (the Cadbury factory workers' estates are an example of this). Other groups and social movements, such as the Arts and Crafts movement, were also responsible for new, more socially responsible, house designs and/or influenced the planning and layout in many of the towns and villages we know today.

Between the two World Wars, most British towns expanded significantly, often characterised by streets of modern semi-detached houses and bungalows that stretched out of the urban centre of a town, developing in patterns adjacent to the roads leading out of town.

After the Second World War there was an urgent need to re-house people who had lost their homes during the War and many 'new towns', such as Crawley, Peterlee, Corby and Telford, were designed and quickly built.

In 1972 the Local Government Act reviewed existing (historical) county boundaries and defined and established new areas with new boundaries, such as Avon, Cleveland, Humberside and Teesside, as well as new metropolitan areas, such as Greater Manchester and Greater London. Further changes to such boundaries were made in the 1990s following the Local Government Act (1992).

The changing landscape

Settlements have always been in a state of change; recent changes continue to have a significant impact on how and where we live.

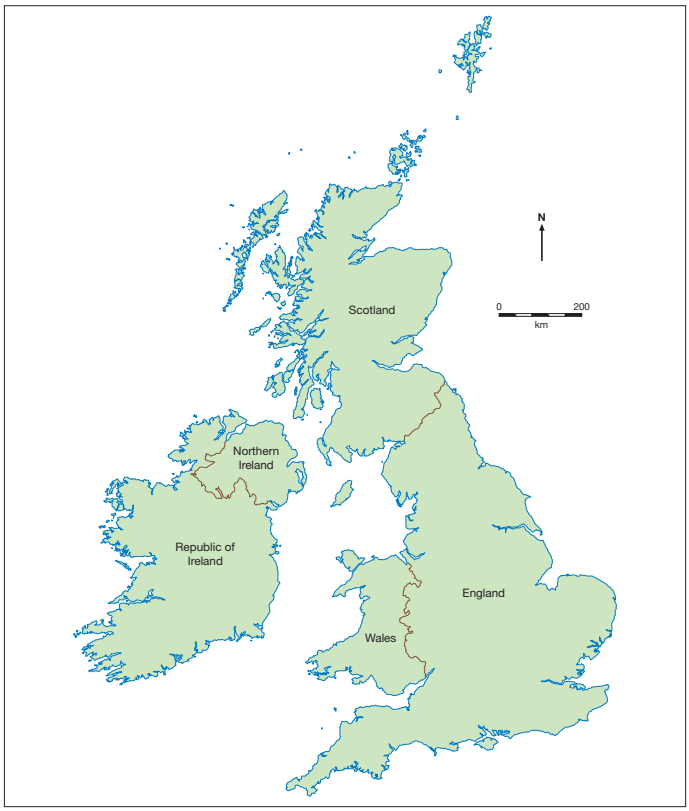
- The character of many villages has changed over time, from agricultural to residential, and villages now often house commuters who travel longer distances to work in towns.
- Many industrial areas have become derelict and now offer brown field sites where new light manufacturing or technology industries can be located.
- Some local services in towns, such as shops, have closed over time and people rely more on shopping in supermarkets, out of town hypermarkets, or online.
- Shops in towns and cities now face tough competition from shopping malls, chain stores and internet shopping, and many local shops have vanished from our high streets.
- Parking and traffic issues are significant everywhere and have an impact on where and how people want to live and work.
- The UK population is estimated to reach more than 70 million people by 2030; this will have a huge impact on the provision of housing for the future.

Greater Manchester modern housing. Photo: Bryan Ledgard

The shape of the islands

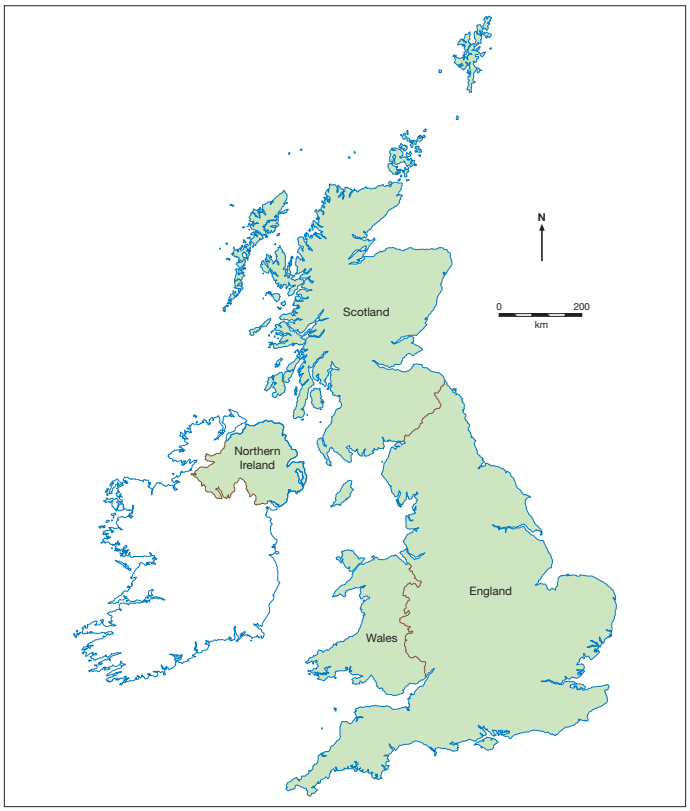
British Isles

England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales plus the Isle of Man and over 5000 or so smaller associated islands.



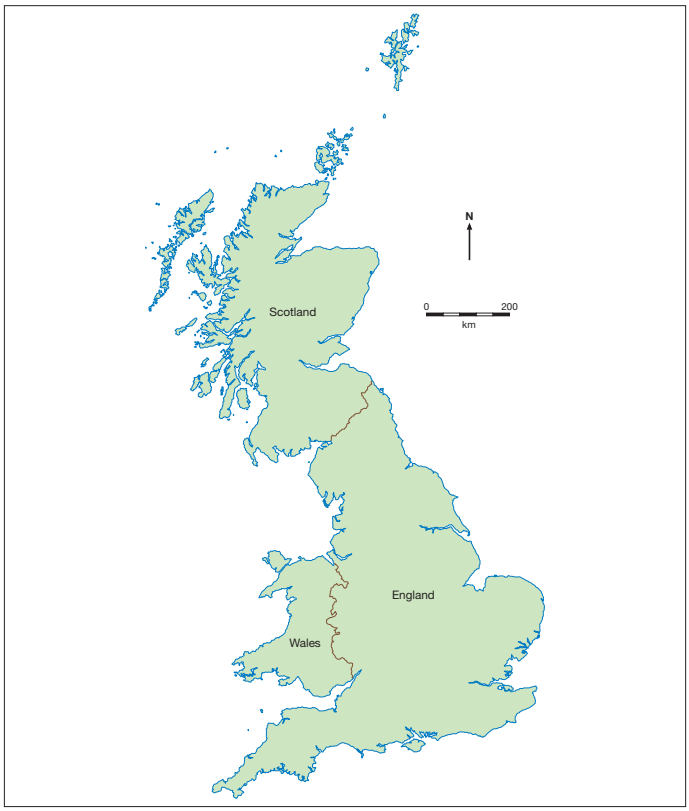
United Kingdom

England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It refers to the political union between these four countries.



Great Britain

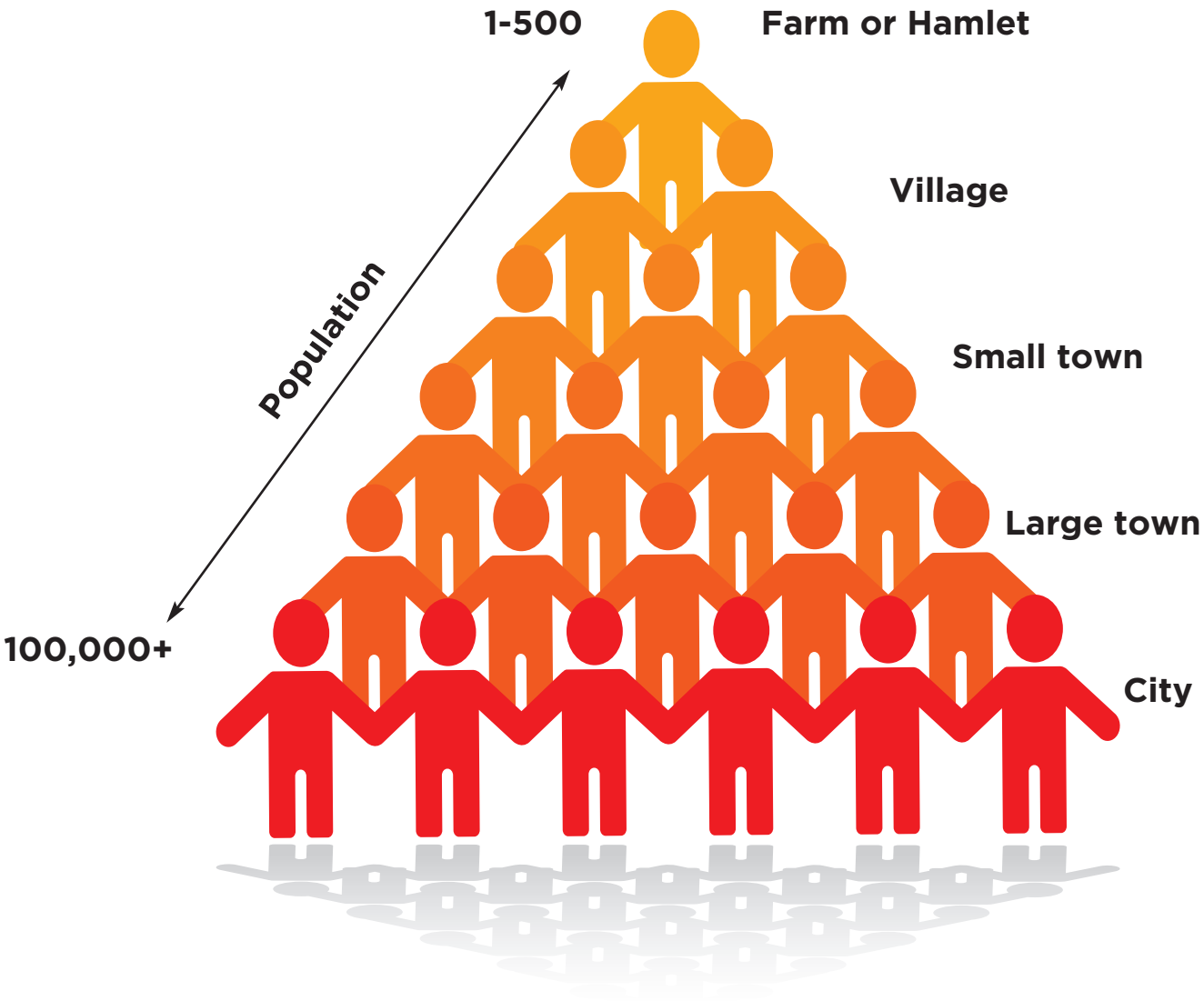
Great Britain is the official name given to England, Scotland and Wales and their islands. It does not include Northern Ireland.



The UK has four capital cities: London (England), Cardiff (Wales), Belfast (Northern Ireland) and Edinburgh (Scotland). These each govern their respective countries through their Parliament, each of which is also linked to the Central Government in London. London is the capital city of the UK.

FACT The Isle of Man is a self-governing Crown dependency and not part of the UK or of political Europe, although its inhabitants are British Citizens.

FACT The Channel Islands are also Crown dependencies. They are neither independent countries nor part of the UK, but the Channel Islands are recognised as dependant territories.



A hierarchy of settlements

- A hamlet has a population of less than 500 people. It can be a group of houses dispersed in the countryside or running alongside a road. A hamlet has no services, such as a church or post office.
- A village generally has a population of between 500 and 3000 people. It usually has a few services – typically a church, a post office, a school and a pub – and may once have served the farming community. Now, villages usually provide housing for many people who work in the nearby towns.
- A town usually has a population of between 10,000 and 100,000 people. Towns can vary in size but need a population of at least 10,000 people to support the greater range of services they offer. Large towns will provide a much greater variety of goods and services. Sometimes towns grow into each other and it is hard to see where one town ends and another begins, these are known as conurbations.
- A city generally has a population in excess of 100,000, but there are exceptions. A city is defined as a town that has been created a city by Royal Charter. Size is a major factor in this, as is the possession of an Anglican cathedral or a town's regional or historical importance, but none of these automatically means a town is given the Royal Charter.

FACT St Davids (with a cathedral) is a city despite having only 2000 inhabitants, while Bournemouth is not a city despite a population of nearly 197,000. Reading is not a city but is the largest town in England, and Blackburn is not a city either, despite having an Anglican cathedral and over 110,000 inhabitants.

Glossary

Arts and Crafts movement – A movement that promoted and stood for craftsmen, individuals, and the value of human, hand-made work in the 19th century as an alternative to the mechanised, dehumanised, factory-production of the Industrial Revolution. The movement influenced the layouts of settlements and housing styles, especially for workers.

Brown field site – A dis-used industrial or derelict site that offers potential for new buildings.

Chain stores – Shops usually owned by the same company, selling the same goods in multiple locations; they are found nationwide or even worldwide.

Clone town – Main shopping area that is dominated by chain stores at the expense of smaller, local shops.

Conurbation – A large urban area created by several towns merging together.

Commuter village/town – Where people live but travel elsewhere to work.

Derelict – Land or buildings that are unused or neglected, but which provide a potential site for development.

Garden village/town – A planned settlement often around major cities, where houses, open spaces, public buildings and industry are carefully integrated to provide a good quality of life for the inhabitants.

Gentrification – A process of rejuvenating run-down areas, which in turn attracts wealthier people to live there, often displacing lower income or poor residents.

Green belt – An area of open space or countryside around a city where development is either banned or restricted.

Green field site – Sites not previously built on but which offer potential for development.

Green wedges – Protected green areas around a city, which run along its main roads in a linear fashion.

Industrial Revolution – A period of major industrial expansion in the late 17th and 18th centuries that changed the face of urban areas completely; it brought economic growth to an area but also pollution and often unchecked expansion.

Linear settlements – Places that develop along lines of communication, such as roads, canals, rivers or the foothills of a hilly ridge.

Metropolis – Sometimes a capital city of a country or region, often with a population of over a million people.

New towns – Built after the second World War with government funding to re-house people who had lost their homes; new towns were designed and built as a completely 'new town' in a short space of time, in contrast to the organic development of most towns over time.

Nucleated settlement – A place clustered around a central area, such as a village green or a bridging point over a river.

Rural to urban migration – The movement of people into towns, usually to find work and affordable homes.

Shopping mall – An urban shopping centre, usually covered and pedestrianised.

Sphere of influence – The distance from a town that indicates how far people will travel to use its services.

Tech hub – An urban area developed as a hub for technological industries, such as computers or electronics; it may also be a centre for innovation or marketing companies. An example is Silicon Valley in California, USA.

Town charter – A document signed by the monarch or Parliament that gave a town legal rights and privileges and often provided for a large market, cathedral or other major institutions.

Urbanisation – The growth of population and building in towns, in comparison to rural areas; in the UK, 90% of the population lives in urban areas.

Urban decay – Occurs when an area of a city or town falls into dis-use or decline; it is characterised by unemployment, poverty and a poor-quality environment.

Further ideas, links and resources to support your teaching of settlements can be found at:
www.geography.org.uk/investigating-settlement-at-key-stage-1-2

 ISBN 978-1-84377-434-1.
Published by The Geographical Association, 160 Solly Street, Sheffield S1 4BF.
Company number 07139068.
Website: www.geography.org.uk.
The Geographical Association is a registered charity: no 1135148.