

Iron Nail

Period: Iron Age to modern day (c. 800 BC – present)

Material: iron

Complete item

Nails are a well-known modern day building material, and they have a long history. They have been used to fix materials together since the Iron Age when iron started to be smelted and worked, but they are more commonly found from the Early Historic period onwards.



Corroded nails from Balnakeil Viking burial, now in the NMS, Edinburgh

As blast furnaces capable of melting iron were not in use in Europe until the Medieval period, iron objects were forged by heating and hammering by hand. Nails made in this way are square or rectangular in section as this is a quicker and easier shape to produce by hammering than a round section.

Nails and rivets were used for building large wooden structures including houses and boats. They were also used for smaller fixings on items like shields and boxes. Square iron nails have long been associated with shoeing horses, and modern horseshoes are still fixed with square nails.

As with other metal items, broken iron objects could be repaired or even re-forged into something new.

How are nails still used today?



Horseshoes from Urquhart Castle

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See also:
CT Iron Working

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