



Activity



Suitable for
Ages 8+

Time
Required:
30 minutes

What were animals used for?

Background

Most of the animal bone we find on archaeological sites in Britain comes from domesticated animals. Cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs were all domesticated in the Middle East and Near East and were first brought to Britain around 5,000 years ago, in the Neolithic.



Prior to the Neolithic, people hunted animals like deer, wild boar, birds like ducks and geese, and aurochs, which were large wild cattle. Domestic farm animals were an important source of food, but they were also useful for many other things.

For most of the archaeological past, there was no plastic. Glass and metal were expensive and used relatively rarely, so most people had to make the things they needed from cheap materials derived from plants and animals. In this activity we will explore what people in the past used animals for.



You will need:

- pens/pencils
- paper
- print out of activity pages (below)





Activity 1: What were cows used for ?

In the past, people relied on domestic animals like cattle for all sorts of materials and tasks which made their lives easier.



Write down five things you can use a cow for! What are cows useful for when alive? What could you make from a cow when it is dead?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.





Answers:

When the cow is alive:

Milk: which is also used to make butter and cheese.

Manure: animal dung is an important agricultural fertiliser.

Traction: oxen were used in many periods to pull carts or ploughs.

Baby cows: it's important to maintain your herd and your milk supply!

Social effects: The quality of livestock is often really important in farming communities, and a prize-winning cow can raise someone's social standing. Cows may have been used as a form of wealth in Iron Age Britain, and some designs of houses, like the Viking Age longhouses in Scotland, had people sharing a building with livestock to benefit from free body heat during the winter.

When the cow is dead:

Meat: burgers, steaks, meatballs, mince, tongue, oxtail, tripe (lining of a cow stomach), offal (brains, heart, liver, kidneys, etc.).

Leather: made from treated cattle skin into products like shoes, bags, clothes, tents (in the Roman army), belts, straps, horse harness and saddles, and more

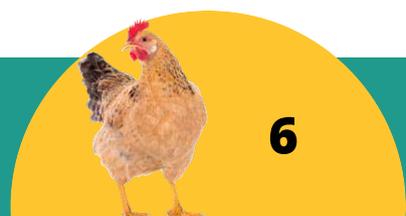
Vellum/parchment: treated calf skin used in the same way we'd use paper, mostly expensive and used for official or religious documents.

Horn: the outer sheath of cow's horns is made of keratin, the same stuff that fingernails and hair is made from, and can be separated from the bony horn core. It is a light, warm, translucent, plasticky-type material which could be shaped, and was used to make spoons, mugs, bowls, drinking horns, windows (glass was very expensive!).

Bone: could be carved into all sorts of objects like bone pins, needles, combs, spindle whorls, knife handles, sword pommels, decorative figurines. Ice skates found in medieval and Viking York were usually made from either shaped horse bones or cow bones.

Sinew / tendon: can be used as a strong string-like fibre.

Glue: can be made from boiling down hooves.





Activity 2: How were animals used in the past?

What other animals in the past provided useful things for humans?
Think about what these other animals were used for:



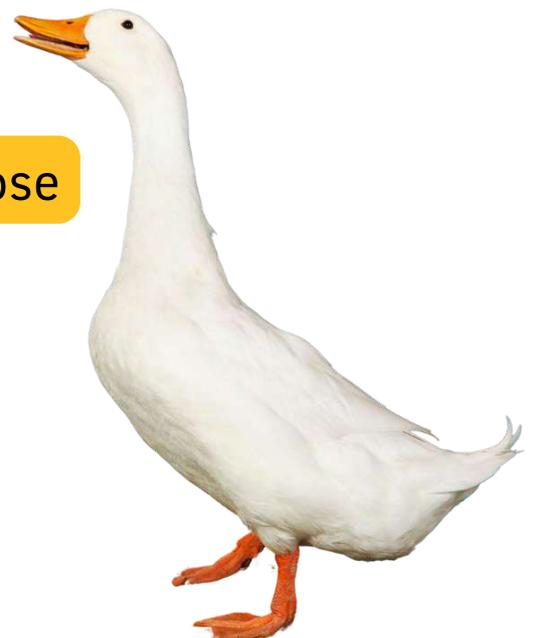
Chicken



Horse



Sheep



Goose





Answers:

Chicken:

Meat, eggs, sport (cockfighting), fertilizer (manure), pest control



Horse:

Sport, traction, meat, leather, glue, tail hairs are used to make bows for violins & cellos



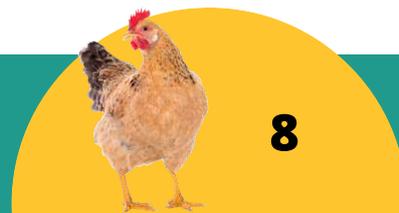
Sheep:

Milk & cheese, wool, lanolin from the wool is used in cosmetics, meat (haggis!), hide used for clothes & rugs, tallow used in candle & soap making, lawn mowing



Goose:

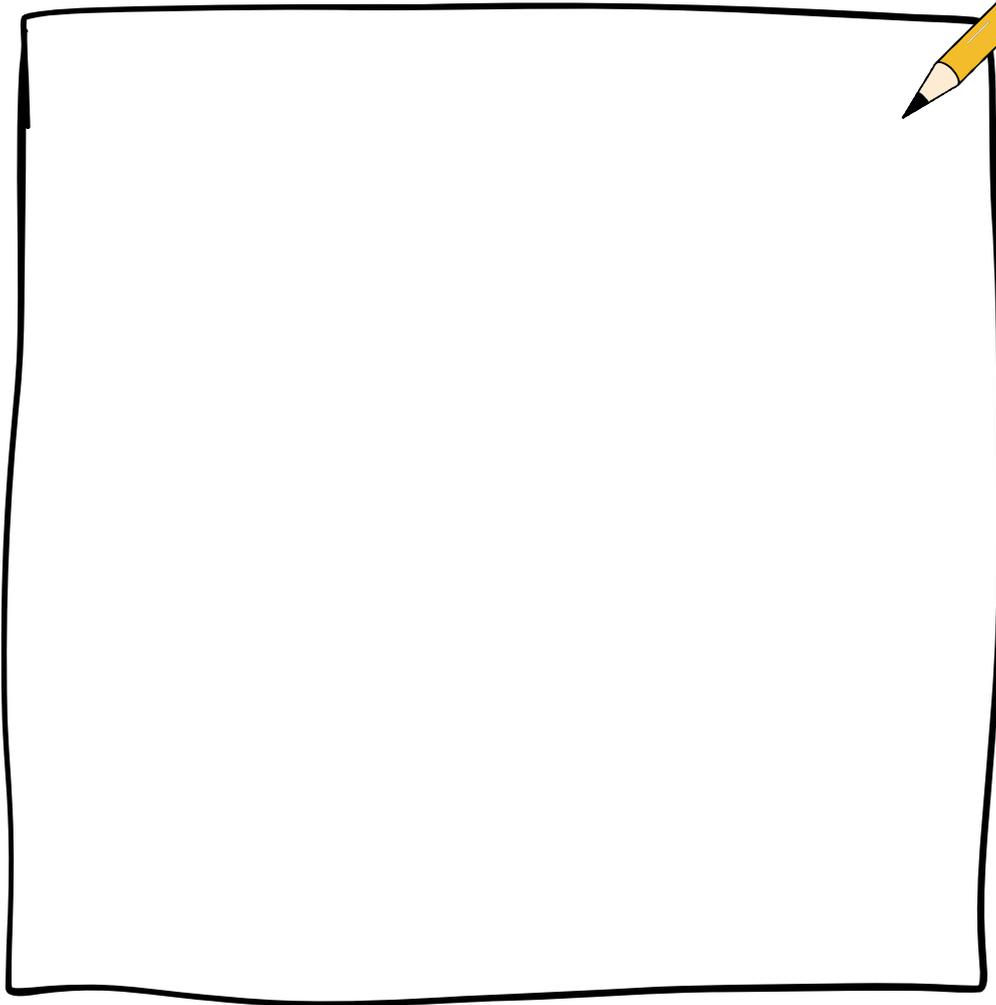
Feathers (quills), down (pillows and duvets), eggs, meat (foie gras), weed and pest control





Bonus Activity

Design or draw something that comes from one of the animals you've explored.



Here are some ideas.....

Bone comb?

Writing quills?

Leather shoe?

Woolly jumper?

Roast beef?

