

# A short history of Burgh Castle Roman Fort

At Burgh Castle you can explore the best preserved Roman monument in East Anglia. In fact, this is one of the most impressive Roman buildings to survive anywhere in Britain. The Burgh Castle fort was probably called Gariannonum by the Romans. During the 3rd and 4th centuries AD it was one of a chain of 'Forts of the Saxon Shore', sited at intervals around the coast of south-east England.

Despite their name, they were built by the Roman administration, not Saxons. There are other Saxon Shore forts in Norfolk at Caister-on-Sea and

Brancaster. The forts guarded harbours and merchant shipping, and may have protected Britain from attacks by raiders and pirates from across the

North Sea. During its long history this site has also been the site of an early Christian settlement and a Norman castle.



## East Norfolk in Roman times

Burgh Castle's setting has changed a great deal over the last 2000 years. In Roman times sea levels were much higher than they are now and the coastline quite different. The fort would then have stood on the eastern edge of an inland 'Great Estuary' which covered the whole of the present-day Broads area. Large ships might have docked next to the fort and sailed up the rivers Yare, Waveney and Bure to reach inland settlements.

## Roman Fort

This fort was one of a series of at least nine Roman coastal forts in eastern and southern England known as the Forts of the Saxon Shore. The earliest of these were built sometime after AD 200. The later Roman period in Britain was a turbulent time, when life in East Anglia was affected more and more by seaborne raiders from the Continent. The present defences at Burgh Castle date to around AD 300. The fort formed part of an administrative network that included much of Europe, extending from Britain as far as Egypt, Palestine





This section of the outer face of the wall is well preserved. A bastion is visible in the centre of the picture.

and Turkey in the east. This reminds us that Roman East Anglia was closely connected to a very much wider Roman world, and was an important part of a great empire.

The role of these forts probably changed over time. Raiding increased during the 4th century AD. Perhaps the forts were first intended as defended trading or market centres, or as naval bases protecting merchant shipping. The network of forts was linked by a line of coastal signal stations. Some of these have been recognised, while others have now fallen into the sea. There were two other Saxon Shore forts in Norfolk, at Brancaster (in north-west Norfolk), now owned by the National Trust and at Caister-on-Sea, to the north of Burgh Castle on the opposite side of the Roman-period 'Great Estuary' (now owned by English Heritage).

The Saxon Shore forts were under the control of one official, the Count of the Saxon Shore, who commanded soldiers

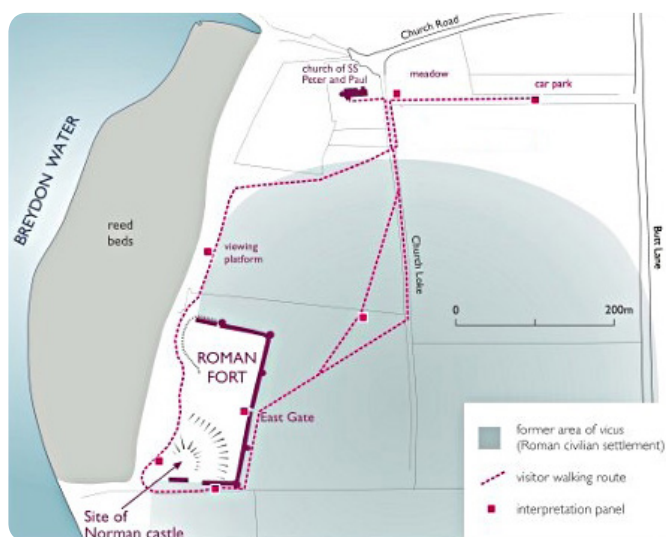
from across the Roman Empire. The Burgh Castle fort was large enough for between 500 and 1000 foot soldiers, or up to 500 mounted soldiers and their horses. Burgh Castle was garrisoned by *Equites Stablesiani*, a class of cavalry in the Late Roman army. The remains of an iron cavalry helmet were found at the site, similar to helmets found in Holland and Romania dating from the 300s AD.

The defensive walls survive almost to their original full height, although a parapet (now missing) protected soldiers patrolling the wall top. The defences were strengthened by a series of projecting bastions, sited at the corners of the fort and at intervals along the walls. These huge 'drums' of masonry were added when the walls were half built. In the middle of the top of each bastion there is a hole in the masonry, which may have held the central support of a timber structure or (perhaps less likely) a large catapult.

The scene in Roman times was very different in many ways. The west wall of the fort has vanished – probably it collapsed down the steep slope below long after the Roman soldiers left. The walls were once faced everywhere in flint and tile. This has mostly been taken away to be used in other building work, except in parts of the south wall. We know little about the buildings that lay within these defences in the Roman period because there has been little excavation here. It's likely they were made of timber.

## Vicus – civilian settlement

Today the fort stands in isolation, surrounded by open meadows, but in Roman times this was not so. Air photographs and surveys have shown that there was a large civilian trading settlement – or *vicus* – on the land to the east of the fort. This was built in timber and no longer survives, but would have dominated the landscape across which visitors walk to the fort today. It was a busy, noisy place, and probably provided essential services to the fort itself. We continue to learn more about it from air photographs and survey work.



Plan showing the location of the fort, motte, vicus and church.

## Anglo-Saxon settlement

After the Romans left Britain, the abandoned fort was reoccupied in the Anglo-Saxon period. Timber buildings and over 160 burials excavated at the site in the 1950s and 60s may date to c. AD 700–900. Burgh Castle has often been linked with Saint Fursey, a missionary from Ireland who was involved in converting East Anglia to Christianity.

Fursey was given land around AD 630 to build a monastery at a place called *Cnobheresburh*. This may have been at Burgh Castle but we do not know for certain. The monastery might have been at the nearby Saxon Shore fort at Caister-on-Sea, where many Anglo-Saxon burials have also been found. Early Christian monastic communities elsewhere in Britain sometimes chose abandoned Roman fortifications to settle within. Perhaps the Burgh Castle and Caister forts were both settlements of this kind, regardless of which of them was actually Fursey's *Cnobhesburh*.

## The Norman Castle

After the Norman Conquest in 1066, much property was taken from its English owners and given to followers of William the Conqueror. Many of these barons built castles in their new lands. In the late 11th or 12th century a small timber castle was built in the south-west corner of the fort on a *motte* or earth mound

The *motte* re-used part of the southern defences of the Roman fort and a big gap was cut through the south wall for the surrounding ditch. The mound was mostly flattened, and the ditch filled in, during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. However, its outline can still be seen at the southern end of the fort.

The round-towered Church of St Peter and Paul lies immediately to the north of the Trust's Burgh Castle property. Parts of the church date from the same Norman period as the castle, and contain re-used Roman tile.

## Excavations and research

Between 1958 and 1961 the late Charles Green carried out limited excavations within the fort at Burgh Castle after plough damage became evident. However, he died in 1972 without producing a report. During the 1970s Stephen Johnson, at that time an Inspector of Ancients Monuments, took on the task of writing the report with the help of Charles Green's daughter, Barbara Green, who was at that time Keeper of Archaeology at Norwich Castle Museum. This report was published in *East Anglian Archaeology* and can be downloaded at <http://eaareports.org.uk/publication/report20/>

Due to the limited nature of the excavations combined with the problems of previous disturbance the report produced few conclusive results but raised many interesting questions.

Two buildings with mortar floors and wattle-and-daub walls were located, one against the east wall of the fort near the north angle, the other freestanding but nearby. A large amount of pottery and coins were found in debris above these buildings, the majority within or around the second quarter of the fourth century (AD325-350). Against the south wall of the fort, there were indications that a similar dating might be applied to the use and destruction of the buildings there.

Post-Roman activity was traced in most of the areas excavated. At the north-east angle, a fifth-century hoard of glassware was found buried within an iron-bound bucket and a bronze bowl. In this area, the upper levels produced a considerable scatter of Middle Saxon wares. A cemetery of graves all aligned roughly east-to-west and without grave-goods was confirmed by three random radiocarbon tests to be of Middle Saxon date (seventh-to-tenth centuries). Substructures for a timber tower were located and a wide ditch, which was dug to encircle the motte in the eleventh century, breaking through the south wall of the fort in the process. The motte was levelled during the course of the nineteenth century and the ditch filled up, leaving this part of the site in a very disturbed state.

*Some of the many Anglo-Saxon graves excavated at Burgh Castle (Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery)*



In July and August of 2016, geophysical survey over two fields in the area outside the fort, covering an area of c. 12 ha revealed a complex pattern of magnetic anomalies relating to former land use at the site. An interpretation based on the alignment of linear elements along with reference to cropmark data suggests the vicus [the civilian settlement outside the fort] followed a planned layout aligned with the shore fort, with little evidence of pre-existing settlement in the immediate vicinity.

There is reasonable evidence for post-Roman settlement at the site in the form of a large triangular enclosure to the south of the fort along with pit and SFB [Sunken Feature Building] type features, suggesting a Saxon date. An extensive double-ditched droveway to the NE of the fort might also be post-Roman in date as it appears to cut earlier structures. A

## Further reading

Guidebook available at local shops and post office:

Gurney, D., 2002. *Outposts of the Roman Empire, A guide to Norfolk's Roman forts at Burgh Castle, Caister-on-Sea and Brancaster* (Norfolk Archaeological Trust)

### Online:

Excavation report. Much of our present knowledge about Burgh Castle derives from excavations in the 1950s and 60s.

Johnson, S., 1983. *Burgh Castle: Excavations by Charles Green 1958–61*, East Anglian Archaeology 20

<http://eaareports.org.uk/publication/report20/>

Burgh Castle Roman Fort: Life outside the walls - the geophysical survey 2016

<https://sites.google.com/site/burghcastlelifeoutsidethewalls/geophysical-survey-1>

### Other reading:

Bidwell, P., 1997. *Roman Forts in Britain* (London: English Heritage)

Davies, J.A., 2009. *The Land of Boudica: prehistoric and Roman Norfolk* (Norwich: Heritage/Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service)

Gurney, D., 2005. 'Roman Norfolk', in T. Ashwin and A. Davison (eds), *An Historical Atlas of Norfolk*, 3rd edition (Chichester, Phillimore), 28–9

Johnson, S., 1976. *The Roman Forts of the Saxon Shore* (London: Elek)

Pearson, A., 2002. *The Roman Shore Forts* (Stroud: Tempus)

significant level of undated industrial activity was also detected in close proximity to an area of former quarrying. The full report can be downloaded at <https://sites.google.com/site/burghcastlelifeoutsidethewalls/geophysical-survey-1>

## Norfolk Archaeological Trust ownership

The site was bought by the Norfolk Archaeological Trust in 1995. The Trust's landholding extends beyond the Roman fort itself, and totals 37 hectares/90 acres. This ensures that the large area outside the defences occupied by the buried remains of the Roman civilian settlement or vicus is included in the area under Trust control. The remains of the fort itself are in the guardianship of English Heritage.

## Location

Burgh Castle Fort, High Road, Burgh Castle, Great Yarmouth, NR319QQ



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