

**nat**  
caistor  
roman town

## A short history of Caistor Roman Town

**The Roman town of *Venta Icenorum* is the Romano-British predecessor of the modern county town of Norwich. Founded during the AD 60s at Caistor St Edmund in the valley of the River Tas, immediately to the south of its confluence with the Rivers Yare and Wensum, this was the largest and most important Roman centre of northern East Anglia.**

We know that there was a town called *Venta Icenorum* here because the Roman writer, *Ptolemy*, described *Venta* as the one significant town in the territory of the *Iceni* tribe. *Venta Icenorum* is also included in the 3rd-century *Antonine Itinerary*, a Roman document which listed settlements in the Roman Empire.

*Venta* was the Roman administrative base for the area of Norfolk, northern Suffolk and eastern Cambridgeshire. This was the area which had been controlled in the Iron Age by the *Iceni* tribe

Along with Silchester (Hants) and Wroxeter (Shropshire), *Venta Icenorum* is one of only three major Romano-British towns which have not been buried or destroyed by medieval and modern towns and cities. The Trust has owned the defended area of the town since 1984, and has acquired much surrounding land since that date with the aim of protecting and conserving the monument and its setting.

### Prehistory

The River Tas which flows through the site, enters the River Yare immediately to the south of Norwich. These river valleys were important natural routeways, and the area where they meet is rich in prehistoric sites. These include Arminghall Henge, a Neolithic ceremonial monument 2.5km to the north, close to the River Yare on the outskirts of modern Norwich (not open to the public). This may date to c. 3000 BC. The remains of many barrows or burial mounds are also known nearby. Some were excavated on the line of the Norwich Southern Bypass, and may have been two thousand years old by the time the Romans arrived here.

Before the Roman conquest, Norfolk was under the control of the Iron Age tribe known as the *Iceni* (usually pronounced lke-eeny).

Many Iron Age metal objects have been recovered at *Venta*, including *Iceni* silver coins, decorated brooches and harness



A remarkable find from the 2010 excavations. This palaeolithic hand-axe came from a layer apparently dating to the 4th century AD, but pre-dates the Roman period by thousands of years. There have been very many prehistoric finds from the area (Dave Griffiths)





Air view of *Venta Icenorum* from the south. The walls and street plan are clearly visible, as well as the parish church in the south-east corner of the walled area (Mike Page)

findings. These finds have been made to the east and west of the Roman town walls as well as within them.

After the Roman invasion of AD43, the *Iceni* king, Prasutagus, made an alliance with the Roman authorities. When he died the alliance broke down. In AD60/61 Prasutagus's wife, Boudica, led a revolt against Roman rule. The *Iceni* rampaged through the south of the region, burning towns including Colchester and London before they were defeated by the Roman army. *The fate of the Iceni after the revolt is unknown but it is likely that the region continued to be inhabited and farmed by the Iceni.*

## The Roman Town

The settlement at Venta began after the *Iceni* revolt of AD 60/61, and may have developed from a Roman army base.

In some ways the location of *Venta Icenorum* seems surprising – Norwich lies at the very centre of the great east Norfolk river confluence, and is also more naturally defensible and closer to deep water for shipping. However, the presence of a number of prehistoric monuments shows that the *Venta* area was important from the Neolithic period onwards and it may be that the new town was founded in an area of existing importance.

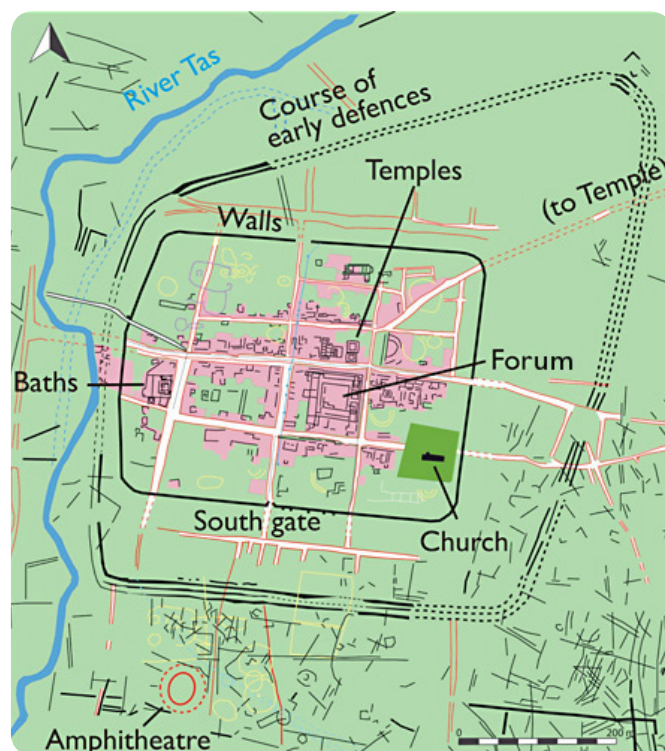
Recent surveys and excavation suggest that the river here was never much deeper than it is now. In the Roman period it was slightly wider, with marsh and reed beds at either side. Only boats with a shallow draft or flat-bottoms could have reached the town – but the River Tas could be easily crossed at this point giving access to the main roads to the north and south.

Most of the inhabitants of the Roman town were probably of local origin. The tribal name was present in the name *Venta Icenorum* recorded over 200 years after the revolt, and archaeological evidence suggests that many local customs continued.

The new settlement was small and without paved streets. But the people living here used high quality pottery from Gaul,

and some of the buildings were decorated with fine painted wall plaster – fragments of this decoration were found during excavation.

Around 60 years later (AD 120) the earliest known gravelled roads were laid out and the grid-system of streets began to develop. Soon after, stone buildings started to appear. At this time the town was surrounded by ditches – not walls - and covered a much larger area than the current walled enclosure.



Interpretative plan of *Venta Icenorum*, showing Roman built-up area (pink), roads and streets (white), and other evidence from geophysical survey. The oval remains of the amphitheatre are visible in the lower left-hand part of the plan (University of Nottingham; extra-mural cropmark data derived from the National Mapping Programme (English Heritage and Norfolk County Council)).



Caistor St Edmund Venta S side turret [0284] 1934-09-09 1934 excavations. Footings of one of the towers in the wall. South side.. (Photograph: George Plunkett)

The walls were built in the late 3rd or 4th century. Many towns all over Roman Britain built walls at this time in response to increasing attacks from abroad by Germanic raiders.

Excavation and survey has shown that some areas of the street plan were never built up. All buildings in the early period were modest ones of timber. Only in the time of the Emperor Hadrian (AD 117-38) did grander public buildings start to appear, with the laying out of the first forum in the town centre.

*Venta*, like all Roman towns, had forums and baths. Excavation which took place in the forum area in the 1930s showed that the Hadrianic forum had been rebuilt in the later 2nd century, and again after it burnt down. It was the town's market place, and the *basilica* (town hall) and two temples lay close by. There were fine public baths in the west part of the town, which also saw some excavation in 1935. The entire town was supplied by running water, perhaps from an aqueduct on high land to the east. Wooden water pipes and drains running along the streets have been found during excavation and survey work; water and waste would both have flowed down the slope westward to the river.

Other major Roman buildings have been recorded outside the core of the town. The oval outline of an amphitheatre has been identified on aerial photographs c. 200m to the south of the defences, and more recently has been plotted by geophysical survey. We do not know if this was a public building or a military exercise and training facility. Approximately 1km to the north-east of the town lay a major 3rd-century temple complex surrounded by a *temenos* (boundary) wall with a monumental entrance gate. This site was excavated in the 1950s, and has produced many finds.

## Building of the walls

The circuit of defensive walls and ditches were built in the late 3rd or early 4th century. This was a period when many towns all over Roman Britain were walled in response to increasing problems of security, arising both from attacks by Germanic raiders and from civil war within the empire.

Originally, tower-like bastions were attached to the outside of the walls at regular intervals. These were used as watch towers, or to mount artillery or other weapons. Only one bastion now survives, near the site of the west gate adjacent to the River Tas, although traces of others can be seen in front of the south wall.

Only about a half of the area covered by *Venta Icenorum's* original street grid was enclosed by the defences. Although the 'extra-mural' areas could have remained in use into the 4th century AD, some of these areas may never have been densely inhabited, even before the walls

were built. The best preserved section of the wall is the eastern half of the north face, where it is exposed to its full height of c. 7m and parts of the original wall-top walkway survive.

A single gate lay in the centre of each side. The south gate was temporarily exposed during Professor Donald Atkinson's excavation campaign of the 1930s. We have some remarkable photographs of the excavation, although the results have never been fully published.

## The end of Roman Caistor and the Anglo-Saxon period

In the early 5th century occupation of the area inside the walled town probably came to an end. But the site was not completely abandoned.

Although Roman forces were withdrawn from Britain by the emperor Honorius in AD 410, the breakdown of Roman authority probably began in the 340s AD. Little is known of the fate of *Venta* and of its inhabitants, although coins of Honorius found at the site show that activity continued here after AD 400. Anglo-Saxon burials were found when the railway was built in the 19th century, and Anglo-Saxon buildings have been identified more recently using aerial photography, geophysics and excavation. Coins recovered by metal detecting show that the people living here had contacts across Europe.

Evidence from excavations shows that the area outside the walls was soon occupied, possibly by settlers from across the North Sea. *Venta* remained an important place during the Anglo-Saxon period until the 8th century when Norwich took over as the main centre of settlement in the region. We don't know whether the existing population was driven out by newcomers or whether they stayed on and adapted to the new way of life. No evidence for violent conflict has been found at the site but there is evidence for a profound change in the way people lived here. Changes included a shift in settlement from inside the walls to outside, and differences in architecture, dress and diet.

There is little Anglo-Saxon evidence from the walled area itself. However, the techniques used by excavations in the 1930s – which targeted major Roman buildings, and would have dealt only summarily with later layers above them – might have failed to detect more subtle remains. One possibility is that the Roman defences were used to enclose an early church or monastic community, and that the walled area was somehow set apart from secular life. The medieval parish church of St Edmund is sited in the south-east corner of the town *and appears to have been built on the line of a Roman street*. It is possible that the



One of two unusual burials dating to the 4th or early 5th centuries found in the northern part of the town during excavations in 2009. This body seems to have been placed in a pit, rather than in a specially dug grave (Will Bowden)





Excavations in the northern area of the town during 2010 (Will Bowden)

church was built on the site of a Roman church.

## Excavations and research

In the dry summer of 1928 aerial photography revealed the pattern of Roman streets and buildings inside the walls of the town.

The existence of the Roman town had long been known, but these remarkable images awakened national interest. An excavation followed (1929 – 35) which found evidence for major public buildings including the forum, a bath-house and the south gate. These were later re-buried.

Between 2006 – 2014 the University of Nottingham led a programme of excavation and research in the Town which has radically changed our understanding of the town and the people who lived here and is reflected in the information summarised

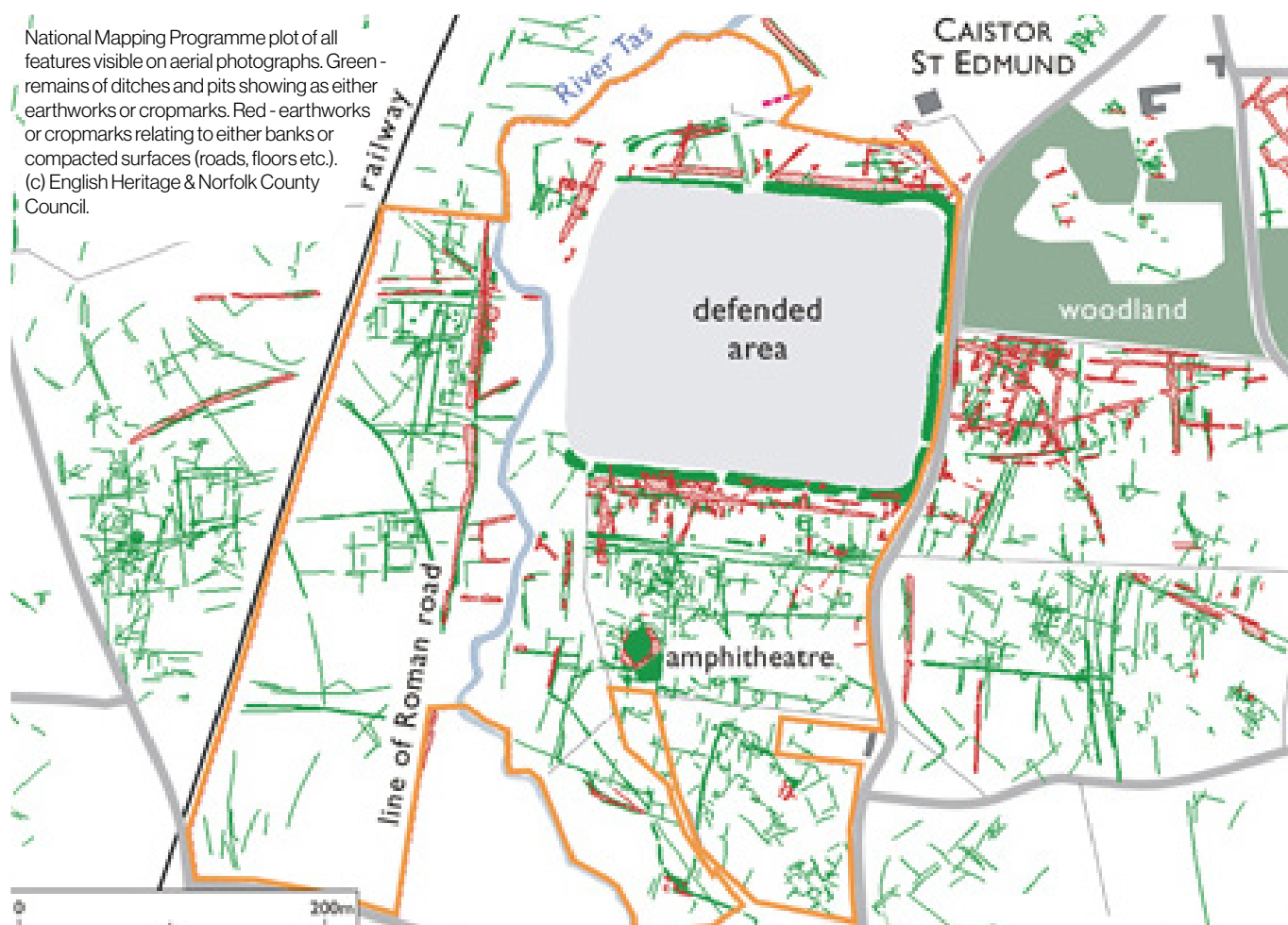
above. Further archaeological research continues in the wider area of the Roman and Anglo-Saxon settlements led by the Caistor Roman Project, a volunteer organisation which grew out of the excavation programme: [www.caistorromanproject.org](http://www.caistorromanproject.org)

Air photographs of Caistor Roman town were studied by the Norfolk County Council team undertaking the National Mapping Programme (NMP) in Norfolk. NMP was an English Heritage initiative that aims to identify, map and interpret all archaeological sites visible on aerial photographs. One significant discovery at Caistor was the identification of elements of the well-known triple-ditched defences in two places to the north of the town. This suggests that the triple-ditch enclosure was perhaps once kite-shaped. Perhaps they formed part of a civil defence of the 2nd century or later, rather than of an early fort as is more usually suggested. Traces of further possible extra-mural streets and traces of pre-Roman activity have also been seen.

## Norfolk Archaeological Trust ownership

The defended area of the Roman town has been owned by the Norfolk Archaeological Trust since 1984, when it was vested in the Trust following the death of Mrs E.H. Hawkins the previous year. Much of the site, however, lay outside this area, and there was no provision for vehicular access to the monument. The Trust's subsequent purchase in 1992 of land around the walled area gained wide support – from the public and local news media as well as from conservation and other bodies concerned with archaeology and cultural heritage.

The purchase was funded with the aid of a package of grants from English Heritage, Norfolk County Council and South Norfolk Council.



National Mapping Programme plot of all features visible on aerial photographs. Green - remains of ditches and pits showing as either earthworks or cropmarks. Red - earthworks or cropmarks relating to either banks or compacted surfaces (roads, floors etc.). (c) English Heritage & Norfolk County Council.



The south gate of the town, as revealed by excavations by Donald Atkinson in the 1930s. (Photograph: George Plunkett)

## Further information

Interactive interpretation scheme on site tells the story of the Town *[Please download the app from NATs website before visiting]*.

An illustrated colour guide published by the Trust is available from the Caistor St Edmunds Church (within the Roman Town), Caistor Post Office, the Caistor Hall Hotel, the Wildebeest Arms at Stoke Holy Cross, and local bookshops.

### Other reading:

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Penn, K.J., 2000. *Excavations on the Norwich Southern Bypass 1989-91. Part II: The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Harford Farm*, East Anglian Archaeology 92 Download at <http://eaareports.org.uk/publication/report92/>

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Wade-Martins, P. (ed.), 1999. *Norfolk from the Air II* (Norfolk Museums Service)

## Location:

Caistor Roman Town, Caistor St Edmund, Norwich, NR14 8QN



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