

# THE CAISTOR EXCAVATION 2010

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2010 saw the first full-scale excavation inside the walled area of the Roman town since Donald Atkinson ceased work in 1935. As in the 2009 season, the excavations were designed to test hypotheses generated by the geophysical survey. In particular the trenches were aimed at the investigation of possible pre-Roman circular features and also at establishing the date at which the Roman town itself was laid out. In addition to the two trenches investigating the Roman town, excavation was also carried out adjacent to the south wall of St. Edmund's church in advance of the construction of a new kitchen and toilet.



Caistor during the 2010 season, with the streets marked out on the ground. The two excavation trenches can clearly be seen (*Mike Page*).

## The Origins of the Town

The excavation areas were focused on two circular features identified by the geophysics. One of these lay adjacent to the main north-south axial street, which the other was apparently truncated by the diagonal street that led out of the north-west corner of the town. In the event only one of these features was securely identified, and proved to date to the 3rd century AD, rather than to the pre-Roman period. In fact, neither of the two trenches revealed any significant trace of pre-Roman material, with the exception of a high number of Mesolithic-early Neolithic struck flints recovered from a relic soil level found beneath the diagonal street. These finds, together with the c. 1,500 Mesolithic finds from the 2009 excavations, point to quite intensive use of this area of the Tas valley during this period. Thus far, however, there is no clear evidence of Iron Age activity from the excavations although we should be wary of drawing too many conclusions from this.

The earliest deposits found in both trenches dated to the early – mid 2nd century AD. Although Atkinson argued that the town was laid out in the post-Boudican period (around AD 70), there was no evidence from his excavations to suggest that the street grid was any earlier than the 2nd century AD, although he did find some deposits apparently dating to c. AD 70-100.

No clear dating evidence was recovered for the diagonal street itself. In its earliest form it was approximately 5.5m wide with a pronounced camber. A series of metallised surfaces (perhaps representing some form of public space) were found to the south of the diagonal road. Both the street and the metallised surfaces were periodically refurbished during the 2nd and 3rd centuries. The western trench, however, reinforced the evidence of the geophysics that suggested that large parts of the town were not intensively occupied, particularly during the town's early history.

## A Changing Town

By the early - mid 3rd century the town was changing. The cambered diagonal road and metalled surfaces were smothered by a layer of soil and detritus, which seems to mark quite a decisive break in occupation in this area. This was also the period when a series of pits was dug next to the road. They seem to contain a carefully selected range of items, including pots that had been deliberately broken or “killed” prior to burial. The ritual interment of objects has been recognised elsewhere as an Iron Age tradition that continued into the Roman period. The date and location of these pits is worthy of further study, as are the collections from Donald Atkinson’s “rubbish” pits, which also contained a significant number of complete vessels.

The mid-late 3rd century saw the laying of a new street along the diagonal line of the earlier one. This was a much wider construction (c. 8.5 m) without the camber of the earlier street. This was subsequently cut by a series of major pits/post-holes and ruts or gullies. The western trench meanwhile saw the deposition of large quantities of rubbish, overlain by a small hearth dating to the early-mid 4th century.



The trench across the diagonal road (from the southeast). The narrow early road is clearly visible as the more orange stripe in the deepest part of the trench. In the foreground are metalled surfaces which have been cut by later pits.

## The Post-Roman Period

Neither of the trenches produced any in situ evidence of occupation beyond the end of the 4th century, although some material in the upper levels suggested some 5th-century activity in the vicinity. The excavations at the church did not produce any conclusive evidence of the earlier church suggested by the 2009 excavations (which recovered skeletal material radiocarbon dated to AD 890-1030). The earliest part of the existing church that was revealed was the south-west corner of the nave. This was entirely constructed from Roman brick, giving a (probably) misleading appearance of a Roman building. The most interesting find at the church, however, was the clear foundation of a south aisle. This would be a highly unusual feature in a late Saxon church, although no conclusive dating evidence for this feature was recovered.

## What have we learned?

The 2010 excavations show a very different Caistor to that suggested by Donald Atkinson and in previous reconstructions of the town. The lifespan of the town as a recognisable urban centre seems to have been quite short and much of it was never densely occupied. It was not, however, “a dump”, as Tony Robinson charmingly suggested on Time Team, but a place in which the Iceni fashioned a townscape that reflected local needs and values. This is the value of Caistor, in that we are starting to see how an ostensibly “Roman” town of streets and public buildings was in fact a creation of its local inhabitants rather than simply a reflection of the requirements and values of a distant imperial power.



The trench next to the north-south axial street (from the north). The curved feature in the foreground is that revealed by the geophysics, while a late Roman hearth can be seen as the latest feature in the trench.

## Presenting Caistor to the public

5100 visits to the site were recorded during the 3 weeks of the season, encouraged no doubt by the presence of Time Team. We also hosted visits by the children of Education Otherwise (the network for home educated children) and the Norwich High School for Girls. They were able to walk along the streets of the town, as marked out by Fred Marsham using a line marker. This was a very successful exercise, which we hope to repeat in 2011. Our volunteer activities also included sessions on Samian, Roman pottery and faunal remains. These and other activities were aided by a very generous grant from the South Norfolk Alliance, while May Gurney and A-Plant continued their unflagging support for the project. The excavation and post-excavation work is funded by the British Academy.



Visitors to the marquee. More than 5100 visits to the excavations were recorded during the 3-week season.