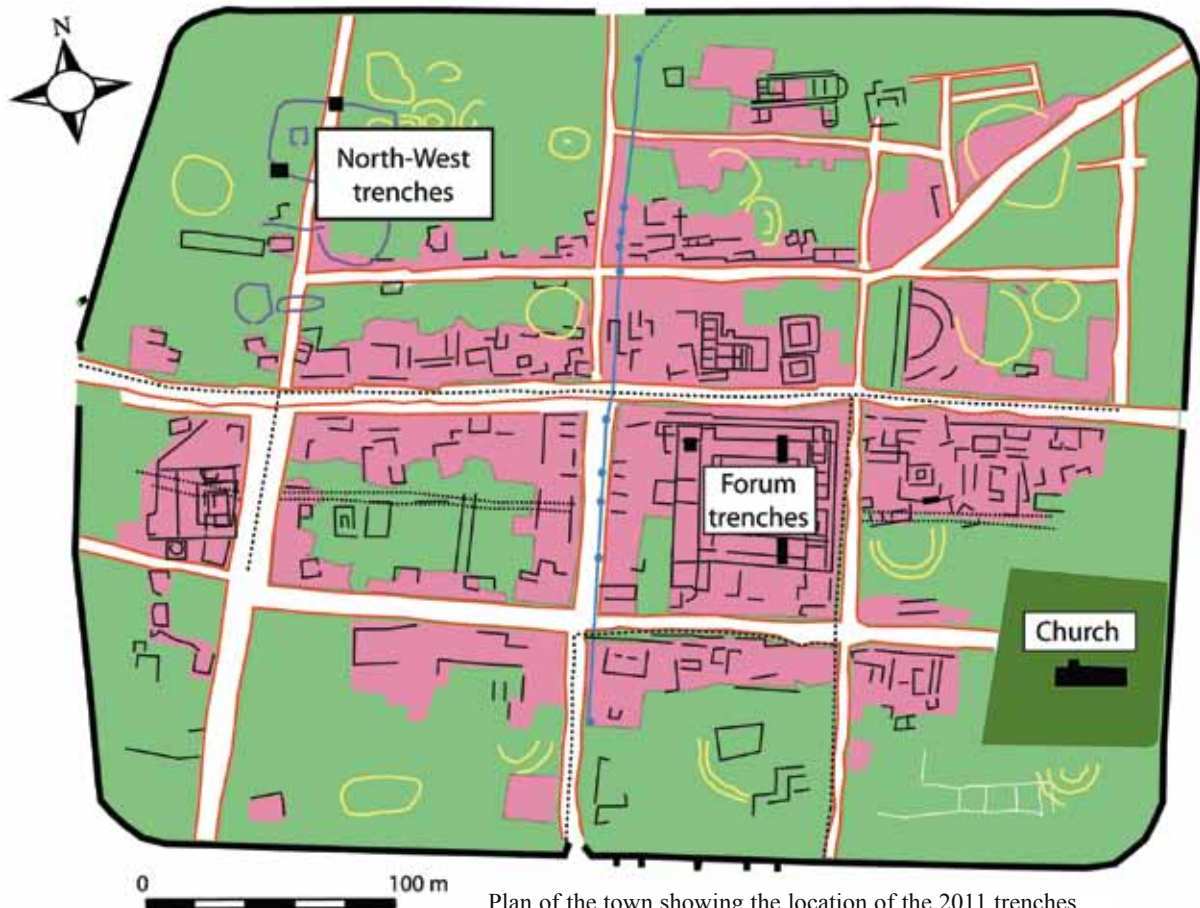


THE CAISTOR EXCAVATION 2011

The 2011 excavations at Caistor saw a further five trenches excavated within the walled town itself. Three trenches were on the site of the forum (first excavated by Donald Atkinson in 1931 and 1933) while a further two trenches investigated one of the streets in the north-west of the town and a possible post-Roman enclosure. The season also saw further public outreach work by the project, including two special days of events run in conjunction with the BBC's "Hands-on History" project, while over 3000 people visited the excavations over the course of three weeks.



Plan of the town showing the location of the 2011 trenches.

The forum

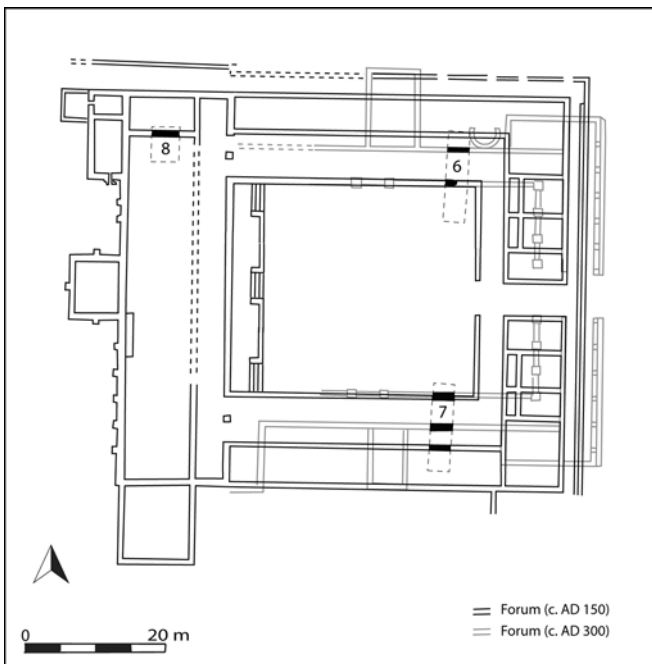
The forum was first excavated in two seasons by Donald Atkinson, although the excavations were only published in summary form by Sheppard Frere in 1971 (working from Atkinson's notes). Natasha Harlow's continuing work on the Atkinson archive material in Norwich Castle Museum has done much to clarify what Atkinson actually did, including the fact that he took a year off the forum excavations in 1932 in order to get married! He dug the forum in two halves, excavating the east end fairly comprehensively in 1931 and then in 1933 digging most of the north and south wings and the basilica by means of trenches excavated along the walls. The surviving photographs suggest that, even by the standards of the time, the process was fairly shambolic. The only plan showing the entire forum was drawn up later and, as Frere discovered, contained significant inaccuracies.

The new excavations, together with the geophysics, have done much to correct some of the errors of the published plans and have also shed important light on the development of Caistor as a town. Trenches were excavated on the north and south wings and in the basilica. The earliest structures identified were made of timber

and clay on masonry foundations and clearly predated the earliest masonry forum identified by Atkinson (dated by Frere to c. AD 150). These buildings, which were found beneath both the north and south wings of the forum, had been destroyed by fire. They can probably be related to a phase of buildings excavated by Atkinson in insula IX (just to the north of the forum) which dated from AD 90-140 and which had also been destroyed by fire. The fact that the burnt deposits don't seem to extend into the area of the forum courtyard could suggest that our burnt buildings represent an early timber phase of forum. Certainly the discovery of quantities of painted wall plaster belonging to this phase beneath the later basilica suggests that these early timber buildings were of some pretension.

The stone forum (Atkinson's Forum I) does not seem to have lasted long. By the early to mid 3rd century it had seemingly been abandoned as a public space and was being used for casual rubbish disposal, giving some indication as to how little the Iceni were attracted to Mediterranean style urban life. However, the forum was rebuilt on largely new foundations in the early 4th century. This had been argued by Atkinson and was conclusively demonstrated by the new excavations.

The late Roman construction of what seems to be a new forum is extremely unusual in the western Roman Empire and hints at the refounding of Venta Icenorum as a major late Roman political centre. The best UK parallel is that of Cirencester, known to have been the capital of the province of Britannia Prima, one of the four provinces into which Britain was divided by AD 312. The locations of the other capitals are unknown but it is not impossible that Caistor was one of them. Whether or not this is the case, all the archaeology of Caistor indicates that its most intensive occupation took place in the late Roman period, perhaps relating to its strategic importance at the head of the river system guarded by forts at Burgh Castle, Caister on Sea and probably Reedham.



Revised plan of the forum showing the locations of the 2011 trenches.

The trenches in the north-west

Two trenches were excavated in the north-west of the town to investigate a possible post Roman enclosure, noted on the geophysical survey as apparently cutting through one of the streets. It was also hoped to extract further dating evidence from the street itself. In the event, the enclosure ditch was only located in one of the trenches where it proved to be of late Roman date. The ditch was the latest element of a sequence of occupation that could be described as representing a “back-yard” with rough gravel surfaces and traces of post-built structures, reinforcing the impression from the geophysics that occupation of this part of the town was less intensive and perhaps less “urban” than in other areas.

Perhaps the most surprising evidence came from the street, which proved to be very different from the street excavated in the north-east of the town in 2010. The gravel that made up the street was very shallow (around 0.2 m) compared with other streets in the town which have multiple gravel surfaces making up a depth of more than 1m. In addition, pottery recovered from beneath the street showed that it could not be earlier than the late 2nd century. This clearly demonstrates that not all the street grid was laid down at the same time, forcing us to reconsider our ideas of how the town was founded and how it developed.



Burnt buildings probably dating to AD 90-140 beneath the north wing of the forum (trench 6).



Burnt tile layer beneath the south wing of the forum, cut by later masonry buildings (trench 7).



Trench 8 in the basilica showing the wall dividing the nave from the northern room. The floor is supported by dumps of clay derived from earlier buildings (and full of painted wall plaster). The backfill of one of Donald Atkinson's wall-chasing trenches is clearly visible as dark soil in the section next to the wall.

Summary

After three seasons of excavation, our understanding of Venta Icenorum has fundamentally changed. The regular Roman town that was traditionally thought to have been imposed following the Boudican rebellion has been replaced by a town that was probably laid out several decades after the revolt. Its development was episodic and following the construction of more monumental stone building in the second half of the 2nd century, its civic centre seems to have been abandoned. In the late 3rd and 4th centuries, however, while many other British towns were diminishing in size and density occupation, Caistor reached its apogee, perhaps associated with its renewed strategic importance in the face of seaborne threats to the eastern coasts of Britain.

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