

# A town of the Iceni?

10 years of research at *Venta Icenorum*



A one-day conference presenting the results of  
new survey and excavation at Caistor Roman town

Saturday January 14th 2017  
Thomas Paine Study Centre  
(UEA - Norwich)

Programme and Abstracts

## **“A town of the Iceni”: 10 years of research at *Venta Icenorum***

### *Programme*

9.00: Coffee and registration

9.45: Welcome – W. Bowden

9.55: The changing view of *Venta Icenorum* – W. Bowden

10.20: Caistor from the air: the work of the National Mapping Programme – Sarah Horlock

10.45: 'The geophysical surveys: Mapping cultural and environmental remains at Caistor St Edmund'  
– Dave Bescoby

11.10: coffee

11.30: Animals and people at *Venta Icenorum* – Matilda Holmes

11.55: Stories from the bones: examination of the human remains from Caistor – Hannah O'Regan

12.20: “Oh! You Pretty Things”: personal adornment and identity at *Venta Icenorum* – Natasha Harlow

12.45: Pottery studies and *Venta Icenorum* – Alice Lyons

1.10: Lunch

1.55: Samian pottery at *Venta Icenorum* – Gwladys Monteil

2.20: Glass finds at Caistor Roman Town - a consumer market or something more – Harriet Foster

2.45: Saxon Caistor - the ceramic evidence– Sue Anderson

3.10: tea

3.30: Afterlife: Anglo-Saxon Caistor - Tim Pestell

3.55: Caistor Roman Project in the community and future plans - Mike Pinner

4.20: Discussion, Conclusion and Questions – David Gurney

5.00: Close

**We are very grateful to the British Academy for supporting this event**

### The changing view of *Venta Icenorum* - Will Bowden

Since Donald Atkinson's excavations of 1929-35, our understanding of the town of *Venta Icenorum* has been shaped by a number of preconceptions regarding the nature of Roman urbanism and the relationship between Rome and the Iceni following the Boudican rebellion. Using extensive geophysical survey and targeted excavation, the University of Nottingham's research project has uncovered data that have challenged our previous understanding of the chronology and morphology of the Roman town.

Our findings suggest that settlement began in the later 1st century AD but that the street grid, developed later and incrementally during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD (rather than being the result of post-Boudican urban planning in the 70s AD). There is also evidence of timber buildings (possibly including a forum) of the later 1st century. The early settlement was enclosed by a colossal circuit of ditches with a perimeter of 2.4 km, although these were soon filled in.

Much of the street grid seems to have been quite sparsely occupied until the late Roman period, when the walls were built and the town saw an intensive phases of activity including the creation of a major new stone building on the site of the forum. This seems reflect the increased strategic significance and political importance of the town in the late Roman period. This political importance seems to have persisted into the Anglo-Saxon period. Although little occupation has been detected within the walled town itself, *Venta Icenorum* seems to have remained a focus of activity until at least the 8th century.



### Caistor from the air: the work of the National Mapping Programme – Sarah Horlock

The area surrounding the Roman town at Caistor is exceptionally rich in archaeological cropmarks. The natural geology and soils on the edges of the river valleys that bisect the area, provide pockets of good, and often exceptional, cropmark response that have resulted in a wealth of cropmark evidence being recorded on aerial photographs. This talk will outline the results of the assessment and interpretation of these cropmarks, as part of the National Mapping Programme (NMP).

The history of aerial reconnaissance of the Roman town and its environs starts with the exceptional photographs taken in July 1928 by a RAF pilot flying over the town. The hot and dry summer conditions had caused the crops growing over the subsurface compacted gravel roads and building foundations and walls to ripen more quickly than the surrounding crop, clearly showing the plan of the Roman town, in particular the grid pattern of roads and key buildings, to be seen and recorded. The site of the town and the surrounding archaeological landscape has since been a regular



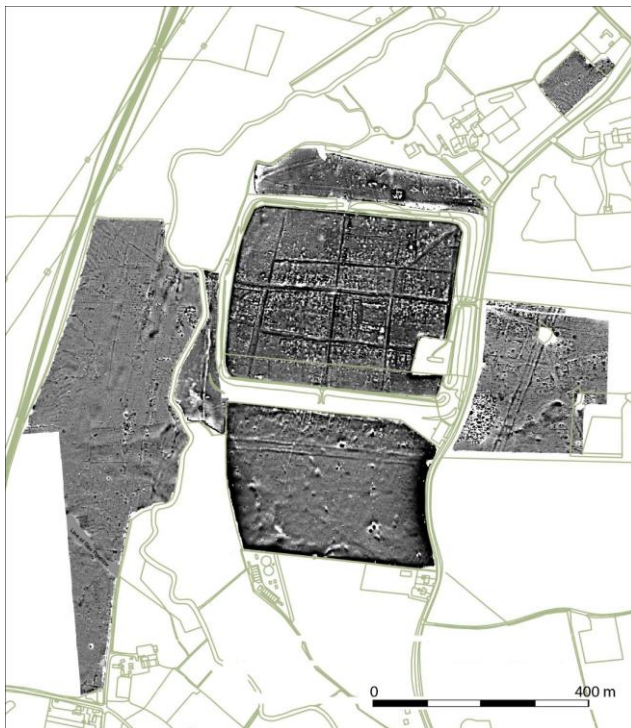
target for aerial reconnaissance and this talk will highlight some of the discoveries made from this photography, with a particular reference to the work of the NMP in environs of the Roman town.



The cropmarks of the extramural settlement to the east of the town. Photography by Derek Edwards. NHES TG2303AMM. (c) NCC.

### **The geophysical surveys: Mapping cultural and environmental remains at Caistor St Edmund – David Bescoby**

Geophysical survey in various forms has developed into an integral part of archaeological research and over the past decade or so, a range of geophysical techniques have been employed at Caistor St Edmund. Initial survey work aimed to map and delineate the extent of surviving settlement remains,



beginning with the walled town and subsequently extending surveys to the south, north and west along the river and most recently, in fields to the east. Bespoke survey methodologies were developed to maximise the sub-surface information recorded which included the construction of a custom GPS positioned survey cart. The resulting sub-surface maps, along with aerial photographic data allowed a working model of the town's former topography to be developed and guided the location of later excavation trenches.

Geophysical survey at Caistor (D. Bescoby – CRP)

Upon the floodplain of the River Tas, immediately west of the main settlement, several difference geophysical techniques have been deployed to attempt to elucidate the nature and extent of past river systems. A series of boreholes and hand-augered cores

across the alluvial floodplain have been used to verify the results of the geophysical surveys and allow a model of former riverine environments to be constructed.

### **Animals and people at *Venta Icenorum* – Matilda Holmes**

This paper will examine how the story of Caistor is enriched with the consideration of the role of animals in relation to those living within the Roman town. The faunal evidence from the 2009-21 excavations shows how animals contributed to the diet of the inhabitants and how different butchery strategies were adopted. It also sheds light on their roles as pets and as working animals, and shows

how faunal remains contribute to our understanding of the use of spatially distinct areas of the town. The evidence also allows us to make suggestions as to how we can view the town within the wider economy of Roman Britain.

### **Stories from the bones: examination of the human remains from Caistor – Hannah O'Regan**



4th-century burial from South Field in "running" position

Excavations at Caistor in the 1930s found a large number of human skulls that were related to the so-called "Caistor Massacre" (although this was subsequently debunked). In contrast the recent excavations have uncovered a number of complete burials, as well as some isolated fragments. Overall bone preservation on the site is very poor, meaning that some individuals are only represented by teeth. Nevertheless we can still learn a lot from these burials about the age, sex, stature and health of the Caistor inhabitants during the Romano-British period.

This talk will discuss the information gained from each individual, and then place the results from Caistor in the wider context of Roman Britain. We will also examine the burial position of the remains, including a burial placed on his side in a "running" position and a more recently discovered skeleton from the ditch, and what this might tell us about both the individuals who were buried, and the people who were burying them.

### **"Oh! You Pretty Things": personal adornment and identity at *Venta Icenorum* – Natasha Harlow**

Artefacts relating to dress and personal ornament are the most frequent category of small finds discovered at Roman towns, and Caistor is no exception. In this paper, I will look at objects of adornment and consider what they can reveal about the people who lived, worked and traded in the town and its hinterland.

Enamelled plate brooch, 2nd century CE, PAS ref: NMS-4CB2F5 (copyright Norfolk County Council, used in accordance with Attribution-ShareAlike license)



Material culture can also be linked to expressions of identity and belonging: how people chose to signify their allegiances through personal appearance and grooming. Using examples from the recent Caistor Roman Project excavations, finds from the 1929-35 digs at the town, as well as metal-detecting and chance finds recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme, I will explore

what can be interpreted about wider social, political and religious practices at the Roman capital of the Iceni.

### **Pottery studies and *Venta Icenorum* – Alice Lyons**

It was the antiquarian William Camden, who first recognised Caistor St Edmund as *Venta Icenorum*, that first mentioned 'urnes' as a subject for study in his book *Britannia* which he published in 1586. From this beginning in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, the large numbers of ceramic vessels left behind by our ancestors have continued to be used to inform on their lives. That these fired clay pots have survived is one of the primary reasons they have been, and continue to be, so useful to the archaeologist.



Early Roman cremation vessel from Caistor (A. Lyons))

During the period of modern archaeological explorations at Caistor, beginning with Donald Atkinson in 1929, a large quantity of pottery has been excavated. In many cases it has been the primary dating tool and also an important indicator of the activities and status of the people that lived there. This paper will take a brief look of how pottery studies have been used at Caistor, how this has changed over the years and what we still hope to learn from pottery today.

### Samian pottery at *Venta Icenorum* – Gwladys Monteil



This talk will provide an overview of the samian ware recovered from excavations at Caistor-by-Norwich undertaken between 2009 and 2012. With 1459 sherds the samian ware assemblage offers a good stratified sample to explore the various industries involved in supplying the town of *Venta Icenorum* in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD. A number of quantified analyses of the group will provide information about the rise and decline in samian quantities used on the site and what they can tell us about the status and eating habits of the inhabitants of the town.

Samian vessel from 2010 excavations (D. Leese)

Attempts will be made to compare this samian group with the samian assemblage recovered from Atkinson's excavation particularly the stamps which are now fully published in *Names on Terra Sigillata* (2008 to 2012).

### Glass finds at Caistor Roman Town - a consumer market or something more – Harriet Foster

A fairly substantial assemblage of glass vessels, numbering several hundred sherds, has been discovered at Caistor but is currently unpublished. Much of this material was discovered during the Atkinson excavations some 80 years ago. More recently, further finds made by the Caistor Roman Project have also come to light. Current research, being presented here for the first time, is focusing on identifying the glass fragments by type and date with a view to understanding its 'consumption' during the occupation of the site – Did this extend throughout the lifetime of the town or was it specific to certain periods? What do the types of glass tell us about the people who were using them? How representative or unique is the assemblage compared to Roman glass found elsewhere in Britain?



Recent glass finds from ditch to north of town



Yet there is more to consider. Caistor is one of the few sites in Britain where evidence for Roman glass working has been found, and this find is quite unusual for several reasons. It was last interpreted by Atkinson at a time when the understanding of the Roman glass industry was still in its infancy. Re-examining the glass working evidence from Caistor in light of more recent discoveries and modern thinking is crucial to understand the implications of this important find within the context of the town and indeed Roman Britain.

### **Saxon Caistor - the ceramic evidence– Sue Anderson**

A small quantity of Early and Middle Saxon pottery was recovered during recent excavations. Much of this material was associated with a single sunken-featured building located to the west of the Roman town. Other Saxon pottery has been recovered from test-pit work to the east of the town. However the bulk of the evidence for Saxon activity comes from two cremation cemeteries, and a large quantity of pottery was recovered for these in 19th and 20th centuries. These groups require re-assessment, which is beyond the scope of the current work, but a brief discussion of their significance in terms of Caister and the wider region will be included.

### **Afterlife: Anglo-Saxon Caistor - Tim Pestell**

This contribution will look at what we know about Caistor from the very limited surviving historical evidence and the various archaeological finds that have been made in the parish. While there are a number of cemeteries known about which have been excavated, the contributions of random metal-detector finds in particular have served to open up new ways of looking at not only the Roman town but its wider placement and function in the later landscape. I will attempt to look at what these might say about the place and judge Caistor's importance after the end of Roman rule.

Sunken-featured building excavated in Dunston Field in 2012 (WB)



### **Caistor Roman Project in the community and future plans - Mike Pinner**



The Caistor Roman Project has developed a community group of local volunteers who initially took part in field walking and excavation as part of the University of Nottingham's investigation of the Roman town. The volunteer group has since developed competencies in taking fieldwork from site identification through excavation and post excavation work to publication. Ably supported by professionals, the group has undertaken geophysics work, trial test pitting and large scale work in attempting to chart the development of the Roman town and the medieval village beyond the walls of the township.

Supported by funding from HLF and other sources, the group is in the first year of a three year project aimed at placing the Roman town in the broader context of the existing village of Caistor St. Edmund. The group has grown in numbers and has always aimed at the highest standards of research with a multiplicity of skills learnt by volunteers. Informing and involving local residents is at the heart of the project and our work is genuinely community based. This presentation will describe the development and intentions of the group.



Caistor Roman town from the air in 2013 (Mike Page)

[www.caistorromanproject.org](http://www.caistorromanproject.org)