

How Norwich began



Norwich was one of the the largest cities of medieval England, by some accounts greater in size than London. But why? And indeed how? Norwich came to prominence relatively late, but by 1066 it was already the fourth largest town in the country, and it continued to grow.

Norwich was not a Roman town. The Roman predecessor is Caistor-by-Norwich which lies in open fields some 3 miles to the south. There are, it is true, two Roman roads that pass through Norwich, but there continues to be no sign of any Roman settlement. Certainly, excavations frequently encounter Roman 'background noise' in the form of artefacts and re-used building material but this is no more than could have come from scattered farmsteads.

Nor does the city owe its origins to early Anglo-Saxon invaders. Despite the discovery in 1896 of an early Saxon cremation cemetery at Eade Road immediately north of the later medieval wall, and pagan Saxon material in the area of the cathedral, it was not until the 8th century that occupation extensive enough to be called urban was established on both banks of the river.

Norwich is situated on the River Wensum, which flows in an S shape through the city. The centre of the medieval, and indeed modern, city is on the south side of the river, where both the castle and cathedral are situated. However, while it seems that

Above. Earliest Norwich? Excavations at Coslany reveal an early revetment to the river.

Opposite page above. The biggest concentration of finds has been along Fishergate. Here a caterpillar brooch and a pin are both dated to the 8th/9th centuries.

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