

NORFOLK ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT

Report No. 1008

**An Archaeological Watching Brief at St Edmund's church,
Caistor St Edmund**

40830 CBN

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Location: St Edmund's church, Caistor St Edmund
District: South Norfolk
Grid Ref: TG2321 0338
HER No.: 40830 CBN
Date of fieldwork: 5th and 6th October 2004

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken at St. Edmund's church, Caistor St. Edmund, within the walls of the Roman town of Venta Icenorum, to monitor works associated with the installation of a new soakaway. Four incomplete human skeletons, associated with the medieval burial ground of the church, were disturbed during the excavation. A single sherd of residual Roman pottery and another of late medieval date were retrieved from the spoil.

1.0 Introduction

(Figs 1 and 2)

A watching brief was undertaken by Norfolk Archaeological Unit (NAU) on a soakaway and associated trenches at St. Edmund's church, Caister St. Edmund, located 5km south of Norwich city centre.

The trenches were opened to the north of the church within the church yard and burial ground. The trenches measured c. 0.5m wide, with a combined length of c. 30m and a maximum depth of 0.4m. The soakaway measured 1.5m in diameter and was excavated to a depth of 1.61m. A total of approximately 17 sq. m.

This watching brief was commissioned and funded by Caistor St. Edmund PCC.

The site archive is currently held by the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, following the relevant policy on archiving standards.

2.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

(Fig. 1)

St. Edmund's church (HER 1860) is of particular interest as it lies in the south-east corner of the remains of the Roman town *Venta Icenorum*. The east-west alignment of the church respects the street layout of the Roman town which raises the possibility that it may have been rebuilt on the site of a Roman building, perhaps even a church (Davies 2001, 27). It is possible that there has been continuous use of the site from late Roman times until the present day.

The nave of the church dates from the reign of King Edward the Confessor (AD 1042-1066), who gave the manor and the church of Caistor to the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds (which accounts for the dedication of the church and nearby village). The present chancel and remainder of the church were constructed during the 14th and 15th centuries. Parts of the church building have been partially constructed from reused Romano-British building materials (Pevsner *et al.* 1962, 238).

The site is located in a rich historic landscape surrounded by prehistoric monuments (Trevor and Bates 2000, fig. 2), many Roman structures, roads and objects associated with a major settlement, including a possible amphitheatre (Davies 2001,

28), an Anglo-Saxon burial ground (Myers and Green 1973) as well as the largely medieval church of Caistor St. Edmund.

In 1997, observation of a trench to the south of the church recorded a chalk spread, cobbled surface and tile concentration, highlighting the archaeological potential of the churchyard (Norfolk Historic Record 32584).

3.0 Methodology

(Fig. 2; Plates 1 and 2)

The objective of this watching brief was to record any archaeological evidence revealed during the excavation of the soakaway and two associated trenches.

Contractors excavated two shallow trenches from the porch entrance, and a circular pit to accommodate the soakaway. A small mini-digger fitted with a toothed bucket excavated until natural was reached, then a wheeled JCB-type digger was employed to excavate the natural (denser) ground.

Spoil, exposed surfaces and features were scanned with a metal detector. All hand-collected finds were retained for inspection, other than those which were obviously modern.

All archaeological features and deposits were recorded using NAU *pro forma* sheets. Trench locations, plans and sections were recorded at appropriate scales and colour photographs were taken of all relevant features and deposits.

The Human Skeletal Remains were recorded, but left *in situ*.

Due to the lack of suitable deposits, no environmental samples were taken.

4.0 Results

A single context number ([1]) was assigned to the homogeneous grave yard deposit and associated spoil excavated from the trenches. Natural orange sand and shingle was encountered beneath this deposit at a depth of 1.10m.

No features or human bone was seen in the shallow trenches. However, four separate sets of human skeletal remains were recorded in the base of the soakaway, encountered at a similar level below 1.12m. A skull was seen in the northern section of the soakaway. Two sets of lower leg bones were observed in the western edge and another single set in the eastern side. Where it was possible to tell, each burial with aligned east-west and no coffin fragments were observed.

A single sherd of residual Roman pottery [1] and the base of a medieval jug [1] were recovered from the spoil.

5.0 The Finds

Pottery

The site produced two sherds of pottery, weighing 0.187kg, from an unstratified context ([1]). A single residual, unsourced but of probable local production, Roman grey ware bodysherd dating from the 1st to 4th centuries and the frilled base of a 14th to 15th century Siegburg stone ware jug were identified.

6.0 Conclusions

This was a rare opportunity to observe fairly deep excavation within the church yard of Caistor St. Edmund church.

The residual body sherd of unsourced but locally produced Romano-British grey ware recovered is typical for the area (A. Lyons pers. comm.). No Roman structures or street surfaces were observed.

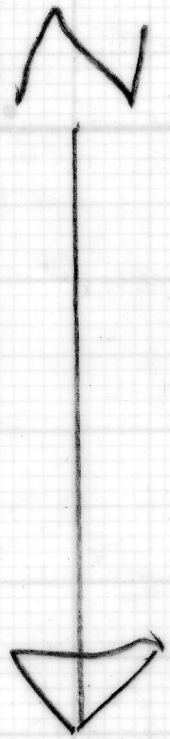
The existence of human burials was anticipated, given that the churchyard had been in use since (at least) medieval times. It would appear that the graves exposed were probably medieval in date, although no coffin fragments or staining were observed. The fragment of Siegburg stone ware jug (14th to 15th date) may be contemporary.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Lucy Talbot for identifying the pottery. This report was illustrated and produced by Julie Curl and edited by Alice Lyons.

Bibliography

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0.3m deep

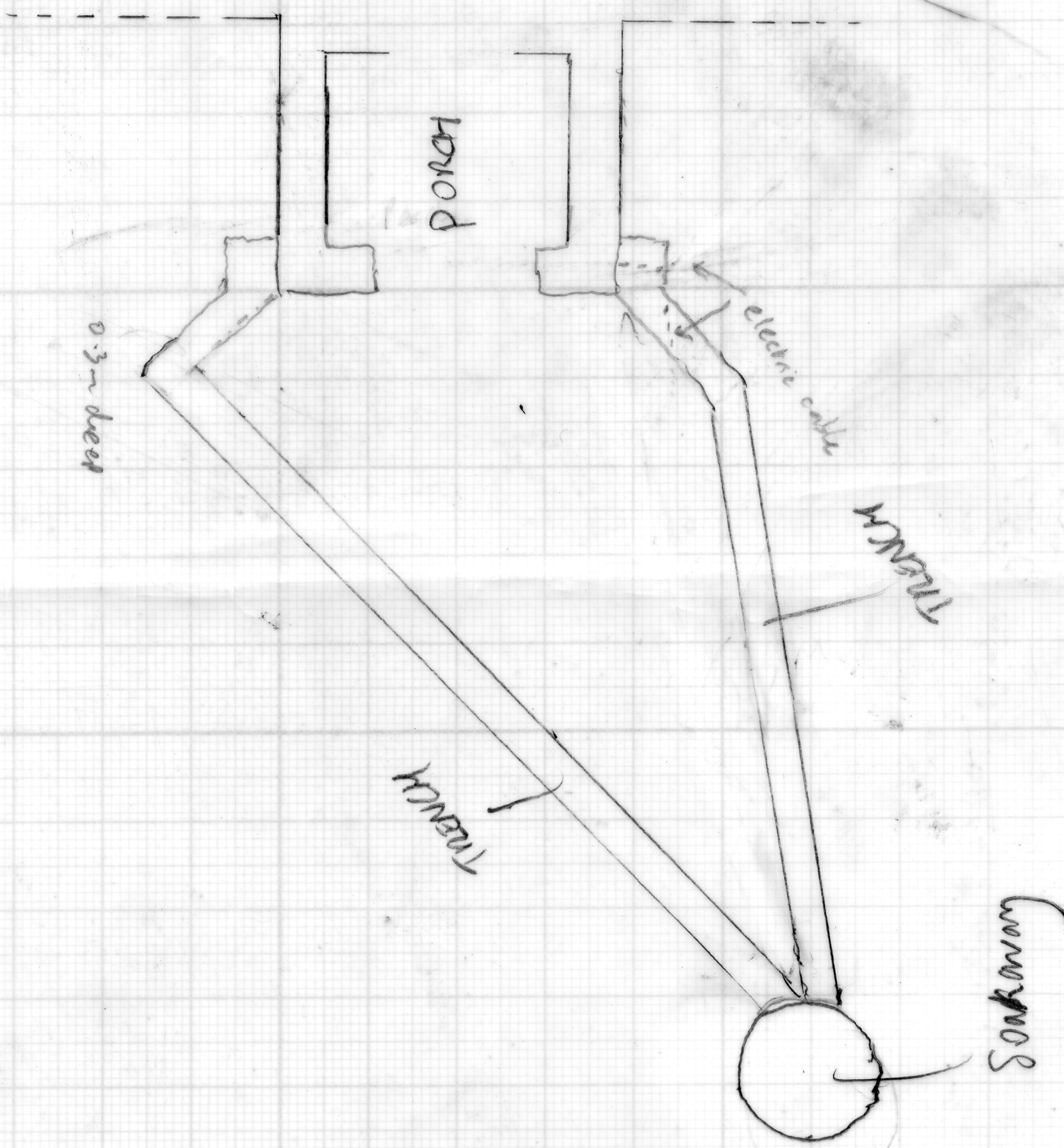
TRENCH

porch

electric cable

TRENCH

soakaway



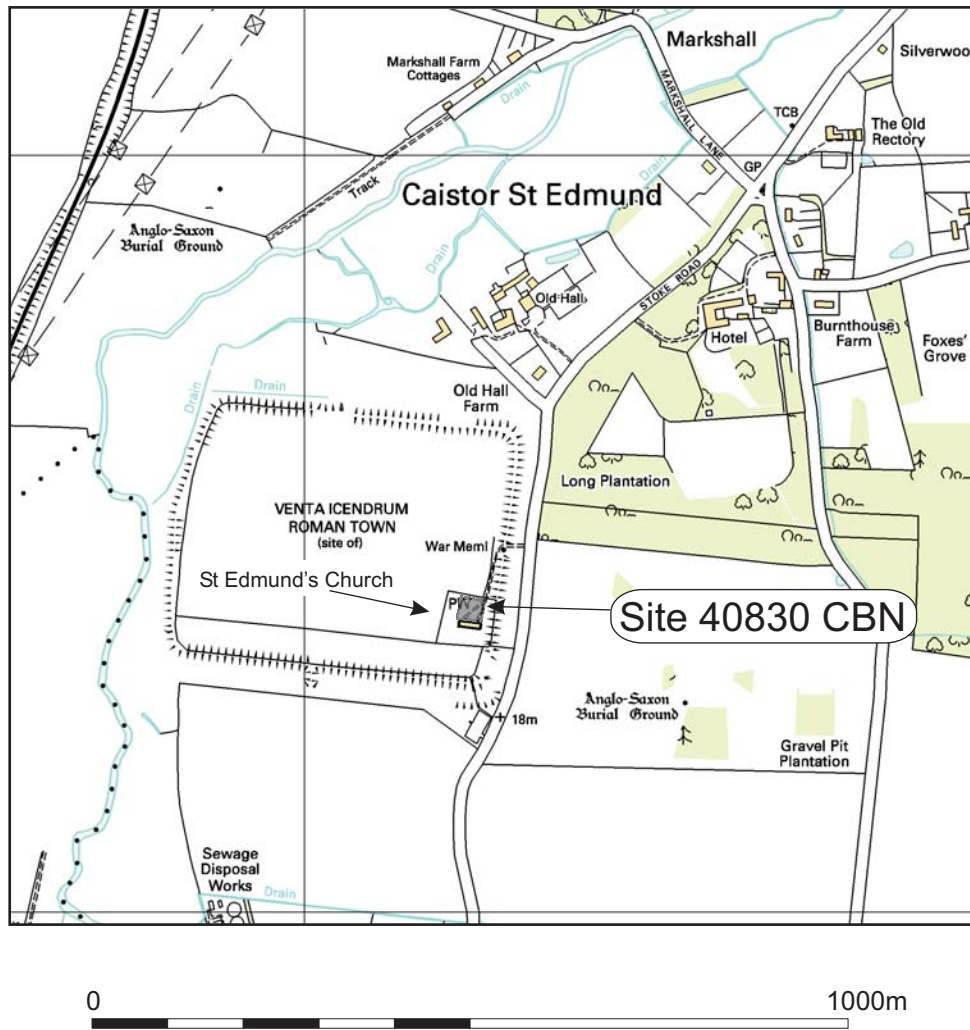


Figure 1. Site location. Scale 1:10,000

Local Authority No.100019340

Fig. 1 is based upon the Ordnance Survey 1:10,000 map with the permission of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office © Crown Copyright 'Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings' Norfolk County Council, County Hall, Norwich (05/01/05).

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Plate 1. Excavation of the trenches, looking south. C.Phillips



Plate 2. Excavation of the soakaway, looking south-west. C.Phillips