

Architectural innovation in the land of the Iceni: a new complex near *Venta Icenorum* (Norfolk)

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Introduction

An intriguing site has been discovered c.1.5 km to the south of the *civitas*-capital of *Venta Icenorum* (Caistor St. Edmund, Norfolk) (fig. 1).¹ The target of unsystematic surface collection and metal-detecting over many years, a number of separate Roman buildings was first suggested by campaigns of field-walking, metal-detecting and geophysical survey conducted in 2005-6. Then, in the unusual weather conditions of the spring of 2007, a series of crop marks at the most elevated part of the site pointed to the presence of a building without obvious parallel in Roman Britain (or indeed the wider empire). In addition to the unusual structure to be described below, the site as it is currently known comprises two substantial aisled buildings, an apparent “corridor villa”, and a further building attested by much tile in a trench machine-dug in 1999 by the landowner.

This complex of buildings is the nearest major rural site to *Venta Icenorum*, a town with no definite villas in its immediate hinterland. Indeed, with the exception of a group of villas in N Norfolk (including that at Gayton Thorpe), villas are few in the *civitas* of the Iceni, although the number of villas or possible ones has increased significantly in recent years. The low number of villas has traditionally been interpreted as a result of the Iceni being less “Romanized” than other British groups, although the limited adoption of new material culture and settlement types by the Iceni is increasingly viewed in terms of active resistance to Rome.²

An unusual winged building intersected by an aisled building

Crop-marks of one aisled building had previously been noted by aerial photography, but in 2007 a very wet early spring followed by a sudden hot dry spell meant that previously unknown sub-surface features were clearly marked by crops that were both higher and riper than the surrounding ones³ (fig. 2). The crop marks suggested a winged building of unique plan, intersected by a substantial aisled building. There were possible indications of a second apsidal structure of oval or polygonal plan adjacent to the east. Trial excavation in 2007 demonstrated that the winged building was of Roman date.⁴

The winged building (fig. 3) comprised two splayed wings (nos. 4, 5) c.13.5 m long, which converged on a long sub-rectangular room (3), a maximum of 18.5 m in length. This

1 Because of the risk posed by illegal metal detecting, the precise coordinates of the site cannot be divulged, even though coins and small finds from the site are in fact minimal.

2 For the traditional view see, e.g., J. Percival, *The Roman villa: an historical introduction* (London 1976) 98-99. For the alternative, see D. J. Mattingly, *An imperial possession: Britain in the Roman empire* (London 2006) 385.

3 The crop marks, which were clearly visible at ground level, were observed by the author and J. Beckerleg during a visit. Aerial photographs were taken by M. Page.

4 Excavation was carried out by members of the Norfolk Archaeological and Historical Research Group, directed by the author. Post-excavation work was funded by the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society and the Caistor Roman Town Project. Pottery dating was provided by A. Lyons, with other finds identified by A. Rogerson (Norfolk Landscape Archaeology).