

All Our Stories: The Big Dig, Toft 2013

Today, Toft is a small village of around 600 people, set in a slight valley beside the Bourn Brook. There are a few Tudor and Jacobean houses, a 14th century church and a Medieval ridge and furrow field at the heart of the village. A hundred years ago, workmen found a group of Roman skeletons and grave goods. We even get a (very short) mention in the Domesday Book. All this is enough to tell us that Toft has been around for a very long time.

But just how long have people been living on the same spot? Were the gently sloping fields, the springs and the stream just as much of an attraction 1000, or even 2000, years ago?

In 2014, we set out to discover the history of Toft over the past 2000 years. The name 'Toft' is of Viking origin, and we had a secret ambition to find our Viking forebears.

With the help of Dr Carenza Lewis and her team of expert archaeologists from Cambridge University, and funded by the All Our Stories Heritage Lottery grant, we created 'Toft Time Team' - 100 volunteer archaeologists from the village and our surroundings, of all ages and a wide range of nationalities. No previous knowledge was required - the only requirement was being prepared to get your hands dirty.

This website tells the story of what we found – from a Roman settlement, through the Saxon and Medieval periods, to the present day.

(And no, sadly we never did find a Viking longship.)

Introducing the dig

The archaeological investigation was focused around 'test pitting', with a number of test pits dug in different places around Toft. Each test pit covered a 1 metre by 1 metre square of ground, with the volunteers digging away 10cm at a time, and carefully recording every find. These test pits are deliberately designed to be small enough that they can be dug in back gardens and in fields, without causing too much long-term disturbance. Test pits are used by archaeologists as a way of sampling a range of locations within an area, as they give a good general indication of the historic usage in that site. The Toft Time Team dug no fewer than 16 test pits – a great achievement by people who were learning as they dug.

Each pit had a dedicated team, with people taking turns to dig, to sieve the soil for every tiny find (surprisingly hard work!), and to record our findings. The finds from each pit were taken over to a central 'washing station' at Saint Andrew's church for cleaning, logging and a preliminary identification. Our visiting experts circulated the pits in turn, giving guidance and identifying finds.

The digging of the test pits was preceded by a 'field walk' led by Dr Susan Oosthuizen of Cambridge University. Susan is a specialist in the archaeology of the Bourn valley¹. This was followed by a series of geophysical surveys carried out by the volunteers from the Archaeology RheeSearch Group. These initial surveys indicated the potential locations for

¹ Oosthuizen, S. (2006) *Landscapes Decoded: The Origins and Development of Cambridgeshire's Medieval Fields*. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.

the test pits, and recommended that we focus on the area to the south and west of the modern village. The practicalities of digging in fields with livestock in them meant that the dig had to be carried out in two phases – a summer dig focusing on people's gardens, and a November dig in the field immediately to the west of Toft Manor.

The Toft dig fits in to a much broader survey of East Anglian village archaeology being carried out by Dr Carenza Lewis of Cambridge University and her team. Villages across the region have been carrying out similar projects, and the Cambridge archaeologists hope to build this up into a richer understanding of how East Anglian rural life has changed from the Roman period onward.

The Southern digs – around the Bourn Brook

The archaeologists suspected that the south of the village, in the fields to either side of the Bourn Brook, was the heart of ancient Toft. As a result, we concentrated our efforts there, with no fewer than eight pits in the area.

Medieval fields south of the Brook

One theory was immediately overturned by the two test pits (pits 1 and 2) south of the footbridge. Archaeologists had suspected that the original village was south of the Brook, rather than beneath the modern village on the north bank. But despite painstaking digging, only three small sherds of pottery were found here. This indicates that this area was probably fields or pasture in the early Medieval period, just as it is today, without any houses.

The heart of Roman Toft?

Test Pits 13, 14, 15 and 16 were all located in the field south-west of the church and Toft Manor and north of the Brook.

This area was probably the heart of the Roman occupation in the village, with sherds of Roman pottery found in every one of the four pits dug in the field. It seems the Romans settled close to the Brook, on the south-facing slope of the field.

The Saxon village was built on the top of the Roman village, as Early-Middle Saxon Ware (450-850AD) was also found in these test pits. In its turn, the Saxon village gave way to Medieval Toft, with plenty of Medieval pottery found here, including St Neot's Ware and Stamford Ware from the 9th to 11th centuries, Early Medieval Shelly ware, Stamford Ware, Ely Ware and Hertfordshire Greyware from the late Medieval period.

The edge of the Saxon village?

Test pits were dug in a couple of gardens on Brookside.

This area seems to have been used in the late Saxon period, and then to have largely dropped out of use again. This may have been the edge of the Saxon village, which had grown a little past the original Roman village south of the church, and was bordered by fields.

These were among the few pits where we found pottery dating from the 15th-16th centuries, suggesting that it may have been one of the places where a small and struggling Tudor community was hanging on.

The Western Pits – to the west of the High Street

A Medieval home on the edge of the village

Test pit 5 was one of the few test pits to be dug in a location with a known historical usage. It was

deliberately dug on a raised area of ground which formed the foundations for a Medieval house. The Medieval houses of Toft seem to have been around the edges of a central field, much as they are today, with the church standing a little bit apart.

Pit Team 5 found the largest collection of late Medieval pottery in the Toft Time Team excavations, as well as a certain amount of early Medieval pottery. This suggests that the house was occupied on into the later Medieval period, before being abandoned sometime in the late Medieval or early Tudor period, and never occupied again.

Other finds included building materials, a few corroded metal objects, and mussel and oyster shells. Perhaps we can imagine the Medieval household living here to have been eating mussels and oysters – popular dishes at the time.

The route of the ancient Lot Way?

The location for Pit 6 – west of the High Street, near the present-day playground - was chosen as we hoped it might turn out to be on the ancient Lot Way. This was an ancient Roman and maybe even prehistoric route. The churches of Caldecote, Toft, Comberton and Barton were probably all built along the Lot Way.

There was a lot of excitement when the team dug through a 10-15cm thick layer of flints and boulders, about half a metre below the surface. This might have been a deliberately constructed road or path, perhaps the Lot Way itself. However, the team found very few of the finds that you would expect to find dropped on and around a road, and sadly, our archaeologists feel the most likely scenario is that the rocky layer has a natural origin. They suspect that this field was used occasionally by Medieval farmers, and then abandoned.

Medieval fields for a growing village

The area to the west of the village, where test pits 7 and 12 were dug, was probably occasionally used as fields by Medieval villagers, before being abandoned in the late Medieval period. The fields were probably brought back into cultivation later. This shows that the area on the far west of Toft has remained in occasional use since Medieval times.

The Pit Team found Medieval pottery dating between the 12th and 14th centuries, including Early Medieval Shelly Ware and our one piece of beautiful Grimstone Ware. We can only guess how a high-status pot like this ended up in a field!

Does it matter exactly where you dig?

Test Pit Twelve was excavated right next to Test Pit Seven, as a way of checking how effective test pits are for historical research. The Time Team and our expert archaeologists wanted to check whether two adjacent pits would have finds from the same historic periods. We found that the finds were indeed very similar – reassuring us that where exactly where you dig a test pit matters less than you might think.

The Central Pits – to the west of the field

Toft is well known locally for our Medieval ridge and furrow fields (at the centre of which lies the present-day Home Meadow) that sits at the heart of the village, with the houses clustered round it. Three test pits (pits 8, 9 and 10) were dug to the west of this central field.

High Medieval Fields

The finds from pit 8 suggested that the very central area has probably only ever been used as fields, commencing at some point after the 12th century. There has been very little digging and disturbance here, and comparatively few pot sherds have been dropped. It seems likely that there has always been a field at the centre of Toft, with the houses scattered to the south and west.

Test pit 10 was an intriguing mix of Victorian and Medieval pottery jumbled together, together with more modern finds such as a couple of batteries! The original layers of history have been disturbed, probably by repeated building works. It's a sign of the many hundreds of years that people have been living on the same plot of land.

At the heart of the village for over 1000 years

West of the ridge and furrow field on Green Lane, and south of pit 8, pit 9 was an exciting find. It produced the largest number of pottery finds of any of the summer Toft Time Team pits, dating all the way through the ages – from Roman Toft, through the Saxon and the Medieval villages to the present day. Enough Saxon pottery was found to tell us there was probably a Saxon house very nearby. This dwelling was probably occupied in the High Medieval period as well, judging by our spread of pottery finds. The team also found a single Romano-British sherd, perhaps marking the northern edge of the Roman village.

Other finds included a stone bead, fragments of clay pipes, and bits of oyster shell, as well as building material, coal and charcoal.

The Northern Pit – on Comberton Road

Tudor Toft

Following the advice of our archaeologists, the vast majority of our test pits were excavated to the south and west of the village. However, we did dig one test pit (11) to the north of the village, in a garden just south of Comberton Road.

Instead of the Roman and Saxon pottery that was found in southern pits, the team found Tudor and later pottery, including Glazed Red Earthenware, English Stoneware and plenty of Victorian pottery.

This shows how the village has gradually spread north, away from the original Roman settlement north of the brook, and the Medieval houses to the south and west of the central field. This also helps to confirm that the Saxon villagers stuck to the original Roman village area.

Toft Pottery Finds

Pottery is vital to archaeologists trying to date a site. It is common; people, both rich and poor, have been using pottery of various forms for thousands of years. It breaks easily, meaning that fragments were frequently thrown onto rubbish heaps for later generations to find. And in the ground, it's hard wearing, so that Roman pottery can be picked up from a field in good condition. But most importantly, the style of pottery changes from place to place and from century to century, making it an easy way for archaeologists to identify where and when it was made. Medieval Toft had clear trade links across East Anglia, for example, with pottery coming from as far as Ipswich and Kings Lynn. The pottery we found in our test pits was identified by archaeological experts from the University of Cambridge, and used to tell which areas of Toft were inhabited at what dates.

Roman pottery

Roman Britons used pottery for a huge range of vessels – including lamps, amphorae for wine and olive oil, cooking pots and tableware. Pottery was made across Britain, but the Nene valley, near Peterborough, was famous for finely decorated table ware. The Toft Time Team found numerous pieces of Roman pottery in the area to the south of the village.

St Neots Ware

St Neot's Ware was common in the south of England in the 3 centuries before and after the Norman conquest, but all the examples found by Toft Time Team date from after 1000 AD. St Neot's Ware was most often used to make small jars or bowls, often an attractive purplish-black colour with white speckles formed by finely crushed fossil shells in the clay. The Time Team found several pieces of St Neot's Ware in pits spread around the village.

Thetford Ware – the practical choice

When Anglo-Saxons needed huge storage jars – up to 1m high – they looked for Thetford ware. This pottery came from Ipswich, Thetford and Norwich, and was made from 850 AD onwards. As well as the enormous storage jars, the East Anglian potters made simple jars, jugs, bowls and lamps, throwing them on their hand-turned wheels. The only Thetford Ware in Toft was found in pit 9, in the central area of Toft.

Early Medieval Shelly Ware – Practical and solid

This early Medieval pottery was practical and solid, with fossil shells mixed in the clay making the resulting pots tougher. It was mostly used for the types of pots that might get bashed around a bit, like cooking pots that would be lifted on and off a hot fire, bowls and jugs. It's no surprise that the Time Team found plenty of this tough household stuff around Toft, with sherds found in almost every site in the heart of the village.

Ely Ware – improving over time

Ely ware came from Medieval Ely, with the potters making jars, bowls and jugs. Their technologies developed over the 300 years that potters made this work, with earlier potters hand-building their vessels, and their descendants throwing finer pots on the wheel. Despite it being so near, the Time Team only found one piece of Ely Ware in Toft.

Hertfordshire Greyware – simple but practical

This Medieval pottery is found all over Hertfordshire, with local potters making a range of simple jars, bowls and jugs from hard, grey sandy clay. It may not be pretty but it's practical!

Hedingham Ware – sparkling glazed pottery

Our pieces of Hedingham Ware might once have been attractive glazed jugs, sparkling when they caught the light. This fine orangey-red pottery from Medieval Essex has a high level of the mineral mica in the clay, which makes the surface sparkle. The Time Team found three different pieces of Hedingham Ware scattered around the village.

Grimston Ware – quirky pots with personality

Decorative Grimston ware, made near King's Lynn, was hugely popular, not just in Medieval England, but in Norway as well. In fact, nearly half the medieval pottery found in Norway was made in Grimston, and shipped out from King's Lynn. So what made the pots so special? Although many of them were practical jugs and pots, Grimston was famous for its ornate jugs, featuring models of knights in armour or grotesque faces on the outside. Unfortunately the Time Team only found one piece of Grimston ware in Toft.

Late Medieval Ware – tough everyday pottery

Finding broken pieces of this pottery could be the sign that a Tudor housewife was brewing beer in Toft 500 years ago. This hard, reddish-orange pottery was made in the 15th and 16th centuries around East Anglia. It was used for everyday pottery like jugs and big bowls, as well as the large pots called 'cisterns' that were needed for brewing beer. The Teams from pits 4, 5 and 6 all found Late Medieval Ware.

Glazed Red Earthenware – the cook's choice

Cauldrons, cooking pots and big mixing bowls – glazed red earthenware items were being made and used almost everywhere in Britain, right the way through from Tudor times to the Victorian age. The smooth red clay could be used for all types of pots, but was particularly appropriate for the larger pots that would be exposed to high heat over a fire or stove. A good-quality glaze on the inside of the pots made them easier to use and clean, no doubt a blessing for anyone who had to do the washing up. The Time Team found plenty of this useful pottery in Toft, widely spread around the village.

English Stoneware

This very hard grey pottery might be the sign of either a scholar or a drinker – it was used particularly for ink bottles and beer jars. However, its very hard fabric made it practical for all sorts of other uses. It's easily recognised by its grey interior clay and the white or brown surfaces. The Time Team only found three pieces of English Stoneware, and only in two pits towards the centre and North-East of the village.

Victorian pottery

Victorian pottery comes in all different shapes and sizes, particularly the cups, plates and bowls with blue decorations which are still used today. Not surprisingly, the Time Team found more Victorian pottery than anything else.

So what might Medieval Toft have looked like?

A church standing among open fields

Our pits suggest that the church was surrounded by open fields on all sides, not unlike today.

Houses to the north of Bourn Brook

And just like our modern village, the Medieval houses seem to have clustered around the fields to the north of Bourn Brook – spreading out from where the original Roman settlers had built. Despite what the archaeologists originally thought, there were no houses south of the brook.

Test pits 5, 6, 7, 10 and 12 show that there were Medieval houses on the western edge of the village, on what is now School Lane and the High Street. However, they don't seem to have reached as far north as our modern Comberton Road. This northern part of the village was left for the Tudor villagers, who built large timber-framed houses including Old Farm and Manor Farm.

The amazing thing is just how similar in location our modern houses are to the original Medieval layout.

Our archaeologists think that some of the Medieval houses may have been made out of brick, tile and baked clay building materials known as 'CBM'. However, there would have been a lot of houses built out of timber, clay and daub.

Pottery from across East Anglia

Toft villagers had pottery from across Medieval East Anglia in their homes. Their houses would have been filled with practical and hard-wearing pottery for brewing and cooking. But there was at least one fancy glazed and decorated pot all the way from King's Lynn – someone's prize possession?

What did Saxon Toft look like?

Like many places in England, it seems that a Roman village was largely abandoned in the early Saxon period, before growing again in the late Saxon period.

However, we found late Saxon pottery almost exactly on top of our Roman pottery, suggesting that there was a certain amount of continuity in Toft over the centuries – the Saxon houses and fields were on top of the Roman houses and fields.

This Saxon occupation of Toft was probably centred around the field just to the north of Bourn Brook, with its gentle south-facing slope and easy access to water.

What did Roman Toft look like?

Roman occupation of Toft was probably centred around the field just to the north of Bourn Brook, with its gentle south-facing slope.

The Toft Time Team discovered plenty of pieces of Romano-British pottery in this area, but no Roman building materials. This means that instead of the well-built and elegant villas that we tend to think of in Roman Britain, the Roman houses of Toft were probably made out of wood and daub – materials that have disappeared into the soil.

We think that a Roman road – called the Lot Way – ran through Barton, Comberton, Toft, Caldecote and beyond. It is possible we found a trace of this road in Test Pit 6, but it may have been a natural feature.

In the 19th century, Roman graves were found in Toft. Sadly, no skeletons were found during the Toft Time Team dig! According to a 19th century book of local history, the graves were found “by Toft church, ... at a place called Priory Field, not far from the brook, in December 1851, by some labourers digging gravel. At about three feet below the surface they found seven skeletons. Six of the bodies had been placed side by side with their feet towards the west, and the seventh lay across their legs. Fragments of Roman pottery, a portion of a lamp and paterae [bowls] were found close by the skeletons.”