An Introduction

Norwich and its surrounding area have a long and rich history. There is much to learn about the first settlers in the area and how its population changed over time. In this study, children will gain an understanding of how Norwich became the place we know and love today.

What you need to know

Norwich and the wider county of Norfolk have a rich prehistoric past, with evidence showing that people have lived in the area for hundreds of thousands of years. One of the most significant discoveries was made in 2013 at Happisburgh on the Norfolk coast, where storms uncovered ancient footprints believed to be 900,000 years old. These prints, left by **Homo antecessor**, represent the oldest evidence of humans in Britain. Alongside the footprints, archaeologists found a flint handaxe and animal bones, offering a glimpse into daily life during the Palaeolithic era.

By around 4000 BC, people in Norfolk began to settle and farm the land, transitioning from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Charred seeds found near Norwich suggest that crops were grown, while polished stone axes helped early farmers clear forests. Flint mining at **Grimes Graves**, a large Neolithic site with over 400 shafts, shows how important flint was for making tools. Sites such as **Arminghall Henge**, aligned with the winter solstice sunset, indicate that Neolithic communities gathered for ceremonies and shared beliefs, supported by evidence of feasting and nearby burial mounds.

During the Bronze Age, large hoards of metal objects were buried, including the **Eaton Hoard**, which contained 145 tools and weapons. The Iron Age saw the construction of hillforts, such as **Tasburgh Camp**, providing protection and community space. The **Snettisham Hoard**, with its carefully buried gold torcs and rare helmet fragments, shows that Norfolk was home to skilled craftsmen and had complex social and religious practices, even using advanced metalworking techniques such as mercury gilding long before it was previously thought possible.

Before the Roman conquest of Britain in AD 43, Norfolk was home to the Iceni tribe, ruled by King Prasutagus. After his death in AD 60, the Romans attempted to take full control of Iceni lands, ignoring his wishes to leave part of his kingdom to his wife, Boudicca. This led to a significant rebellion in which Boudicca led the Iceni and other tribes in attacking major Roman settlements, including London and Colchester. Although the rebellion was ultimately defeated, it left a lasting impact on the area. The Romans established a new town over the ruins of an Iron Age settlement – **Venta Icenorum** – located near modern-day Caistor St Edmund, just outside Norwich.

The town became a major centre in East Anglia, with a population of around 7,000 and featured public buildings such as a forum, amphitheatre, baths and temples.

By the end of the Roman era, coastal defences like **Burgh Castle Roman Fort** were built to repel increasing attacks by seafaring tribes such as the Angles, Saxons and Jutes. When Roman forces withdrew from Britain in the early 5th century, these groups settled in Norfolk. Anglo-Saxon burial sites, including **Spong Hill** and cemeteries near Venta Icenorum, reveal their Pagan beliefs and growing communities. Over time, the Anglo-Saxon town of **Norwic** was established, becoming an important trading centre and place of Christian worship.

The arrival of the Vikings in East Anglia led to periods of peace and conflict. In AD 1004, Viking King Sweyn launched a violent raid on Norwich, burning much of it down in retaliation for the king's order to kill Danes in England. Despite this destruction, the town quickly recovered and grew into a thriving settlement.

Norwich is recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086 as having 1,358 households and 22 churches, placing it among the larger settlements in England at that time. Its prosperity was fuelled by thriving industries, notably the wool trade, which made the city wealthy and led to its ranking as the second-largest city in England by the 14th century. Key structures from the medieval period include Norwich Castle—initially constructed in wood and later rebuilt in stone around AD 1100—as well as Norwich Cathedral, whose construction began in 1096 and required the impressive feat of canal engineering to import limestone from Normandy. Historic market sites, such as the one at Mancroft established in AD 1075, and important buildings like the Guildhall, Dragon Hall, and Strangers' Hall, further symbolise the city's medieval importance. Additionally, monuments such as Ethelbert Gate, dating from circa 1316, and the enduring presence of the city walls, are reminders of Norwich's medieval past.

In later centuries, Norwich evolved into an industrial centre, marked by significant social and economic change. The city welcomed Protestant refugees from the Netherlands in 1565 and later Huguenot immigrants between 1627 and 1652, both groups introducing new techniques that boosted the local textile trade and enhanced agricultural practices, such as the Norfolk four-course system. The arrival of the railway in 1844 further transformed Norwich by facilitating trade and the growth of factories, although this period also brought challenges such as overcrowding and harsh working conditions, which inspired social reformers like Elizabeth Fry (born in 1780). Norwich's industrial heritage is also celebrated through notable local brands, including Colman's Mustard (established in 1814), Caley's Chocolate (founded in 1883), and Start-rite, Britain's oldest shoemaker (established in 1792).

During World War 1 (1914–1918), following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914 which ignited widespread conflict, many Norwich men—often serving in the Royal Norfolk Regiment—were sent to fight, with the Battle of the Mons in August 1914 marking one of their first engagements. Local hero Edith Cavell, born in Swardston in 1865, aided over 200 trapped soldiers to escape to the neutral Netherlands before her execution by firing squad on 12 August 1915; her sacrifice is commemorated by a memorial near Norwich Cathedral. Meanwhile, women in Norwich contributed significantly to the war effort at home by working as nurses, in munitions factories, and organising fundraisers, as the community awaited the Armistice on 11 November 1918—a day now observed as Remembrance Day. In the aftermath, the Norwich War Memorial and the Roll of Honour at City Hall were established to honour the 3,544 local casualties, and the Mile Cross estate was built in the 1920s under the 'Homes Fit for Heroes' scheme.

World War 2 (1939–1945) brought further challenges to Norwich following Germany's invasion of Poland on 3 September 1939. As the nation prepared for conflict, children from Norwich were evacuated under Operation Pied Piper to protect them from the dangers of bombing. The city also became strategically significant with RAF Horsham St Faith, now Norwich International Airport, serving as a key Royal Air Force station. In April and June 1942, Norwich endured the devastating Norwich Blitz as German bombers, targeting the city for its historical and cultural importance, caused damage to around 27,000 buildings, destroyed approximately 2,000 homes, and claimed the lives of 229 citizens. Despite the hardships, the resilience and community spirit of Norwich shone through as neighbours and volunteers, including members of the Home Guard, supported one another during these turbulent times.

Resources

Our key enquiry questions, sources, PowerPoints, activities, and other resources will help to build children's understanding of their local area of Norwich and answer the question 'How has Norwich changed over time?'

Get in touch

Is there an area of local history you'd love to see on our Local History Hub? Get in touch to learn how we can work together! Email LocalHistory@tpet.co.uk to find out more.

Teacher's Pet | Historic England

NORFOLK Norwich

Local History

Historic England and Teacher's Pet have come together to bring you a collection of free resources that you can use in your local history teaching.

Historic England | Teacher's Pet

Who are Teacher's Pet?

Teacher's Pet have been providing downloadable and playable educational content to early years and primary school teachers for over 14 years. We cover all areas of the curriculum and use a team of in-house teachers and designers to create engaging and memorable concepts, that the children will love.

Why local history?

At Teacher's Pet we want to empower primary school teachers by giving them the tools they need to deliver inspiring and thoughtful lessons about the local area and its history. We believe local history teaching has such an important part to play in a child's wellbeing – helping to give children a sense of pride in where they live.

Our Local History project is designed to provide teachers across the UK with everything they need to successfully carry out a full scheme of teaching about their local area, through key enquiry questions and source led activities.

Working with Historic England gives us access to archived maps and photos for resources and information from knowledgeable local historians, as well helping us to provide the content to you free of charge.

For more information about our Local History project or to find out more about Teacher's Pet Classroom Resources, please visit our website.

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