

A Brief History of Caister

The coastal village of Caister, one of the largest villages in the country, takes its name from the Old English word Ceaster, meaning a Roman camp or fort. During the medieval period the settlement was known as Caste and, in the nineteenth century, as Caister-by Yarmouth. The modern name of Caister-on-Sea was adopted in the 1920s as the village grew in importance as a holiday resort.

A Roman fort was built in the second century AD as, at that time, the site was on the northern shore of a large estuary that extended south to Burgh Castle and inland as far as Reedham. The fort at Caister, and another later built at Burgh Castle, gave protection against infiltrators attempting to gain access to the Roman capital of Caistor-by-Norwich. Part of the Roman fort was excavated in the 1950s and today the consolidated remains can be seen off Brooke Avenue. Outside the fort part of a Saxon cemetery was discovered, evidence of a large settlement there in the eighth and ninth centuries. The Danes arrived in the eleventh century and their settlement formed the nucleus of the present village, its centre being the present Beach Road / High Street junction.

When the Domesday Book was compiled in 1086 Caister consisted of about 500 acres of land and had a population of about 400 people. The village had 45 saltpans where salt was produced from sea water, an important industry in medieval times. Medieval Caister was divided into two parishes, East and West, both with their own church, one dedicated to St Edmund, the other to Holy Trinity. In 1432 Sir John Fastolf, one of the richest men in medieval England, built for himself a fortified manor house in the western part of the village. Today this is known as Caister Castle and is one of the earliest brick buildings in England, completed in 1454. Fastolf's land and property later passed to the Paston family, who lived at Caister until 1599. The Paston's have become renowned for the survival of their medieval correspondence, the Paston Letters, many of which were written at Caister.

By the end of the sixteenth century the parish church at West Caister had become a ruin and in 1608 the parishes of East and West Caister were combined into one. Today the spiritual needs of the village are met by the fine medieval church of Holy Trinity in the eastern part of the village and a nineteenth century chapel-of-ease serves the residents of West Caister. The first Methodist chapel in the village opened in 1811, following a visit a few years earlier by the Methodist founder John Wesley. The present Methodist chapel was built in 1886.

The road from Yarmouth was improved in 1712 when a new causeway was built across the Denes. From Caister the main road to Norwich continued as a Turnpike, with a gate across the road at the site of the present Green Gate public house. A railway was built through the village in 1877, to connect with Yarmouth Beach Station. The line closed in 1959. From 1907 until 1933 the village was a terminus for the Great Yarmouth tramway system. The first school in the village was established in 1834 with other schools in later years, one of which is today the Community Centre in Beach Road.

By the end of the nineteenth century the population had risen to almost 1,500, an increase partly due to a migration of many fishermen and their families from villages to the north. Fishing was the lifeblood of the community and, as well as inshore fishing, many men from Caister were owners of, skippers in, or crew members of the herring

drifters that sailed from the nearby port of Great Yarmouth. A small industry developed in the village maintaining the thousands of nets used by the herring drifters, an industry that employed many women known as beatsters, to make and mend the nets.

In the eighteenth century a beach company was formed, a group of men who made a living from maritime salvage and lifesaving. These men formed the crew when the first lifeboat station was established in 1845. From 1867 until 1929 two lifeboats were stationed at Caister. The lifeboat remained under the control of the RNLB until 1969 from which date it became the first independent offshore lifeboat in the country. Over the years the Caister lifeboat crews have gained a reputation for their heroic rescues and lifesaving. A large memorial in the cemetery commemorates the lifeboat disaster of 1901, when nine members of the crew of the lifeboat *Beauchamp* were drowned.

In the early years of the twentieth century Caister moved into the newly emerging holiday industry. A hotel, the Manor House Hotel, had been established in 1894 but this was lost to coastal erosion in 1941. The first holiday camp on the British mainland was established at the northern end of the village in 1906; today this has developed into a large holiday centre run by Haven Holidays. Several other smaller holiday sites were opened in the 1930s and today many of these remain as modern caravan camps. From the 1960s there was a rapid growth in housing developments as the village expanded to the north and to the west and today the population has almost reached 10,000.

© Colin Tooke 2015.