Tracing our county's past links with the Roman Empire

Peter Trudgill

email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

■ The Roman Empire and the Latin graffiti scene as seen through the eyes of the Monty Python team in the film The Life of Brian.
Picture: **LIBRARY**

Norwich Castle Museum is hosting a fascinating exhibition on the Roman Empire, including items from the Middle East and North Africa as well as Europe. Among the European materials, there are displays from Walsingham, Hockwold and Hoxne – the Romans were here in East Anglia, too, for more than 350 years.

How did we get on with these Romans who came over here, invading our country? Maybe "we" isn't the right word. The people who lived in Norfolk when the Romans arrived weren't English-speaking. They were the Iceni, Celts who spoke a language we now call Brittonic, which was the ancestor of Welsh, Cornish and Breton. Famously, to start with, the two groups got on very, very badly indeed. The Iceni queen Boudicca led a brave but ultimately doomed revolt against the Romans.

Not surprisingly, though, after centuries of increasingly peaceful contact with the Romans, the Brittonic language acquired many Latin words from the Romans, as we can see in Modern Welsh words like pont "bridge", and llafur "labour". But in much of Roman Europe, the linguistic conse-

quences of the Roman Empire were much greater. The Celts in Portugal, Spain, France, and Italy, under the influence of Roman culture, abandoned their native tongues altogether and shifted to Latin.

Why didn't that happen here? Well - it did! As the Roman legions were pulling out of Norfolk in AD410, perhaps most of the Celts walking around the streets of Venta Icenorum (Caistor St Edmund) would have been speaking Latin – many of them would have actually been bilingual in Latin and Celtic.

Linguists believe the dialect of Latin which was spoken here in southern England would eventually have ended up being very like Old French. Norfolk would

have gone from being, if you like, Welsh speaking to being French speaking.

So what stopped this happening? Well, we did – depending once again on who you mean by "we". Our linguistic ancestors, the Anglo-Saxons, sailed across the North Sea to our shores, and came to dominate the Romano-Celts politically, culturally and linguistically. They brought with them the Germanic language which eventually became English. The very oldest word of written English ever discovered anywhere was found, engraved on a bone, in the Anglo-Saxon graveyard in Caistor. It reads RAIHAN "roe deer".

You can see that in the Castle Museum too.