

Suburban life in Roman *Durnovaria*

Additional specialist report



Finds

A late Roman coin hoard

By Nicholas Cooke

A late Roman coin hoard from the County Hospital site, Dorchester

Nicholas Cooke

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Summary

Excavations by Wessex Archaeology on the site of the former County Hospital in Dorchester recovered the remains of a dispersed Late Roman hoard of bronze coins, probably of early 5th-century date, associated with the rubble sealing a Late Roman building. A second hoard, similarly associated with rubble sealing a building, was excavated in the same area in 1969/1970. The recent hoard is described and comparisons drawn with the earlier hoard. The significance of these hoards and the nature of late Roman activity in the area is discussed.

During 2000–2001, Wessex Archaeology undertook a series of excavations on the site of the former County Hospital, Dorchester, in advance of the redevelopment of the site, centred on NGR 369070 090455 (Fig. 1). The former County Hospital, incorporating Somerleigh Court, originally built as a large Victorian Town House, occupied much of the south-western corner of the Roman town.

Four areas, predominantly within the proposed footprints of new buildings, were subject to detailed excavation. These revealed a palimpsest of structures, deposits and features of the Roman period (Wessex Archaeology in preparation). This report is

concerned largely with the evidence for late Roman activity excavated in the southernmost of the four areas (Area 4), and only refers to features from other areas where they are pertinent to the discussion.

Earlier excavations

Roman buildings were first discovered in this area of Dorchester as early as 1862/3 when a mosaic and tessellated floors were found to the north and south of Somerleigh Court (RCHM(E) 1970, 561–2). Subsequent work in 1963 identified two further rooms to the south containing tessellated floors and some with mortar floors (RCHM(E) 1970, 562).

The southern half of the hospital site (largely to the south of the 2000–2001 investigations) was subject to a number of archaeological investigations in 1969 and 1970 prior to the construction of further hospital buildings (Patrick Greene 1993). These revealed the remains of a late Roman building (building 1) along with a number of cut features, ranging in date from the 1st century through to the very end of the 4th century and possibly into the 5th.

Building 1 appeared to have been built in the late 3rd or 4th century AD, and comprised a narrow block, 7m wide and over 22m long. This was internally subdivided into a series of four rooms, of different sizes, apparently provided with clay floors, some sealed by chalk-rich floor layers (Patrick Greene 1993, 75–6). Six ovens were set into the floors of the building, suggesting that it served some industrial function. Not all of these were in use contemporaneously — one appears to have been

floored over, whilst others were constructed on the firing floors of their predecessors. The latest appear to have been ovens 4 and 5 at the western end of the building — both contained charcoal-rich deposits sealed by a mixed layer of rubble and mortar (and in the case of oven 4, roof tile as well). Several coins of the House of Theodosius, dated AD 388–402, were recovered from the fills of oven 4, suggesting that the building was still in use at the end of the 4th century.

Finds directly associated with this building and the rubble layer sealing it included some very late Roman pottery and two items of late Roman metalwork (Patrick Greene 1993, 88, fig 10, nos 8 and 9). A total of 473 Roman coins was recovered from the area of the building, over half of which are issues dated to between AD 388 and 402. These were predominantly concentrated in the northern half of Trench 1, from the rubble overlying building 1 and were interpreted as belonging to a dispersed coin hoard.

The recent excavations

The Wessex Archaeology excavations largely concentrated on the area to the north and north-east of the site, with Areas 1–3 all in the vicinity of Somerleigh Court and only Area 4 located close to the earlier excavations. Excavation of Area 4 revealed another late Roman building (G722), elements of which had been identified in the watching brief undertaken as part of the earlier works (see Patrick Greene 1993, fig. 2). This was an aisled building, measuring 18m by 11.5m internally, built on a roughly north–south alignment. The roof was supported by two rows of six posts supported on post pads.

This building lay just over 10m to the north of building 1, and the two appear to have been linked by a fence aligned on the north-western corner of building 1 to the south-western corner of the aisled building (defined by post-holes excavated by Patrick Greene).

The aisled building appears to have been built in the late 3rd or 4th century AD, and remained in use into the late 4th or early 5th century. Like Building 1, this probably had an agricultural or industrial function, containing basic floor surfaces and a sequence of small ovens. There is evidence for both the replacement or renewal of floor surfaces and a sequence in the use of the ovens. The two ovens at the southern end of the building (ovens G720), may have been demolished and levelled whilst the building was still in use. The third oven (G734) was partially dug through one of the post pads, possibly indicating that the structure was no longer roofed at this time (Trevvarthen pers. comm.) Pottery associated with the building includes Black Burnished ware and variant fabrics which are generally assigned a 4th- or early 5th-century date (Seager Smith pers. comm.).

In total, 488 coins were recovered from deposits or features in Area 4. It is clear that most of these represent a hoard of bronze coins dispersed in the rubble of the building. As with the hoard excavated to the south, it was dominated by issues of the House of Theodosius (AD 388 and 402). The number of coins recovered was undoubtedly significantly enhanced by the systematic use of metal detectors during the excavation.

The hoard

Most of the coins (409 in all) from the aisled building were recovered from a single demolition layer (4030), and most if not all of these belong to the dispersed hoard. In addition, stratigraphic analysis has identified a number of layers or deposits which are probably related to this demolition debris and the hoard. Coins from other layers in Area 4, however, clearly did not belong to the hoard, and can be excluded from its analysis. The coins from this hoard were largely concentrated over the northern half of the building (Trevarthen pers. comm.). The breakdown of these groups is presented in Table 1.

It is clear that the 53 coins from layers likely to be stratigraphically associated with dispersed elements of the hoard contain similar groupings of coins by period (Fig. 2), with the ‘probable’ coins within the hoard mirroring the pattern for the assemblage from context 4030 fairly closely. The hoard follows more or less the expected pattern for Theodosian hoards identified by Reece (1974, 92), although there are some minor differences. Reece suggested that a ‘normal’ Theodosian hoard contained a preponderance of Theodosian coins (85–95%) and a tail of coins of the 4th and 3rd centuries, with smaller peaks of coins minted between AD 364 and 378 (up to 8%), AD 348 and 364 (up to 5%), AD 330–348 (up to 4%) and smaller numbers of earlier coins.

The peak of Theodosian coins from the Dorchester hoard is slightly less than expected, but may be influenced by the large number of illegible small coins of the 4th century, which are likely to have been minted in Period 20 or 21, but are too worn or corroded to be identified with certainty. The proportions of coins of the House of

Valentinian (AD 364–378, Period 19) and AD 348–364 (Period 18) lie within Reece's norms, although there is a higher proportion of coins minted AD 330–348 (Period 17) than expected. The remaining coins all conform to the expected pattern.

Although the hoard contains coins from the last issues to reach Britain before the province was urged to look to its own defences by an edict of Honorius in AD 410 (effectively an admission of the empire's inability to continue to maintain the province), the date of its deposition remains uncertain. Many of these latest issues are barely legible through a combination of the use of worn dies in their manufacture and use of the coins themselves. Whilst using the degree of wear on coins as a guide to their longevity in circulation is highly problematic, it is reasonable to suggest that the hoard was put together and deposited in the first quarter of the 5th century.

The stratigraphy of the hoard is also interesting. It was directly associated with the rubble from the collapse or demolition of the building, and was concentrated towards the northern end of the building. So marked was the distribution that the excavator suggested that the hoard may have been hidden within the fabric of the building, perhaps in the rafters, and never recovered, only becoming incorporated in the rubble with the collapse of the structure (Trevvarthen, pers. comm.). In the light of this, we cannot rely on the hoard to date the collapse of the building, which may have happened some years later. Indeed, one coin unrelated to the hoard (a Victoria Auggga issue of the House of Theodosius) was recovered from a construction layer (4132) within the aisled building indicating that it was in use and being modified in the very late 4th or early 5th centuries AD.

Other hoards from the area

The close proximity of this hoard to that from Patrick Greene's excavations, and the close similarities between them in terms of their association with the destruction rubble from the buildings makes their comparison crucial. Unfortunately the publication report for the earlier excavations made little attempt to isolate elements of this hoard, only noting the concentration of the coins in Trench 1 and commenting on their association with the rubble sealing the collapsed or demolished building (Patrick Greene 1993, 89).

However, using the published coin list (Patrick Greene 1993, 93), it is possible to suggest the likely composition of this hoard. In order to do this, only coins recovered from rubble contexts or those recovered from within oven 4 (see above) have been included. This excludes all the coins recovered from topsoil deposits (some of which may relate to the hoard) but does allow us to examine those coins most likely to be part of the hoard. Using these criteria, a minimum of 304 coins can be suggested as belonging to the hoard. The breakdown of these by period can be seen in Figure 3.

Most of these coins (175 in all) belong to Period 21, with a tail of late 3rd- and 4th-century issues. Although this general pattern is similar to the hoard from the aisled building, there are some differences among the earlier coins in the hoard. There are proportionally fewer Period 20 coins in this hoard, but a greater proportion of coins of the House of Valentinian (Period 19). The hoard from the aisled building also has

higher proportions of Period 14 and Period 17 coins. The differences between the two are sufficient to confirm that they are indeed separate hoards.

Theodosian coins recovered from other contexts may also relate to the hoard, although some may relate to the use of the building in the late 4th and 5th centuries AD. These include coins from a late post-hole (1/58) and a probable layer of clay flooring (1/46). The concentration of coins in the rubble from the collapse or demolition of the building may indicate that this hoard was also stored within the fabric of the building.

Reece has suggested (1974, 93) that the larger bronze coins of the 4th century (including the better sized issues of the first 3rd of the 4th century and the House of Valentinian) in Theodosian hoards are more likely to have been removed from circulation earlier than smaller contemporary copies. In the light of this, it is possible that the hoard from the Wessex Archaeology excavations, with its smaller proportion of Valentinianic coins, and a number of small copies in the larger group of coins minted between AD 330 and 345 may post-date the hoard from Patrick Greene's excavations.

A third late Roman hoard is known from the south-west quadrant of Dorchester. This was found during the construction of a stable block on Princes Street to the north of the site (RCHM(E) 1970, 562). This comprised 53 silver *siliquae* buried along with a number of silver spoons and a ligula. One of the spoons bore a Christian 'ichthus' (fish) symbol. Unfortunately the context of their discovery was not recorded in detail. However, the coins all date to the late Roman period (Table 2) and the latest coins in

this group – those of Arcadius and Honorius – point to a deposition date late in the 4th or early in the 5th century AD.

5th-century activity in the south-western corner of Dorchester

Excavations in the south-west quadrant of Dorchester have identified two very late Roman hoards associated with the final phases of use and demolition of two adjacent buildings in the very late 4th and probably into the 5th centuries AD. In both cases, the majority of the hoard appears to concentrate within the rubble (presumably representing collapse or demolition material) sealing the last phases of activity on the site. It is not clear how long this final phase of activity lasted; although once the fabric of the buildings began to deteriorate they are likely to have been abandoned. Both of the buildings excavated seem to have served an industrial function, although they may have been associated with a large well appointed building excavated in Area 2 to the north (Wessex Archaeology in preparation). This was provided with a new polychrome mosaic in the mid 4th century, and saw later activity (including small fires being lit on the mosaic and other tessellated floors), although the final phases of use are poorly dated.

Pottery from both excavations includes material datable to the late 4th or early 5th century, whilst late metalwork was also recovered from Patrick Greene's excavations. These diagnostic items of metalwork were recovered from the same rubble as the coin hoard, and comprised a late Roman belt fitting and belt end of a type generally associated with officialdom and the army. A further belt fitting was amongst the unstratified finds recovered during the 1880s (Henig 1993, 91).

Coin use clearly continued in the Dorchester into the early 5th century. Excavations at intra-mural sites, including Colliton Park, Wollaston House, and Greyhound Yard have all revealed evidence for late 4th- or early 5th-century activity. Approximately 1915 coins have been recovered from these sites, of which 90 were minted between AD 388 and 402 (Reece 1993, 114–5). The presence of three late Roman hoards, containing nearly 350 coins of this date in so small an area is intriguing, as is their non-recovery. The hoarding of bronze coins in the early 5th century suggests that they were still a useful commodity, although the subsequent non-recovery may point to their diminishing usefulness as tokens of exchange. Silver coins, however, would have remained valuable as bullion, and the non-recovery of the hoard of silver coins and spoons from Princes Street cannot be explained as easily.

Whilst there is undoubtedly evidence for activity in the south western quadrant of Dorchester into the 5th century, it is clear that this is taking place within the context of an overall decline. Indeed urban life as such may well have been in decline well before the end of the 4th century — the buildings in this area may represent part of an intra-mural urban farmstead similar to that postulated at Greyhound Yard (Woodward *et al.* 1993, 369) rather than ‘urban’ structures. Despite this, the continued use of at least two buildings in this area into the 5th century, in association with both coin use and hoarding and items of metalwork associated with late Roman officialdom provides us with important evidence for activity in Dorchester in the early 5th century.

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Table 1: Coins from Area 4

(HK – Hill and Kent, Late Roman Bronze Coinage Vol 1, CK – Carson and Kent, Late Roman Bronze

Coinage Vol 2 - jointly published as Carson et al. 1989. RIC - Roman Imperial Coinage)

Period (Reece 1991)	Layer 4030 (Hoard)	Probably part of the hoard	Other coins	Total
4 (AD 69 – 96)		As RIC III, Domitian, 242A (1). 1 coin		1
6 (AD 117 – 138)	Hadrian, uncertain reverse (1). 1 coin		Hadrian, uncertain reverse (1). 1 coin	2
8 (AD 161 – 180)			RIC III, Marcus Aurelius, 1263 (1) 1 coin	1
11 (AD 222 – 238)	RIC IV (II) Julia Mamaea 701 (1). 1 coin			1
13 (AD 260 – 275)	RIC V (II) Victorinus, 78 (1), As RIC V (I) Claudius II, 259 (1), As RIC V (II) Tetricus I, 100 (1), As RIC V (II) Tetricus I, 145 (1). 4 coins	RIC V (II) Tetricus II, 258 (1), As RIC V (I) Gallienus 176 (1) 2 coins	RIC V (II) Victorinus, 57 (1). As RIC V (I) Claudius II, 265 (1) 2 coins	8
14 (AD 275 – 296)	RIC V (II) Carausius, 98 (1), RIC V(II) Allectus 85 (1), Irregular radiate copies (11), Radiate uncertain (3) 16 coins	Irregular radiate copies (5) 5 coins	As RIC V (II) Carausius, 878 (1), Irregular radiate copies (1) 2 coins	23
15 (AD 296 – 317)	RIC VI, London, 280 (1) 1 coin		As RIC VI, London, 1 (1), RIC VI, Trier, 419 (1) 2 coins	3
16 (AD 317 – 330)	As RIC VII, London, 1(1) 1 coin	RIC VII, Arles, 194 (1), RIC VII, Trier, 341 (1), RIC VII, Trier, 368 (1) 3 coins		4
17 (AD 330 – 348)	As HK48 (1), Copy as HK48 (2), HK51 (1), As HK52 (1), Copy as HK52 (2), HK58 (1), HK66 (1), HK76 (1), As HK87 (5), Copy as HK87 (3), As HK88 (1), HK93 (1), As HK100 (1), As HK106 (1), HK129 (1), As HK137 (4), As HK138 (1) HK140 (1), As HK156 (1), As HK158 (1), Copy as HK184 (1), As HK226(1), As HK437 (1), As HK455 (1) As HK 958(1) 36 coins	As HK51 (1), Copy as HK52 (1), HK185 (1), HK200 (1) 4 coins	As HK51 (1), 1 coin	41
18 (AD 348 – 364)	Copy as CK25 (7) 7 coins		Copy as CK25 (1) 1 coin	8
19 (AD 364 – 378)	As CK78 (2), As CK82 (5), As CK279 (1), As CK301 (1), CK340 (1), As CK517 (1), As CK525 (1), CK1001 (1), Valentinian I, uncertain rev (1) 14 coins	As CK78 (1), As CK82 (2) 3 coins	As CK82 (1) 1 coin	18
20 (AD 378 – 388)	As CK141 (1), As CK144 (1), As CK156 (3), CK158 (1), As CK273 (1), CK377 (1), As CK566 (1), As CK754 (1), As CK782 (1) As CK 789 (6), CK2159 (1), Valentinian II, uncertain rev (1) 19 coins			19
21 (AD 388 – 402)	As CK108 (1), As CK110 (1), As CK162 (90), As CK163 (4), As CK164 (11), As CK165 (1), As CK174 (4), As CK389 (3), CK392 (1), CK395 (1), As CK396 (1), CK562 (1), As CK562 (8), CK 566 (1), As CK566 (1), As CK796 (77), As CK797 (4), As CK798 (2), As CK806 (5), CK1105 (1), CK1106 (1), CK1107 (1), CK1759 (1), Honorius, uncertain rev (2), Theodosius uncertain rev (1) 223 coins	As CK110 (1), As CK162 (7), As CK164 (2), As CK174 (1), As CK389 (1), As CK562 (2), CK 566 (1), As CK789 (1), As CK796 (12), As CK798 (1), As CK806 (2) 31 coins	As CK162 (3), As CK163 (1), As CK164 (1), As CK562 (1), As CK796 (3) 9 coins	263
C1 – C2			2 coins	2
C3 – C4	7 coins		1 coin	8
House of Constantine	1 coin			1
C4	78 coins	4 coins	3 coins	85
OVERALL	409	53	26	488
TOTAL				

Table 2: Silver coins from the Princes' Street hoard (Robertson 2000)

Emperor	No. of coins
Julian AD 354–363	7
Valentinian I AD 364–375	3
Valens AD 364–378	7
Gratian AD 367–383	7
Valentinian II AD 375–392	3
Theodosius AD 379–395	6
Magnus Maximus AD 383–388	1
Arcadius AD 383–408	10
Honorius AD 393–423	9
Total	53

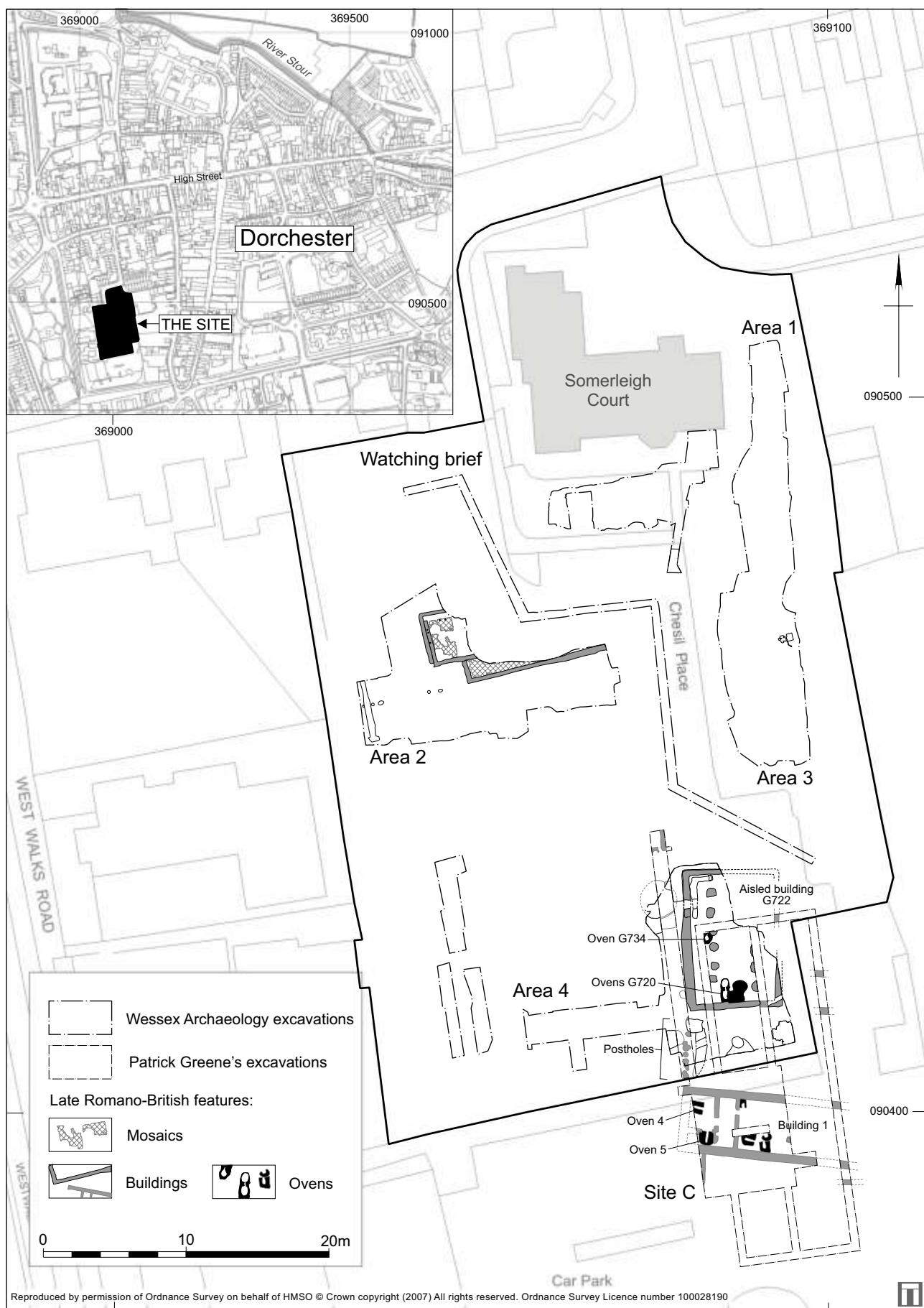


Figure 1. Site location showing selected features

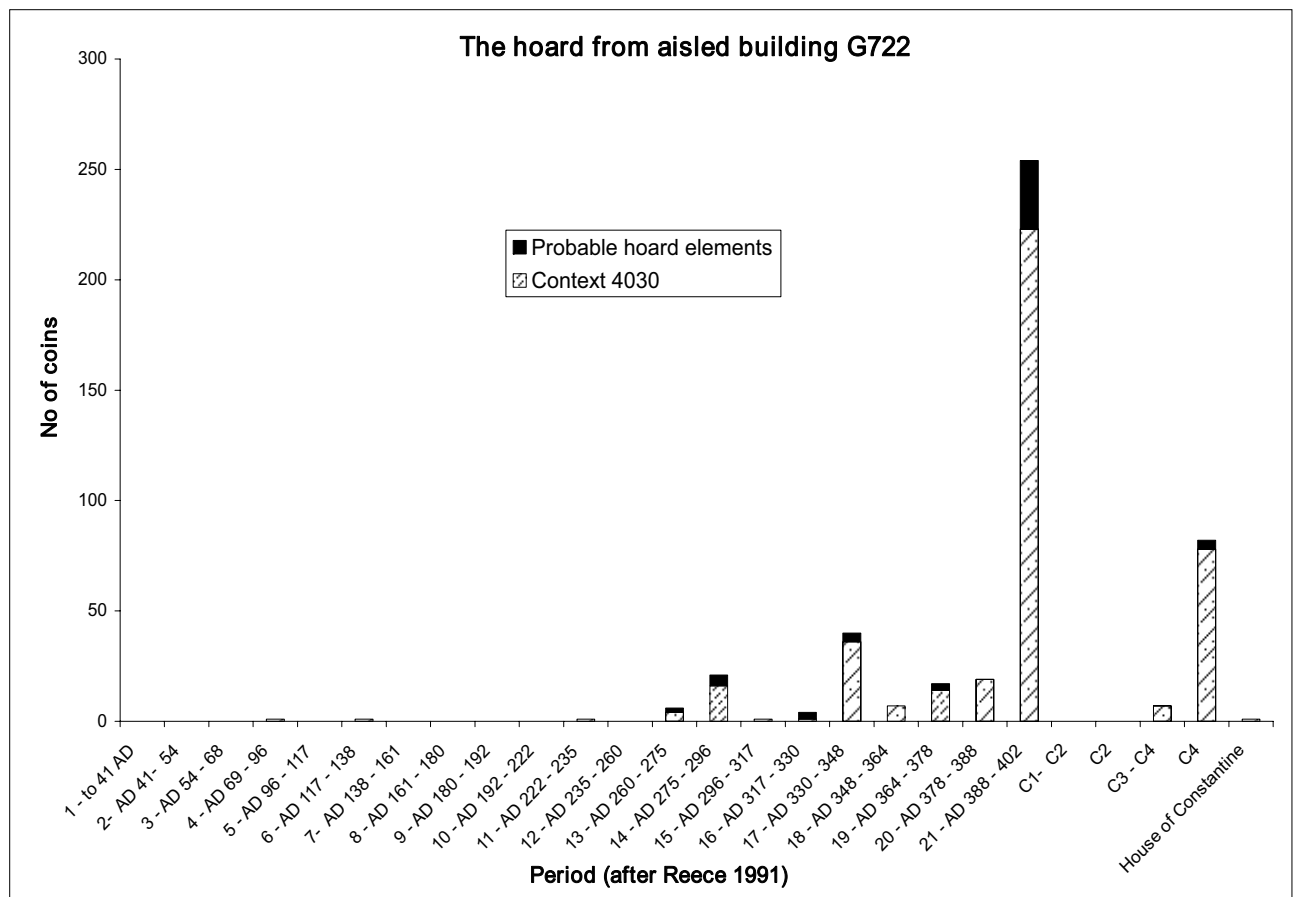


Figure 2.The coin hoard from aisled building G722

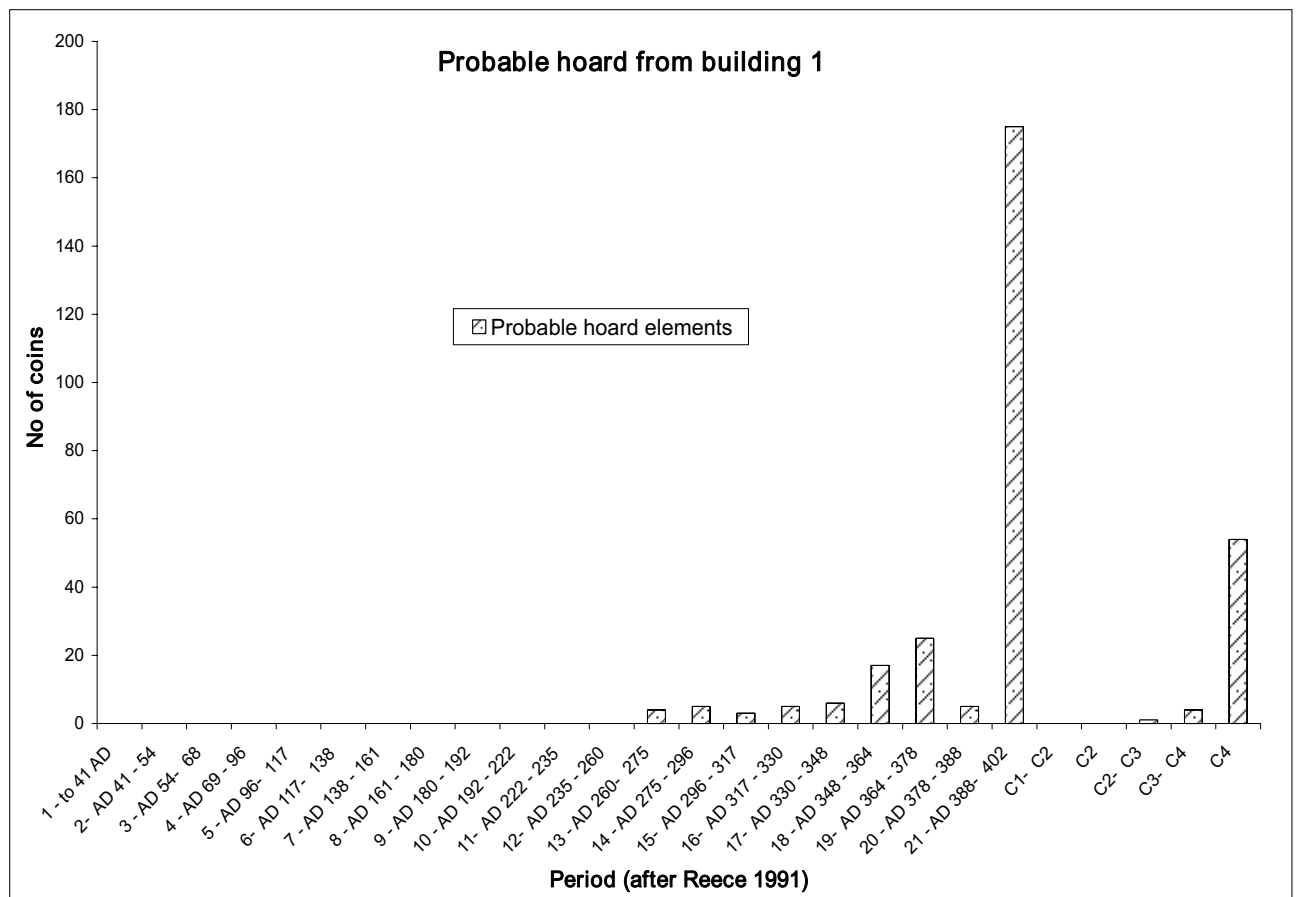


Figure 3. Probable hoard from building 1

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