

Suburban life in Roman *Durnovaria*

Additional specialist report



Stratigraphic description of
selected buildings and structures

By Mike Trevarthen

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(The cross references denoted 'SL' in this report relate to *Suburban life in Roman Durnovaria Excavations at the former County Hospital site Dorchester, Dorset 2000-2001* M Trevarthen 2008)

Building 4

Building 4 was an approximately east-west axially aligned steep-sided and flat-based sub-rectangular hollow, measuring 5.7m by at least 6m, and dug 0.6m through pre-Roman or Early Roman soils into natural chalk bedrock (SL Figs 20-21, p. 17). Resting on the base of the cut, against the vertical face of a step in its northern edge was a linear footing of unmortared flint nodules. No trace of this was found against other edges of the building. It may have been removed after Building 4 became redundant, or may simply never have been necessary to support its superstructure. A small circular, flat-based pit (2303) cut approximately 0.15m into the chalk at the base of the hollow may also have served a structural purpose.

Similar sunken buildings have been noted on Roman settlements around Dorchester, including Alington Avenue, where a suspended wooden floor was inferred, possibly to aid storage of agricultural produce (Davies *et al.* 2002, 65-66), Maiden Castle Road (Smith 1997, 61-62), and Fordington Bottom (Barnes 1997, 213-14).

At the end of its use, Building 4 was deliberately dismantled. The remaining hollow was infilled with numerous dumps of soil and discarded building materials; a fragmentary stone mortar was found amongst this material. Later (possibly as a prelude to the laying of a middle Roman rubble-metalled yard) the remains of Building 4 were more comprehensively buried under a widespread dump of grey-brown silty clay containing 1st and 2nd century pottery.

Building 9

Building 9 lay near the eastern edge of the Hascombe Court excavations, and represents the rear portion of a stone-founded property (SL Figs 47-48, p. 27). The almost north-south to east-west axial alignment differed from the dominant trends north of the coombe, but perpetuated that of the 1st century ditch G.739 which may have remained as a vestigial earthwork.

The full dimensions of Building 9 could not be determined: parts of two rooms occupied an area exceeding 8m by 6m. Shallow footings comprising one or sometimes two courses of mortared nodular flint were up to 0.5m wide and the southern end of the building had been terraced slightly into gently rising ground. Here part of the footing was missing, probably having been robbed-out in antiquity as the building was demolished. No floor-surfaces survived, but a patch of finely-crushed ceramic tile fragments in the south-west corner of the northern room (Room 1) may be the remains of a sub-floor. Vestiges of green-painted plaster were seen, pointing to a domestic function for the building.

The demolition of Building 9 could not be dated closely, as insufficient artefactual material was recovered, but this event clearly pre-dated construction of aisled Building 12. Its loss fits the emerging pattern of urban re-structuring and building clearance in the latest 3rd or 4th century. Overlying the remains of Building 9, a dump of plaster and mortar approximately 0.2m deep may be waste material left over from thorough salvage of re-usable building materials.

Building 8

A sunken, concrete-lined masonry structure was discovered at the furthest northern extremity of Chesil Place (SL Figs 57 and 60, p. 33). Although stratigraphically 'late', its construction cannot be closely dated, and its purpose remains a matter for speculation. It lay at right-angles to the axis of the adjacent street 178, corresponding with the dominant structural alignments in the northern portion of the site, but neither the eastern nor western ends lay within the bounds of the trench. Given the proximity of street 178 at this point, the structure cannot have projected more than perhaps a metre or two further to the east. The floor and internal wall surfaces had been sealed with a single thick skim of hard *opus signinum* and the junctions of the floor and walls were marked by quarter-round coving. The interior surfaces of the walls also bore numerous triangular pecking marks, as if keyed for a secondary render or relining and the floor was much eroded and pitted. The floor adjacent to the eastern site edge had actually been punctured in this way, exposing the rubble sub-base below.

Building 8 was constructed in a steep-sided, flat-based trench, 0.7m deep and dug through the grey silts and redeposited chalk layers that formed (Open Area 10) into clean chalk bedrock. Its northern and southern walls both survived to a height of approximately 0.30m, and were constructed from solidly mortared undressed limestone blocks and slabs, and were securely founded on a sub-base comprising 0.20 – 0.30m of crudely mortared nodular flint and limestone rubble. Its floor-level lay at least 0.40m below the level of the contemporary ground surface.

Aisled Building 12

On the southern shoulder of the coombe, an aisled barn (Building 12) (SL Figs 73-75, p. 39-40) may have been constructed as early as the later 3rd century, although it probably belongs to the first half of the 4th century, and its use was probably directly contemporary with that of Building 13.

Internally Building 12 measured 19m north-south by 11.25m east-west at its southern end and an estimated 13m wide to the north. The continued mis-alignment of the eastern wall is confirmed by observations made during the 1970s foundation trenching. Most of the mortared stone walls had been robbed-out in the medieval or post-medieval period but an approximately 10m long section of the west wall survived. The reason for this can only be guessed at: it may perhaps later have lain beneath an obstacle, or its survival could reflect later divisions in land ownership and tenure.

The building's lowest footings were constructed from nodular flint packed firmly in stiff brown clay and set in vertically-sided and flat-based trenches 0.8m wide and 0.45m deep. These had consistently been ignored during robbing of the superstructure. Along the western edge of the building, a shallow 'lip' was noted on the outer edge of the construction trench, but the reason why this should exist remains unclear. It may represent later maintenance of the foundation. The two lowest courses of the wall were approximately 0.80m wide, providing an external offset of between 0.1-0.2 m. Above this, five courses of mortared flint nodules and limestone pieces stood 0.6-0.7m wide and to a height of 0.55m.

Parts of two rows of large, stone-packed post-pads attest substantial wooden roof-supports. These pads were probably originally capped with a large limestone slabs or blocks in order to spread the roof's structural load and keep the posts above the damp, rot and rats likely to prevail at floor-level. Because of the gentle gradient beneath the building, the post bases became progressively deeper from south to north. The deepest reached 1.20m below ground level, although this had been dug through the relatively soft upper fills of a large Middle Roman pit or well G.728.

Because of the shallowness and truncation of deposits, the internal developmental sequence of Building 12 is only incompletely understood. Parts of what may have been an original thin mortar floor were seen in the central area, possibly associated with an L-shaped beam slot. Another L-shaped trench internal to the building's north-west corner had been packed longitudinally with vertically-set limestone slabs, perhaps to improve drainage, or as stabilisation or underpinning deposit. Later, a layer of redeposited chalk was inserted to form a new floor, possibly (but not conclusively) post-dating disuse of the postpads. Corresponding with the position of the central beam slot, an irregular feature filled with dark soil and limestone pieces may indicate removal of an internal structure or fitting. Other internal modifications were also evident, but the evidence for them was fragmentary, and no coherent structural phasing was possible. On the western side of the building, the chalk floor was (probably) overlain by an area of limestone blocks and slabs, amongst which was one exceptionally large piece measuring approximately 1m by 0.72m, and some 0.15 to 0.20m thick (*SL* fig. 55, p. 30).

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