

# Suburban life in Roman *Durnovaria*

Additional specialist report



Finds

Mosaics from Buildings 13 and 6

*By Stephen R. Cosh*

## **Mosaics from Buildings 13 and 6**

Stephen R. Cosh

(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 13 mosaics**

Mosaics found in the 19th century just to the north of Building 13, probably belong to a separate structure, and are not considered here, and in 1963 a cross passage with a coarse chequered mosaic found just to the north west was also probably part of another building. (For a full account and illustrations of these and all mosaics in Dorchester with references see Cosh and Neal 2006 in which the following mosaics have the catalogue nos. II, 165.39-165.42).

The western end of Building 13 appears to have been occupied by a bipartite room, floored with a fine mosaic pavement executed in tesserae of dark blue-grey, blue-grey, pale blue-grey and white stone, and red and yellow ceramic. These averaged 12mm across; with a border in red and pale grey tesserae of approximately 30mm (reconstructed in *SL* Fig. 64, p. 35). The best-preserved part of the mosaic (Panel A) was found in Room 1. Here there seems to have been insufficient space for a coarse border to exist along the eastern edge of the Panel; the restriction of borders to three sides may indicate that the room functioned as a *triclinium* (a dining room with space for three couches) of the type popular in the mid-4th century. Instead a narrow intermediate mosaic panel (Panel B) lay to the east. As this did not extend to the width of the adjacent panels, it can be assumed to indicate the position of responds (short protruding walls which may originally have supported an arch). Panel C, which lay to the east in Room 2, was only partially exposed but paved what is normally the larger square part of a bipartite room. However, a modern foundation trench had destroyed the eastern edge of Panel A, along with the flooring and/or walls between it and Panels B and C, making reconstruction of the room less than absolutely certain.

#### **Panel A** (*SL* Fig. 68, p. 36)

In the centre of Room 1 was a square panel, of which only parts near the margins and traces of the centre survived. The scheme was a saltire (St Andrew's cross) formed by triangles on each side of a square frame delineated in simple guilloche (rope-like bands) outlined dark blue-grey with strands of blue-grey, pale blue-grey and white (except on all three sides of the triangles where they alternated with strands of red, yellow and white). Pairs of lozenges occupied the arms of the saltire; all the surviving ones had traces of swastikas in dark blue-grey. The two surviving triangles at opposite ends had unusual chessboard patterns of dark blue-grey isosceles and right-angled triangles. Only a very damaged fragment of the centre of the mosaic remained. It had traces of a curved band of guilloche seemingly interlaced with another which formed two sides of a small white triangle. The probable reconstruction is a poised square interlacing with a cushion-shape. A leaf is all that remained of the filling motif in the odd U-shaped interspace in the arm of the saltire. There were also two curved double fillets of dark blue-grey and traces of

rows of white and yellow, perhaps from a central guilloche knot. The square panel was flanked on the north and south sides by bands of opposing stepped-triangles (creating rows of poised squares with serrated sides), and spaced swastika-meander developing two squares on each side occupied by guilloche knots. The whole panel (4.20m by 2.60m) was bordered by a double fillet of coarse red tesserae and, up to the room's wall foundation slots, grey tessellation interrupted by a narrow band of red. The mosaic displayed good workmanship and, where undisturbed, an exceptionally smooth finish.

The saltire arrangement is reminiscent of the work of the mid-4th-century Saltire Group, which can be seen on mosaics from Halstock in the north of the county and also features swastika-lozenges in the arms of saltires. Perhaps the closest parallel is from Tockington Park, Glos., and, although superior in quality, it has the same scheme, including the central poised square, as a mosaic from Dinnington, Somerset, which also has a comparable outer border. The Dorchester mosaic may thus be attributable to the same group, although its centrepiece is untypical and without parallel in Britain. The design is very occasionally found elsewhere, notably on late mosaics in Spain. However, this, and especially Panel C have affinities with mosaics from Colliton Park (in the north west corner of Dorchester) and may be by the same craftsmen. The Colliton Park mosaics are datable to the period after AD 340. If this was the case, the mosaicist demonstrates the same ability to elaborate on standard schemes.

**Panel B** (*SL Fig. 70, p. 37*)

Only the edge of this survived but enough was visible to show that it was a band (or mat) of guilloche shaded alternately as in the simple guilloche, but the strands have extra rows of red and blue-grey; this may have been a threshold panel marking the boundary between Room 1 to the west and Room 2 to the east.

**Panel C** (*SL Fig. 70, p. 37*)

The decorative scheme of Panel C was probably a grid of octagons within a square (or rectangular) frame, delineated in simple guilloche outlined dark blue-grey with strands alternating red, yellow and white, and blue-grey, pale grey and white. Part of one octagonal compartment was uncovered, containing a circle of simple guilloche (shaded as before) enclosing a motif probably comprising four inward-pointing heart-shaped leaves with the tesserae laid obliquely to produce serrated divisions between the red, yellow and white shading; stalks from the base linked each leaf to the guilloche circle. Traces of a stepped-triangle occupied the one remaining triangular interspace at the margin. The panel was surrounded by a dark blue-grey triple fillet, which was linked on one corner to a spaced swastika-meander that ran along the western side, and perhaps originally the opposite side. The rectangular space created was filled by a strip of four-strand guilloche with broader-than-normal strands of two rows of blue-grey, pale grey and white except for the central 'bars' executed in red (x2), yellow and white (an extra one results in a rather clumsy arrangement at one end). Part of the coarse outer border was exposed on the north side, having a red band beside the panel and pale creamy-grey tesserae beyond.

Although the size of the mosaic could not be ascertained, the room probably had the same north-south dimension as that with Panel A (5.80m), in which case Panel B is likely

originally to have had a four-by-four grid of octagons. The workmanship and style confirm that it is contemporary with, and by the same craftsmen as the neighbouring panel. Both employed the same colour scheme and some similarities to the 4th-century mosaics from Colliton Park: notably Panel C and the mosaic of the same scheme at Colliton Park (except there the octagons are not bound by a frame) and the spaced swastika-meander border of the seasons mosaic. It is interesting to note that three features on this pavement are more typical of 2nd-century pavements: the scheme of octagons (as in one from Fordington High Street, re-laid in the Dorset County Museum); the reticulated infill of the heart-shaped leaves; and the differently coloured central 'bar' in the four-strand guilloche (the more normal 2nd-century coloration is employed in the finest mosaic from Colliton Park, Dorchester). However, the mosaic is almost certainly 4th century (probably mid-4th) and this phenomenon is perhaps further evidence for the eclecticism on the part of the mosaicist. Nevertheless, given the similarities of Panel A with Saltire Group mosaics, it is noteworthy that a fine mosaic from a bipartite room at Lopen, South Somerset (another mid-4th-century pavement), is more certainly attributable to that group and has an adjacent panel with a scheme of octagons.

A very similar example, found in Dorchester outside the walls at Olga Road, has been set into the floor of the Dorset County Museum.

**Porticus mosaic** (*SL* Fig. 64, p. 35)

This mosaic paved a south-facing porticus (corridor/veranda) 2.50m wide by over 16m in length and comprises six bands of red and alternating with grey running the length of the room, of which the western portion was exposed in 2001. The widths of the bands vary, the grey (seven to nine rows) are generally wider than the red ones (five to seven rows), and is executed throughout in coarse tesserae (30mm). Other corridors and passages in Dorchester with red and grey bands are from excavated townhouses in Colliton Park and Glyde Path Road, both datable to the mid-4th century. The mosaic was re-buried.

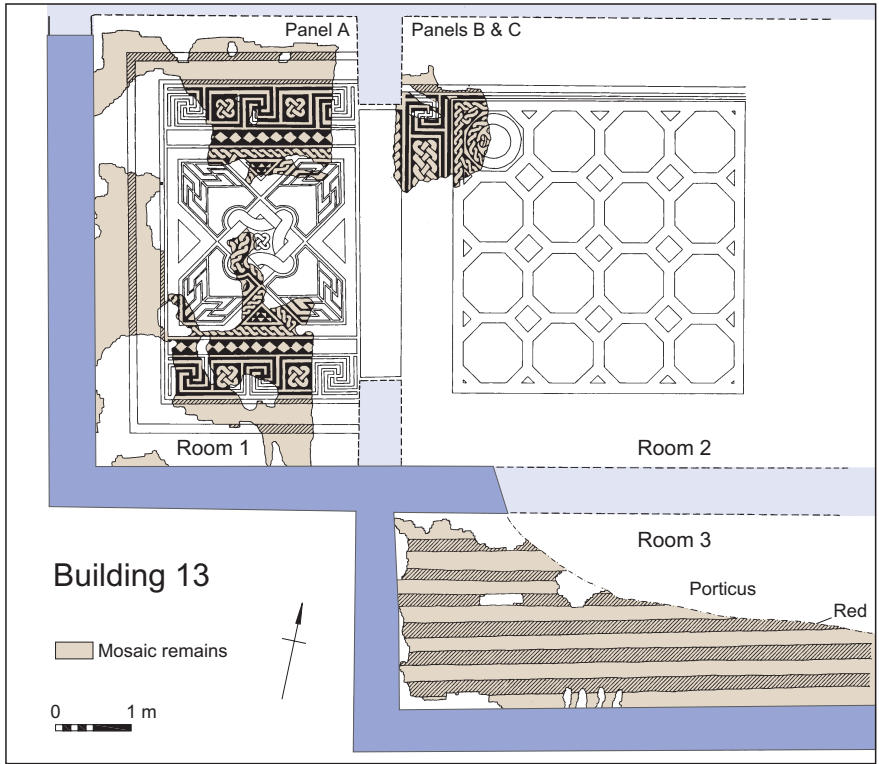
**Building 6** (*SL* Figs 39, 41, p. 24-25)

Building 6 lies to the south-east of Building 13, and the part excavated in 2000 may represent the living quarters at the rear of a shop, of which one room (3.40m by 2.70m) was paved with a mosaic. Apart from small areas at the north-west and north-east corners, its panel was destroyed; originally it would have been about 1.80m square. It is edged by a dark blue-grey double fillet and both corners have small red squares containing a quincunx arrangement of single white tesserae. The squares are surrounded by white; the usual band of white separating the panel from the coarse red border is absent. The panel appears to be centrally placed with broader borders on the north and south sides. The workmanship is mediocre and the size of the tesserae variable (averaging 15mm across); some of the tesserae forming the complete quincunx are curiously tilted. Insufficient survives to reconstruct the design and the corner elements cannot be paralleled in Britain. It may have been the work of a building contractor rather than a professional mosaicist.

The Association for the Study and Preservation of Roman Mosaics (ASPROM) is devoted to the study of mosaics, and especially the Roman mosaics of Britain. Further information about ASPROM may be found at [www.asprom.org](http://www.asprom.org)

**Bibliography**

Cosh, S. R. and Neal, D. S., 2006, *Roman Mosaics of Britain: Volume II: South-west Britain*, London, Society of Antiquaries









This report is supplementary material to the publication  
**Suburban life in Roman *Durnovaria***  
*by Mike Trevarthen*

ISBN 978-1-874350-46-0

[www.wessexarch.co.uk/projects/dorset/dorchester\\_hospital/](http://www.wessexarch.co.uk/projects/dorset/dorchester_hospital/)

