

# The Compton Coin Hoard in Context

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**Geophysical  
survey at  
Nether  
Compton**

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**John Oswin**

**N**ether Compton is just west of Sherborne, in Dorset. The hill behind the village rises steeply to a plateau. There is a large Romano-British settlement up there, some 25 acres, first recorded in 1951. The gentlest climb from the village is at its east end, where Kitton Lane climbs a narrow ridge, with a deep valley to the east and a promontory to the west.

In 1989, a metal detectorist found a pot containing 22,500 late Roman coins in the field immediately east of Kitton Lane. The coin hoard was sent to the museum at Dorchester, where it raised initial excitement and was then put aside. It was subsequently reclaimed by the finder (it was not covered by the old Treasure Trove laws as there was no gold) and sold to a dealer. Most of the coins were commonplace, but there were a few rare, valuable samples amongst them.

A friend of mine moved to the village a couple of years after the discovery. She knew of the find, but as the years went by and nothing more was said about it, she asked if there was anything I could do to find out. I have now done some geophysics to put the hoard into an archaeological context, just 20 years after the discovery. I had planned the work for October 2009, but had spent a couple of days in September working on the field west of the lane, before agricultural use took it out of bounds.

The weekend in October did not go quite so smoothly, owing to a few communication problems, so on the Saturday we were first stalked by a shooting party, and then run over by a large tractor towing discs to prepare the field for planting. At least I managed to persuade the farmer not to bring in another large tractor to drill the field until Monday lunchtime, so I had a profitable time surveying on the Sunday, and at lunchtime on Monday, I just finished collecting in all my markers as a large tractor pulled into the field...

The results were intriguing. Although we did some resistance work, it was the magnetometer which produced the results, and that is the plot shown here. The gash through the middle is the line of Kitton Lane, which is a deep hollow way.

To the west, there is a lot of activity, but it is not very coherent, apart from a long dyke crossing the field from south to north. West of that, the ground falls away very steeply. I interpret this area as pre-Roman promontory settlement behind a cross-dyke. Immediately outside this at the east end of the west field is a large Roman complex. We were hoping to find signs of a villa in the resistance survey, but were not successful. Activity continued into the hedge, so perhaps the buildings would be on the other side of the lane...

The east side of the lane produced no villa, but lots of activity and this even more difficult to explain. The sharpest image looked almost like half a Roman military camp, which seemed to continue into the active area on the other side of the lane but which did not join up directly with lines to the west. The combination of sunken trackway and iron gates and fences here means that we cannot now know how these features related to each other. To the east of the 'camp' are some very large pits or post holes, and the coin hoard was found amongst these.

Just to the north of this is a band of intense activity, some fifty metres wide, extending east of the plot. The activity is shown as extended dots packed close together, some in patterns, some not. It looked at first sight like a Christian cemetery, but that seems unlikely from its position. Until we know better, my best interpretation is an area of intense industrial activity of the Roman period. Nothing on the bare surface of the field suggested any activity. To the north of this are more enclosures and lines. A couple of lines may represent the side ditches of a road, except that resistance survey showed a small building sitting neatly between them!

I cannot do more until the crop comes off next summer, but I hope then to extend the survey east

to try to understand what is going on. The field dives into the deep coomb just a little further east and I would expect that to limit the area of interest.

In the mean time, any suggestion that the hoard was buried secretly in a remote place can be utterly refuted.

Thanks to my friend Elizabeth, and to the landowners and farmers who allowed me access to their land, and to Dorset County Museum for background information.



**Figure 1 left**  
**The Nether Compton coin hoard found in 1989.**  
**Figure 2 below**  
**Geophysical survey results of the area where the hoard was found.**

