

# The Pirbright (1844) hoard of Elizabethan silver coins

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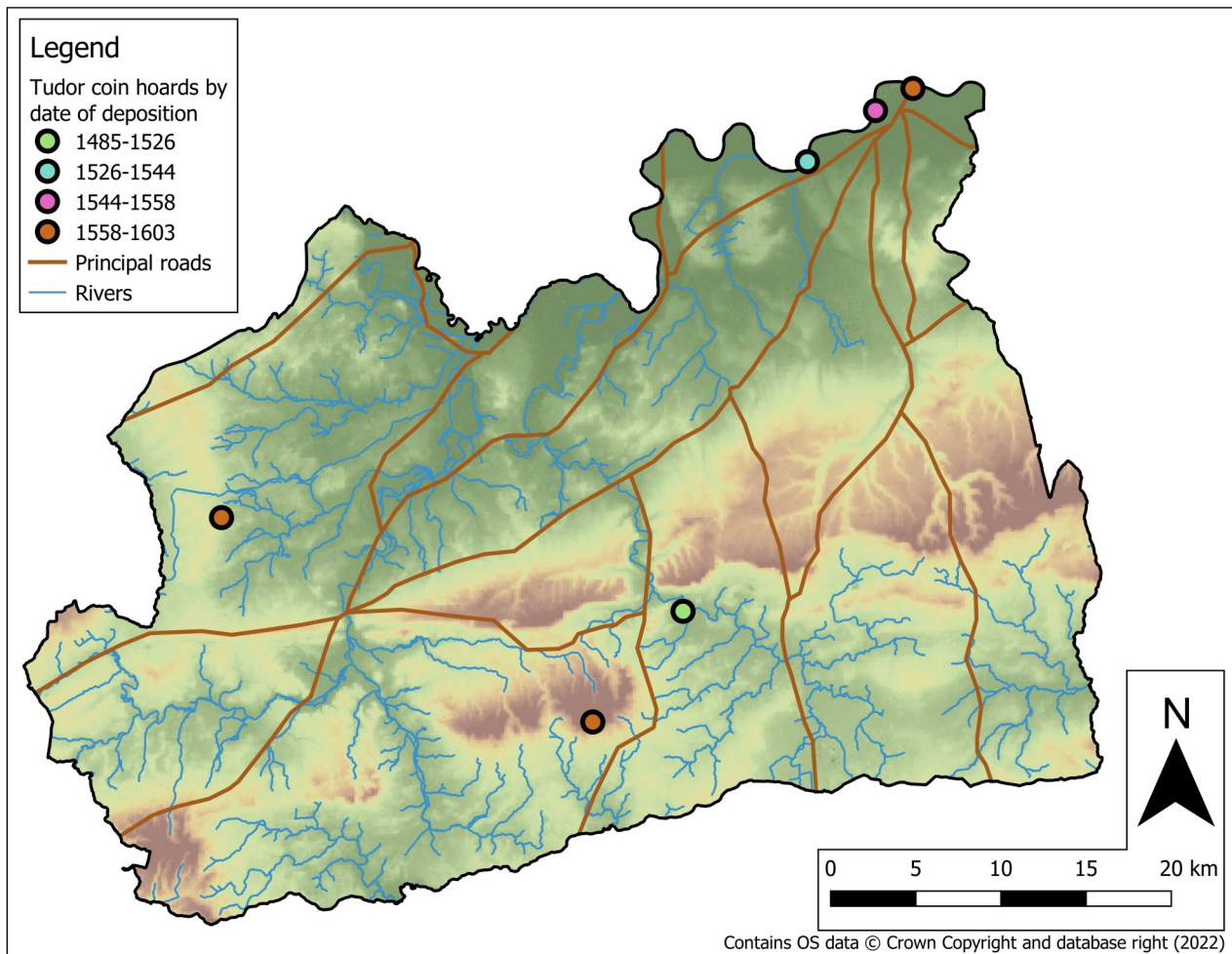
On 4 January 1844 a hoard of Elizabethan silver coins was unearthed on Pirbright Common, 6.5km south-west of Woking. No record of this find appears in the Surrey Historic Environment Record or Brown and Dolley's (1971) corpus of post-medieval coin hoards, but an account of its discovery was reported in the *Maidstone Gazette* and reprinted verbatim in other provincial newspapers (e.g. *Sun*, 18 January 1844, 9; *Reading Mercury*, 20 January 1844, 2). It reads as follows:

*Pirbright - Discovery of Old Coins. On Thursday, the 4th inst., as William Russell, digger, was boring for stone on the common, at the foot of the hills running from Bagsbot to Farnham, he saw what he thought, on the surface, a button, but on examination it proved to be a coin of Elizabeth, 1565. On removing the earth, he found several others which caused him to search diligently, and he discovered 100 pieces more in a good state of preservation. They are all of Elizabeth, 1565 and 1567; some of the size of half-crowns, others shillings and sixpences, all silver, but much*

*thinner than the present coins. Several persons have searched since the 4th instant, and have found about twenty other pieces.*

The principal finder, William Russell (1786-1875), was a Pirbright-born agricultural labourer resident at Burrow Hill at the time of the 1841 census (Kew, The National Archives (TNA), HO 107/1080/2, p. 9). What he and the 'several' subsequent finders did with the coins that they found on

Fig 1 Distribution map of Tudor coin hoards from Surrey



the Common is unclear; none appear to have been preserved in public collections, and in lieu of any evidence to the contrary we may suppose that they, like so many other coins from early finds, have since been dispersed, lost, or destroyed.

Though relatively brief, the newspaper report preserves some important information relating to the contents of this otherwise unrecorded Tudor coin hoard. The description makes clear that the hoard consisted of c.120 silver coins of Elizabeth I, which were equivalent in breadth – but not thickness – to 19th-century halfcrowns (diameter 32mm), shillings (diameter 24mm), and sixpences (diameter 19mm). Cross-referencing these details with modern accounts of the Elizabethan silver coinage (Brown, Comber & Wilkinson 2019) suggests that the hoard contained a mixture of shillings (diameter 30-32mm, struck 1559-1561 and 1583-1603), sixpences (diameter 24-26mm, struck 1561-1603), and threepences (diameter 18-20mm, struck 1561-1583), and perhaps additionally groats (diameter 22-24mm, struck 1559-1561) and/or halfgroats (diameter 17-20mm, struck 1559-1571 and 1583-1603). The reference to at least two coins dated 1565 and 1567 further confirms the presence of sixpences and/or threepences, since these were the only Elizabethan silver coins to bear dates, and suggests a burial date somewhere in the later years of Elizabeth's Third Coinage (1561-1571).

Information relating to the archaeological context of the hoard, however, is less forthcoming. The stated findspot of the hoard, Pirbright Common (NGR SU 918 544), is a large expanse of open heathland located in the south-west of the parish of Pirbright, and has been used as common land since at least the medieval period. Exactly where the coins were found on the Common is unclear, but the observation that they were found while 'boring for stone' could localise the findspot to one of the two 'Old Gravel Pits' recorded near Foxholes Bottom (NGR SU 9237 5390) and Pirbright Camp (NGR SU 9289 5711) on the Ordnance Survey 2nd edition 1:10,560 map of 1920. While there is no evidence for the use of a hoard container, we cannot exclude the possibility that the coins were originally deposited in a textile bag or purse, which would be unlikely to survive burial in the

acidic loamy and sandy soils that dominate Pirbright Common.

The Pirbright hoard is one of only six Tudor coin hoards known from the historic county of Surrey (Fig 1). Three of these hoards date to the reign of Elizabeth I: aside from the Pirbright find, these consist of a hoard of gold coins of Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Elizabeth I found in a ceramic jar near Leith Hill Tower in 1837 (Brown & Dolley 1971, 24, EN27), and a poorly-recorded hoard of gold and silver coins found while demolishing The Bear at the Bridge Foot Tavern in Southwark in 1761 (Woodhead 1996, 105, no. 116). Though composed exclusively of mid- to low-value silver coins, the Pirbright find compares favourably to these high-value gold hoards, with a face value of between £1 11s. 0d. and £5 18s. 9d. at the time of its deposition in the late 1560s – equivalent to one to five months' wages for a skilled labourer, or two to seven months' wages for a semi-skilled labourer (Rappaport 1989, 406). The hoard would therefore have represented a significant sum of money, but would not have been so valuable as to be out of the reach of a prosperous yeoman farmer like John Baker of Pirbright, whose will of 1586 includes monetary bequests to the value of £50 15s. 0d. (TNA PROB 11/69/621). The hoard may, therefore, represent an accumulation of household or personal savings belonging to a local farmer like John Baker, which may have been buried on Pirbright Common – a marginal location far removed from the village core – for the purpose of temporary safekeeping.

## References

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