

# Tothill Street Westminster, and Anglo-Saxon civil defence

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## Introduction

LONDONERS walking past Westminster Abbey may recognise the street name Tothill Street, leading towards Horseferry Road, but will be surprised to learn that it can be associated with the Late Saxon defence of London. The word *tot-hyl*, from which the street takes its name, means "a watch-hill", and is directly related to a system of Anglo-Saxon beacons found in south-east England. In this brief section we shall examine the evidence for a *tot* site at Westminster, and discuss this in relation to other sites of its kind. The earliest surviving document recording a *tot-hyl* at Westminster, dates from the late twelfth century<sup>1</sup>. As there can never have been a natural mound here, the name must have referred to an artificial mound<sup>2</sup>, possibly that referred to as a *hlaue* in a document of 979-1016<sup>3</sup>. The last use of the area for defensive purposes was in 1642/3 during the fortification of London<sup>4</sup>. It may be possible yet, to identify this site even though it is extensively developed.

## The study of Anglo-Saxon beacons

The place-name element *tot-hyl* is rare in Middlesex and Surrey, the only other such site in Greater London being a field-name in Hendon, first recorded in 1685<sup>5</sup>. Such place-names have a specific meaning, stemming directly from a tradition of Anglo-Saxon watching positions on hills and beacon sites. While the principal source of data is that provided by place and field-names, there is limited charter, archaeological and topographical evidence.

Russell provided the first research of this class of site, claiming that the beacons of the Anglo-Saxon period were look-out posts on which a man was stationed when trouble threatened, and from which he ran down to give warning<sup>6</sup>, although this is not based on documentation. Hill has postulated a Late Saxon date for a number of beacon sites in Hampshire, although based wholly on documentary data, some of it rather late<sup>7</sup>. Study of watch-hills and beacon sites is thus still in its infancy. Such sites are hinted at in Late Saxon texts such as the *Rectitudines Singularum Personarum*<sup>8</sup>, and the tradition of them is recorded in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* of 1878<sup>9</sup>.

1. J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton *The Place-names of Middlesex* English Place-name Society 18 (1942) 174.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 222; M. Gelling 'The boundaries of the Westminster Charters' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc New Series* 11 (1952-4) 101-4.
4. N. Brett-James 'The fortification of London in 1642/3' *The London Topographical Record* 14 (1928) 1-35.
5. *Op. cit.* fn.1, 211.
6. P. Russell 'Fire Beacons in Devon; with a note on other visual signals' *Trans Devonshire Assoc* 87 (1951).
7. D. Hill *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (1981).
8. R. Abels *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England* (1988) 117.
9. Chapter Three.

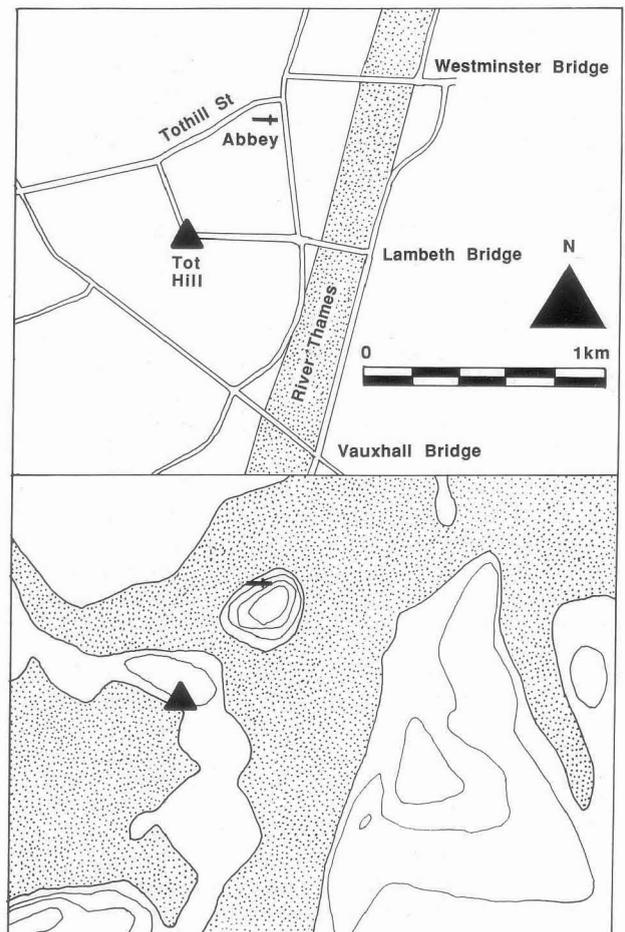


Fig. 1:

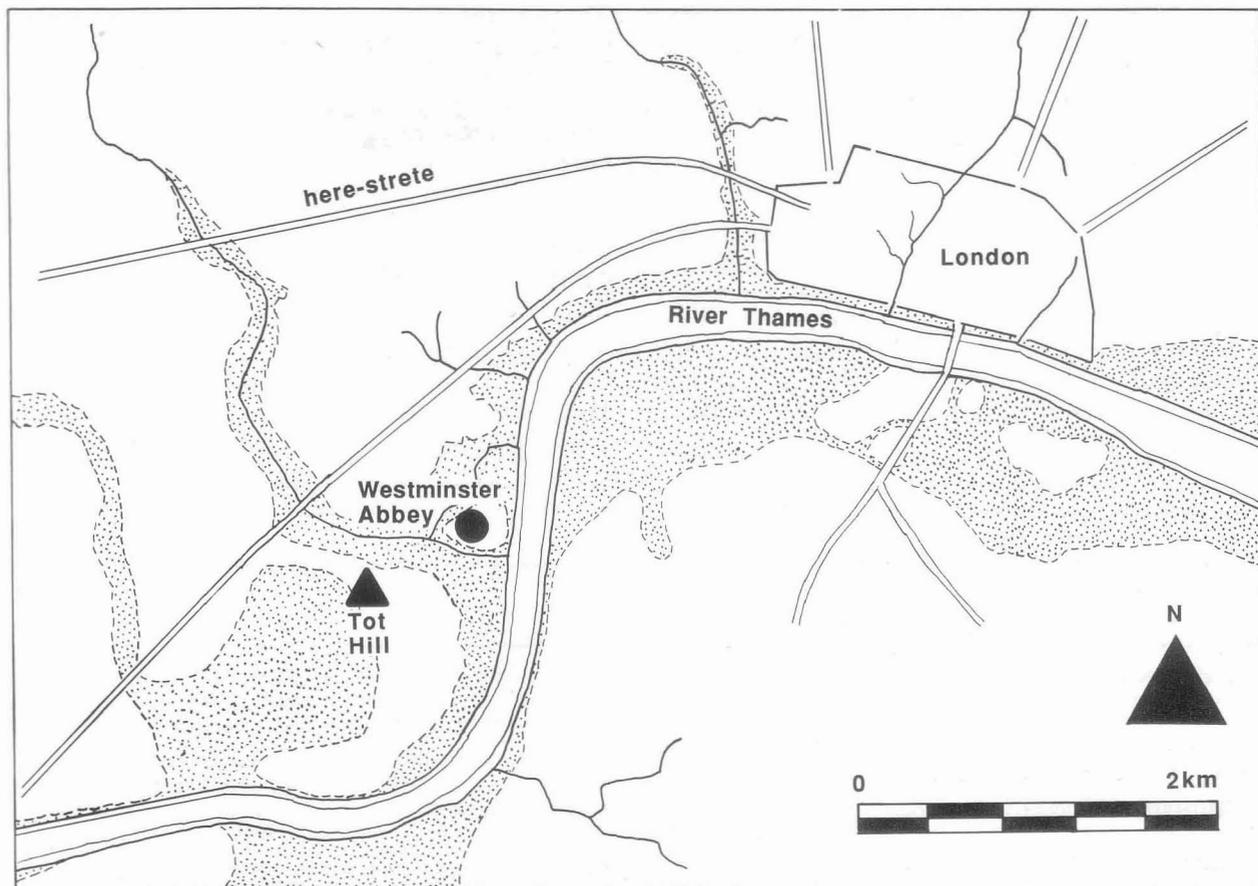


Fig. 2:

A principal problem of the identification of beacon sites is their continuous reuse. Thus in Dorset, the earliest documentary evidence was the Henrician map of *c* 1538, which shows the coastal defences as they stood in readiness for French attacks<sup>10</sup>. These were succeeded by Elizabethan beacons of a similar design, and the resulting situation is further complicated by those of the Napoleonic scare<sup>11</sup>. Archaeologically we cannot be sure what kind of evidence will be left behind by a beacon. Documentary sources indicate that the Westminster *tot-hyl* should be archaeologically identifiable as a mound<sup>12</sup>.

Evidence from charters suggests that *tot-hyl* and other beacon sites, are linked into an integrated system of Anglo-Saxon civil defence, by a system of routeways called *herepaths*<sup>13</sup>, meaning literally 'army-roads'<sup>14</sup>. Studies in Dorset, Hampshire and

Wiltshire have illustrated the complexities of the *herepath* network, extending from Beaford in north Devon<sup>15</sup>, straight into Oxford Street in central London where a charter records a *here-strete*<sup>16</sup>. This route is probably directly related to that recorded as the *Lunden Herpathe* in a charter from Crawley in Hampshire in AD 909<sup>17</sup>. At rare situations such as Nettlecomb Tout in Dorset, a beacon site appears to be placed directly on the course of a *herepath*<sup>18</sup>.

A number of place-names have beacon elements in them, though most are recorded in field-names. Those which are Saxon can be plotted against *burh* place-name elements and from this a pattern may be quickly discerned, whereby the two form a dichotomous relationship covering large areas of the country. Thus in the county of Berkshire such sites are rarely coterminous because the two varieties of defence appear complementary. Such sites

10. J. Harte *Cuckoo Pounds and Singing Barrows* (1986) 28.

11. *Ibid.*, 27.

12. J. Rocque *The A to Z of Georgian London*, facsimile of, London Topographical Society (1982).

13. G. Pepper and A. Reynolds *The archaeology of Anglo-Saxon communications* (forthcoming).

14. W. Bosworth and T. Toller *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (1882)

533.

15. J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton *The Place-names of Devon Part One* English Place-name Society 8 (1931) 87.

16. *Op. cit.* fn 3.

17. P. Sawyer *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An annotated list and bibliography* (1968) no. 381.

18. *Ibid.*, no. 347.

are often found on important administrative boundaries, such as Toothill, Cookham in Berkshire<sup>19</sup>, Toothill in Pirton, Hertfordshire<sup>20</sup>, or Toot Hill, North Kelsey in Lincolnshire<sup>21</sup>. It is thus no surprise to find a *tot-hyl* at Westminster on the important administrative boundary of the River Thames.

Examination of Rocque's mid-18th century map of London appears to illustrate the presence of the *tot* mound. It is set well back on the line of the original land surface, and commands an excellent view of both the city and Westminster. Rocque's map indicates that the mound was built in at least two stages<sup>22</sup>. Traces of the site exist to the present day.

19. M. Gelling *The Place-Names of Berkshire Part One* English Place-name Society 49 (1973) 87.

20. J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton *The Place-names of Hertfordshire* English Place-name Society 15 (1938) 22.

There is the slight rise of Regency Place – the junction of Rutherford Street, Horseferry Road, Maunsel Street and Ayneway Street. A more pronounced slope occurs at the western end of Page Street. Indicative of an earthwork is the subsidence crack running through the structure of 14 Maunsel Street, part of a long Georgian terrace. It is possible that the site could be ascribed to some other landscape feature, but it dates prior to the Civil War and is unlikely to be a windmill due to its place-name.

### Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Gustav Milne for his advice and Jane Sidell for the use of certain maps.

21. K. Cameron *The Place-Names of Lincolnshire, Part Two* English Place-name Society 64/5 (1991) 185.

22. Cf. fn 12.

## Letters

### Finds research

MAY I congratulate you on printing the review of recent finds research by Hedley Swain in your Winter 1995 issue? As someone who tries to keep in touch with London's archaeology can I say how much I appreciate this sort of article?

A Museum of London Archaeological Service (MOLAS) archaeologist recently suggested to me that it was impossible for anyone other than a MOLAS archaeologist to write an up-to-date (and by implication worthwhile) book on the archaeology of London. I hope this is not true, because if it is it suggests that MOLAS is not publishing quickly enough, or providing detailed enough interim statements. Be that as it may, MOLAS articles such as Hedley Swain's contribute an enormous amount to keeping the rest of the archaeological community in touch.

For those who missed the article it is worth, I think, reiterating what to me seem to be the most exciting discoveries Swain draws attention to (the references suggest that this is the first time some of these gems of information have appeared in print). I include a brief note on their possible consequences but please note that these interpretations are not necessarily Hedley Swain's: the identification of conquest period pottery from an excavation in Park Street, Southwark – arguably making Southwark the oldest part of London,

the discovery of a new form of amphora produced in St. Alban's and suggesting a 'flourishing wine industry' in Roman Britain, the identification of *Classis Britannica* tiles from Winchester Palace, Southwark, which with other information suggests Southwark was a very important military area in the Roman period,

the finding of rare polychrome relief tiles in the Guildhall, suggestive of early medieval royal presence, and backing a tradition of a Saxon palace in this area,

the recognition of two 5th-century sherds from Professor Grimes' St. Bride's archive which, apart from the rarity of finds from this period, is intriguing considering the folklore which suggest an early foundation for St. Bride's.

I cannot recall another article in *London Archaeologist* which had given me so many new facts to fit into the archaeological jigsaw.

May I therefore encourage you to commission more of this type of paper? Perhaps you could include a news round-up, in which you concentrate on major new discoveries, papers and theories?

The paper suggests that the future place for major new discoveries is not in the field, but in the finds processing room – years after the original excavation. I hope funding bodies and developers will take this into account when setting up budgets.

Finally to balance the praise can I make one small complaint about the same author's work which appeared in the preceding issue (written in conjunction with others), which is simply that the absence of any place names or easily identifiable icons made the reading of Figs. 2 and 7 concerning the site of the Roman road in Westminster much more troublesome than it need have been.

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### Leyton Playing Field Excavation

WITH REFERENCE to the article in Vol. 7, no. 15 (Winter 1995) please note:

1. On p. 397, the postal code for Leyton is E10; E4 is for Chingford, which is some 4 to 5 miles north of the site.

2. George Mitchell School is not on the site, it is about a quarter mile to the north of the site.

3. On p. 401, it is Church Road, not Church Street.

4. The Arts Building now on the site is not a development of the George Mitchell School; it is a facility used by the School by day and by the Youth Group at night.

5. The playing fields are not just for the George Mitchell School. They are known locally as The County Ground and officially as a Youth Centre. Some twenty schools and other local groups all use the ground at various times.

I note that there are to be other articles on Leyton; it is to be hoped that the authors will be more careful and less misleading in those.

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