

Fig. 1: schematic map showing the distribution of 'tot' Place-names and other 'look-out' positions along Stane Street between Chichester and London and adjoining Roman roads.

Key: C = Chichester; P = Pulborough; D = Dorking; L = London. 1 Aldingbourne; 2 Glating Beacon; 3 Pulborough; 4 Slinfold; 5 Rowhook; 6 Anstiebury; 7 Dorking gap; 8 Headley; 9 Tumble Beacon; 10 Cheam area; 11 Totterdown; 12 Brixton Hill; 13 Westminster; 14 Stedham; 15 Hurstpierpoint.

A suggested Anglo-Saxon signalling system between Chichester and London

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Introduction

Situated between Chichester and London and alongside Stane Street is a sequence of six place-names which contain the Old English word element *tot*, meaning 'look-out place'. In most cases this place-name is associated with Anglo-Saxon watching points, which are usually located on areas of high ground with commanding views over the local countryside.¹ Whether the sequence of these sites is coincidental or implies some significance is uncertain, but nevertheless, the

location of these sites overlooking Stane Street, a highway of historical importance, merits some attention (Fig. 1).

Constructed during the early decades of the Roman occupation, Stane Street ran from *Noviomagus* (Chichester) to *Londinium*. Covering a distance of some 60 miles, the road negotiates a varied topography and secures the shortest route possible between the two towns. The directness of the road to London ensured Stane Street as a major thoroughfare during the Roman period and over the following centuries, as confirmed by the

use of long stretches of the route in the modern road system.²

However, there was a latent disadvantage with the geography of Stane Street, which arose during the late and post Roman period and again in Saxon times. Running directly inland from a coastal area dotted with inlets and safe harbourage, Stane Street offered a potential aggressor a convenient entry route into Sussex, Surrey and beyond. By its nature the road held a strategic value, a factor no doubt recognised by the late and sub-Roman authorities in their endeavours to contain Saxon incursions coming from the south coast. In an emergency Stane Street would have facilitated the rapid movement of troops to Chichester and the coastal area, and may have been a contributory factor in containing the Saxon invasion of Aelle, who landed at Selsey in 477 and subsequently made little progress inland.

The military importance of Stane Street would have been appreciated in later centuries, when similar circumstances confronted the Saxon military. Their concerns would have stemmed from the threats of coastal raids and incursions by Viking armies. Such concerns would have heightened in the 9th century with Viking attacks upon Wessex and during the late 10th century when they began attacking southern England from their base on the Isle of Wight.

The association of these *tot* sites with Stane Street suggests that some form of observation and signalling system may have been established by the Saxon military between Chichester and London. Such a system would have monitored Viking movements inland and towards the Thames Valley region; and furthermore given early warning of impending attacks upon the trading centre of *Lundenwic* and the embryonic settlement of *Lundenburgh* within the City walls.

The use of prominent hills and earthworks for look-out posts or fire beacons has been part of our national defence system for centuries.

Unfortunately, knowledge of their use during the Saxon period is limited and primarily reliant on place-name and charter evidence. However, the Anglo-Saxons are recorded as having army beacons (*here beacna*) and in the *Rectitudines Singularum Personarum*, a text of Late Saxon origin, reference is made to the lighting of fire beacons on hills as part of the ‘sea-watch’.³

Tot sites

The first *tot* site associated with the road is located at Aldingbourne, 6 km east of Chichester. Here, on the flats of the coastal plain, a *totehul* was recorded during the 12th century.⁴

Considered to be an artificial feature, this extant ‘look-out’ position would equally have served as a ‘sea-watch’ for Chichester as well as for the initial stretch of Stane Street.

From Aldingbourne the next *tot* position is 21 km to the north at Pulborough, lying north of the South Downs. To pass a signal to this position would require an intermediary post on the Downs. A likely place for this would have been Bignor Hill, a commanding position 7 km north of Aldingbourne and over which Stane Street makes its route before descending to Pulborough. On its progress over the hill the road passes close to a number of earthworks, notably ‘*Glating Beacon*’;⁵ a feature that may well be recording the tradition of an earlier ‘look-out’ place.

From Bignor Hill the next *tot* site can be discerned with little difficulty 6 km to the north and just beyond Pulborough. Lying 1 km west of Stane Street is a small but prominent hill where *Toat Farm* is located.⁶ From this vantage point a view over the Arun river and valley is also obtained and of the following look-out site positioned 6 km away at Slinfold, Surrey. Here, set back 2 km west of the road is an area of high ground, again offering clear open views to the north and south along Stane Street and where *Toat Hill* and *Toot Farm* are old locality names.⁷

The next position is near to a spur road of Stane Street which branches north-west at Rowhook and towards the Roman temple at Farley Heath.⁸ The look-out here is south of Cranleigh and is remembered in the name of *Tothill wood*.⁹ This elevated ground lies 6 km to the east of Stane Street and gives a satisfactory sighting line towards the North Downs and the Dorking gap, through which Stane Street passes.

From here the following location is at Headley, 27 km to the north and beyond the Dorking gap. To pass a signal over this distance and through the gap to Headley further posts would be required. Although there are no recognised *tot* sites along this section of the road there are a number of possible positions. One likely place

would be on the Greensand heights, a dominant feature lying to the immediate south-west of Dorking. Here is Anstiebury, an Iron Age hill-fort occupying a commanding position and noted for its views over the Surrey Weald and downs and ideally suited to be included in this suggested look-out system.

As the North Downs prevent a direct sighting line from Anstiebury to Headley a second post would be expected above the gap. A suggested position would be the high ground of the Ashcombe Wood, an area giving a view through the gap and over Stane Street towards Headley. On leaving the Dorking Gap the road makes an alignment towards Ewell, taking it past the village of Headley lying 2.5 km to the east. Just to the edge of this village is *Tot Hill*,¹⁰ a pronounced feature in the landscape and ideally suited for its named purpose.

From Headley there is a substantial distance to the next *tot* location at Tooting in south London. However, before this site is reached, Stane Street passes below Tumble Beacon,¹¹ a large earthwork of uncertain origin lying on the edge of the chalk downs at Banstead, 6 km north of Headley. The location of this beacon gives an unchallenged view over the landscape of south-west London and its dominant position and nearness to Stane Street suggests possible inclusion into the system. Although a view is obtained from this point towards Tooting it is likely that a further look-out position was needed to satisfactorily bridge the viewing distance. This could be in the locality of Cheam village or further north at Morden, areas where the contour level rises and through which Stane Street passes towards Tooting. There is however one possibility. Standing in Morden Park and very close to the line of the road is a mound of unknown age and origin. Whether this is a lost garden feature or a result of some earlier activity has yet to be determined.

Of the six *tot* sites associated with Stane Street, the one located at Tooting is of particular interest.¹² The place-name here is *Totterdown*, a compound name comprising in addition of *tot*, the elements *earn* house and *dun* hill. The existence of this place-name is usually associated with hill-forts, as for example in Berkshire where a number of associations are known.¹³ Where such a feature is located in this part of London is not known,

although the association may be with 'Caesars Camp' on Wimbledon Common. The look-out at Tooting is considered to be sited on a ridge of high ground, and remembered in the local name 'Totterdown Fields'. This position overlooks a pass through which Stane Street makes a course towards Kennington Oval and finally Southwark.

From Tooting the next *tot* location, which may be a 'linking' position for a system covering the western approaches to London, is found at Westminster, where a *tot-hyl* is recorded; an artificial mound which stood on the edge of Tothill Field and Horseferry Road.¹⁴ However, a sighting line direct from Tooting to Westminster is blocked by the Clapham Heights. To overcome this a signal could have been directed to Brixton Hill lying 3 km to the north; a dominant feature in

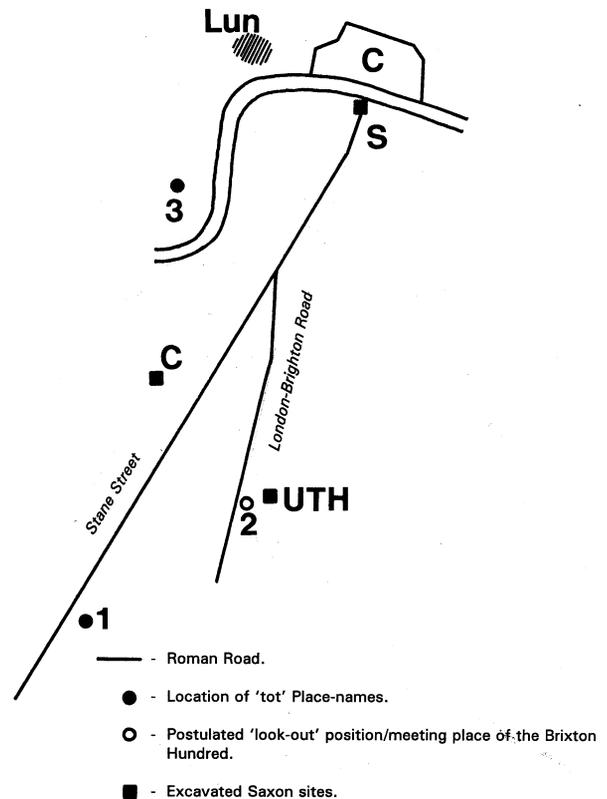


Fig. 2: schematic map showing 'tot' locations in relation to London.

Key: Lun = Lundenwic; C = City; S = Southwark; C = Clapham; UTH = Upper Tulse Hill. 1 Totterdown, Tooting; 2 Brixton Hill; 3 Tothill, Westminster.

the South London landscape overlooking the Thames floodplain from Battersea to Deptford. Interestingly, the summit of Brixton Hill was chosen for the location of *brixges stane*, the meeting place of the Brixton Hundred.¹⁵ Furthermore, the historic importance of the hill has been emphasised by recent excavations 600 m to the east of the summit at Upper Tulse Hill. These have revealed prehistoric and Roman activity, but importantly have shown evidence of Saxon settlement activity.¹⁶ This encourages the possibility that the summit may have also served as a look-out position, as any signal received from Tooting could be passed directly to Westminster, or more importantly across to London (Fig. 2).

Conclusion

Although there is an absence of historical or archaeological evidence to support a Saxon look-out system along Stane Street, the establishment of one is not improbable, considering the particular need to protect Saxon settlement at London from Viking attacks. A warning system set up between Chichester and London would have been a prudent measure when trouble threatened, as would be the probable designation of Stane Street as a '*here path*' (army road) by the Saxon military.

The importance of the road during the Viking assaults upon Wessex is suggested by two battles fought at places, considered but not proven, to be along the road. In 851 the West Saxon King Aethelwulf intercepted and defeated a Viking force at a place called *Aclea*. Tradition has this battle located at Ockley, a village which flanks Stane Street south of Dorking. Twenty years later Ethelred and Alfred fought the Viking Great Army at *Meretun*, a locality not yet satisfactorily identified but thought to be Merton in Southwest London, through which Stane Street passes on route towards Tooting. Although these are debatable locations, lack of certainty does not mitigate the importance of the road to an army wishing to control Surrey or Sussex and the environs of South London.

Furthermore, other evidence indicates an active Viking presence in South London during this period. In 1862 a Viking coin and silver hoard was found approximately 1km east of the London-Brighton Roman Road at Thornton Heath. The hoard has been given a burial date of 871/872, a time when the Great Army was wintering in London. Other similar coin hoards have been found at Waterloo Bridge (c. 1884) and at Westminster Bridge (c. 1895) and are also attributed to this period.¹⁷ Further evidence of local Viking activity is recorded with the complaint by the Bishop of Winchester, to Alfred successor King Edward, that his estate of Beddington near Croydon, had been 'stripped bare by the heathen men'.¹⁸

The mobility of Viking armies was no doubt facilitated by the old Roman Road system, which centred on London. To the south the system focused upon Southwark and the approach to London Bridge. The importance of this area in the defence of London is recorded in the Burghal Hidage, where there is reference to '*Suthringa geweorche*' (the work of the men of Surrey), and taken to be an early reference to Southwark. However, the ambiguity of the entry does invite interpretations, encouraging the possibility of other defensive measures being undertaken along the southern approaches to the Thames foreshore and opposite the settlement area of *Lundenwic*.¹⁹ Such activity could be seen in relation to the defence of this settlement, around which a defensive ditch appears to have been constructed during the mid 9th century; a response, it appears, to Viking attacks.²⁰ With an early warning system directed at *Lundenwic*, time would have been given for the defences to be made ready and for non-combatants to move into the walled city.

The string of *tot* names along Stane Street appear to be more than just coincidence, and may represent the remnants of a complex Anglo-Saxon communication system based on the old Roman road system. Evidently, it is easy to draw the desired interpretation from these *tot* sites and to be speculative about their context, but it suffices to say that their existence is indeed somewhat intriguing.

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Excavations and post-excavation work

London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre, Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7EE. Contact Archive Manager, John Shepherd (020 7566 9317).

Croydon & District, processing and cataloguing of excavated and museum collections every Tuesday throughout the year. Archaeological reference collections of pottery fabrics, domestic animal bones, clay tobacco pipes and glass ware also available for comparative work. Enquiries to Jim Davison, 28 Blenheim Park Road, South Croydon, CR2 6BB.

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