

Watling Street through Kent

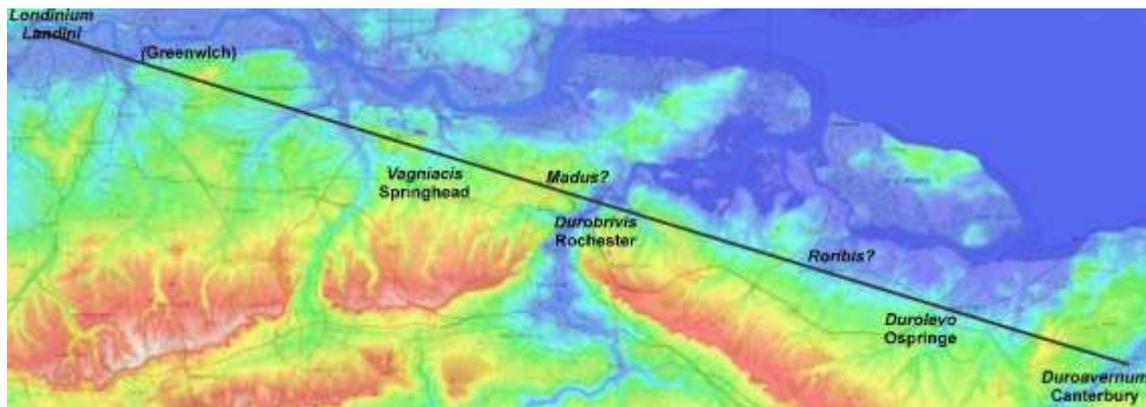
Watling Street was an Anglo-Saxon name for several Roman roads, one of which ran through Kent to London. Its course is a remarkably straight line, whose ends are conveniently at Canterbury cathedral and the archbishop's London residence, Lambeth Palace. Its known history began as the likely route of Roman invasions: under Julius Caesar in 54 BC and under Aulus Plautius in AD 43.

This article is concerned with Watling Street more as a social phenomenon than as a physical structure. Information comes from maps and archaeological reports, but the key is names in ancient texts. In the table below, the Antonine Itinerary supplies the first three columns, where Roman numerals in front of a name show the distance to it from the name above, in Roman miles (1.48 km). The Peutinger Map reveals only a tiny part of Britain, having frustratingly lost its first page. Such sources can be hard to read, and contain copying errors, but I try to cite names as exactly as modern typography allows, generally not putting them into a theoretical nominative case.

<u>iter 2</u>	<u>iter 3</u>	<u>iter 4</u>	<u>Peutinger</u>	<u>where now</u>
Londinio	Londinio	Londinio		London edge
x Noviomago				Spring Park
xviii Vagniacis				Springhead
			madus	Cobham Park?
viii Durobrovis	xxvii Durobrius	xxvii Durobrivis		Rochester
			xvii Roribis	Sittingbourne
xiii Durolevo			vii Durolevo	Ospringe
xii Durorverno	xxv Durarveno	xxv Durarvenno	vii Duroaverus	Canterbury

In addition, the Ravenna Cosmography supplies a sequence of names without distances: *Duro averno.Cantiacorum.Rutupis.Durobrabis.Landini.Tamese.Brinavis*. And Ptolemy's geography mentions Canterbury as *Δαρουερνον (Darwernon)*. More information is in the classic book by Rivet and Smith (1979), but watch out that many of their interpretations are wrong.

Figure 1 shows the line of Watling Street on top of a screen-grab from *topographic-map.com*. Most of the Roman road lies under the modern A2, but the last six miles or so at the western end, under built-up London, have not been found. Presumably the road network evolved over time, responding to changes in habitation patterns, economic activity, and wet ground.



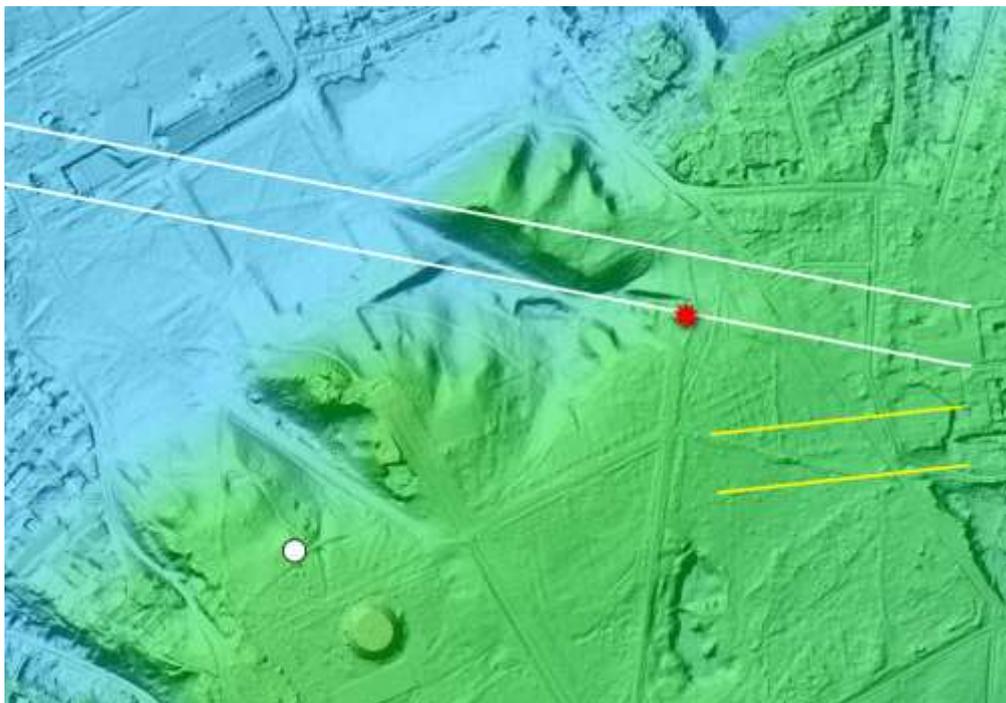
As the oldest Roman road in Britain, and one of the straightest, Kent's Watling Street is particularly interesting for the light it can throw on ancient communities along it. Surviving mileages fix their locations fairly well, which can often be matched up with archaeological traces, but much that is in print about place names along Watling Street is misleading.

It is tempting to dismiss all analysis of ancient names as hopeless, harmless fun. Rather like the way that many people view politics: all politicians lie; it is often hard to tell truth from fiction; let's just leave the liars to carry on ruling the world. I do not abdicate responsibility like that. The key to

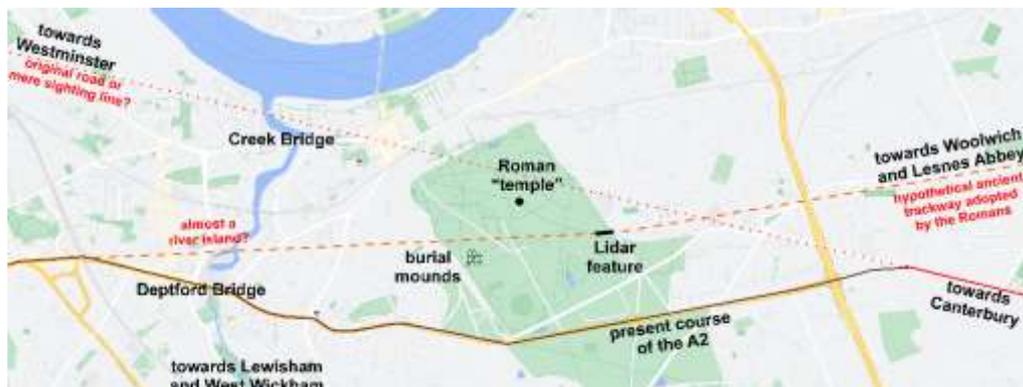
understanding place names along Watling Street is to think like a data scientist and a geographer, as well as a pragmatic linguist.

As will become clear, the surviving place names along Kent's Watling Street all seem to refer to water, or rather to wet ground. And, as the map shows, Roman names have survived mainly at places where only a short cart ride separated the road from boats that could sail on the Thames and the North Sea. Those places are like a string of pearls, linked by relatively dull string.

Let's start in Greenwich (my home), which has a Roman "temple" in the Royal Park. When Time Team came to excavate it, their lumps-and-bumps man, Stewart Ainsworth, spotted a possible Roman road agger apparently heading towards the cluster of 30 or so "Anglo-Saxon" burial mounds, on the brow of the escarpment further west inside the Park. Recent Lidar data from the Park, kindly processed by Paul Smith into Figure 2 here, shows a definite linear feature (surrounded by yellow lines), which is distinct from a projection of the Roman road arriving from Canterbury (white lines).



Roman surveyors coming from Canterbury would have had a clear view of Westminster from the top of Shooters Hill, our local high point. See Figure 3. If Julius Caesar or the original Roman road had continued in that direction, they could have easily forded Deptford Creek near its mouth, provided that the tide was out and its feeder river, the Ravensbourne, was not swollen with rain. Or, on reaching the Blackheath plateau, they could have turned 30° left, either onto the present course of the A2, towards Deptford Bridge, or onto the line of the Lidar feature.



Close-up on the ground (Figure 4) there is little of the linear feature to see now, but that is also true for the burial mounds, which are best seen from the air. Judging by the 1896 Ordnance Survey 6-inch map (Figure 5), this slight bump may have been more visible in the past, extending into what is now a formal flower garden. Obviously this Lidar hint needs to be followed up with non-destructive geophysics on the Park's manicured lawn, but already it starts to pose some intriguing questions.



Outside the Park on the right, that linear feature lines up with some modern property boundaries, which are centuries old. Beyond there, a main road runs along the edge of the escarpment south of the Thames past many burial mounds and grand houses, to reach the Thames again near Lesnes Abbey, so maybe the Romans turned left where their road hit a pre-existing native track.

Another classic marker of the track of a Roman road is a series of quarry pits, dug for stones to make the raised road-bed. Can any Roman quarry pits be recognized near Watling Street's approach to Deptford Creek? Surely they must all be lost among the plethora of dirty great holes, medieval or later, that scar Blackheath and Greenwich Park? Or maybe not...

One reason the Blackheath plateau has stayed open is that it is useless for arable farming, being essentially a prehistoric shingle beach covered with a thin layer of topsoil. As common land it was fair game for anyone to dig, and also for revolting peasants to gather repeatedly. At bottom right of Figure 2 is a huge pit (known to local schoolkids as Cowboy Land) from which stones were dug and carted downhill to Ballast Quay to be loaded into ships returning empty after delivering coal to London. Figure 6 shows how the pit's base now looks after a century of regeneration.



I do not know much about the details of Roman quarrying and road construction, but three facts seem certain. Blackheath gravel was ideally placed for use in constructing a causeway for Watling Street across the squelch of Deptford Creek. The easiest place to dig gravel was wherever edges of the Heath descended most steeply towards the Thames. And boats from Deptford Creek could have carried material up to *Londinium* for the construction of its quaysides, much like the lime burned from Blackheath chalk (in kilns where my office now sits) shipped to London after the Great Fire.

Notice also in Figure 2 the series of gullies, now occupied by modern roads, leading downhill from the Heath towards the Thames. Most people have hitherto assumed that the Roman road ran in the big valley on the right, quite steeply down towards modern Creek Bridge. On the other hand, if the road ran along the edge of the escarpment, as that linear Lidar feature (and grand medieval houses) suggest, it could have had a more gradual descent towards modern Deptford Bridge. However, that line would cross three modern roads, known as The Avenue, Crooms Hill, and Hyde Vale, each of which sits in a gully that would have been a real problem for the Roman road to cross.

Do we dare to suggest that each of those road gullies started life as Roman quarries, which eroded over the centuries? Is there any way to identify Blackheath pebbles now on the foreshore of central London? I am no geochemist, but can at least draw attention to the name of Greenwich, whose earliest attestation (*Gronewic* in AD 918) meant something like ‘gravel trading place’.

Exactly where Watling Street crossed Deptford Creek, and how that changed over time, is unknown, because water levels relative to land have changed so much over the centuries. One good guess might be a little downstream from modern Deptford Bridge, where a modern promontory bounded by wharves juts into the Creek. The side-arm there is slightly hidden from view and is now full of houseboats such as the [Sabine](#), charmingly described on the Friends of Deptford Creek website.

One last, important point about Deptford: its main settlement sits at a classic position recognized by geographers, the highest point on a river that can be reached by a cargo boat from the wider world. This is generally near, but not necessarily identical with, the lowest point on the river where men and animals can cross on foot. Technology (boats and bridges) can affect that optimum position, but ultimately the deciding factor is usually where riverside land is highest and driest. All this matters because Deptford is a model for the other named places along Watling Street.

If the Greenwich Park “temple” was some kind of Roman roadhouse, equivalent to a later coaching inn, why is it over a mile from the Creek crossing? Maybe that is simply a matter of class. Roman imperial messengers, like modern expense-account businessmen, expected a higher standard of accommodation than riff-raff down by the docks. Historical Deptford has been a cradle of industry, where poor people hustle for a living, in contrast with the asset-rich gentfolk living uphill.

Historians have long suggested that, during the Roman invasion in AD 43, the Roman HQ advanced along Watling Street flanked by supply ships on the Thames estuary. However, it is rarely spelled out just how much effort the Roman army needed to put into its logistics. An army advancing into unfamiliar, potentially hostile territory, with no pre-existing roads, cannot carry more than a few days’ worth of food. Foraging (stealing from the locals) can be counter-productive and a baggage train of ox-carts is notoriously slow. It follows that the Thames must have been buzzing with ships during the Roman invasion.

No Roman forts are known in Kent, except at the coast, and there is little sign even of marching camps. This suggests a largely consensual takeover of Kent in AD 43, as if the elite knew about life in Romanized Gaul and the futility of resisting a Roman army. All the Roman names along Watling Street are where boats could bring in supplies from the wider Thames estuary. In AD 43 each such place would have needed a small garrison guarding stores depots and keeping the route open – the original meaning of Latin *praesidium* – plus, ideally, a good relationship with local elite people. Deptford Creek, with its surrounding wet ground, and possibly a river island or promontory, is an instructive model for all other named places along Watling Street.

Of course, there was conflict during the Roman invasions. Bigbury, near Canterbury, is usually suggested to be the native fort overcome by Caesar in 54 BC. And there was at least one river-crossing battle in 43 AD, according to Cassius Dio, against the sons of king *Cunobelinus*. David [Young](#) has discussed online the likely course of a battle at an upstream Medway crossing.

Now let’s look at the eastern end of Watling Street. Three names begin with *Duro-*, which is essentially the modern word door, but in early place names its core meaning was ‘transport hub’ or what geographers call a Central Place. In 1980 Leo Rivet described *Duro-* as “Belgic”, because of where it occurs across northern Europe. In Britain it is a distinctive marker for the early stages of the Roman road network, because eight more *Duro-* names lie north of the Thames and into East Anglia, where the conquering Roman army would have headed after pacifying Kent.

Prominent among the invading Romans were some Batavians. They came from a river island in the Rhine delta around modern Nijmegen. Their fighting skills were vital for crossing the river Medway; they (and similar auxiliaries) later won Agricola’s battle at *Graupius mons*; and it is even suggested

that they made up Caesar's personal bodyguard. The name Batavia is said to contain a Germanic word for river island, **awjo-*, related to *aqua* 'water', seen, for example, in the *Ingaevones* people. Descendant words show up in a remarkable number of place names across northern Europe.

River islands positively infest the story of Watling Street, which runs from one at Canterbury (formerly called Binnewith) to one at Westminster (formerly called Thorney Island). And Strasbourg, whence came one invading legion, is river island incarnate. Actually, island is not the ideal word for these places so much as wet ground more generally. All around the North Sea, military and economic success depended on mastering the boundary zone between land and water.

For crews of their supply ships, the Romans would have recruited from cultures that regularly messed about in boats. With the Mediterranean far away, and after Caesar had slaughtered most *Veneti*, the biggest available pool of experienced sailors lived in the Rhine–Meuse–Scheldt delta or the coastal marshes of *Belgica*. Even if the Roman fleet was commanded in Latin, most sailors would have grown up speaking languages related to Old Dutch, Old English, and Low German.

The Roman army in Britain was, right from the start, more strongly Germanic than books like to admit when they discuss later *foederati*, *laeti*, and a post-Roman Anglo-Saxon "invasion". When Watling Street was born, key newcomers would have been sailors, who were generally lower down the pecking order than Roman soldiers, but more likely to abscond with a pretty British girl. There is no credible evidence that native people around the Thames estuary had close cultural and linguistic links with Wales, but plenty of hints about links across the Channel, such as Caesar's comment about *Belgae* or the *Notitia Dignitatum's* mention of a Saxon Shore.

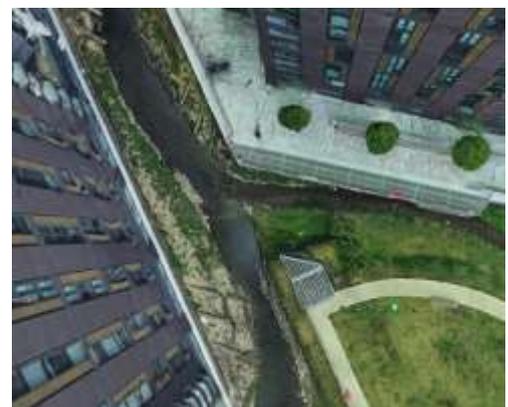
One oft-repeated bit of nonsense is that Canterbury was originally *Durovernum* 'fort on the alder swamp'. That idea traded on medieval Welsh *dur* 'steel' and *gwern* 'alder tree', two words that came from Latin (*durus* 'hard' and *vernus* 'of spring'), plus failure to recognise that alders are among the first trees to flower in spring and to colonize a wet habitat. Another contributor to the mistake was cherry-picking evidence: the source texts suggest that the original name contained a letter A. Both elements of a name like **Duroavernum*, *Duro-* and something like **awjo-*, were mentioned above as looking very north-European.

Archaeology at Canterbury (notably in the very latest *Archaeologica Cantiana*) reveals extensive native settlement uphill to the west (beyond Bigbury fort), whereas the earliest signs of urban development and riverside wharfs are down by the river island. In other words, Canterbury fits the picture developing here of a place that started out as a Roman logistics base.

Next along Watling Street, heading west, is *Durolevo*, generally identified with the Roman site at Syndale (at Ospringe near Faversham), about 11 Roman miles from Canterbury on a modern map. *Iter 2* reports 12 miles, but Peutinger shows 7, perhaps due to confusion between *xii* and *vii*. Two more Peutinger names' locations rely on *Durolevo*, so it worth asking what that name meant.

In geographical names, **lev-* is related to our modern words lips and labia. For example, ancient *Levefanum* (literally 'fen lips') was beside the Rhine, not far from the infamous Bridge Too Far at Arnhem. Here it refers to the single narrow opening through which Faversham Creek, Oare Creek, and their associated marshes flow into the Thames estuary.

I spent entire days poring over maps and dictionaries, to understand why L–vowel–V shows up in so many river and place names, both ancient and modern, all over Europe. Then it turned out that a fine example is just down the road from me, at Lewisham. Figure 7, screen-captured from Google Maps 3D, shows the confluence of the rivers Quaggy and



Ravensbourne, squeezed together originally by two hills but now by the concrete canyons of commuter blocks near the station.

Next, heading west, the Peutinger map shows *Roribis*, which is almost the same as Latin *roribus* 'to or from the dews'. The distance from Ospringe puts it at the end of Milton Creek, Sittingbourne, another obvious site for a Roman army/navy logistics base.

Next along Watling Street is the mouth of the river Medway, with a Roman place name usually cited as **Durobrivae*, based on three different spellings in the Antonine Itinerary and a fourth in the Cosmography. Even though the Itinerary supplies mileages from this site to four other places, they do not locate it precisely within the Medway conurbation. Rochester's claim on the name **Durobrivae* relies heavily on a belief that **briva* meant 'bridge', which is probably wrong.

In at least late Roman times, the main road is thought to have crossed the Medway near the line of Rochester's big modern bridge. This idea is supported by archaeological [finds](#), the castle, and the location of a medieval bridge (AD 1392) just a little upstream, but it is hard to believe that building a multi-span stone bridge across the Medway would have been an early priority for Britain's Roman administration. If Watling Street originally stuck to its straight line, it would have crossed the Medway half a mile upstream from the modern bridge, roughly between St Margaret's church on the east bank and Strood Temple on the west.

The Peutinger map's next name (or name-fragment) is *madus*, 17 miles from *Roribis*. That name obviously hints at the river Medway and at Latin *mado* 'to flow', but the distance does not fit Rochester, while alternative crossings of the Medway at Maidstone or Yalding are not supported by any archaeology. A possible solution may lie in the Roman villa at Cobham Park, which is over 3 miles from the Medway and about the same from wetlands beside the Thames. A roadhouse there, as un-military as *Villafastini* in Suffolk, might use a name based on another sense of Latin *mado* (whose nearest relative in English is meat) if it offered free-flowing food and drink to travellers.

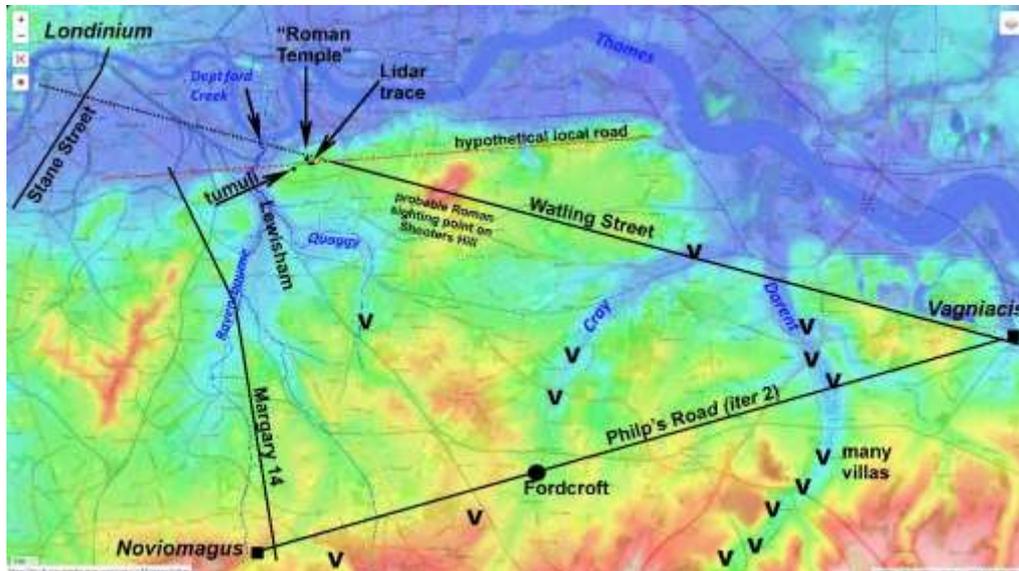
Cobham Park is a natural place to branch off Watling Street and head north towards the Thames, to where a medieval ferry used to run between Cliffe, in Kent, and East Tilbury, in Essex. Patrick [Thornhill](#) in 1977 made a case for the Thames being fordable there at low tide in Caesar's time. Exactly how much water levels have risen relative to adjoining land since Roman times in Britain's estuaries is a much-discussed puzzle, but one needs to remember a strange paradox. In eastern England, land onto which rivers are allowed to flood and to deposit silt tends to rise in step with water, whereas land protected by sea walls tends to sink.

Vagniacis meant something like 'marshy', being related to the river Quaggy mentioned above. The Roman settlement lay at the head of a respectable river, the Ebbsfleet (where -fleet implies use for transport), now vanished because its water has been diverted to human consumption.

Next comes the river Darent and its tributary, the Cray, whose joint estuary was wide, flat, and soggy where Watling Street crossed. Presumably the Roman road ran over a succession of causeways, small bridges, and fords, leaving little for archaeologists to find. However, there is evidence of over a dozen substantial Roman villas in the rich farmland upstream. The one at Lullingstone has even been suggested as a Roman governor's country residence.

No ancient settlement name has survived from this valley, but the river names Cray and Darent have attracted a deluge of nonsense guesswork; even the great Eilert Ekwall went badly wrong over them. The battle of *Crecganford* in AD 457, after which *Brettas* fled from *Centlond* to *Lundenbyrig*, probably has nothing to do with Crayford, but happened in east Yorkshire. (A long story, for another day.) However, there was conflict in this area after the end of Roman imperial authority, judging by the earthwork known as *Faesten Dic*, which runs south from Watling Street near the Cray/Darent confluence. It is well known to appear to defend Kent from London, but the fact that most Roman villas are on the Kent side must mean something.

Continuing west leads to south-east London, where Figure 8 shows what is known of the Roman road network. Many people have dabbled with archaeology and road-hunting in this area, most notably [Brian Philp](#), who found the correct location for *Noviomagus* on *iter 2*. Philp has feuded with “establishment” archaeologists in Kent, and I can sympathize, after my own bad experience with some academic linguists.



Finally, at the western end of Kent’s Watling Street lies London. The Cosmography name-checks places called *Landini* (probably *Londinium*, now the City of London) and *Tamese* (probably the fording place by modern Westminster). Various classical authors mentioned a river *Tamesis*, probably referring to the estuary generally. Some scholars’ efforts to explain the names London and Thames deserve prizes for comedy or long-windedness, but Occam’s Razor suggests ‘landing place’ and ‘cut’, respectively.

Roman London was a very cosmopolitan place. Much like a modern airport (or that famous bar scene in Star Wars), it was buzzing with people who grew up speaking a hundred different languages. They all needed to know some Latin, but a large proportion of the vernacular speech would have come from around the North Sea and the English Channel.

Simple arithmetic yields a surprising conclusion about routes into London. The distance by road from the Channel coast (for example *Rutupiae*, Richborough) via Canterbury to *Londinium* was about 72 Roman miles. By boat, through the Wantsum Channel and all the wiggles of the Thames, the distance was about 82 miles. Roman sailing vessels could average about 5 miles per hour, which is much faster than a human or horse can walk comfortably for long.

It follows that not just heavy cargoes travelled on water. It would have been logical for Roman pedestrians and marching soldiers to catch a boat whenever possible. Water travel is usually safer, and a lot more restful, too. Then why does Watling Street exist at all? Imperial messengers with relays of horses could outrun a boat, but not a simple message passed between Roman signal stations. Even if the Roman road started out as a prestige project, it ended up mostly carrying local traffic.

Kent’s Watling Street is exceptionally long and straight, but what makes it unique in Britain is how exactly it parallels the river Thames. The closest equivalent anywhere else in the Roman Empire was along the Rhine frontier, where most of the auxiliaries and many of the legionaries who invaded Britain were recruited. No one truly knows how close the native population already was to incoming “Romans” from the Rhine delta, but they seem to have accepted place names and waterside settlement patterns from there fairly peacefully.

One final bit of name-foolery. The name Watling, applied to roads outside Kent, has been linked with *Uæclingacæstir*, offered by Bede as one of two names for the site of Britain's first Christian [martyrdom](#). Bede's bit of hagiography rests on a flimsy foundation and almost certainly has nothing to do with Watling Street. That was first attested as *wætlinga stræt* in about AD 880, where *wæt* was the Old English precursor of modern wet, whose vowel has become A in water. What a charming way to end this story: watermen were once called wetlings.