

## Crossing the Thames

This is part of an article for the Roman Roads Research Association, which became too long, so the first two parts were hived off to appear in the RRRRA Newsletter. This bit got stranded when its master copy got lost on a dying computer. One day I hope to resuscitate it properly.

*Pontibus* in *iter 7* is usually said to belong at Staines, where most people vaguely imagine a multi-span bridge across the Thames, perhaps a bit like the modern [bridge](#) there. However, no archaeological evidence has been found for a Roman bridge at Staines, and not much for a substantial Roman town. Also, Itinerary mileages do not fit Staines.

The line of Margary's road 4a crosses the Thames near the modern Staines bridge, where the river is now about 60 metres wide and on average 2.8 metres deep. In Roman times, the river would have been much wider and [braided](#) or swampy. How wide is uncertain, but, for comparison, the mediaeval Thames near Waterloo Bridge was 360 metres wide and the zone around Staines officially declared to be at high risk of flooding is several kilometres wide. It follows that most of the river was very shallow, easy to cross by ford(s). Any bridges over deep channels could be short and simple, relatively easy to construct from timber. One can see what ancient Staines might have looked like from another place called *Pontibus*, in France at modern [Ponches-Estruval](#), where the Roman road to Boulogne crossed the small river Authie. That river now runs through a valley full of fishing ponds and damp meadows, where its braid of streams can be crossed by short bridges.

If *iter 7*'s mileages are to be believed, *Pontibus* was not at Staines. The last three stages are all *xxii* (22) miles, where 25, 27, and 21 miles might be expected. Their total is about right (if the Roman mile was longer than 1.48 km, as suggested above), but the mid-point of the stage between Silchester and London lay somewhere around Virginia Water Lake, within a mile or so of modern Cascade Bridge, at SU978685. That Lake was formed in 1753 by [damming](#) the river [Bourne](#), which collects waters from a series of streams. As one can see in this [photo](#), the river leaves the Lake over a cascade waterfall into a little ravine, over which a short bridge would have been very desirable in Roman times.

In fact a lot of that area was historically wet, and as the line of the Roman road approaches Staines, running roughly parallel with the modern A30, about 11 km away it hits Old Windsor Bog. As [McDougall](#) (1854) put it: "at about a mile from Duke's Hill the road crosses a marsh, where, having been raised to a considerable height, it is in some parts very distinct".

The place name Windsor (earliest recorded form *Windelesora*) is widely claimed to mean 'windlass bank', but this does not fit other places that independently have names like Windsor. One of them, Winsor, is close to Tatchbury, mentioned above. And Broadwindsor in Dorset is where [Laurie](#) (2016) studied culverts under a Roman road. He explained that any road along the flank of a wet slope needs to be pierced with a series of culverts to avoid damage from water pooling on its uphill side.

Also close to our likely *Pontibus* is the place name Wentworth, which is interesting because it may contain an element *\*werth*, usually translated as 'marsh' (though 'wart sticking up in marsh' may be better), and probably seen at ancient *Verteris* (Brough Castle). There is a whole class of W-vowel-N river names ([Windle](#), Windrush, Wensum, [Went](#), Wantsum, Wandle, etc), which have attracted various unconvincing explanations: 'winding/wandering', 'pleasant', etc.

Ekwall (1928) commented "Went is a very difficult name", but he also suggested that Wantage was originally a river name derived from an early precursor of wane 'to decrease'. This caught my eye because there are several instances of [bourne](#) 'intermittent stream'

feeding into the Thames, and because Ptolemy's [Ἀβραουάννου](#) (*Abrawannu*) river mouth was probably the Water of Luce, a spate river in Galloway.

Variable rivers can be caused by several types of local topography, but they must have been a serious issue for Roman road builders to think about, in an age when more of the landscape went squelch under foot than now. Roads needed to be prepared for flooding, whether it was insidiously slow, due to a gently rising water table, or ragingly fast, from overflowing rivers. Variable river flows directly affect fords. Every tidal river contains a zone where it is possible to wade across the river at low tide, yet cargo boats can float past at high tide. That zone is many miles long near London, where the tidal range is 6 to 8 metres vertically, but its position has shifted upstream as sea levels have risen relative to land since Roman times, possibly by as much as 3.5 metres.

Staines is beyond the direct influence of tides, but let's think some more about crossing the Thames lower down. It is not seriously doubted that a precursor of London Bridge existed for much of the Roman occupation, but until recently most people crossed the Thames by boat, costing money, or by ford, getting wet.

A regular ferry still runs between Gravesend in Kent and Tilbury in Essex, which may have had a medieval precursor a little downriver, from Cliffe to East Tilbury. As explained [here](#), causeways through the riverside marshes may have approached that Cliffe ferry site in Roman times, even leading to a ford across the Thames that might have been relevant during the Roman invasion.

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Anthony Durham [anthony.durham@ntlworld.com](mailto:anthony.durham@ntlworld.com)