

The Rochester Roman Road
and the
Battle of Hastings

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Draft – Rev 1e

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Introduction

The Rochester Roman road provides crucial clues about events leading up to the Battle of Hastings. It is the only irrefutable evidence about some key locations. Yet, its importance is easily missed because the clues are peppered around our book 'The Battle of Hastings at Sedlescombe'¹, and they have not been considered elsewhere. We have extracted the relevant sections, sometimes word for word, into this paper.



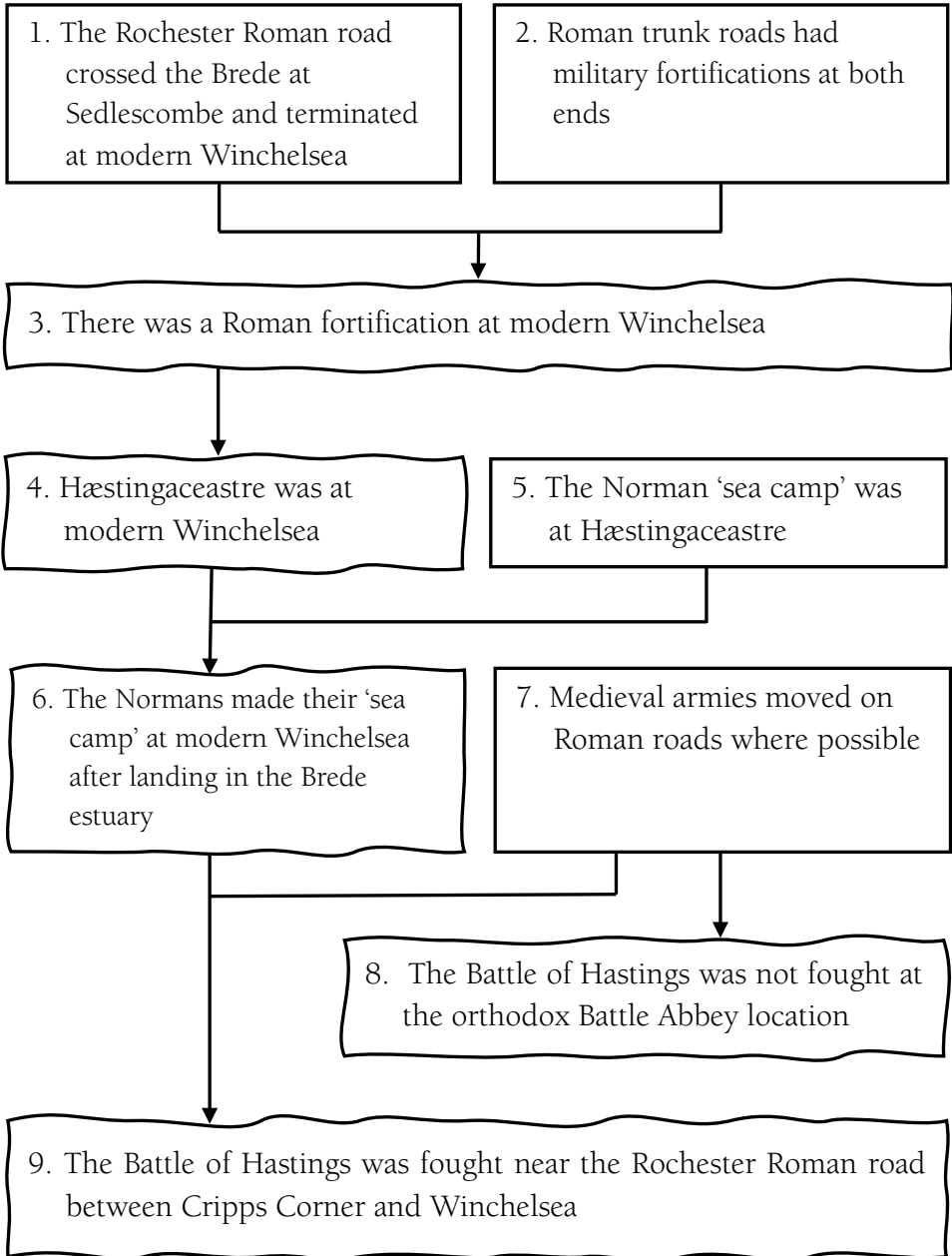
Figure 1: Rochester Roman road at Icklesham, showing wheel rut in crushed slag surface

The impetus for this paper is the recent excavation of a section of the Rochester Roman road at Icklesham (Figure 1).² While a geophysical survey had previously suggested the presence of this road, the excavation proves it beyond doubt. It conclusively demonstrates - just as we predicted 15 years ago - that the Rochester Roman road terminated at modern Winchelsea. This evidence refutes the orthodox Battle Abbey battlefield location while supporting our hypothesis that the Normans landed in the Brede estuary, and that both Hæstingaceastre and the main Norman camp were at modern Winchelsea. In this paper, we will explain the relationship between the road and these locations.

¹ https://www.academia.edu/45425862/The_Battle_of_Hastings_at_Sedlescombe

² December 2024 by Cameron Ross of the Battlefields Archaeology Group

Our thinking is outlined in the chart below. It comprises four statements shown in straight-edged boxes and five inferences in curly boxes. They provide a structure to present our reasoning.



1. The Rochester Roman road crossed the Brede at Sedlescombe and terminated at modern Winchelsea

Thomas Codrington rediscovered the Roman road leading south from Rochester, but he only traced it to Maidstone. His route was extended by Ivan Margary for his 1948 book 'Roman Ways In The Weald' and again for his 1955 book 'Roman Roads In Britain'. Figure 2 shows Margary's proposed routes for Roman roads in southeast England. He assigns numbers to his roads, as labelled on Figure 2. The Rochester road is 13.

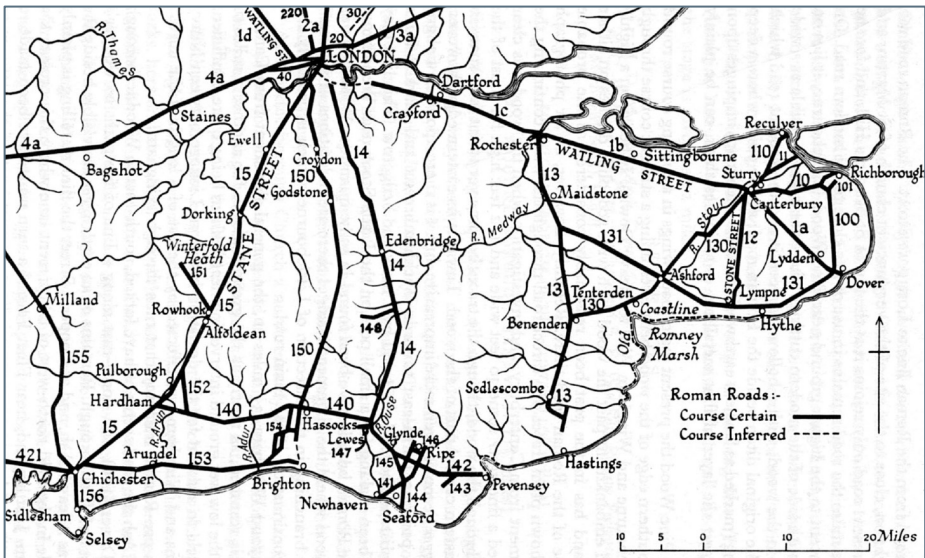


Figure 2: Margary Roman roads in southeast England

Margary explains that the Rochester Roman road crossed the Brede at Sedlescombe: “the older course of the road past Great Sanders (not the straight road which is a turnpike) and through Sedlescombe almost certainly mark it [the route of the Roman road]”. This interpretation is compelling, as it was standard Roman practice to establish river crossings at the head of tide, and Sedlescombe lay at the Brede’s head of tide during Romano-British times. More tangibly:

- The road through Sedlescombe north of the Brede is named ‘The Street’, formerly ‘Sedlescombe Street’, nearly always an indication that the Anglo-Saxons recognised it as a metalled Roman road.

- Margary notes what looks like an agger just north of Great Sanders, nearly always a remnant of a Roman road.
- David Staveley has found a section of metalled Roman road passing through north Sedlescombe.
- HAARG has found another section of metalled Roman road branching to the iron workings at Footlands.

Margary 13 continued south of the Brede. David Staveley and IHRG have found a section of metalled Roman road inside the Meadowview caravan park, some 750m south of the Brede crossing. Where did it go thence?

Termination at modern Hastings?

There is a general assumption - though we have not seen it explicitly stated - that the Rochester Roman road terminated at modern Hastings. The reasoning appears to be as follows:

- The Normans are believed to have camped at modern Hastings, the supposed location of the Anglo-Saxon burh fortification of Hæastingaceastre
 - Places with the Old English suffix *-ceastre* were almost invariably former Roman fortifications
 - Roman fortifications were accessed by Roman trunk roads
 - The Rochester Roman road was the only Roman trunk road in the region
- ⇒ Therefore, the Rochester Roman road must have terminated at modern Hastings.

However, this argument is predicated on the assumption that the Normans camped at modern Hastings - a claim we find implausible (see 'The Camps' section of our book linked in footnote 1) and for which there is no direct evidence.

Margary speculates that the Rochester Roman road went to Ore, tentatively hinting that it might have terminated at modern Hastings: "*Beyond Sedlescombe it is probable that the road continued to Westfield, marked by the*

course of the present road, there to meet a short but notably straight road running south from the shore of the Brede estuary to the ridge at Ore, above Hastings.” While his argument is plausible, we believe it is incorrect.

Margary’s only evidence that the Rochester Roman road ran between Crowham and Ore is a ‘notably straight’ – and therefore perhaps Roman - road between Crowham and St Helens: “*This is almost certainly a Roman alignment, for it bears no relation to existing villages, and it would form the most convenient southward end to the road from Sedlescombe and Bodiam.*” He is referring to Cottage Lane and Stonestile Lane between Crowham (C on Figure 3) and St Helens (SH) on the Hastings Ridge. Some physical evidence supports his hypothesis, as Gerald Brodribb recorded a section of metalled Roman road near this route in Little Hides Wood (LH).

We are sceptical that Margary 13 continued to St Helens. Nine hundred metres south of Little Hides, Stonestile Lane curves up a steep incline to St Helens, in a way uncommon for Roman roads. Moreover, the Romans would have needed a powerful incentive to build 5km of metalled road up a steep 100m rise, yet none are obvious. There is no evidence of Roman settlement at Ore or modern Hastings or anywhere on the Hastings Ridge beyond Baldslow. There are no known natural resources between Little Hides and Ore, or anywhere near the Hastings Ridge beyond Baldslow. Anglo-Saxons liked to settle beside Roman roads, but there are no known Anglo-Saxon settlements between Westfield and Ore³, nor anywhere on the Hastings Ridge beyond Baldslow. There is no LiDAR, aerial photography or archaeological evidence of a Roman road on Margary’s proposed route or anywhere else on the Hastings Ridge. A few Romano-British coins have been found at Ore and at modern Hastings, but Roman coins are found at many places on the Hastings Peninsula that lacked a Roman road.

In our opinion, Margary 13 did not rise onto the Hastings Ridge and therefore did not terminate at modern Hastings. Even if it did rise onto the

³ Paul Reed and Chris Butler have written papers tentatively supporting an Anglo-Saxon origin for Old St Helens church in St Helens, based on the discovery there of some Anglo-Saxon sherds and a Harold I coin, but as they say, it is also possible that they were left by Anglo-Saxon workmen employed by Normans to build the church.

Ridge, there is no evidence that it continued to modern Hastings and no reason it might have done. More likely, it crossed the Ridge heading towards the iron workings at Crowhurst Park and the minor Roman port at Redgeland (R on Figure 5).

We will explain more about Margary's theory and Brodribb's discoveries in the section about Beauport Park below. If we are right, Stonestile Lane between St Helens and Beaney's Lane is part of a post-Conquest shortcut between modern Hastings and the Rochester Roman road.

Termination at modern Winchelsea

We believe that the main Rochester Roman road terminated at modern Winchelsea. Here are some of our reasons (sections of excavated metallated Roman road are indicated on Figure 3 by red dots):

1. A section of metallated Roman road has recently been excavated at Icklesham, 2km west of modern Winchelsea and aligned towards it, as we explain in the introduction.
2. A section of 'ancient stone road' was excavated at Crutches Farm - 1km west of modern Winchelsea and aligned towards it - during the 1930s.
3. A section of metallated Roman road was seen by William MacLean Homan at the A259 motel in modern Winchelsea in the 1930s.⁴
4. A section of metallated Roman branch road was found by Voë Vahey of HAARG heading north from Old Place, Icklesham. This must have connected to a Roman trunk road and Margary 13 is the only one in the area.
5. A post-Conquest writ issued in 1294 refers to the Rochester Roman road as the 'London to Winchelsea road', another issued in 1300 refers to it as the 'Winchelsea to Robertsbridge road'.
6. The Anglo-Saxons liked to make settlements adjacent to Roman roads, and there is a string of Anglo-Saxon settlements along the south bank of the Brede (Figure 3). East to west they are Iham (I), the Anglo-Saxon name for modern Winchelsea, Wickham (W), Icklesham (Ic),

⁴ It was 1 metre under the current carriageway, seen when the road was being resurfaced

Snailham (Sn), Guestling (G), Lidham (L), Doleham (D), Toreham (T), Crowham (C), and Sedlescombe (S). Nowhere else in southern England has so many Anglo-Saxon settlements so close together. It seems likely that they had a common *raison d'être*, which in this area was probably to service traffic that passed along the Roman road.

7. There is a string of Roman iron workings at the Anglo-Saxon settlements listed in 5, as well as at the major Roman industrial site at Oaklands. Bulky iron ore and iron blooms would have been moved on a metalled road to be processed or shipped, which in this area could only have been the Rochester Roman road or a branch off it.
8. There is a Roman looking descending zig-zag road with cuttings and causeway at Rock's Hill in Crowham. It is shown as red question mark on Figure 3.
9. We believe that Ptolemy's *Novus Portus* was immediately adjacent to modern Winchelsea at Pewis Marsh (P on Figure 3 - see footnote 5).

Beauport Park

Bulky freight - iron ore, iron blooms, and timber for charcoal - needed to be transported by wagon on a metalled road. Margary therefore deduced that the Brede basin mines were connected to the Rochester Roman road by branches: "*Hereabouts are numerous ironworks of the period, some, as at Footlands, approached by branch roads metalled with the slag*". The section of Roman road at Footlands and another aligned towards Beauport Park (B on Figure 3) in the Meadowview caravan park (M) supports his theory.

Gerald Brodribb excavated Beauport Park in the late 1960s and early 1970s, identifying a significant Roman settlement at the already well-known iron ore mine. He proposed that Beauport Park was further connected to a broader network of roads. While his conclusions were partially based on dowsing, we believe he is correct.

The Brede basin was once a hub of industrial activity, a Romano-British precursor to the Ruhr Valley. It teemed with industry, traffic, miners, labourers, tradesmen, dock workers, sailors and Roman legionaries. The legionaries policed and protected a major port at the mouth of the Brede, as well as a minor port at Combe Haven, the vast iron ore mine at Beauport

Park, major iron ore mines at Footlands, Oaklands and Crowhurst Park, hundreds of minor iron ore mines, and likely hundreds of saltpans.

Roman legionaries were based in fortified camps known as ‘castras’, from where they marched to their stations, typically daily. It seems likely that they built a direct road from Guestling (G on Figure 3) to Beauport Park (B) or from Mill Lane (ML) to Beauport Park to cut two miles out of their most frequent commute. Either route would have passed through Little Hides.

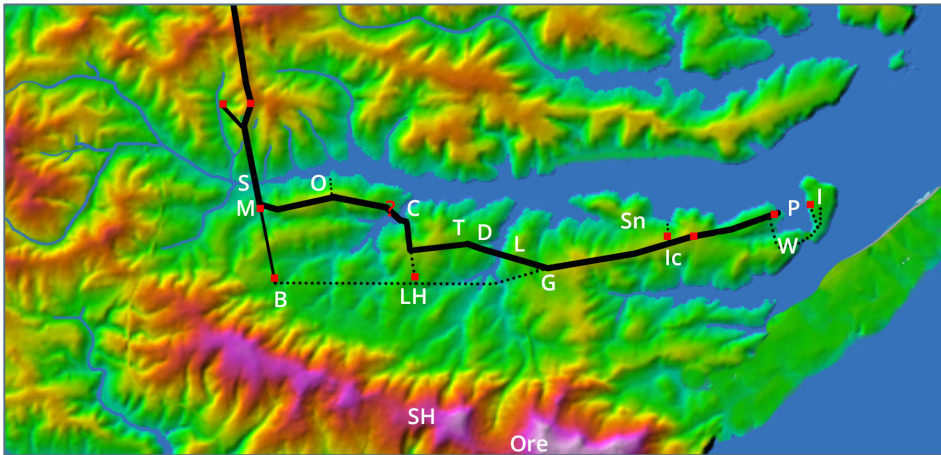


Figure 3: Roman road network – W = modern Winchelsea; V = Wickham; P = Novus Portus; I = Icklesham; G = Guestling Thorn; L= Lidham; D = Doleham; T = Toreham; C = Crowham; O = Oaklands; S = Sedlescombe; B = Beauport Park; LH = Little Hides; Excavations in red dots

Regarding Margary’s suggested route between Little Hides and St Helens, we propose that it has a Norman origin. William commissioned the stone castle at modern Hastings, which became the administrative and military centre of Hastings Rape, a significant regional hub. As such, from the 12th Century there would have been substantial traffic between modern Hastings and the northern half of Hastings Rape and further afield, to Canterbury and London, all accessed via Margary 13. It seems likely then that Stonestile Lane between St Helens and Beaney’s Lane served as the main Norman route to Margary 13 and the north.

Old Winchelsea served as the main port for modern Hastings until the end of the 13th century. Thereafter, port activities moved to modern Winchelsea and Rye. There must have been heavy post-Conquest traffic

between modern Hastings and modern Winchelsea, all of which would have used Margary 13 between modern Winchelsea and Guestling Thorn. The most likely route between Guestling Thorn and modern Hastings is that now used by the A259, running entirely along a ridgeway through Ore.

2. Roman trunk roads had military fortifications at both ends

Wikipedia says: “*Roman roads in Britannia were initially designed for military use, created by the Roman army*”. Roman military history expert Dr Simon Elliott explains⁵: “*All the roads of the Roman Empire were built by the Roman military ... there was nobody else who could do it*”, because they alone had engineers with the skills to survey routes and to build roads and bridges.

Mike Bishop writes authoritatively about the origin and purpose of Roman roads. He explains that some roads were built as the army advanced at frontiers. The others were built to interconnect important static places like military bases, population centres, ports, industrial complexes, and mines. Each of these static places would have been policed and protected by Roman legionaries based in nearby permanent castras. Permanent castras were of a similar design to the temporary castras that frontier legionaries might build every day that they advanced, only better fortified and more comfortable. Permanent castras were often located on militarily advantageous promontories near the asset they were protecting, but physically separate and self-contained. All castras were accessed by at least one Roman road.

Thus, Bishop is right to conclude that: “*The forts are linked by roads*”. The converse is also true: Roman trunk roads had a fortified military camp at both ends. Watling Street, for instance, had Rutupiae and Deva, the Fosse Way had Isca Dumnoniorum and Lindum, Ermine Street had Londinium and Eboracum. There is no reason the Rochester Roman road would have been an exception to this pattern.

⁵ <https://www.historyhit.com/roman-roads-a-story-of-romans-and-ways-to-the-past/>

3. Therefore, there was a Roman fortification at modern Winchelsea

Wikipedia says: “A trunk road in Britain would typically be 5–8 m (16–26 ft) in width, with a gauge of 7 m (23 ft) being the most common”. The metalled agger section of Margary 13 excavated at Icklesham is 810 cm between the ditches, confirming it as a trunk road. If Roman trunk roads had military fortifications at both ends (Statement 2 above) and Margary 13 was a trunk road that terminated at modern Winchelsea (Statement 1), it follows that there must have been a Roman military fortification at modern Winchelsea. This is consistent with the geography because Romans liked to build castras on promontories with a commanding view and modern Winchelsea was the only promontory in the Brede basin with a good sea view.

The termination of Margary 13 at modern Winchelsea is consistent with Wickham, an Anglo-Saxon manor immediately adjacent to it. When the Wickham name is of Anglo-Saxon origin, it is the location of a former Roman vicus. Roman vici are civilian settlements adjacent to Roman fortifications, typically beside the main gate and therefore adjacent to the fortification’s access road. Thus, Margary 13 passed through Wickham and terminated at modern Winchelsea.

We believe that the Roman garrison was stationed at modern Winchelsea primarily to police and protect the port that Ptolemy refers to as *Novus Portus*. We believe that its harbour was became the Pewis Marshes, directly adjacent to modern Winchelsea (P on Figure 3).⁶ *Novus Portus* was situated at the mouth of the Brede estuary because the Brede basin was one of the richest sources of iron ore in the Roman empire, and nearly all of it was shipped to the Classis Britannica complex at Bordeaux for processing into weapons and armour. Between 100 and 250 AD, when the Brede basin mines were active, *Novus Portus* was probably the busiest port in Britain.

⁶ https://www.academia.edu/111778609/Novus_Portus_and_H%C3%A6stingaport_At_Winchelsea

4. Therefore, Hæstingaceastre was at modern Winchelsea

Hæstingaceastre is listed in the Burghal Hidage as an Alfredian burh fortification. ‘ceastre’ is the Old English adaptation of Latin ‘castra’, a Roman fortification as we say above. ‘ceastre’ nearly always – see Ekwall below for exceptions - refers to an Anglo-Saxon settlement at a former Roman fortification. The Rochester Roman road terminated at modern Winchelsea (Statement 1), which had a Roman fortification (Inference 3). It was accessed by the only Roman trunk road in East Sussex (see Figure 2). So, the major (and only definite) Roman fortification on the Hastings Peninsula was at modern Winchelsea. By extension, Hæstingaceastre was at modern Winchelsea. This is consistent with Alfred’s defensive strategy because he liked to build burhs on promontories with a commanding view, especially where there was a pre-existing fortification, and modern Winchelsea matches all three requirements.

Ekwall suggests that ‘ceastre’ might sometimes refer to pre-Roman fortifications, reasoning that there are too many places in Northumbria with ‘ceastre’ type names for them all to have been Roman fortifications. He is right, but they are rare. The only example cited in Stan Beckensall’s ‘Place Names and Field Names of Northumberland’ is Chester Hill, an iron age hillfort. It seems unlikely that there are any exceptions when *-ceastre* is used as a suffix, especially in southern England where they are relatively rare. Thus, Hæstingaceastre was almost certainly built on the site of a former Roman fortification.

This is not to claim that modern Winchelsea was definitely the only Roman fortification on the Hastings Peninsula. A minor Roman port was located at Redgeland in Combe Haven, facilitating the export of Crowhurst Park’s iron products. Beauport Park was the most valuable asset in Roman Britain (bar slaves). Both places might have warranted a permanent outpost castra. However, they were neither located on promontories nor on the coast, making them unlikely candidates for a major Roman fortification or for an Alfredian burh, and they would have been on a much smaller scale than the primary Roman castra at modern Winchelsea.

5. The Norman ‘sea camp’ was at Hæstingaceastre

Three Norman camps are described in the contemporary accounts:

1. A bridgehead camp near the Norman landing site where they stayed for a few days
2. The main Norman camp where William and his barons spent nearly a month either side of the Battle of Hastings
3. A battle camp where the Normans assembled and dressed before the battle

Our interest here is in the second Norman camp, the one that Carmen refers to as their ‘sea camp’.

William of Jumièges, William of Poitiers and Orderic say that the second camp and its wooden kit-fortress were at ‘Hastingas’. The Chronicle of Battle Abbey says that William took his men to a “*port named Hastings*” where “*having secured an appropriate place ... he built a fortress of wood*”. Bayeux Tapestry panel 45 depicts the second Norman camp with the caption: “*ISTE JUSSIT UT FODERETUR CASTELLUM AT HESTENGA CEASTRA*”, meaning: “*He [William] ordered that a castle be dug at Hestenga Ceastra*”. The D recension of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that: “*soon after his [William’s] landing was effected, they built a fortress at Hæstingaport*”. John of Worcester says the second fortress was at ‘Heastingam’, then that after the battle “*William, however, returned to Heastingam*”. Carmen says that, after the battle, William “*returned to his castra marina*” (‘sea camp’). It goes on to say that he then spent fourteen days in his “*camp at Hastings Portus*”.

‘Heastinga’ is an alternative phonetic spelling of Old English ‘Hæstinga’. ‘Hastingas’ is a Latin phonetic transliteration of Old English ‘Hæstinga’ and of Norman Romanz ‘Hastinges’, so the root names are etymological cognates. ‘Hastinges Portus’ is the Norman Romanz translation of Hæstingaport. ‘Hestenga Ceastra’ is an alternative spelling of Hæstingaceastre. All these references are to the place where William built his second fortress and where he made his second camp, so the compound names are geographic cognates of the root names.

There are two more reasons to think that Hæstinga, Hæstingaceastre and Hæstingaport were linked. Firstly, John of Worcester refers to them all as Heastinga, as if they are cognates. Secondly, Hæstingaceastre was one of 36 ‘Grately Code’ places in England that were licensed by Æthelstan as mints. Coins from that mint are stamped with an abbreviation of ‘Hæstingaceastre’ or ‘Hæstingaport’ or ‘Hæstinga’ or ‘Winchelsea’, as if they are cognates.

This is compelling evidence that the second Norman camp, the ‘sea camp’, was at Hæstingaceastre.

6. Therefore, the Normans made their ‘sea camp’ at modern Winchelsea after landing in the Brede estuary

If the Norman sea camp was at Hæstingaceastre (Statement 5) and Hæstingaceastre was at modern Winchelsea (Statement 4), then the Norman ‘sea camp’ was at modern Winchelsea.

According to Wace, the Normans headed for a port and landed in a nearby estuary. The implication, although Wace does not say so explicitly, is that the port was at the mouth of the estuary in which they landed. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the Normans made their second camp at Hæstingaport. If the Norman ‘sea camp’ was at modern Winchelsea, the port was Old Winchelsea, a major port on a shingle island a mile or so south of modern Winchelsea, at the mouth of the Brede estuary. It implies that the Normans landed in the Brede estuary.

Wace and Carmen state that the Norman fleet landed in a sheltered estuary. Wace elaborates that they landed together on an estuary strand adjacent to a firm level plain. The only place in the region that matches this description and that was long enough to land more than half the Norman fleet is the north bank of the Brede estuary (see ‘The Landing’ section of our book).

7. Medieval armies moved on metalled roads where possible

Charles Barrett pointed out over a hundred years ago that: *“Nearly all the battles on English soil have been fought either across one or other of the old*

Roman roads, or in close proximity thereto.” Mike Bishop elaborates in his chapter about the post-Roman use of Roman roads: “*The Romans may have gone, but armies still needed roads. In 1993, N.J. Higham published a map illustrating the association of Anglo-Saxon battlefield sites with Roman roads. Although it went almost uncommented in his text, the significance of his observation is obvious: early medieval armies used Roman roads to move around.*” They are saying that medieval armies moved on Roman roads (meaning metalled Roman roads) unless they had no alternative.

Some disagree. Medieval settlements were interconnected by ‘country roads’, unmetalled earthen tracks. They formed a nationwide network. Some scholars have suggested that medieval armies might have used these byways instead of metalled Roman roads. We think this is implausible if they had the choice. One major factor is the army wagon train. Medieval country roads were primarily used by walkers, individual riders, and packhorses. Hooves and wheel pressure quickly turned earthen tracks into rutted, impassable sludge, entirely unsuitable for heavily loaded wheeled traffic except during the driest part of summer.

Two examples might help explain the difficulties. Poitiers says that the byways in the theatre of war were so soft that the Norman barons returned from reconnoitring it on foot. If the byways could not support a mounted horse, they could not support loaded wagons. Daniel Defoe described Wealden country roads as so poor that he saw six oxen struggling to pull a small carriage carrying an elderly lady to church. An army wagon train, much heavier and longer, would have been unmanageable on such byways.

Military logistics expert Robert Evans, Head of the Army Historic Branch, estimates that Harold’s army would have needed 100 ox-drawn wagons just for the tents of his barons and huscarls, with additional wagons required for armour, weapons, and provisions. Medieval armies also travelled with blacksmiths, carpenters, weaponsmiths, cartwrights, wheelers, cooks, and their tools. Harold’s wagon train therefore probably consisted of 150 or more heavily loaded wagons. Such a convoy could not have traversed

unmetalled byways from London to the Hastings Peninsula quickly enough to arrive in time for the Battle of Hastings.

Barrett identifies two additional reasons why medieval armies used Roman roads when possible. First, the role of commissariat had not been invented. Medieval armies foraged for provisions along their route: Roman roads typically passed near large, well-established farms, while byways usually traversed sparsely populated areas with small farms. Indeed, Barrett lists several examples of medieval armies that starved after deviating from Roman roads. Second, medieval barons expected comfortable accommodation while on campaign. Settlements with adequate facilities were commonplace along Roman roads, rare along byways.

Barrett overlooks a third critical reason: access to ale. Unprocessed water was unsafe to drink, as evidenced by half of William's army contracting dysentery during the siege of Dover (as reported by Poitiers). Ale was the primary beverage, even for children, and the quantities required by an army made transporting it impractical. Only settlements along Roman roads could supply ale in sufficient quantity.

Woodland presented additional challenges for medieval armies. Away from rivers and the coast, much of the country was blanketed with mature deciduous woodlands. Among these forests, the Andredsweald was the largest in southern England, some 120 miles east-west by 60 miles. It was situated between London and the Hastings Peninsula, and therefore had to be traversed by the English army. Nearly every historian writing about the Battle of Hastings assumes that the English army used forest tracks to cross the Andredsweald. Edward Foord was probably the first, depicting Harold's route to be roughly following that of the modern A21 (Figure 4).

Our blog examining the development of the orthodox Battle of Hastings narrative reproduces more than thirty engagement diagrams from Battle of Hastings analyses.⁷ Without explicitly saying so, they nearly all seem to agree with Foord that the English crossed the Andredsweald on the route of the A21, indicated by labelling the road through Battle 'To London' or

⁷ https://momentousbritain.co.uk/go/BOH_Evolution

'To Tonbridge'. It is, of course, anachronistic because the route of the A21 was only cleared for the construction of the Hastings to Flimwell Turnpike in the 1750s.



Figure 4: Edward Foord, Harold's route to Hastings

Harold's only choice was between the Rochester Roman road on the one hand and unmetalled byways, including unmetalled forest tracks through the Andredsweald, on the other. It is implausible that the English wagon train could have traversed the Andredsweald on forest tracks and still arrive in time for the battle. Not only would they have had all the byway problems listed above, but they would keep getting jammed. Horse collars and pivoting front axles had not yet been invented. Without the horse collar, heavy wagons were pulled by yoked oxen, and without pivoting front axles, wagons were unable to make sharp turns. Even though the average gap between tree trunks in mature deciduous woodland might have been around eight meters, wagons would frequently become stuck in ruts or jammed against trees. In such cases, the only solution would be to lift the wagon around the obstacle, perhaps having first partially unloaded it, an exhausting and slow process.

Provisions would compound the logistical difficulties because food and ale for the men and fodder for the oxen would have required an additional 20 wagons a day. The impracticality of feeding thousands of men and hundreds of oxen on a painful slog through the Andredsweald on forest tracks suggests that it did not happen.

The difficulty of navigating medieval byways, especially those in mature deciduous woodland, can be illustrated by the royal itineraries of Norman and Plantagenet kings. Even with relatively small trains of just a few dozen wagons, they moved almost exclusively on Roman roads and never through extensive woodland. Coastal routes were the only notable exceptions, and these were likely traversed by sea rather than by overland byways.

So, as Barrett, Higham, and Bishop say, medieval armies rarely used unpaved byways and only when Roman roads were unavailable. This was not an issue for the English army marching to the Hastings theatre of war because they could use Margary 13, and it seems certain to us that they did.

8. Therefore, the Battle of Hastings was not fought at the orthodox Battle Abbey location

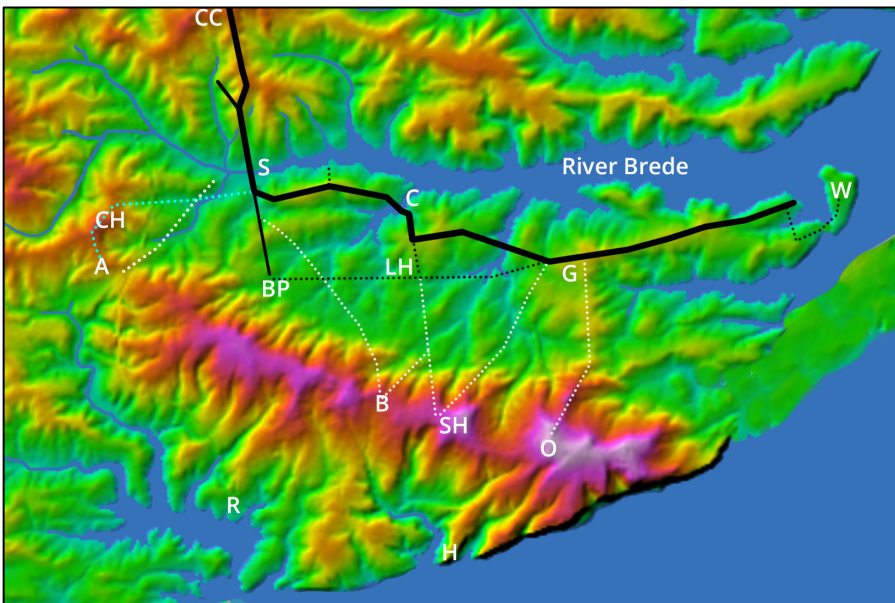


Figure 5: Possible byways onto the Hastings Ridge, shown as white and cyan dotted lines

If the English army arrived at the theatre of war on the Rochester Roman road (Statement 7) and it terminated at modern Winchelsea (Statement 1), there are no credible circumstances in which they could have ended up fighting the Battle of Hastings at the orthodox Battle Abbey battlefield location (A on Figure 5). To explain why, we must plug these statements into the orthodox engagement scenario, which is to say that the Normans were in their sea camp at modern Hastings (H), while Harold was either trying a surprise attack on the Norman camp or was trying to blockade the Normans on the Hastings Peninsula. The orthodox English camp is at Caldbec Hill (CH), although some think they camped at Battle (A).

1. The orthodox engagement scenario is inconsistent with a surprise attack

The only evidence for Harold's decision to lead the English army onto the Hastings Ridge comes from Poitiers and Jumièges, both of whom claim he was attempting a surprise attack. However, it seems implausible that Harold might believe he could catch William by surprise when Wace and Poitiers report that they had been exchanging messages during Harold's journey to the theatre of war. Moreover, it is inconceivable that he thought William's scouts would have missed his army streaming over Sedlescombe bridge and laboriously ascending the slope to the Hastings Ridge.

A surprise attack is also inconsistent with the orthodox battlefield location. If Harold intended to attack the orthodox Norman camp, he would not have headed west through Petley Wood after crossing the Brede because the woodland would impede his wagon train and the route heads 3km in the opposite direction from the Norman position. Any alternative route onto the Ridge would have brought Harold to the Hastings side of Battle. For a battle to have been fought at the orthodox battlefield, Harold would need to have led the English army away from the Norman camp, the exact opposite of what a surprise attack entails. It has been suggested that Harold intended a surprise attack then realised his folly and decided to fall back to defend the ridge at Battle. It seems implausible for someone as thoughtful and meticulous as Harold, and if

he was in that position, he would have fallen back to Margary 13 to defend the bridge at Sedlescombe.

2. The orthodox engagement scenario is inconsistent with a blockade

The improbability of an English surprise attack leads many modern scholars to believe that Harold's strategy was to blockade the Normans on the Hastings Peninsula, but this is inconsistent with the geography (see Figure 5): Neither of the orthodox English camps would block Norman egress from the Hastings Peninsula because they are not within two miles of Margary 13.

Indeed, implausibly if Harold was trying a blockade, the orthodox engagement scenario assumes that the English abandoned Sedlescombe bridge, the one strategic location where a blockade would have worked, to move to a barren, disadvantageous position on the Hastings Ridge. The Normans, unencumbered by a wagon train, would have marched down to Margary 13 from their orthodox camp at modern Hastings to blockade Sedlescombe bridge themselves, trapping the English on the Hastings Peninsula and cutting off their supplies and reinforcements. In effect, the orthodox engagement scenario means that the English voluntarily placed themselves in a self-imposed siege for no reason.

We are convinced that Harold did intend to blockade the Normans on the Hastings Peninsula by blockading Margary 13 at Sedlescombe bridge – as we explain the 'Harold's tactics' section of our book linked at footnote 1 - rather than by blockading the Hastings Ridge at Battle.

3. The orthodox engagement scenario is militarily implausible

The only credible way for Harold's wagon train to get onto the Hastings Peninsula was to cross the Brede at Sedlescombe. The bridge was probably only one cart wide, but the fluvial Brede was only a few metres wide. Perhaps Harold added a jury bridge to accelerate the crossing. Even so, it would still have taken several hours for the English army to cross the Brede, all the while disorganised and unarmoured on disadvantageous terrain with nowhere safe to retreat. William would need to have been implausibly naïve or inept to have missed the opportunity to attack

Harold while he was so vulnerable. Harold would need to have been implausibly ignorant to think he might. Even if William allowed the English to cross the Brede, Harold's problems were not over.

The northern slopes of the Hastings Ridge - from Petley Wood in the west to Coghurst Wood in the east - were covered in dense woodland. Moving ox-drawn fixed axle wagons through dense woodland was slow and difficult, as we explain in Statement 7. It would have been doubly difficult for Harold to get his wagon train onto the Hastings Ridge because of the steep slope. In principle, the steepness could be mitigated by an oblique climb, but on the north slope of the Hastings Ridge, this would mean crossing more woodland and more streams, so it would not help much.

The woodland was cut by a dozen or so streams draining runoff from the Hastings Ridge and there were Anglo-Saxon settlements at Baldslow on the Ridge and, probably, at Telham. There might have had partially cleared forest tracks from these settlements down to Margary 13. But all these routes would have been soft and rut prone, slow going for an army wagon train climbing a steep hill.

Whichever way Harold might have wanted to climb onto the Hastings Ridge would have taken hours, if not days, all the while leaving the English disorganised, unarmoured and on a downslope. Again, William would need to have been implausibly naïve or inept to have missed the opportunity to attack Harold while he was so vulnerable. Harold would need to have been implausibly ignorant to think he might.

4. The orthodox engagement scenario is inconsistent with William's tactics

The geography is inconsistent with the orthodox Norman attack. If the Normans were at modern Hastings and the English were at the orthodox Battle Abbey battlefield, William would not have attacked on the traditional route by marching northwest along the Ridge. The Normans were not encumbered by a wagon train, so they could negotiate woodland and steep slopes with relative ease. Their obvious and best plan of attack would have been to descend to the Rochester Roman road, blockade

Sedlescombe bridge to trap the enemy on the Hastings Peninsula, march through Petley Wood to get onto the Hastings Ridge north of Caldbec Hill, then attack modern Battle downhill from the northwest (route shown by cyan dots on Figure 5). It is militarily implausible that William would attack up the disadvantageous slope south of Battle Abbey as tradition dictates, when he could easily have attacked on level ground from the north and east.

The orthodox Battle Abbey battlefield is even less consistent with our proposed engagement scenario. If the Normans were camped at modern Winchelsea (Statement 5) and Harold was arriving on Margary 13 (Inference 6 and Statement 7), there is no credible reason that Harold or William would have climbed onto the Hastings Ridge, and no credible reason they would have gone within two miles of the orthodox Battle Abbey battlefield.

In our opinion, these inconsistencies make it implausible that the Battle of Hastings was fought at the orthodox Battle Abbey location, and we list another 25 non-Roman road reasons to think so in the ‘Traditional Battlefield’ section of our book.

9. Therefore, the Battle of Hastings was fought near the Rochester Roman road between Cripps Corner and Winchelsea

If medieval armies did not stray from Roman roads unless they had no alternative (Statement 7), the Battle of Hastings must have been fought near the Rochester Roman road. There are no hills of a suitable shape or size to have been defended by the English army between Cripps Corner and the River Rother. Therefore, the battlefield was near Margary 13 between Cripps Corner (CC on Figure 5) and the Norman camp at modern Winchelsea (see 5 above). The exact location can be narrowed down.

Several hills on the south side of the Brede near Margary 13 match some battlefield clues, including Cottage Lane above Pestalozzi, Doleham, Lidham, and Snailham. However, these locations are only viable battlefield

candidates if the English crossed the Brede, for which there is no evidence and no likelihood.

The traditional reasons to think that the English crossed the Brede were to try a surprise attack or to blockade the Normans on the Hastings Peninsula. We explain why this is wrong in Inference 8 above. Therefore, the English had no reason to cross the Brede and lots of reasons to refrain. Most notably, the narrow Sedlescombe bridge was dangerously ambush prone, as we explain in Inference 8. It would have taken several hours for the English to cross the Brede, constantly vulnerable to attack, trapped on unfavourable terrain, disorganised, unarmed, and unable to retreat to safety. It is almost inconceivable that Harold would have taken this risk. If he did, it is almost inconceivable that William would have missed the opportunity to attack. Even if William did allow the English to cross the Brede, he would have immediately blockaded or dropped Sedlescombe bridge to trap the English on the Hastings Peninsula.

However, according to the contemporary accounts none of this happened. Therefore, the English did not try to cross the Brede, and the battle was fought north of the Brede. There is only one hill of a suitable shape and size for the battlefield, that being Hurst Lane spur in north Sedlescombe. We provide thirty additional non-Roman-road clues that the battle was fought on Hurst Lane spur in 'The Battlefield' section of our book linked at footnote 1.

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