

Middlewich Timeline from Archaeological data

Prehistoric

Within the area of the modern settlement there are a number of prehistoric finds. These include a Neolithic stone axe found near St Michael's Way, a Bronze Age stone axe found in the vicinity of Park Road, Newtonia, prehistoric flints found near Bembridge Drive, and prehistoric flints discovered in the northern suburbs of the modern settlement.

In the surrounding Middlewich landscape, finds include Bronze Age axes at Oldhall Farm, Croxton Hall Farm and a surface scatter of flints and a Bronze Age axe located east of Middlewich and a crop-mark of a potential Bronze Age ring ditch. This concentration of high status finds indicates that there was activity in this area in the prehistoric period. By the late Iron Age, Middlewich lay in the territory of the Celtic tribe of the Cornovii and it is likely that by this time, route-ways converged in the Middlewich area, based on the fords across the Rivers Dane and Croco.

Evidence of possible pre-Roman activity, in the form of pits and ditches comes from the area east of King Street. There is a suggestion that salt was being extracted in Middlewich in the late Iron Age due to the discovery of VCP (Very Coarse Pottery - poorly fired ceramic vessels used to dry and transport salt).



Roman

Some of the best evidence for salt-working in the Roman period comes from Middlewich. The evidence suggests that there was Roman activity at Middlewich during the pre- and early Flavian periods and that this was also the site of a legionary garrison.

A Roman fort was confirmed in 1993 in Harbutt's field at the northern end of the settlement. The prime function of the fort was initially associated with tactical and strategic considerations, but control of the salt industry was no doubt a significant issue. The fort was founded around AD 70-80. It is suggested that the military presence in Middlewich started in the form of a temporary camp established during the campaigns against the Brigantes, which was later established as a permanent fort for an auxiliary unit. The discovery of a bronze diploma issued to an auxiliary soldier on his retirement in AD 105 indicates that there was still a military presence in the area at this time. The army probably withdrew from Middlewich by c AD 130, but military interest continued in Middlewich due to its important strategic location and the salt industry. In 1993 the entire plan of the fort was revealed through a combination of resistivity and magnetometry geophysical survey. Entrances were visible on all four sides and a structure within the northern gateway was also apparent, along with a number of internal features. The enclosure was surrounded by a single rampart and ditch. The fort is a Scheduled Ancient Monument.



During excavations in 2001 on land south of Harbutt's Field, adjacent to King Street and east of the River Croco the remains of a road running east-west were located along with archaeological evidence of settlement. The road is presumed to be that of a side road joining King Street to the east and possibly crossing the River Croco to the west.

Evidence of salt-working has been found over a large area of the settlement, in the form of kilns for evaporating salt, pits where the brine was stored, lead salt pans, briquetage and the waste from brine

storage pots. By the middle of the 2nd century salt-works were well established along King Street. Most of the evidence of actual brine working has come from the area to the west of King Street by the River Croco. Further south, during excavations in 2001, a plank-lined well and wicker lined pits were recorded, which may have been associated with salt production.

Recent archaeological work suggests that brine working was probably carried out in a wider area than previously thought, continuing to the east of King Street. A probable kiln or furnace was revealed in close proximity to a rectangular timber structure which produced a considerable quantity of briquetage at Kinderton Manor in 1997, while in 2001 a probable brine kiln was recorded, at Centurion Way.

The settlement, probably occupied until 400 AD, was apparently centred on King Street, and timber strip buildings, measuring 6.4 –7.3m wide and over 15m long, with their narrow ends fronting onto the street have been excavated on at least six sites. Behind these buildings were workshops, where small-scale industry such as iron, bronze and lead working was carried out, the remains of which include furnaces with built-in anvils, heaps of iron slag, nails, spades and brooches. Other industries carried out at Middlewich include shoemaking, weaving, window glass making and leather working.

The ***Domesday*** entry for Middlewich demonstrates that the salt-works were in operation in the 11th century, but whether they had continued in production from the Roman period is uncertain.

The small size of Middlewich township, and the fact that the Domesday entry concerns itself entirely with salt-working, makes no mention of agricultural production. This suggests that the township originated as a purely industrial, salt-working enclave. Newton township, immediately to the west of Middlewich, possessed a priest and therefore possibly a church. So was Middlewich originally part of the Newton estate, from which it was removed in the early medieval period?

The Domesday entry also indicates that Middlewich, like many Cheshire townships, had suffered devastation in the 'harrying of the north' by the Norman forces c 1069-70, and had made only a partial recovery by 1086.

Medieval and Post Medieval

The earliest known discovery of medieval archaeology dates back to 1854, when a brine pit was excavated c 13 feet below the ground surface, during the construction of the gas works. Oak logs and planks were recovered, the preservation of which suggested they were of medieval rather than Roman date. Approximately where Kinderton Street and Sea Bank meet, a potential medieval brine pit c 6m in diameter and 5m deep, with a lining of 16th or 17th century date was discovered in 1973-4. Two possible 12th to 14th century timber buildings, c 3m x 4.5m with small porches on their south sides, were revealed adjacent to Kinderton Street. In 1982, nine trenches were dug to determine the extent of Roman and medieval Middlewich, of which the Wych House Lane dig revealed a large clay lined pit, c 5m x 6m, dug into re-deposited medieval layers.

Evaluation and excavation on the west side of Lewin Street at 20/20A revealed 13th century deposits which produced a Scottish silver long-cross penny of c.1280. Later, medieval and post medieval pits, ditches and postholes were cut into these deposits containing pottery from the 14th to 19th centuries, with a significant assemblage dating to the 14th and 15th centuries.

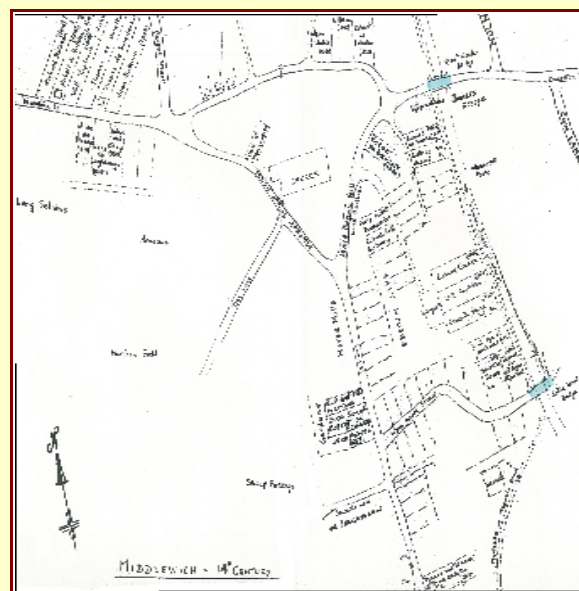
The Manor of Middlewich belonged to the Earl of Chester and therefore the crown, but it was leased out to farmers. The administration of the town was in the hands of officers, including a chamberlain, steward and bailiff.

There is no surviving borough charter for Middlewich. Nevertheless, it was regarded as a borough and there are frequent references to burgesses within the town from the 13th century onwards. Middlewich was granted a market charter in 1260 and there were two annual fairs held in the town. The hundred courts were held in the town until c 1217 when they were transferred to Northwich, and Middlewich had one of the largest prisons outside Chester.

The town was destroyed by fire in 1281, which indicates that the main building material was timber. Two bridges are mentioned early in the 14th century: *pons magnus* and *parvus pons*, in the 17th century, they are referred to as Great Bridge and Little Bridge. It is likely that the site of the Great Bridge is that of Kinderton Bridge, the present town bridge. The location of Little Bridge is possibly at Wych House Lane.

The town's economy was doubtless dominated by the salt industry, with its role as a market centre providing further revenue. A leadsmithy was present in the town before 1316, which presumably produced lead pans for use in the salt industry. In the 14th century, shops were built in the town 'for the use of merchants coming in from outside with their goods' The lord's hall was built c 1334 and this possibly stood on the site of the later Market Hall. In the mid-14th century stalls in the lord's hall were transferred to butchers and other merchants. In the 15th century there is reference to a steward of the town (mayor), as well as reference to a doctor. Other positions in the town include: kennel lookers who inspected the streets, watercourses and wells, fire lookers, leave lookers, and ale barbers who checked weights and measures. There were also various officials who controlled the salt industry, for example, Rulers of the Walling and Steward of the Wych.

A mill is recorded at Kinderton in 1330, and the mill way leading to Kinderton was also mentioned in the early 14th century. It is likely that this was the located on the site of the later corn mill on Mill Lane, which has a date stone of 1609 and is listed Grade II. The mill pool and dam of this later mill lay between the Mill and King Street; it has subsequently been filled in and built over.



Salt-working

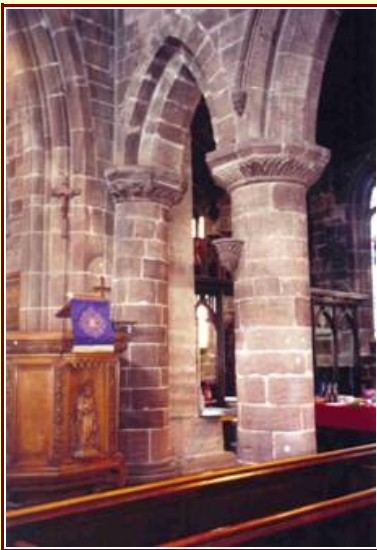
A number of religious houses held land and property in Middlewich. Dieulacres, (Staffordshire), Basingwerk (Flintshire) and Vale Royal Abbeys all had vested interests in land or salt houses during the 13th to 15th centuries. The Priory of St John of Jerusalem held a salt house in the late 15th century and Brasenose College, Oxford held property in the town in the 16th century.

Six pits are named in the medieval period, although some may be different names for the same pit. William Smith writing in the late 16th century referred to 'two brine pits on each side the river'.



A 17th century account records that brine was distributed from the brine pits to salt houses (*wych houses*) in overhead wooden troughs. This was then boiled in lead salt pans. As the water evaporated salt crystals were formed, and these were then raked off and dried in wicker baskets called 'barrows'. The earliest recorded salt houses date back to the 13th century, when reference is made to Elworth House, *Salina de Kinderton* and *Le longe Wichehouse*. In the reign of Henry III (mid-13th century) there were 75 salt pans in Middlewich. The number of salt pans in the town rose and in 1485, 82 six-lead houses and one eight-lead house were

documented. In the 16th century references were made to wich-houses along Kinderton Street and by 1605 there were an estimated 646 salt pans in operation in Middlewich.



The parish church of St Michael and All Angels on the Bull Ring has a central position within Middlewich. The present church dates mainly from the 14th century but 12th century architectural fragments survive and there was extensive restoration in the mid-19th century.

There may also have been a chapel at the southern end of Newton. St Anne's field is named in the tithe award of 1848 and a deed of 1666 refers to St Anne's chapel. Richards (1973) suggests this may be a precursor of the parish church and therefore of medieval date.

William Smith, writing at the end of the 16th century, recorded that Middlewich had a market on a Saturday and two annual fairs. He also noted a 'broad place in the midst of the town, in manner of a market place, called the 'King's Mexon'. A plaque located at the site of the Mexon, which lies just to the west of St Michael's churchyard records that this was where bull and bear baiting was staged until 1834.

To the west of the church, on either side of Wheelock Street, are long, narrow tenements, which may have been deliberately laid out. To the west of Lewin Street, however, are irregular properties that have not been formally laid out and are perhaps the lower status tenements of salt-workers and other minor craftsmen. It is unclear how much of Middlewich was planned in the 12th and 13th centuries. The market charter may have resulted in a deliberately laid out market place and the formal laying out of burgage plots in the 13th century, pointing to a period of controlled development.

Civil War

Middlewich was the scene of two battles in the Civil War. The first took place in March 1643, when the Royalists under Sir Thomas Aston were defeated by the Parliamentarians under Sir William Brereton. The second took place in December 1643 and January 1644 when the tables were turned and the Parliamentarians were defeated by the Royalists. Sir Thomas Aston's account of his defeat describes the defences that were hastily thrown up, but no evidence of these now survives.

The west side of the town, around Wheelock Street, Queen Street, the parish church of St Michael's and the route of the Trent and Mersey Canal are designated Conservation Areas. There are around 25 listed buildings in the Middlewich area. All are Grade II, apart from the parish church and a late 17th century house on St Anns road, which are Grade II*. The church of St Michael's is the only building to contain work pre-dating the 17th century, while many of the listed structures are connected with the canal.

Cheshire Historic Towns Survey © Cheshire County Council and English Heritage 2003

Middlewich Archaeology Strategy and Historic Town Survey is available via Cheshire East website, follow the link – Culture, leisure and tourism then Heritage and Museums to get onto the Archaeology sites.

www.middlewich-heritage.org.uk

