

The site of the Roman settlement at Middlewich has been under continuous excavation since 1964, in an effort to determine the chronology and plan of the town, and to examine the industrial, social, and economic aspects of Roman inland salt production, traces of which were first suspected by Watkin¹, and actual remains found by Atkinson² and Harding³.

The identification of the site as SALINIS, of the Ravenna Cosmography is now almost certain; the meaning of the name being "salt works"⁴. The large quantity of debris from Roman salt kilns, found during the excavations of the last eight years seem to substantiate this conclusion.

The area in which Roman remains are found is bordered on the north by the River Dane, and on the west by the Croco, and the field at the confluence of these rivers has long been called the Harboro, Harbours, or Harbutt's Field. Antiquaries of the last century thought this to be the site of a Roman auxiliary fort, but excavations by Atkinson in 1921 failed to find any evidence of military occupation.

Roman pottery and other small objects have been found along King Street and to the south of Kinderton Street, up to three quarters of a mile to the south of the River Dane. The date range of this pottery and the extent of its distribution make it obvious that a settlement of considerable size existed for almost the entire period of the Roman occupation of Britain. In 1964, the writer decided to carry out a series of excavations on widely separated sites, to determine the extent of Roman buildings, none having been previously located with any certainty.

The first site to be examined (Site B: SJ76 704668) on the east side of King Street adjacent to No. 34, revealed traces of sleeper beams set in slots forming the foundations of wattle and daub walls. The floors were of pebbles and the roof was tiled; but the remains indicated that the building had been systematically demolished. The upper levels were disturbed by later agriculture and gardening. The surviving structure dated to the early second century, and traces of late first century buildings of a similar construction were found beneath it. Later occupation was probable on this spot due to the late second century pottery found in the disturbed levels. The lack of space available for excavation made further identification impossible⁵.

- REFERENCE:
1. W.T. Watkin, Roman Cheshire, 1886.
 2. Prof. D. Atkinson, Unpublished notes.
 3. F.H. Thompson, Roman Cheshire, 1964.
 4. J.D. Bestwick, The Roman Town at Middlewich, (forthcoming).
 5. Site A is designated to the Harding excavation of 1960, the only work accurately located prior to 1964.

Late in 1964, work began on an eighty feet square of land adjacent to 57, King Street, (Site C: grid reference 70356665) the site had remained undisturbed and Roman timber buildings ranging from the late first century to the early-mid fourth century were found in plan form. The development of building methods and the increasing size of Romano-British domestic and industrial structures was apparent. The buildings were all the western half of a group adjacent to a street to the east; hence, the front half of all phases had been destroyed by the construction of the modern road and house building.

Enough survived, however, to show that the structures had plastered walls of wattle and daub, and rooves of heavy Roman tiles, the weight being carried on internal posts; and internal rooms being partitioned off with wattle and daub walls.

A vast quantity of pottery came from all phases of occupation, especially from the drainage ditches that ran behind and alongside the Flavian and Hadrianic buildings, acting as eaves drip ditches to drain away rain water. Internal cooking hearths and debris from local industries indicated that the inhabitants produced iron, bronze and lead objects, as well as glass, leather, and cloth; for sale presumably at open shop fronts located, as on other Romano-British settlements, on the adjacent street.

The most important group of structures and industrial remains on site C belonged to the mid-second century, where a small salt works had operated an open brine kiln, and stored the brine in large dolia or spherical amphorae set into the floor of the yards. One of these large vessels had the word AMVRCA scratched on to its side, probably referring to its contents prior to the salt winning process⁶. Amurca was a brine lees produced during the manufacture of olive oil, whilst muria was a brine solution. The ligature of the "AM" may indicate a semi-literate Briton trying to write "brine" and confusing two similar Latin words.⁷

Remains from the kiln included fire bars and clay plates, many fragments bearing a salt glaze due to high temperatures and spills of brine.

The first phase of occupation on this site was circa A.D. 85, and from this period come two large pits which contained quantities of leather offcuts from the manufacture of sandals, and also three worn sandal soles, in perfect condition due to the damp sand and layers of heather, hazel, and hawthorn branches also thrown into the lower levels. Pottery, coins, and broaches were also found.

REFERENCE: 6. Britannia, Vol. 1, 1970, page 313.
7. Pliny, Natural History, XXXI.

The buildings of the second and third centuries followed almost the same plan, but in the fourth century the width doubled and corridors were added on the north side. This period seems to have been quite prosperous, but the structures seem to have fallen into decay by the mid-late fourth century, and show no sign of violent destruction.

A gold ring was found in the late third century structure, probably lost when it rolled through a crack in a boarded floor.

Site C was probably unique as an example of a complete picture of the Roman occupation of Middlewich, undisturbed by later building or deep ploughing⁸.

A short excavation on Site D, (Grid reference 70366705) revealed more timber beams and pottery of the second century, but limited space made further work impossible.

Sites E, Brooks Lane; and F, on the south side of Kinderton Street; were both blank, the Roman levels having been destroyed by canal building and house building.

A small scale investigation adjacent to 22 King Street revealed further second century timber buildings (70356670), again following the east to west alignment, as found on the other sites described above. In a beam slot on this site were found the remains of a Roman folding camp stool, made from bronze, iron, and wood, and decorated by turned bronze spacers⁹.

In March, 1969, building operations in Dane Street, Site G (70526655) gave an opportunity to examine briefly a site 260 feet by 60 feet. Mechanical excavators were in action, but it was possible to detect the beam slots of several large Roman timber buildings over 110 feet in length and 40 feet wide. As on Site C, the front section of the structure was disturbed and an overall plan was not obtained. A cobbled street (?) six feet wide with a paralalled ditch running north to south was located, and on the west side of this, smaller timber structures were noted underlying the modern road surface of New King Street. The group of structures had all been demolished by the early third century, and the timber posts and beams had been removed, pottery and rubbish being used to fill the holes. A group of pot-sherds, all "wasters" resulting from over firing in the kiln, had been thrown into a post hole, thus providing the only evidence of local pottery production in the second century. The ware is a hard gritty fabric in all forms, from flagons, bowls, and beakers, to large cooking pots.

REFERENCE: 8. Journal of Roman Studies, Vols. LVII, LVIII, and LIX.

9. J. Liversidge: Furniture in Roman Britian, pp. 39 - 41.

In August, 1969, excavation began on a Cheshire County Council development site on the north side of Kinderton Street (Site I: 70576634). The work was divided into three phases as garden sites became available, and is still proceeding in its final stage. Phase 1 produced no evidence of Roman occupation due to recent disturbance, but phase 2 revealed the west end of timber buildings of the second century facing to the east.

Behind these buildings lay a bread oven three feet in diameter, and two double circular kilns, at first thought to be pottery kilns. Further examination of the kiln furniture, fire bars, etc. showed considerable traces of salt glazing in the form of spills and splashes, and it thus seems probable that these kilns represent a more primitive form of a salt evaporation kiln¹⁰. Pairs of this type have been reported by Atkinson in 1922 in this part of the site. Within the adjacent building were found a large pair of iron shears used in the process of fulling, and fairly common in Roman Britain.

Phase 3 has revealed the centre portions of these same buildings and although disturbance of the upper layers has destroyed much of the later Roman buildings, the Trajanic - Antonine (early to mid-late second century) floors and beam slots remained in good condition. The Antonine floors were of heavy pebbles and represent some of the most impressive remains yet found in the Roman town.

From this brief description of the nature of the evidence collected in the last eight years, it will be apparent that the Roman occupation has left remarkably little in the way of permanent structural remains. This is to be expected however, when we consider that the area in Roman times was heavily wooded, stone not being readily available, thus the buildings tend to be almost entirely timber, which leaves only slight traces, and can easily be disturbed by later activity.

The intensive study of this town as a social and economic unit in the military and agricultural pattern of this part of the Roman province, is only just beginning.

So far, it is possible to say that occupation began around 90 A.D. possibly as a vicus of an auxiliary fort, which was soon abandoned. The presence of brine springs had already attracted the Iron Age population to take advantage of the settled state of Roman military supervision, by living and working in a Romanised settlement. Even in its earliest phases the town consisted of buildings of a rectangular plan, all lying on an east to west axis, quite unlike the circular and scattered arrangement of pre-Roman dwelling sites.

REFERENCE: 10. J.D. Bestwick, op. cit.

The north-south road, from Littlechester (DERVENTIO) to Warrington, where it crossed the Mersey, and on into Lancashire, was probably of Flavian-Trajanic origin¹¹, and formed the basis for ribbon development for local traders and artisans. Romanised occupation may have occurred at Middlewich before this date, as the presence of several fragments of the Samian form Dr. 29 suggest, together with mid-first century coins, but no structural evidence has, as yet, been found.

The town flourished in the second century, and by this time more than one north-south street appears to have been in existence, the plan following the usual system of parallel streets, signified at Middlewich by the alignment and position of the six groups of buildings so far located. As many as five are at present suspected.

The prime industry was salt, but iron, lead, and glass objects were also manufactured, probably for sale to a sub-Roman rural farming community on a weekly or monthly market basis. The use of the word "industry" must not conjure up the large scale production units of the present day. The main industry of the ancient world was agriculture, and anything else was on a much more localised basis, such as the Middlewich salt production, carried out by family groups on their own premises.

A decline occurred during the third century, which may reflect the crises in the Western Empire, but by the early fourth century Middlewich was flourishing once more. What caused the final abandonment of the town is not certain, but as yet no trace of a violent end has been found. Perhaps the answer lies in the economic breakdown in the Province, which made the trade of the settlement decline, thus depriving the inhabitants of their livelihood and forcing them to return to agriculture in the surrounding countryside.

REFERENCE: 11. Prof. G.D.B. Jones, Roman Lancashire, Royal Archaeological Institute, 1970.

EXCAVATIONS AT MIDDLEWICH:

PART TWO - SITES I AND J, 1972 - 73

SITE I.

The rescue excavation of site I, on the north side of Kinderton Street, was completed in July, 1972. The work was made more difficult than usual by the proximity of old buildings, and by considerable disturbances, both industrial and "archaeological" carried out since 1770. The early industrial disturbances seem to have been part of a large navy camp used by labourers during construction of the Trent and Mersey Canal in the late 1770's. The evidence for this occupation was mainly latrine and waste pits, the latter containing quantities of bottles and pottery, oyster shells, and other food traces. Houses built on the north side of Kinderton Street later used the area as gardens, and some further disturbance took place. Near the centre of the row of houses stood Kinderton House, the home of the late Mr. C.F. Lawrence, who, for many years searched the area for Roman remains, pottery, etc, with, it seems, some success. His garden was totally cleared of all Roman evidence, but no record of his findings apart from a brief description of the pottery, remains.

As already described the site was divided into three phases, dependent on the availability of the property as the occupants moved out prior to demolition. Phase 1, the west garden, was completely devoid of Roman evidence due to Mr. Lawrence's investigation. Phase 2, the central garden, revealed the west ends of a complex of timber structures which probably extended eastwards to the main Roman street, some hundred feet away. At the western end of this complex, lay two pairs of small clay hearths or ovens, filled with briquetage normally used in the Roman salt process. These fire bars, bricks, and clay plates showed traces of glazing which have since proved to be a salt glaze, which must have vitrified when spills and splashes occurred during the boiling and stoving of brine. These circular kilns are unlike the normal trough kilns which seem to have been the stoving kilns, and it is possible that they are a more primitive type of kiln used in Gaul, and described by Pliny in his Natural History.¹

Phase three of this excavation revealed a large portion of the structures to the east. The buildings dated to the second century A.D. and were of three phases, each with substantial stone packed floors,

REFERENCE: 1. Pliny, Natural History, XXXI, xxxix, 82.

and timber sleeper beams to carry a timber and daub structure above. The structures appeared to have been demolished, and the empty beam trenches had been filled with brine briquetage. An old feature of this complex was that all phases sloped to the south-west and they appeared to follow the natural contour of the hill, rather than as was earlier suspected, to have suffered from subsidence. The last period of this complex was found to date to the early third century.

Due to the industrial importance of site I, a further narrow area was stripped, following the line of a large hedge between the gardens, giving, in effect, a section across the entire complex. This strip had not been disturbed by recent gardening, and it was thus possible to obtain a complete section of all three phases of the structures. The width was twenty three feet, and the south wall, of which only nine feet was discovered, ran parallel to an extensive ditch of an earlier period. The complex of timber structures therefore, compared favourably with those found previously on site C. Beneath these structures of the second and third centuries, evidence of early second century occupation took the form of a scatter of pottery associated with a working floor, and the ditch which ran from east to west. The southern edge of the ditch had been revetted with horizontal and vertical timbers set in pieces of turf. Some of the timbers were in good condition and the revetment seems to have been designed to prevent the ditch from breaking away on the southern side. When excavated, the ditch filled with water which was found to flow from east to west. It is possible that the ditch was an open leet designed to carry water away as waste towards the River Croco. The bottom of the ditch was lined with a deposit of vegetation and timber, which may have been placed there as a lining. No clay was present. Pottery from the ditch suggested a date in the late first or early second century for these features. To the north of the ditch was found a circular feature, twelve feet in diameter, with a shallow gully surrounding it. The size makes this too small for a hut, and the date suggests that it may have been a store area as part of some industrial process. The base of the circle was covered with a thin clay layer, and contained mixed stones.

Although no structures later than the early third century were found on site I, pottery from the upper layers showed a scatter through the third century, and into the fourth. The latter buildings and occupation had thus been disturbed and removed by later activities. An important aspect of the excavation has been the distribution of salt briquetage from the first to the third centuries, showing that the industry extended over a considerable period. Although this has previously been suspected by the Writer, it has not been proved until now.

SITE J.

Work commenced on site J in September, 1972, and unlike Site I it is a research excavation on a site which is not threatened by development. This is one of the few chances to plan and lay out an excavation in an effort to try to answer specific problems near to the apparent centre of the Roman town. By extending a series of six meter boxes from the eastern limit of the site westwards towards the river, it is hoped to locate houses, shops and workshops, and also the brine kilns behind them.

Although the excavation has not proceeded very far at this point in time, evidence of late occupation is already appearing in the form of late third and early fourth century pottery, and traces of a possibly aisled timber post structure. Iron slag from the smelting process is now suspected, and it is hoped that the industrial nature of the site will develop in an undisturbed state. Members who have so far taken part in this work will know only too well that the pace has been very slow indeed, and some may be suprised. The slow rate of progress is intentional in an effort to locate the very latest occupation evidence which appears to be within half a metre of the surface, and which is extremely difficult to locate unless viewed over a wide area.

I would like to thank all the members of the Society who attend the weekend excavation sessions so regularly and thus make planned research of this kind possible.