

EXCAVATIONS AT THE ROMAN TOWN OF MIDDLEWICH (SALINAE),  
1964 - 1971.

( A brief interim report )

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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 Watkin<sup>1</sup>, and actual remains found by Atkinson<sup>2</sup> and Harding<sup>3</sup>.

The identification of the site as SALINIS, of the Ravenna Cosmography is now almost certain; the meaning of the name being "salt works"<sup>4</sup>. 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 704658) 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 impossible.

- NOTES: 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 caves 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 onto its side, probably referring to its contents prior to the salt winning process<sup>6</sup>. 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.<sup>7</sup>

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 brooches were also found.

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.

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

Site C was probably unique as an example of a complete picture of the Roman occupation of Middlewich, undisturbed by later building or deep ploughing<sup>8</sup>.

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 spacers<sup>9</sup>.

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 parallel 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-shards, all "westers" 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.

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 kiln<sup>10</sup>. Pairs of kilns 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.

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- NOTES: 8. Journal of Roman Studies, Vols. LVII, LVIII, and LIX.  
9. J. Liversidge: Furniture in Roman Britain, pp. 39 - 41.  
10. J.D. Bestwick, op. cit.

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.

The north-south road, from Littlechester (DERVENTIO) to Warrington, where it crossed the Mersey, and on into Lancashire, was probably of Flavian-Trajanic origin<sup>11</sup>, 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.

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