

EXCAVATIONS AT MIDDLEWICH: SITES I AND J , 1972 - 73.

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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 described in Newsletter No. 1, 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 briquettage 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 represent the boiling kilns; but it is also possible that they are a more primitive type of kiln used in Gaul, and described by Pliny in his Natural History.<sup>1</sup>

Phase three of this excavation revealed a large portion of the

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

structures to the east. The buildings dated to the second century A.D. and were of three phases, each with substantial stone packed floors, 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 metre boxes from the eastern limit of the site westwards towards the river, it is hoped to locate houses, shops, and workshopd, 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 week end excavation sessions so regularly and thus make planned research of this kind possible.