

MIDDLEWICH BEFORE THE ROMANS

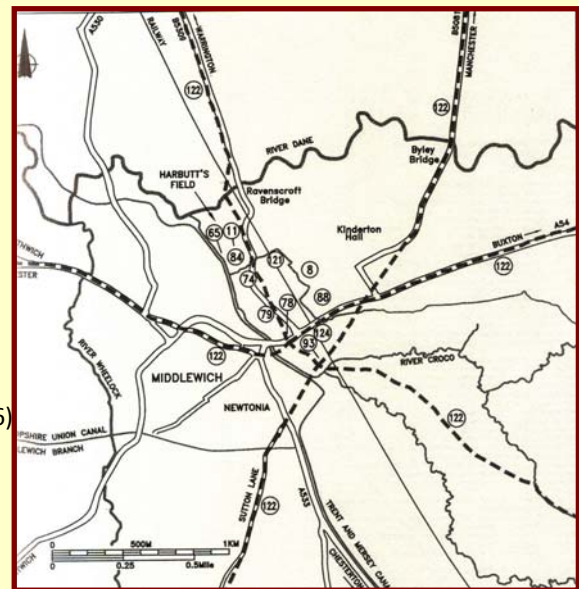
During the last few Centuries BC, the Middlewich area was within the northern territories of the *Cornovii*. The *Cornovii* were a Celtic tribe and their territories were extensive: they included Cheshire and Shropshire, the easternmost fringes of Flintshire and Denbighshire and parts of Staffordshire and Worcestershire. They were surrounded by the territories of other similar tribal peoples: to the North was the great tribal federation of the *Brigantes*, the *Deceangli* in North Wales, the *Ordovices* in Gwynedd, the *Corieltauvi* in Warwickshire and Leicestershire and the *Dobunni* to the South. We think of them as a single tribe but it is probable that they were under the control of a paramount Chieftain, who may have resided in or near the great hill-fort of the Wrekin, near Shrewsbury. The minor Clans would have been dominated by a number of minor Chieftains in a loosely-knit federation.

There is evidence for Late Iron Age, pre-Roman, occupation at Middlewich. This consists of traces of round-houses in the King Street area, occasional finds of such things as sword scabbard-fittings, earthenware salt-containers and coins. Taken together with the paleo-environmental data, which hint strongly at forest-clearance and agriculture, it is possible to use this evidence to create a picture of Middlewich in the last hundred years or so before the Romans arrived. We may surmise that two things gave the locality importance; the salt brine-springs and the crossing-points on the Dane and Croco rivers. The brine was exploited in the general area of King Street, and some of this important commodity was traded far a-field. While there must have been extensive tracts of virgin forest in the general area, there was also a great deal of cleared land in which there were small fields and scattered enclosed farmsteads. In a generally less well-drained landscape, with impenetrable boggy thickets along most river-banks; natural crossing-points, such as those near the sites of the bridge in the town-centre and where King Street crosses the Dane, would have been much-used and important. Long-distance track-ways, mostly consisting of linked up shorter stretches between settlements, had been in use for many Centuries already, and we can assume that some of these converged on the Middlewich crossing-points.

List of Archaeological Discoveries

(The numbers refer to numbers on the map, showing where each discovery was made)

- 8 A cast bronze terret ring. Late Iron Age
- 11 A cast bronze scabbard-chape. Late Iron Age.
- 65 Bronze terret-ring (2000)
- 74 Late Iron Age pottery, circular timber building (1969-72)
- 78 Iron Age pottery, circular timber building (1969-72)
- 79 Iron Age pottery (1969-72)
- 84 Pre-Roman Iron Age Pottery, circular timber building (1998-9) Watching brief
- 88 Pre Roman field system (1999) Watching brief on land at Kinderton Hall
- 93 Mr Vawdrey collected finds in and around his property at Kinderton Old Hall (1820-66)
- 121 Possibly the location of early brine springs exploited in Iron Age and Roman periods.
- 122 Probable prehistoric track-ways
- 124 Aerial photography indicating possible Iron Age buildings/features



Middlewich in the first century AD, the site is framed by the River Croco and the River Dane.

EARLY ROMAN MIDDLEWICH AD48 – c.AD100

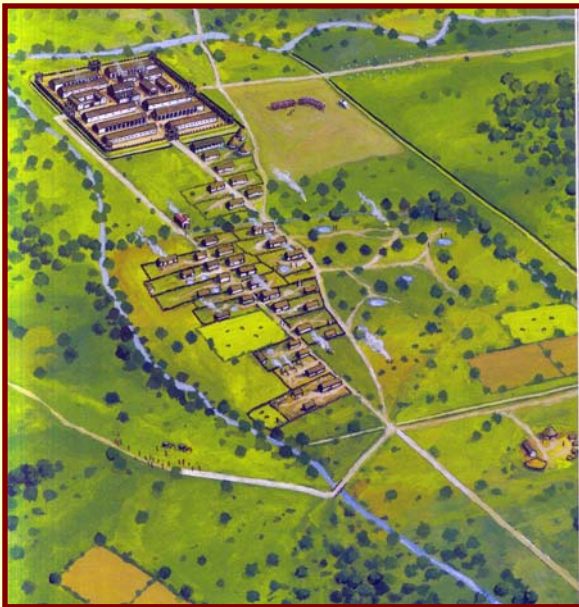
After the successful landings in Southern Britain in AD 43, the Emperor Claudius had had great hopes of a speedy and successful conclusion to the advance into the Midlands. But the war-leader, Caratacus, fled to the *Silures* and *Ordovices* in Wales and, in so doing, led these tribes into furious guerrilla action against Rome. This resulted in several years of bitter and inconclusive fighting but, eventually, Caratacus was defeated and handed over to Rome. The associated campaigning from 48 to 58 drew the Romans into the territory of the *Cornovii* and ultimately, via the Middlewich area, to the River Mersey and the *Brigantes* beyond.

Middlewich was situated on one of the major Roman routes to the North, and we may imagine a series of temporary marching-camps in the area. The *Cornovii* were considered friendly to Rome, and so the scattered tribal farmsteads and salt-brine extraction continued. Soon, however, the Roman Army became well aware of the importance of the salt-industry, and also of the crossing points and track-ways in the area.

Continuing unrest among the *Brigantes* forced Rome to keep military units in the area and to maintain firm control of the main route across the Mersey. This fact alone demanded the presence of auxiliary regiments at important locations on the road to the North, and so the temporary fort at Harbutt's Field was upgraded to a permanent establishment. And then, in 78, Rome set her mind on the complete subjugation of Northern Britain and Scotland. By this date, a great new legionary fortress-depot had been built at Chester. The Middlewich area, now at the junction of several of the newly-upgraded roads, in possession of important supplies of salt, now became important to the Roman Army. This remained the case throughout the Roman advance and occupation of the North until the late 80s.

On Rome's controlled and gradual withdrawal from Scotland in the 90s, it became necessary to relocate some of the auxiliary regiments. One such, the celebrated ALA CLASSIANA, may well have been established at Harbutt's Field in this period. We know that, at this date, the Army had laid out and developed a sizeable settlement, whose occupants were a mixture of retired soldiers, their families and others involved in producing salt. Here and there, among them, some *Cornovian* Britons continued to reside in their round-houses. The old track-ways had all been upgraded into those famed Roman roads; the crossing-point on the Croco being the place where no less than six of them converged.

MIDDLEWICH IN THE ROMAN HEYDAY. AD100 –c.250



It would appear that restoration of the fort took place and the re-cutting of its defensive ditches happened on at least two or three occasions, before the fort at Harbutt's Field was dismantled; its site thereafter being maintained as a cleared area. This suggests that the auxiliary regiment that had been in residence had moved elsewhere, but the maintenance of the cleared site thereafter attests to continued military control, perhaps for tented encampments. We can relate this development to a well-known historical context: the removal of a number of units of the Army from Britain in preparation for the Jewish War of 132-134. This does not mean that the Roman Army had abandoned Middlewich, but it seems to indicate that the place was not afterwards the permanent home of an auxiliary regiment. Instead, military control of salt-supply would have been maintained by officers assigned to the task from Legionary HQ at Chester.

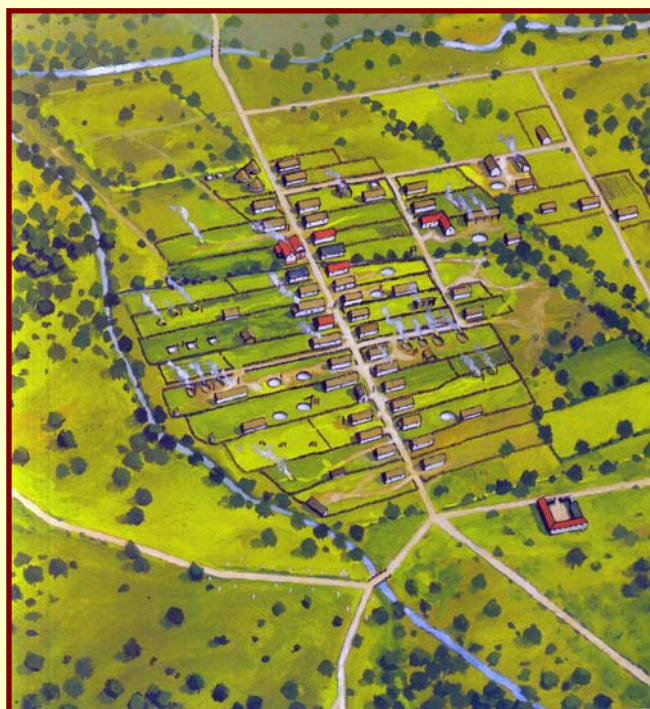
This is the time of the celebrated Emperor Hadrian, famed for bolstering and encouraging the development of what he considered to be Civilisation. All over Britain, cities and other settlements were adorned with new public buildings and refinements, and it is thus not surprising to find that the former military settlement at Middlewich was completely rebuilt on a new alignment; that of King Street. This new small town was essentially a ribbon development, and consisted of a number of long buildings set at right-angles to the main road, with long

property-strips behind. The occupants of most of these buildings are known to have been heavily engaged in salt-production.

For the next 100 years or so, this settlement flourished and grew lengthwise. In the early decades of the third century, Britain as a whole was reinvigorated by the policies of the Severan Emperors. Because these policies were stimulated initially by reforms to the Roman Army, we may surmise that the nature and practice of Legionary involvement at Middlewich also changed. No doubt the Army was still involved in some way but with great differences implied by one of the greatest legal reforms of all: in the early third century **ALL** free-born within the entire Roman Empire had become Roman Citizens. In the process, earlier social distinctions must have begun to break down and fade away. All the salt-proprietors and such-like at Middlewich were now Romans.

LATE ROMAN MIDDLEWICH c.AD250 – c.410

By the middle of the third century things elsewhere had begun to go seriously wrong for Rome. Rampant inflation had hit everyone and brought great changes in the coinage, and a material fading of the earlier public services in its wake. The western provinces were now under ever-increasing threat from Germanic tribal illegal immigration across the Rhine and Danube frontiers. Most of the eastern provinces had fallen to the regal dynasty of Palmyra, at the same time threatened by an emerging Persian Dynasty. Roman Soldier-Emperors rose and fell in rapid succession and much of the western empire (including Britain) withdrew from direct Roman government-control. Hardly surprisingly, this period has become known to historians as the 'Age of Crises'. Archaeological evidence at Middlewich is insufficient to enable us to identify any details of developments at Middlewich...; except in one general respect, that of the settlement. One thing is clear: what emerged from this was much reduced in activity and size. No less important, however, but a generally reduced context over all.



Rome emerged from the approaching chaos with a newly reformed Army, a new system of devolved government, a new social order, and a strong and reforming Emperor, Diocletian. Gone were the days of a strong economy based on expanding markets worldwide; Rome had become a totalitarian dictatorship. On top of all this, came another great Emperor, Constantine, through whose reforms in 313 the Roman World would one day become officially Christian.

What of Middlewich in this period? Well, the focus of the ribbon development seems to be on a much-reduced scale, in the southern area of King Street. Furthermore, the non-Romanised, British element of this settlement seems to have been present, too, with more of those ubiquitous round-houses. But the officially controlled and well-organised salt-industry continued when, for reasons not altogether clear, the proprietors had begun to use leaden salt-pans, on which their names were stamped. One such was LUTAMUS, whose evidently Celtic name suggests a British background. But...there is one most important discovery to relate: the emerging role of the Christian Church in the *Cornovian* salt-industry. It is now known that the Church was directly involved in running some of the Cheshire salt-workings. The evidence is that the industry was partly supervised by Christian Priests on behalf of a Bishop. The legal basis of official Roman Christianity, promulgated in the late 4th century, implies that the Church had acquired this administrative role in the last decades of Roman Britain.

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS c. AD410 – c.700

During the reign of the luckless Roman Emperor Honorius (395-423) the link between Britain and direct imperial government from the Continent began to fray. And when, in 410, the surviving British authorities sought help from their Emperor, they were told –in the famous *rescript*- that they would have to fend for themselves. Rome had other problems and priorities: among them, the sack of Rome by the Goths. This is often considered to be the end of Roman Britain but, in fact, the process was a long, drawn-out one, which only really ended in the late 5th-early 6th century.

At some stage around the middle of the fifth century, most of Cheshire had become part of the British Kingdom of Powys, itself plausibly a Late Roman creation in origin. We may also assume that, within this new British political framework, the Church continued to exercise a considerable degree of influence and control. Certainly salt continued to be a very important commodity, and one that would have given a degree of importance to long-distance communication with its production-centres. This must surely be the underlying reason for the long-term continued use of the main roads: the road north (King Street), the road to Chester (northern capital of the Kingdom) and the road via Whitchurch to Wroxeter (southern capital of the Kingdom).

By the middle of the 7th century, however, Cheshire had fallen to the Kings of the emerging English Kingdom of Mercia. By this date, robbing of any reusable materials from the former Roman salt-settlement of SALINIS had begun, and the English newcomers had opted to develop their own new settlements well away from the heart of the onetime Roman town, in Kinderton to the east, and in the Newton area on the other side of the river Croco. The centre of the place we now call Middlewich had begun emerge in the latter. What had been had faded into weed-strewn marginal land. A new beginning, equally blessed by the presence of brine-springs in the locality, had been made.

***Written by Tim Strickland. Photo permissions from Tim Strickland, Roman Middlewich booklet
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