

EXCAVATIONS AT MIDDLEWICH (SALINAE)

PART 3 - 1974

by J.D. Bestwick, Dept., of Archaeology,  
University of Manchester.

During 1974 excavations have continued on Site J<sup>1</sup> and have been completed on Site K at the corner of Kinderton Street and King Street. Both excavations have been directed by J.D. Bestwick on behalf of the Middlewich Archaeological Society and the Cheshire County Council.

Site J. (SJ70456645). Investigation of the iron working yards of the 2nd and 3rd centuries continued with special attention to the hearths. The rectilinear ditches mentioned previously were traced further and were clearly in use to define the extent of individual working areas and possibly ownership. Similar demarcation ditches have since been reported in other Roman settlements<sup>2</sup>. Most of the year has been devoted to Site K, but Site J has been extended to the west, further away still from the Roman timber building adjacent to the main street of the settlement. The ditches continued, but the hearths had not been built so far west. Heaps of iron slags were located and work is still progressing in this area. Although extremities of Roman settlements, whether extraction sites such as Middlewich, or settlements containing industrial processing activities, have previously been ignored, it is obviously important to study the open areas where much outdoor activity occurred.

Site K. (SJ70626635). The extension of the Middlewich by-pass and the movement of the end of King Street to the west meant that a large area of the Roman settlement was to be disturbed. Excavations undertaken by the writer on Site I (1968-1972)<sup>3</sup> indicated the positions of Roman timber strip buildings of the 1st to the 3rd centuries together with brine hearths and a timber and turf leat carrying water from east to west. The 4th century occupation was disturbed by a navy camp of the 18th century and later gardening activities. Houses lying on the north side of Kinderton Street had destroyed the Roman levels totally and so a large part of the site was barren.

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- REFERENCE: 1. Cheshire Archaeological Bulletin, No. 2. pp. 29-30.  
2. The Small Towns of Roman Britain; forthcoming publication of the Oxford Conference, January, 1975.  
3. Council for British Archaeology, Group V Newsletter, Nos. 16, 18 and 20.

A controlled excavation was carried out by the writer on the site of the recently demolished Pool Head Farm. The remainder of Site K westwards to the town bridge was observed and photographs were obtained<sup>4</sup>. The area, 12m x 25m was first cleared using a JCB excavator and the floors of the farm were removed by hand. The area immediately beneath the L shaped farm house was completely barren as all the ground floors had been lowered by at least 0.5m in the last century. Sections 20m long were later to show that the Roman levels had risen from the north and the west, which accounted for the clear natural sand and clay beneath the farm house. The farm yard and garden were cleared by hand, and here considerable evidence of Roman occupation of the 1st to 3rd centuries remained undisturbed.

The earliest occupation in this part of the settlement took the form of a rubbish pit, 2.44m in diameter and 1.2m deep. Deep silt contained animal bones and pottery including samian, dating to 70-80 A.D., or even earlier. This is in keeping with finds from other parts of the settlement. Also in the lowest silt of this pit were several pieces of briquetage from brine kilns. The fact that extraction of brine is evident in the earliest Roman levels may point to military involvement or supervision. No pre-Roman evidence had yet been found at Middlewich, in the vicinity of the brine springs.

The pit had been filled in after a long period, and a building was erected over it in the early-mid second century. This was a timber framed structure on sleeper beams with a doorway on the south side. The axis of the strip build lay NE to SW and unlike previous building, it lay at an angle of approximately 70° to the projected line of the main street of the settlement. It was, however, parallel with those mentioned previously on Site I. Both ends of this building ran out of the area of the excavation. To the east, the modern King Street had destroyed it, and to the west the Kinderton Street houses in their cutting had also removed all traces. The building was, however, traced under the disturbances of the farm yard, and proved to be at least 27.74m (91 ft) long. Due to disturbance to the north, it was not possible to get an accurate width, but it was at least 6.10m (20 ft). This was again in keeping with the 2nd century timber building immediately to the north, which was 5.50m (18 ft) wide. The Site K building had been re-built three times during the 2nd century and the floors were trodden earth (phase I), crushed salt briquetage (phase II) and packed pebbles and amphora (phase III). In phases I

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REFERENCE: 4. The writer is indebted to the Cheshire County Council and Messrs. Thomas Ashley & Co. Ltd., for their co-operation on Site K.

and II a large oval cooking oven was situated just inside the doorway, with the flue away from the door. The oval oven body measured 0.60m x 0.50m and its vertical walls remained to a height of 0.10m. The walls were made up of local soft stone and packed clay and were 0.20m thick. The dome, part of which appeared to have been of large amphora sherds, had collapsed into the oven, sealing in only charcoal and fine ash 50mm thick. Below the oven, a shallow hollow was filled with fine ash to a depth of 0.18m. In front of the oven flue, a fan shaped apron of soft stone 0.80m long and 0.60m wide at the widest point. This close set surface had been used for a period of time as the open hearth front on which the ashes and hot coals had been raked out. In time, this hearth had been covered by a layer of clay 30mm. thick which had become hard fired in time with use. The surface had been decorated when laid down, by the maker, drawing a cross with his or her finger in the wet clay. This six armed cross was as large as the original stone apron, and its only purpose can have been for decoration. Phase III of the strip house had involved the laying of a new stone packed floor, which had covered the oven to the level of the top of its vertical walls. This third floor was probably put down in the late second century. Much pottery was associated with this building, but no industrial activity was apparent apart from the briquetage of floor phase II. This had probably been brought into the building from an area of salting immediately to the west or north.<sup>5</sup> A large Roman ditch had been cut across the site in the 3rd or 4th centuries and this had cut away a portion of the earlier timber building. All later Roman activity had been disturbed by the farm from the 17th century onwards.

The area to the west of this excavation up to a distance of 70m was being cleared by large earth moving machines. A number of Roman pits were recorded and numerous fragments of Roman salt briquetage and pottery. It was obvious, however, that the area had already been deeply disturbed in later periods, and no large scale clearance by hand was needed. At the western extremity of the site a layer of Roman salt briquetage up to 0.30m thick ran into the area from the north. At this point, the engineers were working with a section face 5.50m (18 ft) deep and sub-surface water springs made the section very unstable. Records were taken and some items of briquetage removed for study as machines removed the face. This by far the most dense layer of briquetage found at Middlewich since long term excavation began by the writer in 1964.

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REFERENCE: 5. For briquetage deposits see C.B.A. Group V  
Newsletter op. cit.

The western half of Site K gave the first clear evidence of medieval and post-medieval salt extraction. Several pits lined with timber in vertical boards, 1m in diameter and 1m deep, were recorded. Some contained 17th century pottery. As deep excavation proceeded using machines, an area of silt was encountered opposite the Boars Head Inn. Although totally waterlogged, it was possible to record the presence of vertical timbers lining a hole 6.10m in diameter and 5.18m deep. The vertical oak posts were on average 0.15m in diameter and were spaced roughly 0.61 meters apart. The sides of the pit were lined with horizontal oak planks behind the vertical posts, with large pieces of clay rammed down at the back to hold them in position. Much of this timberwork was in a good state of preservation but the speed of the machine, against the inflow of water made accurate recording very difficult. The centre of the pit was filled with a black slurry which was highly dangerous, and hence recovery of dating evidence had to be accomplished with the aid of a Hymac. Pottery indicated that the pit was in use into the mid-18th century. Many horse bones were brought up from the lower silts including two skulls, both shot through the forehead. The bone also included a human skull. This was of a young adult male. The date is uncertain but probably is contemporary with the horse bones and 18th century pottery.

Two timber buildings were also exposed by machines opposite to the Boars Head Inn. Both structures measured 3.05m x 4.75m and both had small porched doorways on their south sides. The walls were constructed of vertical close set timbers of circular section. These vertical timbers were held in position below ground level by square section horizontal timbers on the inside and the outside. These two structures were exposed and destroyed at the very end of the contract work, and members of the excavation team were not given the chance to photograph them. Pottery collected from the immediate vicinity by the contractors indicates a 12-14th century date.