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# REVEALING CHESHIRE'S PAST

 Supported by the  
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## From Farm to Fortress

### 2 The Romans

**Ordnance Survey Statement of Purpose**

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# Enter the Romans

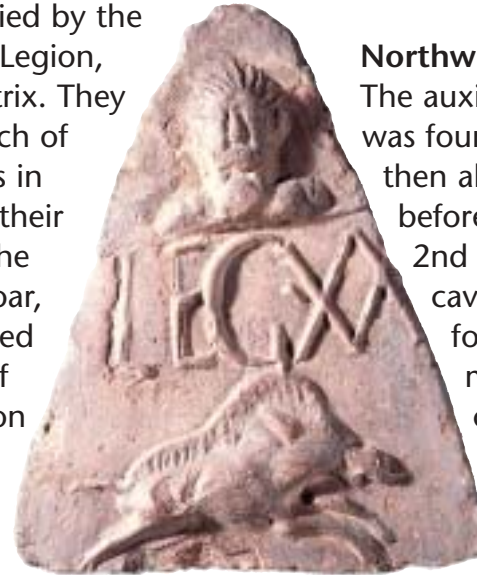
The Roman army arrived in Britain in 43AD, settling initially in the south before moving north to subdue the native tribes.

By 79AD, a legionary fortress was built at Chester. This was one of three permanent fortresses built in Britain; each was home to an entire legion (between 5,000 and 6,000 men).

The local tribe was the Cornovii. Before the arrival of the Romans, they were farming the land and producing salt from the brine springs of central Cheshire.

The Romans built roads to allow the efficient transport of troops and supplies and these linked Cheshire to Roman settlements across Britain. Important local routes linked the industrial settlement of Wilderspool, the trading post of Meols on the Wirral coast and the salt making sites of central Cheshire.

The Roman army had been present in Cheshire for around 20 years before the fortress at Chester was built. The first legion stationed there was the Second Legion Adiutrix. When they were called away to defend mainland Europe around 87AD, the fortress was occupied by the Twentieth Legion, Valeria Victrix. They rebuilt much of the fortress in stone and their emblem, the running boar, was stamped on the roof tiles used on new buildings (right).



## Auxiliary Forts

As well as the legion stationed at Chester, there were other soldiers at auxiliary forts at Northwich and Middlewich. Auxiliary forts were built to accommodate between 500 and 1000 men. The soldiers were recruited from the local population of a

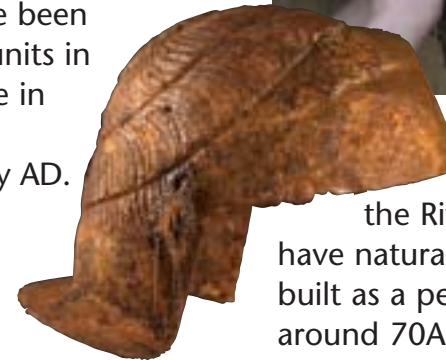
province so were not Roman citizens and were either infantry or cavalry. Two military diplomas were issued to soldiers from cavalry units. They may have been stationed here or settled in Cheshire after retirement.

## Northwich

The auxiliary fort in Northwich was founded around 70AD and then abandoned for a time before being rebuilt in the 2nd century. In 1969, a rare cavalry helmet (below) was found suggesting there may have been cavalry units in Cheshire in the 1st century AD.

## Middlewich

Geophysical survey work and excavation have confirmed that there was an auxiliary fort at Middlewich on Harbutt's Field. Five Roman roads (from Chester, Warrington, Whitchurch, Buxton and



Chesterton) meet at Middlewich where the Rivers Dane and Croco have natural fords. The fort was built as a permanent structure around 70AD and occupied until 130AD. The forces stationed here are likely to have been in control of the salt working settlement on either side of King Street, the Roman road from Warrington to Chesterton.

# A Place to Live

## Civilian Settlements

Only soldiers could live within the walls of the forts so the area immediately outside was home to traders, craftspeople and soldiers' families. Other civilian settlements also grew up close to the military bases but away from their control. There were two civilian settlements on the outskirts of the legionary fortress at Chester, at Heronbridge and Saltney. The settlements would have had traders and workshops to service the needs of the troops.

## Villas

The villa at Eaton by Tarporley is so far the only known villa in the North West. A stone villa was built at the end of the 2nd century on the site of an earlier timber building. It was a winged corridor villa with five main rooms and two projecting wings. One of the wings held the bathhouse and many of the other rooms had hypocausts (under floor heating systems). The walls were decorated with wall plaster and there were mortared pebble floors.

*Reconstruction of Eaton Villa*



*Hypocaust at Eaton Villa*

## Farmsteads

Little is known about the settlements of the native population in Roman Cheshire, though a farmstead has recently been excavated at Birch Heath, Tarporley. A number of circular buildings with a boundary ditch were found and a wide range of Roman pottery including fragments of mortaria, cheese presses and amphora. The amphora would have held olive oil imported from Spain, which shows the Roman influence on this local farming community.



# Making a Living



*Roman bronze saucepan  
from Nantwich*

## Salt

Salt has been extracted from the brine springs of central Cheshire since the Iron Age. Salt was highly valued for its preservative and flavouring qualities. Recent excavations at Nantwich and Middlewich have produced spectacular evidence for Roman salt production. Here the waterlogged conditions have preserved organic material such as wood and leather.

Large wood-lined tanks were used to collect the brine which flowed from springs. The brine was removed in buckets to small barrels where any sediment could settle before the salt was extracted by boiling



*Folded lead salt-pan*

A large number of lead salt-pans found near Middlewich, Nantwich and Northwich reveal that the Romans were using the open pan method of salt production.

Brine was heated in a shallow lead pan over a fire. Low temperatures made coarse salt crystals and higher temperatures gave fine

grained salt. Before lead pans were used, the brine would have been heated in pottery containers, fragments of which have been found at salt making sites across Cheshire.

The salt was removed from the pans and left in wicker baskets to dry before being transported in sacks or baskets.

## Middlewich

Excavation since the 1960s has found evidence of large scale salt production in Middlewich. It is likely that when the fort was built, the army also took control of the brine springs. After they left, salt production continued into the 4th century. By this time, it may have been under the control of the Christian church, as an inscription on a lead salt-pan suggests.

## Nantwich

The road from Middlewich to Whitchurch passes by Nantwich and until recently there was little evidence of Roman settlement in Nantwich. Northwich and Middlewich were thought to be the main areas of Roman salt production.

*Roman salt making site,  
Nantwich*

Recent excavations on the west bank of the River Weaver at Nantwich have revealed a salt production site of Roman date. A side road connected it to the Middlewich to Whitchurch road.

Waterlogged conditions have ensured the survival of two large timber-lined tanks and several basket-lined pits, features associated with brine processing. The timber-lined tanks were later used as rubbish dumps and large amounts of well preserved Roman artefacts were found.

## Northwich

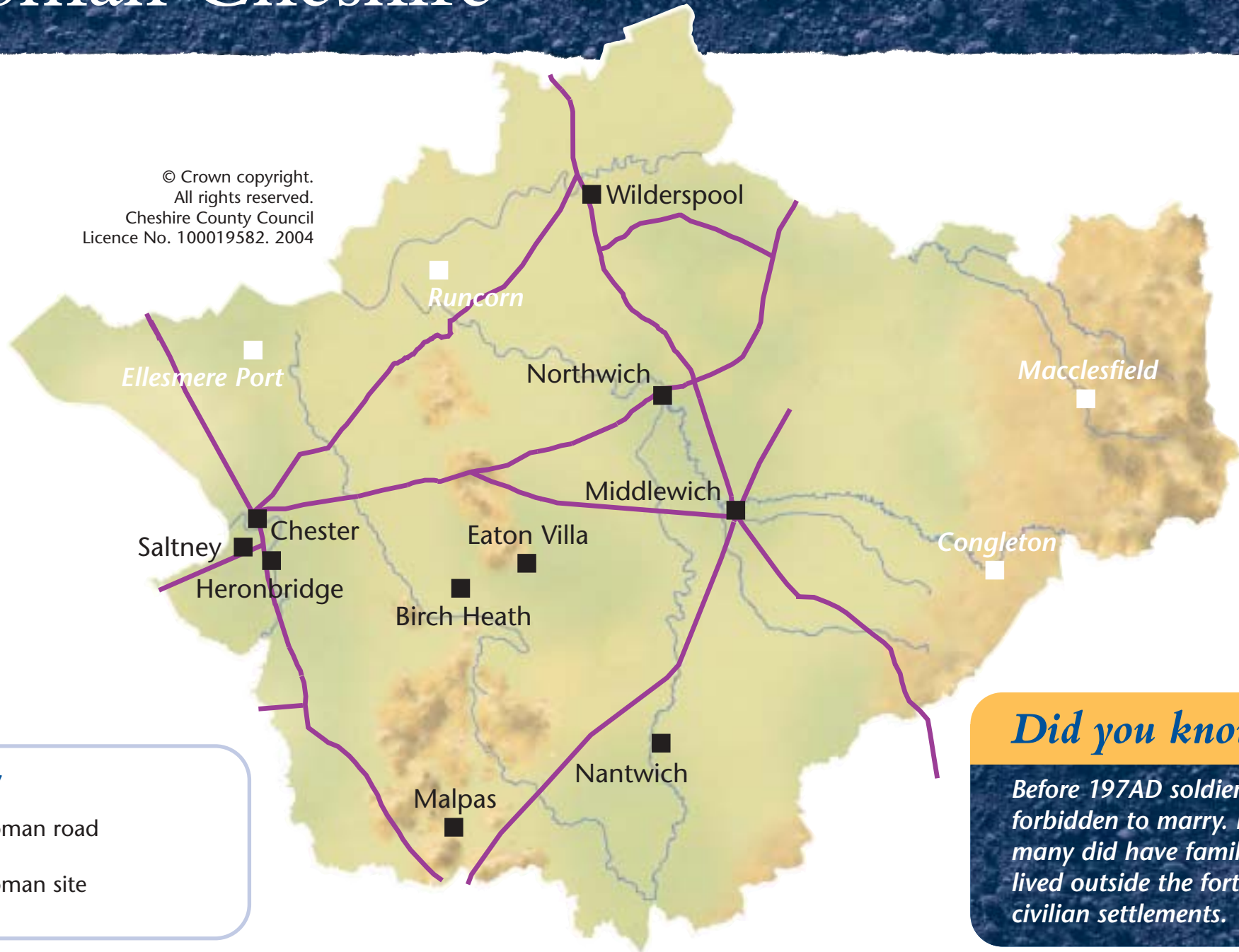
The Roman settlement of Northwich lies at the confluence of the Rivers Weaver and Dane. There is evidence for Roman occupation on either side of Watling Street, as it approaches the Weaver. Finds suggest that occupation began towards the end of the first century, flourished in the second, and may have been in decline by the third century. An

excavation in the gardens of demolished houses before redevelopment, revealed a brine kiln. Several lead salt-pans of Roman date have also been found in Northwich.



# Roman Cheshire

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## Key

- Roman road
- Roman site

## Did you know...

Before 197AD soldiers were forbidden to marry. However many did have families who lived outside the forts in civilian settlements.

# Industrial Activity

The salt producing towns would have also been involved in other industrial activities. The settlement at Middlewich has shown signs of metal working, tanning and leatherworking.

Wilderspool (near Warrington) was an industrial area with iron, glass and pottery making workshops. It is thought to have been occupied from the end of the first century to the third century.

The settlement grew up around the lowest crossing point of the River Mersey. The river would have been crossed by a ford. It would also have been the best place for ships to offload their cargoes, developing into a port as well as an industrial town.

## Pottery

Small scale pottery kilns have been found at Middlewich and Northwich, showing that local potters were supplying the military market. Pottery found in Northwich was marked with the potter's name MACO. The products included jars, cooking pots, bowls and flagons dating to the early 2nd century. Wilderspool was a very successful pottery production centre. Pottery was exported across the North West, Wales and Scotland in the 2nd Century AD.



*Pottery kiln, Middlewich*

## Lead mines

Some of the most important artefacts from Roman Cheshire are not made of gold or silver. They are made of lead.

There were lead mines in North Wales which were kept under official control. The workers would have been criminals and slaves. A "pig" or ingot of lead (*below*) was found with an inscription that shows that the lead and silver mines of Flintshire were under Roman control by 74AD.



Lead was very important to the economy of the Roman empire. Silver for coinage was extracted from lead and the remaining lead was used in building, plumbing and for salt-pans.



*Tally of work carried out by workers at the Legionary tile works at Holt, scratched into an unfired tile. Soldiers were stationed here to make the tiles needed for military building projects.*

# Who Lived in Cheshire?

## Soldier

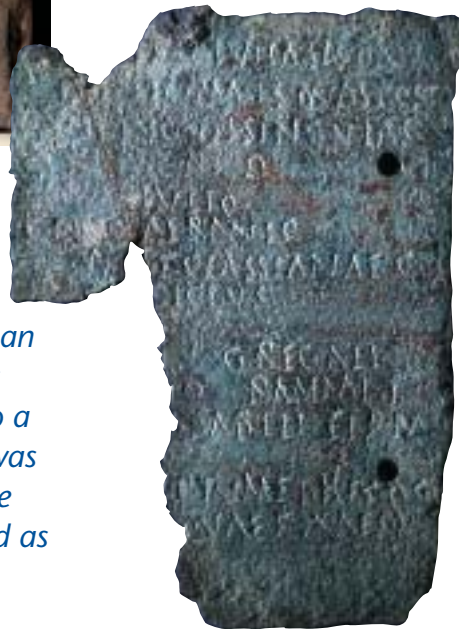
We know many of the names of the soldiers who lived in Cheshire thanks to two very important sources of information, tombstones and military diplomas. The Latin text on these artefacts shows that soldiers in Cheshire were recruited across the Empire, from Spain, France, Italy and the Danube frontier.



*This is the tombstone of Caecilius Avitus, an Optio of the 20th Legion. The optio was an administrator and was second in command to a centurion. This stone was originally painted white with details highlighted as this replica shows.*

Military diplomas are a rare find in Britain yet two have been found in Cheshire, in Middlewich and Malpas. Diplomas were issued to auxiliary soldiers on completion of 25 years of service. They granted Roman citizenship to the holder. If a soldier was married, the diploma legalised this and any children were granted citizenship.

Made of two hinged rectangular bronze plates inscribed in Latin, they were personal copies of decrees displayed in Rome. The inner faces of the tablets were inscribed with the details of his service and the privileges now granted to him as a retiring soldier.



*Middlewich Diploma. It was issued in 105AD to a soldier from the cavalry unit known as 'ala classiana Romanorum'. The soldier's name is not known.*

## Civilian

The local population lived outside the military settlements and in the country. Sometimes, their names survive in inscriptions.

Some inscriptions record names as a sign of ownership. One of several lead salt-pans found in Northwich was inscribed with the name VELVI which is a Romanised version of the Celtic name Veluvius. A wooden barrel from Middlewich has the inscription "LEV" clearly marked on it.



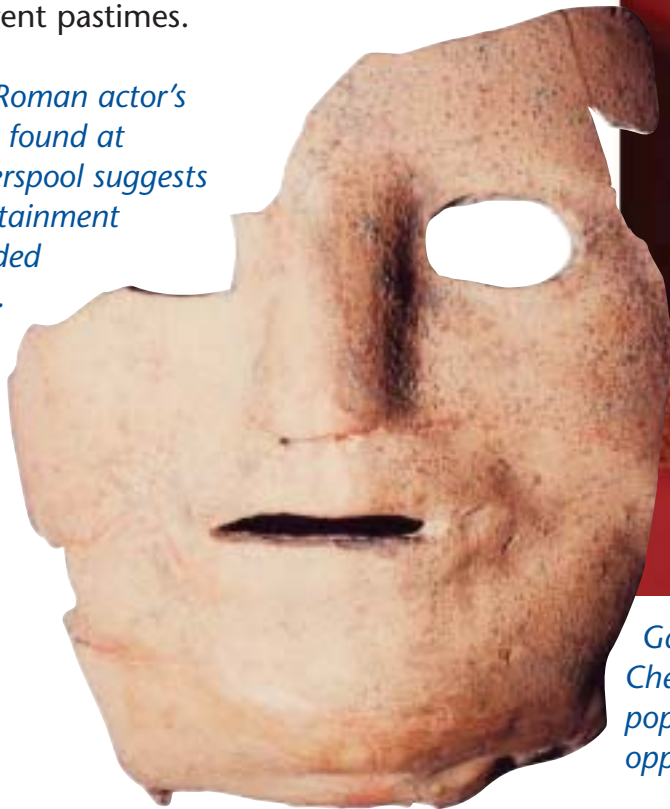
Civilians were not always local. Military communities attracted settlers from across the Empire. Traders in particular were drawn to these new markets. A tombstone records the Greek names of Flavius Callimorphus and his son, Serapion. Two rare inscriptions in Greek from Chester record dedications by the doctors Hermogenes and Antiochus.

# Good Life

Though far away from home, soldiers would still have enjoyed the things they were used to. Fine pottery, wine and olive oil were some of the goods transported to every corner of the Empire. Evidence of these products has been found at Roman settlements across Cheshire, whether fort or farm, showing that they were also available to the local population.

The Romans also brought a number of different pastimes.

*This Roman actor's mask found at Wilderspool suggests entertainment included plays.*



*The amphitheatre at Chester was used mostly for training the army but it would also have been used for public entertainment as the discovery of this gladiator figurine suggests.*



*Gaming counter, dice and game board found in Cheshire. A game known as "little soldiers" was popular, where the aim was to "capture" your opponent's pieces.*

## Baths

The baths were more than a place to get clean, they were essential to everyday life. They were a place to meet, eat, exercise, relax and gossip.

A number of bath houses were built in and around the fortress of Deva. There would also

have been bath houses at other forts and settlements across Cheshire. It was a very important part of Roman life and was available across the empire, whether soldier or civilian.

## End of an Era

In the late 4th century the good life was coming to an end as the Roman empire fell into economic decline, fighting constant challenges to its leadership and barbarian invasion. Troops were sent to defend the most vulnerable areas,

reducing Britain's defensive force. In 410AD the troubled Roman empire abandoned administrative control of Britain, leaving the island to fend for itself.



# Places to Visit

*Opening times vary; please check before planning a visit*

## Amazing Artefacts

### The Grosvenor Museum

27 Grosvenor Street, Chester, CH1 2DD  
Tel: 01244 402008

Permanent exhibition of Roman Chester and Roman Tombstones Gallery

### The Salt Museum

162 London Road, Northwich, CW9 8AB  
Tel: 01606 41331

[www.saltmuseum.org.uk](http://www.saltmuseum.org.uk)

The salt gallery shows how salt has been produced in Cheshire for over 2,000 years and includes Roman lead salt-pans.

### Middlewich Library

Lewin Street, Middlewich, CW10 9AS  
Tel: 01606 832801

[middlewich.library@cheshire.gov.uk](mailto:middlewich.library@cheshire.gov.uk)

Exhibition of Roman discoveries from Middlewich.

### Warrington Museum & Art Gallery

Bold Street, Warrington, WA1 1JG  
Tel: 01925 442392

[www.warrington.gov.uk/museum](http://www.warrington.gov.uk/museum)

Wilderspool displays including Roman actor's mask.

## Roman Remains

### Roman Chester

The remains include

- The excavated half of an amphitheatre
- The Minerva Shrine
- Southeast Angle Tower of the Roman Walls
- Legionary Strongroom
- Roman Gardens – stone building fragments

There are also some remains in the cellars of commercial premises. A complete guide to the visible Roman remains in Chester is available from the Grosvenor Museum Shop.

### Roman Middlewich Trail

A walk exploring this town's Roman past.

Leaflet available from Middlewich Town

Council 01606 833434.

[www.romanmiddlewich.co.uk](http://www.romanmiddlewich.co.uk)



[www.cheshire.gov.uk/archaeology](http://www.cheshire.gov.uk/archaeology)

