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CHESHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REVEALING CHESHIRE'S PAST

Manors, Moats and Monasteries

4 **Medieval**

Medieval Life

In 1066, William I defeated King Harold of England at the Battle of Hastings. This was just the beginning of the Norman Conquest of England. There was fierce opposition to the new ruler. William's armies carried out a ruthless campaign to crush this opposition, devastating the land and seizing property from the Saxon Lords.

The Norman army came to Cheshire in 1069-70 to crush a rebellion by the Mercian Lords. Hugh d'Avranches, also known as Hugh Lupus (The Wolf), suppressed the Mercian uprising and built the castle at Chester to keep control of the county. As a reward, he became the first Norman earl of Cheshire.

To defend the border of Cheshire with Wales, the Norman Earls built a string of motte and bailey castles in the 11th and 12th centuries.

Town Life

Prosperity can also be seen in the development of towns. The borough status of the larger towns gave them administrative control and the right to hold markets and fairs was granted to many towns and villages.

The salt towns of Nantwich, Middlewich and Northwich thrived throughout the medieval period, exporting salt across the country by packhorse.

Manors and Moats

Following the Norman Conquest, much of Cheshire's land was given to new ruling lords and divided into manors. During the 13th and 14th centuries, moated manor houses were built across Cheshire. They were not just for defence, but were also a symbol of the status of the manorial lord.

Rural Life

In the countryside there was increased agricultural activity and the population grew with more land cleared for cultivation. The *ridge and furrow* that survives in the Cheshire landscape is evidence of **strip farming**. Each strip of land was farmed by someone different. The main crops were wheat, oats, barley and peas.

Ridge and furrow

Monasteries

The Church continued to be an important part of Cheshire's development and there were a number of monastic houses in

Norton Priory

Cheshire. The excavated remains of Norton Priory can be visited today.

Between 1536 and 1540, Henry VIII ordered the abolition of the monasteries of England and Wales. Monasteries, abbeys and priories were looted for their valuables and the churches were destroyed. The land was sold and the remains of many of these religious houses were rebuilt as mansion houses. The remains of both Vale Royal and Combermere Abbey have survived in this way.

11th century	12th century	13th century	14th century	15th century	16th century

1066

1540

Coin of William I (1066-1087)

Papal Bull of Pope Urban IV (1261-1264)

Coin of Henry VII (1485-1509)

Making a Living

A reconstructed jug made between the 13th and 15th centuries. From a kiln excavated in Ashton, near Chester.

Pottery

Everyday medieval pottery was made locally on a small scale. A number of medieval kilns have been excavated and the pottery fragments pieced together so we can see what sort of pots were being made in Cheshire.

Decorated floor tiles like this were used in churches and high status houses. At Norton Priory, the remains of a tile kiln were found showing that tiles were made on site for use in the abbey complex.

Salt

Salt production using the natural brine springs of central Cheshire has been carried out since the Iron Age. It was important to the economy of medieval Cheshire and a network of routes known as saltways linked the salt towns to the big commercial centres in Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire

The Domesday survey records that the "*wichs*" of Nantwich, Middlewich and Northwich were waste in 1071 but were again producing salt in 1086. It also records the laws and customs governing salt production. It is likely that these Anglo-Saxon regulations continued to apply to the medieval industry.

Evidence of medieval salt working in Nantwich survives well in the waterlogged ground. The walls of timber buildings have been found as well as hollowed out tree trunks (known as salt ships) and barrels. They were used to store the brine before it was heated in shallow lead pans to produce salt crystals.

Mills

In medieval times, each manor had the right to its own mill and tenants were forced to use it. A tax was payable on all corn ground and there were fines for those who tried to mill corn in their own homes using hand querns.

Cornmills were first recorded in Cheshire in the Domesday survey. There is documentary evidence for well over 100 mills in medieval Cheshire. None of these have survived, though later mills were often built on the same site. Medieval mills are recorded at Stretton, Bunbury and Nether Alderley, where working watermills can be seen today.

Other Industry

Outside the salt production areas, a number of different industries developed.

Cloth manufacture was beginning to become important, with linen produced in the west of the county and wool in the east.

Leather working was an important medieval industry that supported a number of trades including tanners, saddlers, and shoemakers. The excavation of a medieval tanning pit in Chester found a number of leather shoes, preserved in waterlogged conditions.

Where Did They Live?

Castles

Motte and bailey castles were built to defend the borders of Cheshire along the Rivers Dee and Mersey, and at the major settlements at Nantwich and Warrington.

A timber tower was built on top of a conical mound called a motte *(right)*. At the base of the motte was the bailey, which was an enclosed area of living quarters.

Halton Castle

Halton Castle *(below)* stands on a prominent rocky hill overlooking the River Mersey. Its origins are probably as a motte and bailey built for Nigel, 1st Baron of Halton.

By the 13th century, a stone shell keep castle had been built to replace the timber tower. This had a circular stone wall with towers and a range of domestic buildings inside.

Additions to the castle were made by its various owners over the next 300 years. The site was later used as court house, prison and hotel though some of the original castle survives as ruins.
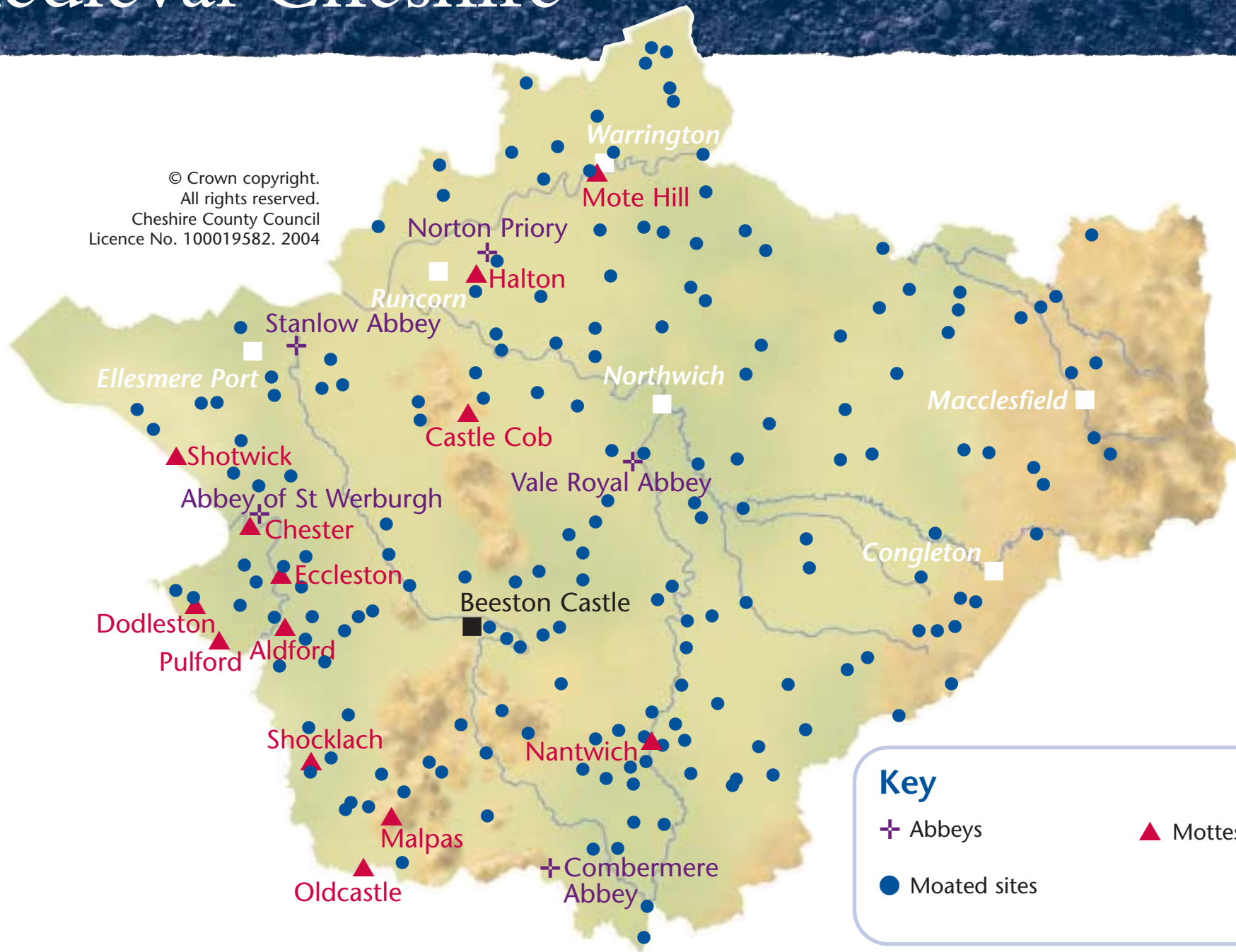
Beeston Castle

Beeston Castle is one of Cheshire's most impressive landmarks. It was built by the 6th Earl of Chester, Ranulf de Blundeville in 1225. It provided a much improved defensive base for the Earl, as well as a symbol of his power. It was designed to make the most of the natural defences of the rocky crag on which it stands. The stone-walled inner bailey was perched high on the cliff edge, with a rock-cut ditch to defend it. A second stone wall with towers and a gatehouse ran around the base of the crag.

Its lofty position on a rock outcrop gives it a commanding view across Cheshire, Wales, Merseyside and the Pennines.

Medieval Cheshire

Warrington

Mote Hill

Norton Priory

Runcorn

Halton

Stanlow Abbey

Ellesmere Port

Northwich

Macclesfield

Castle Cob

Shotwick

Vale Royal Abbey

Abbey of St Werburgh

Chester

Congleton

Eccleston

Dodleston

Beeston Castle

Pulford

Aldford

Shocklach

Nantwich

Malpas

Oldcastle

Combermere
Abbey

Key

+ Abbeys

▲ Mottes

● Moated sites

Monastic Life

Norton Priory undercroft

Large parts of medieval Cheshire were owned by the Church, with much of its land being acquired through patronage.

As the largest settlement in the county, Chester was home to several different religious communities. The oldest was St Werburgh's, originally a Saxon Minster and refounded as a Benedictine monastery by Hugh Lupus in 1092. It survived the Dissolution by becoming Chester Cathedral.

The prosperous medieval market town of Warrington was home to an Augustinian friary, parts of which have been uncovered through excavation.

Outside the major settlements only a small number of monastic houses were founded.

Norton Priory, an Augustinian abbey, was founded in 1133 and was in use until the Dissolution. Excavation has revealed the stone foundations of the church, guest quarters, cloisters and kitchen. The only standing remains of the priory are the undercroft.

There were also Cistercian monasteries at Combermere and Vale Royal. After the dissolution, both these abbeys were rebuilt as mansion houses.

A number of smaller religious communities existed but most were short-lived. The monks of Stanlow Abbey moved to Whalley Abbey, Lancashire in the 13th century leaving Stanlow as a grange or farm.
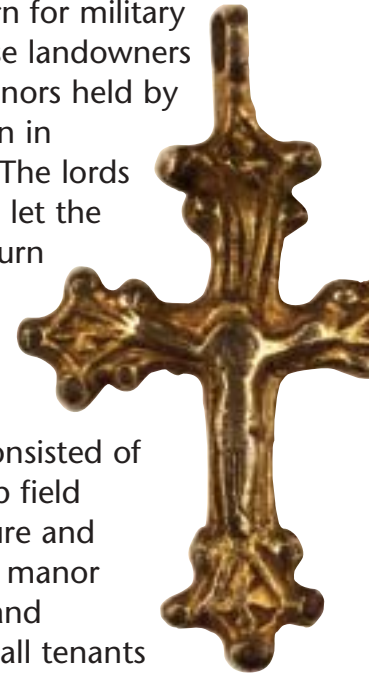
After the Norman Conquest, William's army devastated huge areas of the North of England. Much of the north and east of the county is recorded as waste in the Domesday survey of 1086, while the west of the county seems to have recovered from the devastation and agricultural prosperity had returned.

The Normans brought with them a new administrative structure, the feudal system, which changed the way land was organised. The King allocated land to his loyal supporters, usually in return for military service. The estates of these landowners were then divided into manors held by their own supporters, again in return for military service. The lords who governed the manors let the land to the peasants in return for labour or other service.

Cross from Spurstow

The manors of Cheshire consisted of scattered homesteads, strip field cultivation, common pasture and woodland. The lord of the manor lived in the manor house and controlled the mill, where all tenants had to bring their grain.

Unlike other parts of the country, the dispersed settlements of hamlets and single farmsteads of Saxon Cheshire were not systematically reorganised into villages, though this did occur in the west of the county as can be seen at Aldford and Malpas.
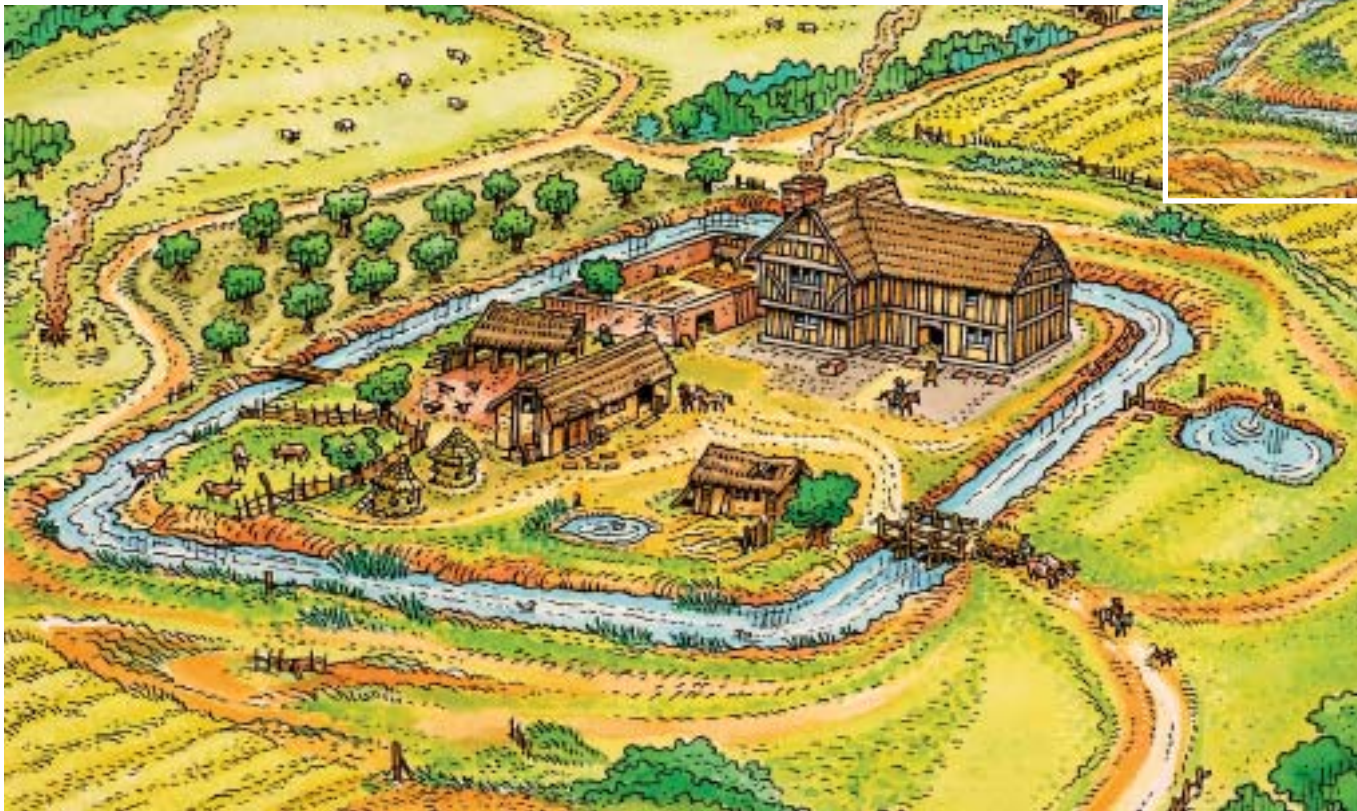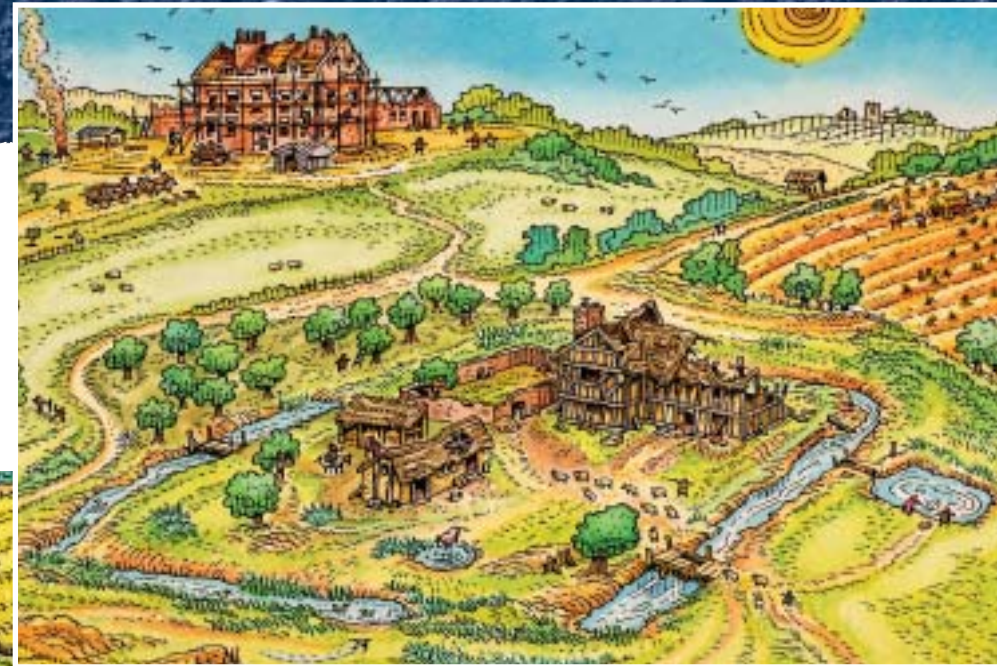
Rural Life

Moats

Moated sites are building platforms surrounded by a water-filled ditch. They are the most common medieval site in Cheshire, with over 200 examples recorded.

They date to the 13th and 14th centuries and were built not only to protect the property of prosperous families in Cheshire, but also as a sign of prestige, to show the owner's status.

Survival of a medieval moated house
If they fell into disrepair, the timber-framed houses were often abandoned in favour of a newer building.

Medieval moated site today
Most surviving moated sites are little more than earthworks as they were abandoned and the moats left to silt up.

Medieval moated house
The manor houses within the moats would have been timber-framed. They were much more elaborate than their tenants' homes. There were also outbuildings for animals.

Town Life

As the population grew so did the number of urban centres. In addition to the "wich" towns and Chester, many new boroughs were created.
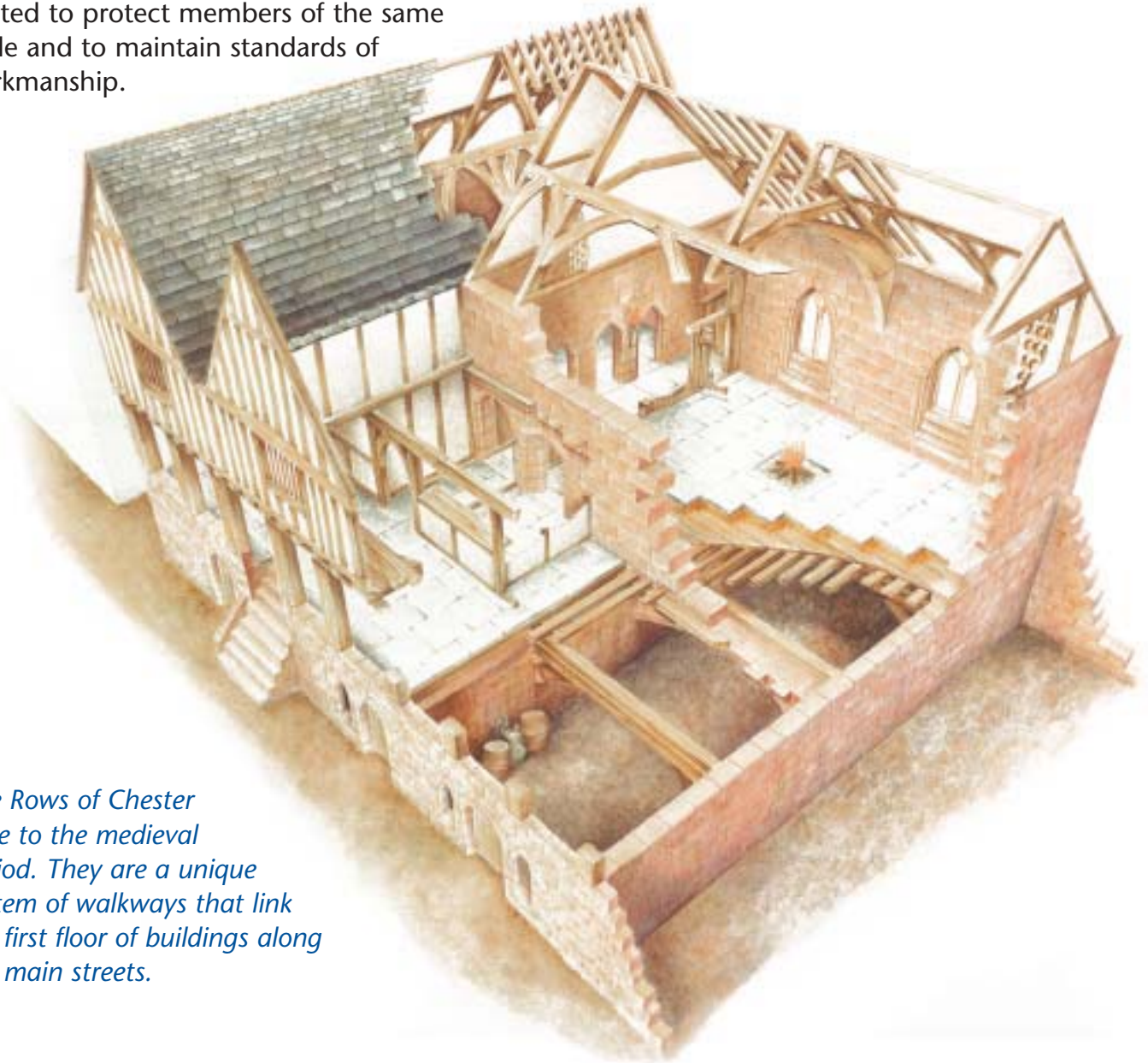
Some were deliberately planned towns while others had been villages that had grown, which were then granted charters giving them the right to self administration, with particular emphasis on trade.

The medieval layout of the streets of Warrington is still visible in the narrow plots behind the street frontage of Church Street. Medieval Warrington was a thriving community with control of the bridges, ford and ferries across the Mersey. The first fair and market were established in 1277.

Many towns in Cheshire thrived at this time. Congleton grew from a village to a wealthy town with markets, fairs, mills and courthouse and Macclesfield flourished as an important centre of trade in Eastern Cheshire. Trades listed for this town include glovers, fulling, bakers and salters.

Chester was the main town and the right to trade there was strictly controlled. Guilds existed to protect members of the same trade and to maintain standards of workmanship.

The Rows of Chester date to the medieval period. They are a unique system of walkways that link the first floor of buildings along the main streets.

Glossary

Dissolution
Between 1536 and 1540, Henry VIII ordered the abolition of the monasteries. He set out to gain their wealth and power for himself as the newly designated head of the Church of England. The ruins of monasteries, abbeys and priories often became a convenient source of building stone and few survive to any height today.

Domesday Survey
A survey carried out in 1086 on the orders of William I. It records the owners, tenants and value of land in Norman England.

Ridge and furrow
Ridge and furrow is the distinctive pattern of earthworks that are created when land has been ploughed to create cultivation beds. The furrow is the ploughed line and the ridge is the bank of soil used to grow crops in. This system has operated in Britain since before the Anglo-Saxon period.

Wich
Wich is the Saxon name for a settlement. In Cheshire, the term "wich" is used to refer to the historic salt producing towns of Nantwich, Northwich and Middlewich.

Sites to Visit

Castles

Halton Castle
Map – OS Explorer 275 – OS Ref SJ 538 821
Footpath around the outside of the castle walls. Access to the inner castle on special open days.
Tel: 01928 569895 for more details on access.
www.haltoncastle.org

Beeston Castle, Tarporley
Map – OS Explorer 257 – OS Ref SJ 537 593
Ruins of medieval castle
English Heritage site, open to the public
Admission Charge
Tel: 01829 260464
www.english-heritage.org.uk

Malpas motte & bailey
Map – OS Explorer 257 – OS Ref SJ 486 473
Remains of the motte can be seen from the churchyard.

Aldford motte & bailey
Map – OS Explorer 266 – OS Ref SJ 419 596
Remains of the motte can be seen from the churchyard.

Agricola Tower, Chester
Map – OS Explorer 266 – OS Ref SJ 405 658
12th century Gate Tower of the inner bailey of Chester Castle.
Tel: 01244 402008 – for details of opening

Monastic Sites

Norton Priory Museum & Gardens
Tudor Road, Manor Park. Runcorn, WA7 1SX
Monastic remains and museum open to the public
Admission Charge
Tel: 01928 569895.
www.nortonpriory.org

Manors and Moats

Little Moreton Hall
Congleton, Cheshire, CW12 4SD
Timber framed manor house with medieval moat. National Trust property, open to the public.
Admission Charge
Tel: 01260 272018
www.nationaltrust.org.uk

www.cheshire.gov.uk/archaeology