**REVEALING
CHESHIRE'S PAST**

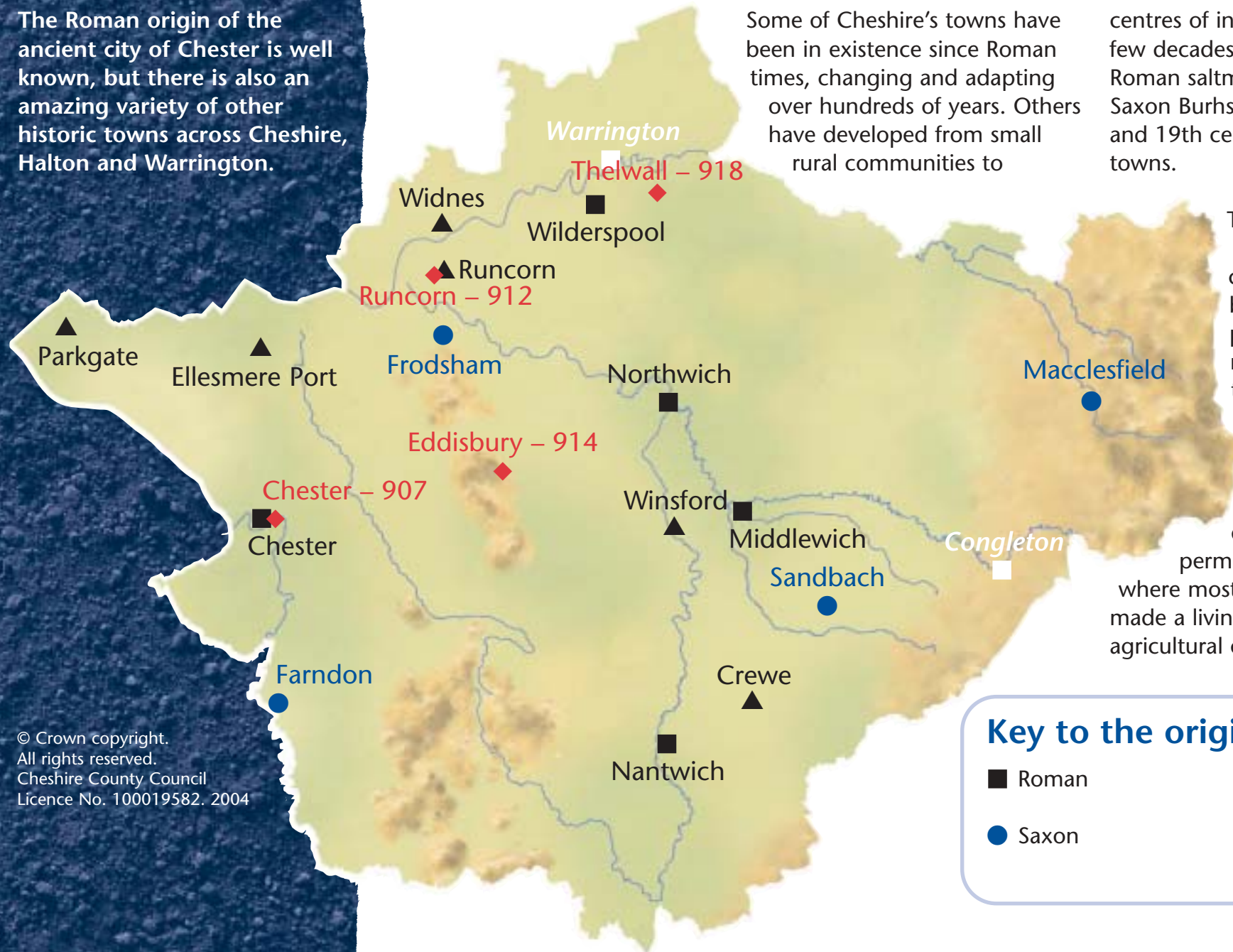# Historic Towns of Cheshire

8 **Historic towns**

Historic Towns of Cheshire

The Roman origin of the ancient city of Chester is well known, but there is also an amazing variety of other historic towns across Cheshire, Halton and Warrington.

Some of Cheshire's towns have been in existence since Roman times, changing and adapting over hundreds of years. Others have developed from small rural communities to centres of industry within a few decades. They include Roman saltmaking settlements, Saxon Burhs, medieval boroughs and 19th century railway towns.

The evidence of their historic beginnings can be seen in the buildings, street patterns and place names of the towns today. These historic towns range in size but they all have one thing in common; they developed into permanent settlements where most of the population made a living from non-agricultural occupations.

Warrington

Thelwall – 918

Widnes

Wilderspool

Runcorn
Runcorn – 912

Parkgate

Ellesmere Port

Frodsham

Northwich

Macclesfield

Eddisbury – 914

Chester – 907

Winsford

Middlewich

Congleton

Chester

Sandbach

Farndon

Crewe

Nantwich

Key to the origins of towns

■ Roman   ◆ Saxon burhs

● Saxon   ▲ Post medieval

Roman Towns

Illustrations by Graham Sumner © Roman Middlewich Project

The Roman army established a legionary fortress at Chester and smaller forts at Northwich and Middlewich. The presence of the army led to the development of towns around military settlements. These towns would have had workshops and traders to supply the soldiers. Towns were also established away from forts, at places where transport links met.

Salt Towns

In Cheshire, the main activity apart from farming was salt making. Salt has been extracted from the brine springs of central Cheshire since the Iron Age, probably by the local tribe. It is likely that the Romans took control of salt working in Cheshire as salt was a

Saltworks around 130AD

valuable commodity, used for flavouring and preserving food. There were salt production sites outside the forts at Middlewich and Northwich. Recent excavations at Nantwich have revealed a substantial salt-working settlement on the banks of the River Weaver.

Middlewich

The settlement here was originally an auxiliary fort of the Roman army, used to help secure control of the northern territories. Outside the military settlement was an area of salt production.

Excavations show that the settlement was laid out along King Street in narrow timber buildings. The evidence of salt working included kilns, brine storage pits and lead salt pans. The land at the rear of the buildings was used for small-scale industrial activity. There is evidence of iron, bronze and lead working, shoemaking, weaving, window glass making and leather working. The land at the edge of the main settlement seems to have been subdivided into small fields for agriculture, salt-making and pottery production.

Reconstruction of Wilderspool Roman Settlement, 2nd century AD

Wilderspool, Warrington

The settlement at Wilderspool was home to a civilian industrial community. It was situated at the lowest crossing point of the River Mersey, making it a good place for a settlement.

The Roman settlement was occupied from the end of the 1st century AD to the 4th century AD. Excavations have identified lots of different industrial activity, with evidence of iron smelting, lead and bronze working, glass and pottery making and enamelling.

The settlement's position on the River Mersey, with links to the network of Roman roads, meant it could easily export its products and there was probably a port there. The settlement seems to have initially supplied the army in north Britain, then later civilian markets. There is good evidence for pottery production at Wilderspool and pottery vessels made there have been found at forts along Hadrian's Wall.

Saxon Towns

Following the decline of Roman Britain, people left the towns and returned to farming, until Saxon settlers developed new urban centres.

Wichs

The place name element "wich" is Saxon. In Cheshire it is used to refer to any of the salt producing towns. The Domesday Survey of 1086 provides valuable information about salt production in Saxon Cheshire. The valuation of the towns of Middlewich, Nantwich and Northwich give an idea of the amount of salt being produced, with Nantwich being the most important.

Estate centres

The large estates of the Saxon Earls would have needed a centre for administration. Both Frodsham and Macclesfield belonged to the Earl of Mercia before the Norman Conquest and were probably originally the administrative centres of large estates. They would have attracted further settlement and trade. At the time of the Domesday survey, both were valued at £8, one of the largest sums in Cheshire.

Churches and monastic sites

Minsters were centres of the earliest Saxon religious communities. The settlement patterns of both Farndon and Sandbach may owe their origins to Saxon Minster churches. Both appear to have circular churchyards, a shape associated with early Saxon Churches.
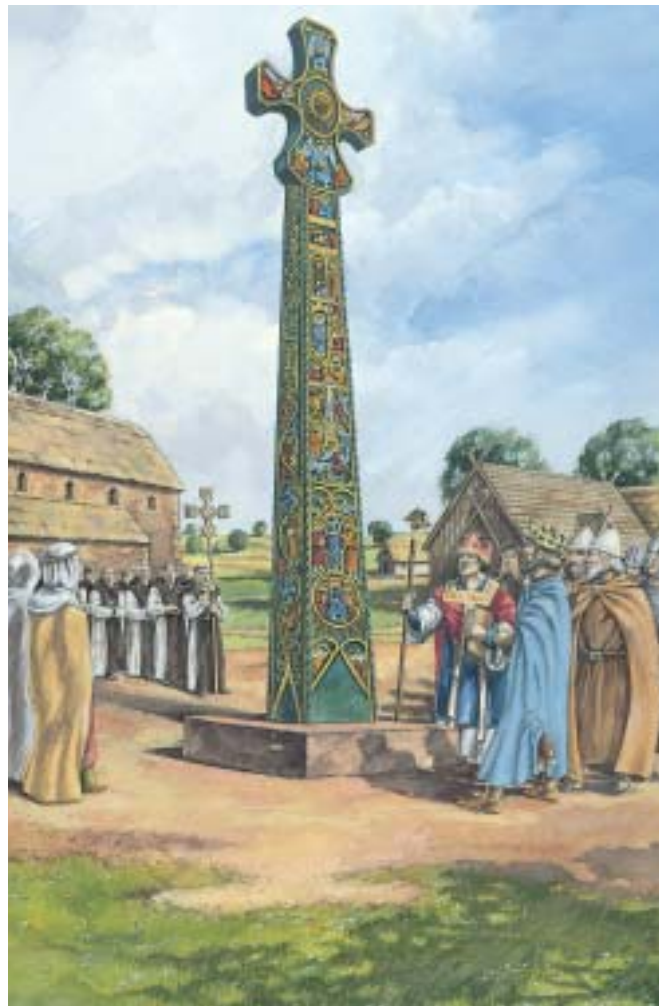
The elaborate pre-Viking sculpture found in Sandbach suggests the town was the focus of a sculpture workshop operating in the early 9th century.

Burhs

The building of new fortified Saxon towns, known as burhs was recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. They were originally intended to defend against Viking attack. Burhs were built at Chester, Eddisbury, Runcorn and Thelwall. These defended sites often grew into trading centres and are important examples of early urbanism in Cheshire.

Runcorn was founded as a burh in 912. It occupied an important strategic position, and would have allowed the Mercians to defend the Mersey against Viking invasion from the North.

Thelwall was the site of a burh built in 918. It was primarily a fort, not a town, so the site was probably quite small. It was probably intended to guard the fords across the River Mersey though no archaeological evidence for the site has yet been found.

Reconstruction of one of the Sandbach Crosses

Medieval Towns

The prosperity of medieval Cheshire can be seen in the development of towns. Tax records are a good way of judging the size of towns through history. Data for Cheshire towns is rare however, because in the medieval period the shire was exempt from national taxes, having its own tax system, the Mize. Records of the Mize of 1405 show that Nantwich paid £7 3s, the largest sum in Cheshire (Chester was not included).

Crown Hotel, Nantwich.

Records show which settlements were granted borough status. The King originally granted borough charters, but by the 13th century local landowners were also issuing charters. Most of the Cheshire boroughs were established in this way. The founding of a borough would have increased the lord's revenue by encouraging and controlling trade. Charters may have been issued to take advantage of the success of existing markets.

Boroughs

The right to self-administration was granted to many towns through borough charters. There are good documentary references to many of these. We have records of the charters for Macclesfield, Frodsham, Congleton, Knutsford, Warrington, Over and Farnworth.

In the 13th century, Macclesfield and Frodsham were granted charters by Ranulph de Blundeville, Earl of Chester. The borough of Congleton was created by Henry de Lacy, Baron of Halton, and Warrington was granted a charter by William de Boteler. William de Tabley granted a charter to Knutsford in 1292.

The charters for these boroughs record the rights of the burgesses (citizens of the town). Their rights included the right to rent plots of land (burgage plots) in the town and exemption from tolls in their lord's other territories.

In Macclesfield and Congleton burgesses could form merchant guilds. This allowed them to control the quality of the goods made and the price at which they were sold.

In all the towns, burgesses still had to bake bread and grind corn at the lord's ovens and mills. They also all had the right to common pasture and at Macclesfield and Congleton they could take peat from nearby mosslands.

All these boroughs were successful. In 1283 110 burgages are recorded in Frodsham; in 1294, 38 burgages are recorded in Knutsford, while by 1311 there were 86 in Congleton.

Medieval Towns *continued*

Settlements without Borough Charters

Other towns have no surviving charter, but do have references to burgages and so are assumed to have had borough status. This is the case for Nantwich, Middlewich, Tarporley and Malpas. Burgesses are mentioned frequently in Middlewich from the 13th century onwards and there is a reference to two burgesses in Malpas in 1288.

Market Cross, Malpas
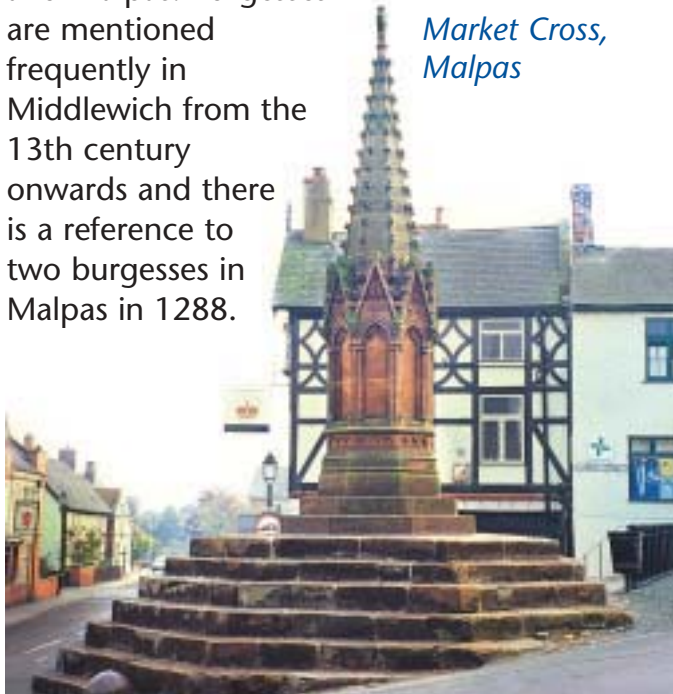
Planned towns

Medieval towns often followed a distinctive plan, whether brand new or the rebuild of an earlier settlement. Frodsham is probably the best surviving example of a planned medieval

town in Cheshire, with burgage plots lining the north of Main Street. These plots are around 150 metres long and look as though they were laid out to a plan, though later division and amalgamation has hidden their original width. 13th century deeds mention properties on Church Street and burgage plots can be identified in this area.

Medieval towns were also founded around castles, as can be seen at Aldford and Malpas, while other towns were established around religious communities.
At Farndon the outline of the earlier Saxon monastery influenced the growth of the medieval town.

Trade

Documentary evidence for the range of trade and industry in medieval settlements is good. Trades recorded in Frodsham include mercers (cloth merchants), blacksmiths, butchers, basketmakers, skinners, dyers and carpenters. Many of the trades were associated with leatherworking, an important export in medieval Cheshire.

Markets and Fairs

Markets and fairs were an important part of medieval life. Some towns had regular markets and so had market places or wide main streets to accommodate traders. Aldford had both a market and the right to hold three annual fairs.

Markets were often held in churchyards. At Burton and Tarporley the churches are set back from the main street, so it is possible that markets were held there.

Extract from 1772 plan of Warrington.

Post Medieval Towns

Farming was still the major economic activity in most areas, but by the 18th century, this emphasis changed in towns such as Warrington. Here manufacturing became dominant, especially the production of sail cloth, as well as copper smelting and the manufacture of files and hand tools. Northwich became the main salt manufacturer but Nantwich and Middlewich survived the downturn in salt production. They prospered as market towns, serving the surrounding countryside with a wide range of trades and services, including cheese making and tanning.

Ports
The ports on the Dee estuary were established in medieval times, with a wide variety of goods exported from the county. There were a number of quays along the Dee Estuary including that at Parkgate near Neston. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Parkgate was a popular coastal resort with regular passenger sailings to Ireland. The silting of the River Dee ended its role as a port and the former quayside is now bordered by a huge salt marsh.

Textile Towns
In the mid 18th century, the east of the county became a centre of textile production with a great number of water-powered mills.

Macclesfield and Congleton were the main textile production centres in Cheshire with a long history of domestic production. In Macclesfield, silk buttons had been made since Elizabethan times and Congleton was known for its silk ribbons.

These towns grew from small farming communities into centres of trade and industry, whose skylines were dominated by textile mills.

Transport towns
A number of towns owe their origins to the industrialisation of Cheshire in the 19th and 20th centuries. Crewe was once a small village, but when it was adopted as the company town for the Grand Junction Railway, its population rocketed. The railway companies responsible for the engineering works also provided housing, schools and churches.

Chemical works, Widnes.

Ellesmere Port developed into a large town through it role as the port for the Shropshire Union Canal. The canal port was well used throughout the 19th century, despite competition from the railways. Ellesmere Port was an important interchange with the Manchester Ship Canal, which was opened in 1894.

Chemical towns
The ancient tradition of salt working fed the development of the chemical industry in Cheshire. Salt was essential for the production of alkali, which was produced in Runcorn, Widnes and Northwich. Alkali was vital to the soap and glassmaking industries along the Mersey. There were soap works at Warrington, Widnes and Runcorn and glass works at Warrington and St. Helens.

Left: Bank Street, Crewe before demolition. A typical example of 19th century railway workers' housing.

Places to Visit

The Boat Museum
South Pier Road, Ellesmere Port, Cheshire
CH65 4FW
www.boatmuseum.org.uk
Tel: 0151 355 5017
Admission Charge

Catalyst Science Discovery Centre
Mersey Road, Widnes, Cheshire, WA8 0DF
Tel: 0151 420 1121
www.catalyst.org.uk
Admission Charge

Congleton Museum
Market Square, Congleton, CW12 1ET
Tel: 01260 276360
www.congletonmuseum.co.uk
Admission Charge

The Grosvenor Museum
27 Grosvenor Street, Chester, CH1 2DD
Tel: 01244 402008
www.chestercc.gov.uk

Nantwich Museum
Pillory Street, Nantwich, Cheshire, CW5 5BQ
Tel: 01270 627104
www.nantwichmuseum.org.uk

The Salt Museum
162 London Road, Northwich, CW9 8AB
Tel: 01606 41331
www.saltmuseum.org.uk
Admission Charge

Warrington Museum & Art Gallery
Bold Street, Warrington, WA1 1JG
Tel. No. 01925 442392
www.warrington.gov.uk/museum

www.cheshire.gov.uk/archaeology