

Excavations at Chester.
Roman land division and a probable
villa in the hinterland of Deva

Excavation at Saughton Army Camp, Huntington, Chester.

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Front cover: Drawing of a Roman altar recovered during the excavations at Saighton Camp.
Back cover, top right: Drawing of a sherd from a Samian ware bowl (12, Dr. 37); decoration includes a seated stag in a double medallion within a panel, which sits above a panel with an eagle with its wings spread. Back cover, below: Cobbling 728 forming entranceway in eastern boundary ditch.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Summary



Figure 1. Saighton Camp, Chester: site location

The former Saighton Camp (centred on NGR SJ 4290 6420) was built for training by the British Army just prior to the start of the Second World War. The camp was located on the plain to the west of the mid-Cheshire ridge, to the east of the River Dee and to the south of Huntington village, separated from the latter by the A55 (Figure 1). It remained in use by the military, in much reduced form, until the turn of the millennium. At its greatest extent in the early 1960s, it covered over 40 hectares, but demolition of redundant buildings started in the later years of that decade. Following withdrawal of the military, by 2005 the site was largely abandoned and the majority of the structures had been demolished.

The land is generally flat, lying at approximately 20m above Ordnance Datum, although there is evidence that local variations in the ground were levelled as part of construction of the camp, especially in its eastern portion.

The camp's redevelopment as housing started in that year and was undertaken in several phases by Commercial Estates Group, Taylor Wimpey, Bovis Homes, and Redrow. Northern Archaeological Associates Ltd (NAA) carried out the archaeological works for each phase and the subsequent post-excavation analysis. The archive resulting from this work has been deposited with the Grosvenor Museum, Chester.

The excavations revealed important and extensive Roman period remains located 3km from the Roman legionary fortress of Chester (Deva Victrix). Part of a high-status settlement of second- to fourth-century date, together with a regular field system laid out over more than 20 hectares, were encountered. The excavated settlement appears to be an ancillary area to a much larger site, the centre of which lies to the south and is believed to be a villa. This is the closest such site to Chester, and villas are notably rare in the region. The field system runs parallel with a modern road (Sandy Lane), suggesting the latter is a Roman route. The field system was probably laid out by the legion at Deva as part of the lands they controlled around the fortress.

Archaeological background: Roman Chester, Cheshire and beyond

By P.N. Wood

Saighton Camp lay 3km south-east of the legionary fortress of Deva Victrix at Chester (Figure 2), which was founded probably in AD74 or 75 as part of the Flavian advance into Wales and northern England. Although experiencing phases of less intensive occupation, it appears to have remained as a permanent military establishment, probably to the end of the Roman period. The extensive civilian settlement (*canabae legionis*) which soon grew up around the fortress also appears to have been occupied well into the fourth century (Mason 2012: 44–5, 50, 109–10, 227–8). The large military presence would have had a substantial impact not only in the immediate vicinity of the fortress, but also across a much wider area, and the spheres of influence of Deva and its legion (first Legio II Aduatrix and after c. AD 90, Legio XX Valeria Victrix) can be detected as far away as Hadrian's Wall and the west coast of Wales. The legion had authority over a considerable number of auxiliary forts and their units, the extent of this command area denoted by evidence of legionary activity; stamped brick and tile, or inscriptions recording building work, have been found at many forts in north-west England and northern Wales (Mason 2012: 131–6). The legion itself established a major brick, tile and pottery works at Holt, 12km south of Chester, producing pottery from c. AD 85 until c. AD 130, with the production of building materials continuing into the third century (Grimes 1930: 48–52; Mason 2012: 158–62).

The Roman state – with Deva as its regional centre – also appears to have taken control over many natural resources, establishing or developing local industries (including agriculture) to exploit them in Cheshire, Lancashire and north-east Wales (Figure 2). This supported the needs of the legion at Deva and the other forts of the command area, which together would have been considerable and would probably have required additional imports from elsewhere in Britain and beyond (Carrington 2008: 20–7).

Stamped ingots deriving from north Wales show exploitation of the lead ores from that area, probably under the direct control of the provincial government, and production sites on the north Welsh coast have been identified at Prestatyn and Pentre (Mason 2012: 134–5, 162–3). The site at Pentre contained a large stone-built house of second century date. This had several phases of rebuilding, including hypocausts and a bath suite, and has been interpreted as the house of a civilian or military official in charge of the lead industry in the area (O'Leary and Davey 1976: 146–51).

Salt was of great importance to both the Roman state and the army in particular, not only for food preservation but also tanning and dyeing, and production centres exploiting Cheshire's salt-bearing rock have been identified at Middlewich, Nantwich and Northwich (Shotter 2005: 42–5). Most evidence has been found for the late first and the second centuries, with some later activity into the late third or early fourth centuries (Arrowsmith and Power 2012: 34–5). At Middlewich, the relationship between an apparently early fort and vicus, and the latter's development for salt manufacture is unclear, but both salt production and building activity appear to have been most

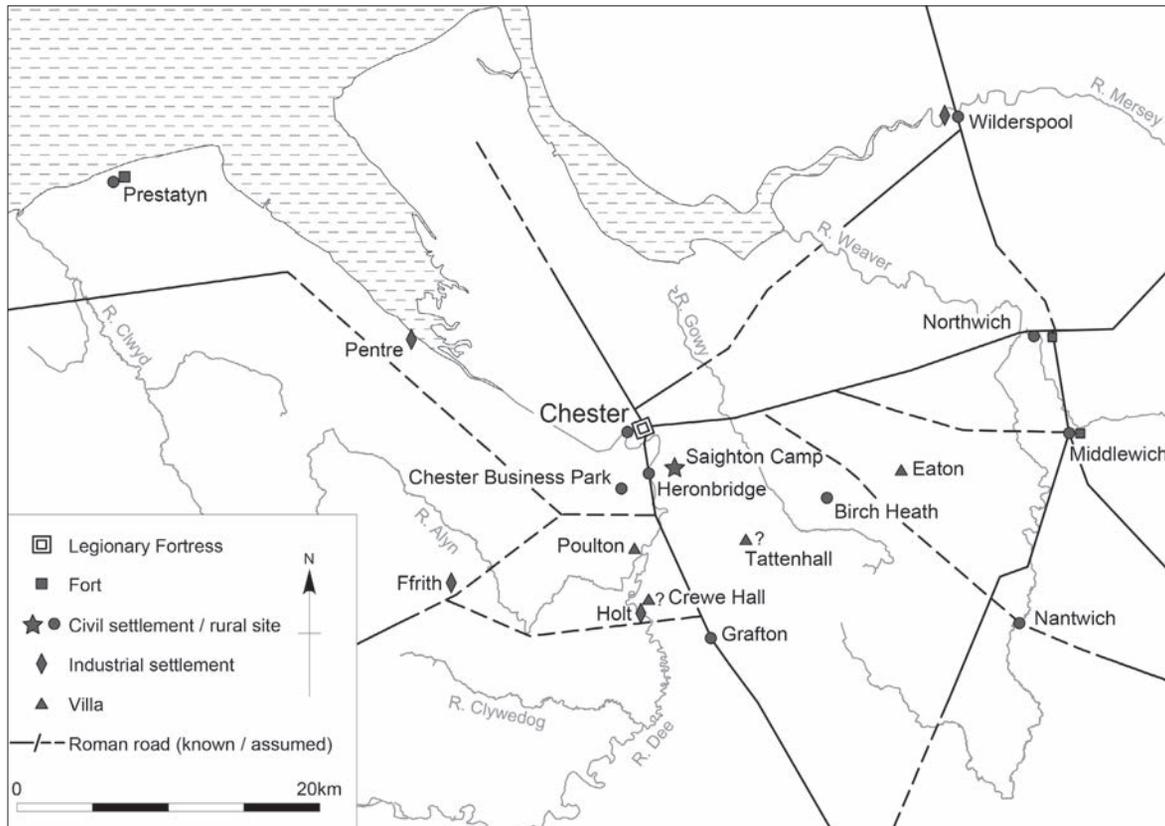


Figure 2. Roman period sites mentioned in the text (after Mason 2012)

intensive from the later first to the mid second centuries. Salt making was accompanied by pottery production, and the tanning and working of cattle hides has also been identified. Occupation later than this suggests that salt production occurred at many smaller sites rather than at Middlewich itself (Garner and Reid 2009: 77–80).

Further north, similar settlements were established along the main Roman route (King Street), which at least in their earliest stages seem geared to the needs of the military. The closest to Chester was Wilderspool, apparently established in the early AD70s, possibly as a military supply depot. Several phases of construction have been recognised in the main roadside settlement, and supply of the army appears to have been central to its function. Metalworking, principally ironwork, is well-documented, along with pottery and tile manufacture. A *mansio* or villa lay c. 300m to the north-east of the main area. Activity in the main settlement appears to have declined sharply after the AD320s, but the villa-like site continued to be occupied into the early fifth century or beyond (Rogers 2007: 23–51).

The supply of the dietary staples of the troops – cereals and meat, both on the hoof and preserved – was of primary importance to the provincial authorities. Calculations of the grain demands of the army and urban civilian population in the region suggest the need for many thousands of tonnes per annum (Carrington 2008: 18–30). The very large quantities of meat, of which cattle are still seen as the dominant species for supply to military sites, has led to the argument that the Cheshire Plain could have been developed for meat production, especially with the presence of the salt deposits (Philpott 2006: 69). Exactly what relationship Deva had with the salt, iron and other production settlements is unclear, but with reference to salt production, it has been speculated that the industry could have been run directly by a procurator, or perhaps leased to private individuals (Shotter 2005: 43).

In addition to its control and interests in the wider area, the garrison was likely to have had direct control of land around the fortress, known as the *prata legionis* ('meadows of the legion'). These are known from legionary fortresses elsewhere in the empire, and where indications of their size can be made, the borders may have been many kilometres from the fortress. This land was appropriated for a number of reasons, but arguably the most important (hence the name) was to provide grazing land for the legion's many hundreds of draught animals, mounts for cavalry and officers, and herds of livestock for fresh meat. Later references to lands controlled by a legion often use the term *territorium* and are associated with various officials for particular functions and duties (Mason 1988: 164–5, 174–5).

Outside the fortress and *canabae*, and in the more immediate area of Saighton Camp (approximately 1.5km west of Saighton Camp), a large nucleated roadside settlement lay at Heronbridge, on the west bank of the river Dee on the Roman road running south from Chester (Figure 2). This site, which stretched for nearly 1km along the road, appears to have been founded in the late first century and continued to be occupied into the fourth century. A rock-cut quay was created in the early second century, which was later adapted as part of a cemetery from which several stone funerary inscriptions were recovered (Mason 2012: 128–30, 156–8, 207–11, 229). Heronbridge's location only 2km or so south of the fortress and especially of the *canabae* is of note, but the presence of large settlements close to a legionary fortress occurs at many sites elsewhere within the Roman empire. Various theories for the origin of these settlements have been proposed, but it is argued that in the case of Chester, Heronbridge lay within the territory of the local tribe – the *Cornovii* – rather than the *prata legionis*. This in turn would mean that in this instance the *prata* lay to the east of the river Dee (Mason 1988: 174–8).

The only certain known villa in Cheshire lay at Eaton-by-Tarporley, c. 14km east of the former camp (Figure 2). Here, a rectangular timber building of possible early second-century date was succeeded, probably in the late second century, by a stone corridor-house with projecting wings and a bath suite. During the late third or early fourth centuries, the structure was altered considerably, with slate as the main roofing material (Mason 1983: 67–72). Finds of wall plaster and of brick and tile suggest the presence of more high-status stone buildings at Tattenhall, Poulton and Crewe Hall near Holt (Nevell 2003: 13; Carrington 2012b: 385).

Relatively few other rural settlements have been excavated in the hinterland of Chester. Sites investigated in the wider area of Cheshire and Merseyside, suggest that the main form of settlement was enclosed farmsteads. Some continued from the late Iron Age but their number increased significantly in the late first and early second centuries. Two significant excavations of such sites have taken place close to Chester and Saighton Camp at Birch Heath and Chester Business Park (Figure 2).

At Birch Heath c. 11km south-east of Saighton Camp, the settlement appears to have been founded in the late first century, although the excavated area may initially have been used for agriculture. Three sub-circular structures, of probable second-century date, may not have been dwellings and were linked to irregular enclosures, suggesting a larger settlement nearby. Occupation continued until around the mid-third century, but another sub-circular structure used for metalworking appeared to be late sixth- to early eighth-century in date (Fairburn 2002: 104–9).

At Chester Business Park, south of the fortress and 4km south-west of Saighton Camp, several phases of Roman period field system and accompanying structures were found, together with a section of metalled road. The settlement appeared to have late Iron Age origins, but most of the evidence was of late first- or second-century date, with some later material suggesting occupation into the early fourth century. The excavated area was again thought to be peripheral to nearby settlement. The field system had a substantial ditch defining the northern extent of the site, interpreted as a boundary ditch to keep livestock out. Parallel ditches, rectilinear enclosures and

a possible stock enclosure containing a well and waterhole were also found, all of which suggested livestock management, and that the system was in use for over a century (Lightfoot and Martin 2004).

Prior to redevelopment of Saighton Camp, the only evidence for Roman period activity within the vicinity was a number of recorded coin findspots. A small bronze issue of Constantine II was recovered during the construction of Saighton Camp in 1938–9. A silver denarius of Lucius Verus and an illegible bronze issue were discovered on nearby Rowton Moor in 1889, and a sestertius of Vespasian and a denarius of Hadrian were recovered in association with an undiagnostic lead disc to the north-west of Huntington Hall (Northern Archaeological Associates 2005: 4–5).