

THE PACKHORSE WAYS FROM NANTWICH INTO WALES

Have you ever wondered why the Nantwich street known as Welsh Row is so called?

It is a reminder of the time when Nantwich was the great centre for the production of salt by the boiling of brine from natural brine springs.

Nantwich Museum contains fascinating displays about this industry and the brine swimming bath is a reminder that 'wild' brine still exists below the surface.

When the antiquary John Leland travelled through Nantwich around 1539 he noted that about 300 salt makers worked there.

The enormous amount of wood or charcoal which was burned to evaporate the brine, to produce salt, meant that a constant pall of smoke hung over the town.

Welsh salt traders, who had a reputation for being rather wild, were not allowed to cross the Weaver bridge and so had to lodge just outside the town, in the street which became known as 'Welsh' Row.

Peter Burdett's map of Cheshire, published in 1777, shows that the route from Nantwich into North Wales divided at Woodhey (pronounced 'Woody'), near Ridley, where on the side of the road the stump of Woodhey Cross still stands.

I think that this cross was some sort of a trading post, where traders coming out of Wales with their long strings of packhorses might have met up with traders coming from Nantwich, to buy their supplies of salt.

From Woodhey one route followed the line of the present A.534, through Bickerton, Broxton and Clutton, to cross the River Dee by the ancient packhorse bridge leading from Farndon into Holt.

Where this road passed through Bulkeley it was at one time known as 'Walshmonstreet' and until the early 20th century the stretch through Bickerton was called 'Salter's Way'.

The other route from Woodhey ran across what is now Cholmondeley Park, through Hampton, Malpas and Worthenbury, to cross the river by the packhorse bridge at Bangor-on-Dee.

After the discovery of rock salt in the Northwich area in the 17th century, the centre of the Cheshire salt industry gradually moved away from Nantwich.

The place-name ending 'wich', as in Nantwich, Northwich, Middlewich and Leftwich, denotes an industrial settlement, one reminder of the former and continuing importance of salt to Cheshire's economy.

Until the days of modern refrigeration, salt was essential for the preservation of food such as meat and fish.

Later, without common salt from which many other chemical compounds can be derived, there would never have been the enormous development of the chemical industries, and companies such as I.C.I., along the banks of the Rivers Weaver and Mersey.

Nowadays, the television news images of Lorries from all over the country queuing outside the Winsford rock salt mine during severe winter weather are a continuing reminder of the demand for Cheshire salt, and its importance for keeping our roads clear of snow and ice.