4.2 SANDBACH FLASHES

Key Characteristics

- Generally a flat open landscape with main variations in topography created by man made features
- Large flat artificial expanses of water located within degraded pasture fields
- The flashes are of nature conservation value and recreational value including fishing
- Landscape is influenced by the mineral extractive industry. Areas of subsidence occurred as a result of former salt mining activity
- Urban fringe developments at Elworth include modern housing, industrial works, railway infrastructure and areas of subsidence are evident within views
- Agricultural land is medium scale under pasture, though relatively poor quality
- Relatively low vegetation cover in comparison to the landscape of the wider Borough. Hedges are often intermittent and have few hedgerow trees
- The railway line is prominent, running north-east south-west across the character area
4.2 SANDBACH FLASHES

LANDCOVER TYPES

Flashes
Much disturbed pasture farmland, within which the flashes dominated. Localised areas of subsidence and erosion expose soils. Vegetation associated with the flashes includes marginal aquatics and clumps of deciduous woodland.

Pasture Farmland
Medium scale farmland predominantly used for pasture. In the vicinity of the flashes, fields tend to be larger in size, and irregular, with poorly defined boundaries.

Elworth Urban Fringe
Housing and industry has developed within pasture fields, located between the flashes. Conflicting usage has created a visually unbalanced, fragmented landscape.

Peatland
Area of peatland situated on a localised raised landform, within which water bodies occur on poorly drained soils. Associated with the flashes are clumps of broadleaf, deciduous woodland, some of which is coppiced. Pasture fields are small in scale and defined by a significant number of hedgerow trees.

LANDSCAPE QUALITY

The Sandbach Flash is poor quality. This landscape is much affected by industry, and has little aesthetic value. There is generally a lack of mature vegetation cover. Factors which contribute to this poor quality landscape include:

- landscape degraded through past salt extraction where subsidence and inadequate restoration occurs; and
- landscape degraded through ongoing industrial processes and 'urbanisation' of the countryside.
4.2 SANDBACH FLASHES

Existing Landscape

The Sandbach Flashes is a small area of land wrapping around the south and west of Sandbach and extends to the River Wheelock at the Borough boundary. This landscape is heavily influenced by mineral extraction and industrial development. However, the area remains mainly rural in character.

This is a broadly level, low lying landscape, which drains either to the Flashes or the River Wheelock. The area is exclusively formed on upper keuper siluriferous beds overlaid with predominantly undifferentiated fluvo-glacial deposits with some boulder clay. The impact of salt mining is evident in areas of degraded land and a series of flat flooded fields and lakes (flashes). These flashes are the result of subsidence caused by pumping out in solution, large beds of salt with an average thickness of about 3 metres. These open expanses of water give the area a very distinct character that is not found elsewhere in the Borough. The Crewe to Manchester railway is raised on a prominent embankment across the area. The subsidence and rail embankment combine to give the landscape an unnatural and despoilt character.

The flashes are mainly open water with some marginal vegetation and areas of tree cover around the perimeter. The flashes are areas of significant nature conservation value and both Watch Lane Flash to the north and Elton Flash to the south are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and are also Nature Reserves, providing a valuable habitat for water fowl.

Agricultural use of the land is predominantly low quality pasture. Fields are medium scale and have an irregular pattern. Degraded intermittent or overgrown hedgerows poorly define field boundaries, more so within areas of subsidence and on land close to the urban fringe. Isolated clumps of hawthorn occur within fields possibly remnants of former field boundaries. Hawthorn hedgerows are generally less evident than elsewhere in the Borough. Where hedgerows have become degraded, field boundaries may be post and wire or post and rail. There are no significant areas of woodland, only dotted clumps of trees. Along some lanes, metal estate railings define field boundaries, reminiscent of other areas within the borough. There is more vegetation along the River Wheelock and in localised stretches along the canal.

Settlement pattern is dispersed comprising mainly scattered agricultural buildings. Many buildings are a mixture of traditional Cheshire brick constructions and modern contemporary structures. Few minor winding roads cross the area. The railway embankment and line infrastructure has more influence on the landscape than the road network and is a prominent feature in many views.

This is an open landscape enabling medium distance views over the water bodies and towards Elworth. The sheets of water are quite unique to this locality, creating an area distinct from the landscape of the wider Borough. The area has a relatively unkempt and unnatural appearance mainly due to the artificial look of the waterbodies and the influence of urban and industrial features. Modern housing appears uncomfortable in close proximity to the industrial works and poorly defined or run down field boundaries fail to unify the landscape. Overall this landscape is poorly balanced with many clashing elements. As the Sandbach Flashes continue to the north, the influence of Elworth lessens, and although areas of subsidence remain evident, the general landscape structure improves and is broadly similar to that of the Cheshire Plain.

Designations

Landscape designations within the Sandbach Flashes are as follows:

Statutory Designations

- SSSI – three designated areas include Elton Flashes, Watch Lane/Red Lane Flashes, Moston.

Non-statutory Designations

- SBI 1999 B – along the short stretch of road at Brook Farm.
- SBI 1999 C – Wheelock Disused Railway small wetland area
- Conservation area– Trent and Mersey Canal

Forces for Change

The main issues and forces for change affecting this character area stem from development pressure and agricultural change

- The potential for urban industrial development to further encroach on the countryside is significant.

- Symptoms of agricultural change include neglected farmland; neglect of hedges, field enlargement, tree loss and replacement of hedges by fencing, which is having a negative effect on the character and quality of the landscape.

- Recreational pressures.

Future Management

The aim of the following guidelines is to outline the most appropriate management and conservation strategies, which ensure that the areas character is conserved, restored or enhanced.

- Respect the conservation value of the flashes. The open expanses of water, wetland surrounds and clumps of tree cover are an important distinguishing feature of the landscape and are of importance for nature conservation. Continue to maintain and manage the flashes, avoiding new developments in these areas.

- Plant new hedgerows, with trees and simple blocks of woodland. Improve the visual appearance and conservation value at the urban fringe and wider character area by planting new hawthorn hedges with hedgerow trees and blocks of broadleaf woodland with oak and ash.

- Promote further areas for nature conservation. Areas of disturbed or degraded land affected by industry provide an opportunity to develop new landscape features such as woodlands, wetlands or grasslands.

- Appropriate screening and integration of new and existing developments. Due to the open nature of the landscape, large buildings are potentially visible from the surrounding landscape. Use off-site tree planting to provide screening to new developments.

CONGLETON LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT