4.3 WHEELock ROLLING PLAIN

Key Characteristics

- Rolling and somewhat more incised landform than that of the Cheshire Plain
- Linear bands of deciduous woodland and scrub along natural watercourses and other corridors such as the dismantled rail line and canal
- Combination of clipped hedgerows and thick overgrown hedgerows along field boundaries and country lanes. Some hedge row loss and replacement with post and wire fencing
- Irregular medium scale fields predominantly used for pasture with some isolated areas given over to arable
- Distinctive Cheshire railings in various states of repair along country lanes
- Dispersed settlement pattern of isolated residential properties, farms and villages
- Urban fringe land uses including golf courses at Sandbach and nurseries/garden centres on the edge of Alsager
- Rolling landform tends to truncate views within the area, generally limiting them to short or middle distance views
4.3 WHEELock ROLLING PLAIN

LANDCOVER TYPES

Rolling Farmland
Agricultural farmland, predominantly pastoral with smaller areas under arable use. Fields are overall medium in scale and have an irregular pattern.

River Wheelock and tributaries
Narrow shallow valleya, comprises sloping ground strips of deciduous woodland, pasture fields and areas of rougher grassland.

Urban Fringe Recreation
Malkins Bank Golf Course, lying adjacent to the Trent and Mersey Canal.

Urban Fringe Industrial
Industrial works located at the urban fringe of Sandbach and Alsager. Works are largely surrounded by vegetation.

LANDSCAPE QUALITY

The Wheelock Rolling Plain is an ordinary/good quality landscape. The overall view of the area is pleasant. Factors which contribute to the quality of the landscape include:

- Managed agricultural land with a mixture of field boundaries and hedgerows;
- Not well managed, non-intensive farmed pasture along Wheelock Valley;
- Occasional mixed land uses of golf course and pasture;
- Detractors include pylons and exposed settlement edges;
- Industrial activity present but generally well integrated into the landscape, although still visible in places.
4.3 WHEELOCK ROLLING PLAIN

Existing Landscape

The Rolling Wheelock Plain is located between Sandbach and Alsager and extends to the Borough boundary. The area runs broadly along the line of the River Wheelock and its tributaries.

The areas topography combined with the influences of the River Wheelock and its tributaries makes the area distinct from the surrounding landscape of the wider Cheshire Plain. The landscape is rolling and somewhat more incised than that of the Cheshire Plain. It is formed predominantly of upper keuper saliferous beds with some areas of middle keuper marl overlaid with a mixture of boulder clay, undifferentiated fluvo-galicial deposits, glacial sand and gravel and small pockets of peat. The more deeply incised landforms exposes the sandy soils, more recent localised erosion along the course of the River Wheelock has formed low river cliffs, again exposing sandy alluvial soils. In places the landform comprises pronounced undulations, whilst other localised areas may flatten out and be more representative of the wider Cheshire Plain.

The Trent and Mersey Canal runs parallel to the Wheelock through much of this area. There are well established linear bands of deciduous vegetation along the watercourses, more so along the riverbank and tributaries. Woodland clumps include oak, ash and willow trees. The dismantled railway line is also well vegetated along its length. There is a combination of clipped well maintained hedgerows and thick overgrown hawthorn hedges along tributaries, stretches of canal and lanes. At Hassall pool, an estate character is evoked, not least by the pond setting of surrounding mature beech trees. At the urban fringe of Alsager there are distinctive small pockets of heath on sandier soils colonised with grassland, gorse and scrub vegetation.

Generally the land use is pasture, however, isolated arable fields do occur throughout much of the area. Pasture quality varies from lush green meadows to lower grazed fields of rougher pasture. Fields are medium in scale, with an irregular field pattern defined by maintained clipped hawthorn hedges, with some post and wire fencing infill. Hedgerow trees are generally present, although sporadic and showing signs of overmaturity. There is a distinct absence of young hedgerow trees. There are also short lengths of traditional ‘Cheshire’ style iron raling in various states of disrepair.

Settlement pattern is similar to that within the wider Cheshire Plain and includes isolated residential buildings and several farm properties and outbuildings. Buildings are not particularly distinctive, ranging from some older cheshire brick properties to a range of modern contemporary styles. Influences at Sandbach include urban fringe uses such as golf courses and also non-native planting, in particular stands of poplars. There is some nursery usage on the fringe of Alsager. The major transport route includes the M6 motorway, which cuts north south across the character area and also the Wheelock bypass. Very winding country lanes, sometimes with fairly high roadside embankments and hedgerows constrain views across much of the area.

Whilst the area is pleasant, the narrow valley associated with the Wheelock and its tributaries are not particularly attractive and do not create any great sense of drama or distinctiveness. The canal is an attractive landscape feature and introduces structures of interest into an otherwise indistinct landscape. Elements within the landscape, which detract from the character and quality of the area, include views of pylons and traffic noise generated by the M6. The rolling landform somewhat truncates views, particularly from the lower areas. The greater degree of enclosure arises in the main from landform and is heightened by vegetation, giving rise to a slightly more intimate landscape. Most views are middle distance, although in places longer distance views are available most notably towards Mow Cop summit.

Designations

Landscape designations within the Rolling Plain are as follows:

Statutory Designations
Conservation Area – Trent and Mersey Canal

Non-Statutory Designations
ASLEV – Abberleyfields and Sandbach Heath.
SBI A – narrow belts of woodland and grassland along the Wheelock tributaries
SBI B – Hassall Grassland; narrow belt of grassland and woodland along tributary leading to Hassall Pool

Forces for Change

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

• Recent urban developments have included new roads, housing. Recreational uses such as golf course have led to the loss of hedges. In addition, there is increased pressure for recreational user facilities. Non-native planting has been detrimental to the area's character.

• Symptoms of agricultural change include neglected farmland, field enlargement, over mature hedgerow trees and replacement of hedges by fencing which is having an adverse effect on the landscape quality and character of the area.

Future Management

The following guidelines outline the most appropriate management and conservation strategies, which ensure that the area's character is conserved, restored or enhanced.

• Respect the conservation value of the vegetation corridors associated with the River Wheelock and its tributaries. These drainage channels are distinguishing features of the landscape and are also of nature conservation value.

• Respect the conservation value of the Trent and Mersey canal. The canal is a distinguishing feature of the landscape. Continue to maintain and manage this resource avoiding new development along its course.

• Conserve small pockets of heath on the urban fringe of Alsager. Area of distinctive local character adds diversity to the landscape. Retain and maintain the healthland character.

• Resist planting poplar or other non-indigenous woodlands. In some areas species have been planted for their aesthetic value which can not otherwise be found in the local area. This practice dilutes local distinctiveness and should be avoided.

• Restore and manage hedgerows as positive conservation features within the landscape. Continue to manage hedgerows, restoring gaps and planting new trees to promote this feature within the landscape.

• 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.

• Maintain/improve quality of urban fringes at Sandbach and Alsager.

CONGLETON LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT

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