5. SETTLEMENTS

Introduction

5.1 Within this study, main settlements have not been included in the landscape character areas, and these are described separately below, under the two headings of Principal Settlements and Smaller Settlements. Descriptions consider extent, historical development, present-day character and influence upon the surrounding landscape. The location and extent of each settlement within the Borough is shown on the accompanying plan using the settlement boundaries as defined within Congleton Borough Local Plan 1998.

5.2 The principal settlements include the five towns of Alsager, Congleton, Holmes Chapel, Middlewich and Sandbach which form the focal points for shopping, commercial and leisure activities within the Borough.

5.3 The smaller settlements include Mow Cop, Mount Pleasant, Scholar Green, Goostrey, Rode Heath, Thurwood, Cranage, Brereton Green and Hassall Green.
Principal Settlements

Alsager

5.4 Alsager is located in the southern most part of the Borough, close to the District boundary, which forms the border with Staffordshire. In addition to the town itself, Alsager includes the settlements of Rode Heath and Lawton Heath. Alsager is surrounded to the north by the Wheelock Rolling Plain and to the south by the Alsager Plain.

5.5 This small town which was for centuries an agricultural village, takes its name from the principal landholder’s family. Until the latter 18th Century Alsager remained a small rural hamlet, with scattered farms and wild moorland. The Salt Line and Mere Lake Way, both former railway lines opened in the mid 1900s, with the primary function of carrying minerals to and from Stoke-on-Trent. Being located close to the railway the towns importance grew as a victorian commuter settlement. Rapid expansion meant that by 1905 approximately 3000 people inhabited Alsager. Development has continued and in 1997 the population was approximately 12250.

5.6 Alsager has retained its rural charm. There are important areas of open space within the town. The Mere is also an important feature and is of historic interest. Notable buildings include the two parish churches, the oldest being Christ church, built in 1789.

5.7 Influences upon the surrounding landscape are particularly evident to the east, where urban links extend beyond the county boundary towards Kidsgrove. Additionally urban fringe influence to the south includes golf course recreational development.

5.8 The extent of Alsager has been confined by the physical landscape. Tributaries of the River Wheelock and River Wear are natural boundaries for settlement development to the north and south, whilst the A50 road defines Alsagers urban edge to the east. There are greater rural influences along the western boundary, which is bordered by farmland. Lawton Gate has developed at the junction of the A50 and A5011. The settlement is defined by these main roads and additionally to the north by the Trent and Mersey canal, whilst being more open to the Alsager Plain landscape to the west.

Congleton

5.9 Congleton is by far the largest town within the Borough, located in the east of the district. The town boundary is heavily influenced by the physical make-up of the surrounding land, the Peak Fringe to the south-east, the River Dane Valley to the north and Macclesfield Canal to the east.

5.10 Early settlement within Congleton dates back to Neolithic times. The town prospered initially during the medieval period and later from its development as a textile town during the rise of the cloth and wool trades in the 16th Century and onwards. With the decline of the textile industry, the 19th Century saw the arrival of light industry engineering and paper trades to the area. 20th Century developments include residential expansion as well as pedestrianisation and development of the central shopping area within the town centre.

5.11 Congleton is a mixture of building types, associated with various phases of development. The town retains many elements of its medieval street plan. Additionally, a number of notable buildings remain from times of earlier prosperity including several half timbered buildings as well as a fine venetian gothic town hall. Much of the town area has retained its Georgian character. Most modern developments are two storey brick buildings with pitched roofs.

5.12 Expansion of Congleton into the surrounding landscape has largely been constrained due to a combination of the physical landscape (Peak Fringe, canal, Dane Valley, Dane-in-Shaw and Timbersbrook) and development planning restrictions (Green Belt, ASCV and ASLEVs). These factors have resulted in Congletons indented settlement boundary. The ‘green wedges’ extend natural feature into Congleton from the surrounding countryside and have become an important part of the character of the town. As well as functioning as green buffers and providing visual relief, these areas are of recreational value. Notable urban fringe influences include recreational development of a golf course and paddocks used for horse grazing.

Holmes Chapel

5.13 Holmes Chapel Village is located in the northern part of Congleton. The village has a relatively compact settlement pattern centred upon the converging A50, A54, A536 roads and rail line. Its northern boundary is defined to the north by the River Dane Valley and to the south by the River Croco. This village is situated in open countryside, being surrounded to the south/south-east by the Cheshire Plain.

5.14 An impressive feature north of Holmes Chapel is the railway viaduct of brick taking the Manchester to Crewe line 105 feet above the floor of the valley. Also nearby stands the futuristic radio telescope complex at Jodrell Bank whose giant reflector dish is widely visible across the Cheshire Plain.

5.15 Buildings are predominantly modern 20th Century brick, two storey constructions with pitched roofs. There are a few older traditional building. Large-scale industrial development within the village is confined to land east of the railway line. A main influence upon the 20th century development of Holmes Chapel has been the M6 motorway to the west.

5.16 Whilst main rivers have defined the settlement boundaries to the north and north-west, there are fewer physical boundaries to the south and east, where urban fringe spread has had a greater impact upon the landscape. Within the Dane Valley there has been some urban fringe developments such as sewage treatment works.

Middlewich

5.17 Middlewich is located in the western most part of the Borough. The western boundary is defined by the River Wheelock along which the district boundary runs, and the eastern boundary is influenced by the Trent and Mersey Canal.

5.18 The expansion of Middlewich has occurred as a result of the salt industry. Middlewich, one of Britain’s main salt-producing towns has been a salt town for 1,900 years. For 200 years it was the centre of the Roman salt industry, and only recently has the Roman method of extracting salt by boiling in huge pans been abandoned for the modern system of vacuum extraction. By the mid-19th Century Middlewich was an important stop on the stagecoach network. Additionally the canal system was vital for the salt industry, transporting coal in and salt out. Industrial development is particularly evident along the canal. Commercial use of the canals has declined over the years, although recently there has been an increase in recreational boating use of the waterway.

5.19 Buildings are predominantly modern 20th Century brick, two storey constructions with pitched roofs. There are a few older traditional buildings.

5.20 The landscape has been most influenced by the salt industry evident in flashes, mere and areas of subsidence. The industrial influence extends southwards beyond Middlewich along the canal. Additionally there has been some recreational development at the urban fringe and along the canal.

Sandbach

5.21 Sandbach is located in the south-west part of the Borough and is the second largest town in the district. The town boundary is influenced by the surrounding physical landscape features
including the Trent and Mersey Canal, River Wheelock tributary, the M6 and the Crewe-Manchester railway line.

5.22 The town takes its name from Richard de Sandbach, the principal landowner and Sheriff of Cheshire in the 13th Century. However, Sandbach had been the site of a settlement for centuries prior to this. Situated in the Market Place are the crosses of Sandbach, thought to have been erected in AD 653 and ranked amongst the finest monuments of antiquity in the UK. Sandbach has since developed as a market town, with the main expansion occurring as a result of the salt industry.

5.23 Distinct building types from certain historical eras are prominent within Sandbach. There are 17th Century Elizabethan style black and white buildings of timber and plaster, as well as 19th Century gothic style brick buildings. Additionally 20th Century developments are typically two storey brick constructions with pitched roofs. The settlement pattern has maintained a relatively open character.

5.24 The surrounding landscape has been most influenced by the salt industry, evident in flashes, meres and areas of subsidence within the pastorial farmland. Additionally, urban fringe influences include golf courses/recreational development.

5.25 Sandbach’s settlement boundary is indented by ‘green wedges’ extending between areas of urban development. These areas separate Elworth from Sandbach as well as extending rural features of the Wheelock Rolling Plain into the town. These areas are valued for functioning as strategic gaps or for amenity/recreational use (see ASLEV).

Smaller Settlements

Mow Cop and Mount Pleasant

5.26 These two villages are situated within a kilometre of each other along the Staffordshire Ridge, along the Borough boundary in the south east part of the Borough. The village boundaries are heavily influenced by topography, largely determining the settlement pattern.

5.27 Quarrying of millstone grit probably began on Mow Cop during the Iron Age. The first stone product was querns, used for grinding corn. The stone later became used for building construction. This outcrop of millstone grit is the western limit of the Carboniferous rocks which form the Pennine chain. On the eastern side of the summit coal was mined, and limestone was quarried on the western slope.

5.28 Building types are a mixture of older traditional agricultural Cheshire red brick buildings and more modern contemporary forms. Stone is a local building material in these settlements along with stone flagged roofs. There is less organisation of built forms than within other villages in Congleton Borough.

5.29 Urban fringe influences include recreational use of the Staffordshire Way, which contributes to pressure upon the landscape. Additionally urban links extend from Mow Cop across the district border.

Scholar Green

5.30 Scholar Green is located in the south east of the Borough. This is a linear settlement, which has developed along and between the A34 road, the Macclesfield canal and the rail line. The village borders the Mow Cop Fringe, below the Staffordshire Ridge, hence the influence of topography within the settlement pattern. Views eastwards are dominated by Mow Cop, whilst those westwards are across the Cheshire and Alsager Plain.

Goostrey

5.31 The village of Goostrey is located in the north of the Borough, close to the District Boundary. The settlement has developed primarily along Goostrey main road, though has also extended westwards across the District boundary and southwards along Hermitage Lane. A break in the built-up area occurs where the main road is crossed by Shear Brook. The village northern boundary is largely contained by a wooded tributary.

5.32 Building types are a mixture of older traditional and more modern forms. A cluster of listed buildings are located at the western end of the village. Goostrey lies within the rural landscape of North Congleton Plain. Views are often short to middle distance, being contained by vegetation, including small wooded areas. The surrounding landscape is much influenced by the radio telescopes at Jodrell Bank, which dominate views from the village to the east.

Rode Heath

5.33 Rode Heath has developed where the A533, A50 and A5011 converge, just north of Alsager. The settlement boundary has largely been determined by man-made transport corridors; a combination of main roads and the canal. The Trent and Mersey canal and the A5011 contain development to the south and east respectively, whilst small woodland blocks are located along the village’s northern boundary.

Property boundaries of Thurlwood, located at the north of Rode Heath, back onto the Cheshire Plain. Beyond the canal is the landscape of the Wheelock Rolling Plain, which separates Rode Heath from the larger settlement of Alsager. Landscape to the east of Rode Heath is dominated by the historic parkland setting for Rode Hall, which includes Rode Pool and several woodland blocks.

Cranage

5.34 The small village of Cranage is located in the north of the Borough, near to the larger settlement of Holmes Chapel. The settlement is situated on the northern slopes of the Dane Valley West, close to the boundary of the North Congleton Plain. Although Cranage itself maintains an open character, views are largely contained within the valley corridor.

5.35 Cranage became important during the mid-17th century when an iron-working industry developed in Cheshire. During the 20th century a hospital has formed the main focus within Cranage. The village is accessed from Knutsford road, which dissect the valley. The main impact upon the surrounding landscape, in recent years, has been the development of the M6 motorway, which lies less than a kilometre away to the east.

Breton Green

5.36 Breton Green lies fairly centrally in the Borough of Congleton, within the Cheshire Plain. The village has formed at the road junction of the A50 and A5022. The settlement centres upon the village green, which provides a focus for activities.

5.37 Breton Hall, lying approximately a kilometre to the north, has influenced the development of the village and maintains a strong link today. Outward views from the village are across the rural Cheshire Plain, with which Breton Hall grounds feature to the north. Twentieth century influences upon the surrounding landscape, include the M6 motorway to the west.

Hassall Green

5.38 Hassall Green lies in the southern part of the Borough, located between Sandbach and Alsager. The village has formed along Betchton road, between the Trent and Mersey canal, and the Betchton/Alsager road junction. The settlement centres upon the village green at Charles Square.

5.39 Hassall Green is located in the Cheshire Plain, close to the boundary of the Wheelock Rolling Plain. A main influence upon this rural village is the presence of the M6 motorway, which passes close by.