Landscape Character Type 1:

Sandy Woods
LANDSCAPE TYPE 1: SANDY WOODS
Woodland, Heath, Meres and Mosses

Key Characteristics

- Large areas of woodland (mainly planted coniferous), interspersed with relict heath.
- Active and inactive sand and gravel and sandstone extraction sites.
- Water-filled sandstone and gravel quarries.
- Glacial meres and associated mossland habitats scattered throughout, including areas with schwing moor characteristics.
- Large (8ha plus) straight-sided hedge-lined fields.
- Recreation features associated with a Forest Park, country-park, golf courses and picnic sites.
- Low settlement density.

General Description

This character type is defined by extensive blocks of woodland (mainly planted coniferous but with some broadleaves), interspersed with relict heath, and meres and mosses formed in glacial hollows. More recent water bodies have been created through the extraction of sand and gravel or the quarrying of sandstone. This is also a partly enclosed character type with large fields.
(over 8ha) defined by regular, straight hedgerow boundaries which in many places are growing out and in poor condition. The mosaic of habitats is of significant nature conservation value (the complex of meres and mosses is internationally important), and there is considerable evidence of human activity in the area since prehistoric times.

This character type has a high level of recreational use and a large number of leisure facilities including golf courses and picnic sites as well as a major Forest Park that offers a visitor centre and open access areas.

Visual Character

This is a landscape of strong contrasts. The flat or gently rolling topography and large straight-sided fields combine with extensive woodland blocks and large water bodies to create a large scale landscape. In marked contrast, within the woodlands and mosses, there is a strong sense of enclosure. The large open water bodies are locally prominent and most views are restricted by trees and woodland blocks. Colours are largely consistent year round with the dominance of conifers, seasonal variation provided by the pockets of broadleaved woodland, the yellows and reds of the mosslands, and purple flowering heathers on the remnant heathlands.

Physical Influences

This character type occurs at an intermediate elevation (c 40 – 80m AOD) with an underlying solid geology of mudstone and sandstone overlain by drift deposits of sand and gravel. The landform, soils and vegetation have been heavily influenced by glacial activity, with numerous meltwater channels and hollows occurring within the spread of deposited material, in which the meres and mosses subsequently developed.

Podzol and acid brown soils are extensive on the glacio-fluvial sands and gravels, the former typical and common where present or recent heathland vegetation has given acidic conditions which promote podzolization. A nationally important example of heathland survives at Little Budworth Common.

The glacial meres and mosses of the character area comprise a series of wetlands that illustrate all stages of the process of natural succession developed over thousands of years from open water through swamp, fen and moss habitats to wet woodland – the vegetation types at each site varying according to the prevailing nutrient status and water level. This diversity is reflected in an extensive range of plants and animals, including many species specially adapted to the unusual wet and sometimes acid conditions. A number of the meres and the associated mosses are protected by national and European designations including SSSIs, for example at Black Lake, Oakmere (also an SAC), Abbots Moss and Hatchmere. Black Lake and
Abbots Mere are also designated as RAMSAR sites and include schwing moor characteristics.

The extraction of sandstone and gravel has led to the creation of distinctive water-bodies some of which have subsequently become valuable ecological habitats in their own right, for example, Shakerley Mere.

**Cultural Influences**

As mainly heath areas that were formerly open and only enclosed in recent centuries, historic settlement is not a key feature of this type. Where settlement does occur it tends to be much more recent such as at the village of Allostock, which has developed since the mid-19th century.

The natural drift geology of this type which has influenced the occurrence of heath and meres has also encouraged the exploitation of sand and gravels which in turn has had a major impact upon the landscape including the creation of new meres. Active quarries in the Delamere, Rudheath and Chelford areas continue to work the local mineral deposits. However, these tend to be well screened from general view by tree belts.

Delamere was one of four large forests in Cheshire in the medieval period (Mondrem, Macclesfield and Wirral were the others). The medieval forest of Delamere covered a vast portion of Cheshire, considerably larger than the coniferous plantations that the place name refers to today. Associated with the medieval forest landscape and integral to it was woodland-pasture and wooded heath. This too covered large expanses of Cheshire and survives today in small isolated pockets e.g. at Rudheath which was once a large grazed heathland providing valuable resources for the local population. Over time these areas have been massively reduced through enclosure. The introduction from the seventeenth century of new grasses which were better suited to sandy and acidic soils enabled the improvement of areas of sandy heath and its enclosure, resulting in the typical landscape of regular large scale enclosure (greater than 8 ha). Today, large scale commercial conifer plantations mark the most recent stage in the development of these former forest and heathland landscapes.

The meres and mosses provide a considerable paleo-environmental resource. Meres are likely to have provided an early source of food going back into prehistory. The discovery of worked flint tools in this area indicates very early human activity – potentially temporary settlement. In later times meres continued to be important resources, for example, Vale Royal Abbey was granted permission to create a fishery at Oakmere in the medieval period.
Issues affecting the Sandy Woods landscape character type

1. **Continued pressure for mineral extraction**: Current and future operations may present a threat to habitats and the historic environment but also provide opportunities for habitat creation.

2. **Recreational pressures**: This type includes very popular recreational areas with visitor pressure at certain locations, leading to loss of tranquillity, loss or fragmentation of habitats, erosion of road verges, visual intrusion of car-parks or stationary vehicles and demand for additional facilities. There is increased demand for water-based recreation in meres and flooded sandpits, leading to potential conflict with nature conservation objectives.

3. **Increased demand for visitor facilities** such as holiday cottages, caravan parks and holiday cabin developments.

4. **Reduction, fragmentation and deterioration of habitats** at some locations, including ancient woodland, meres, mossland and heathland.

5. **Loss of historic field pattern** due to decline in hedgerow management and disrepair of dry-stone walls, with resulting increase in use of fencing.

6. **Erosion of built environment character through incremental development**: This may lead to loss of historic buildings and vernacular character; the suburbanisation of rural properties and their curtilage; pressure for expansion of existing settlement, ribbon development and in-fill.

7. **Standardisation of roads**: Upgrading of lanes and minor roads leading to increasingly suburban character of the countryside.

8. **Historic planting of conifers on ancient woodland sites**: The demand for a commercial return from woodland led to the felling and clearance of many sites and replanting with non-native conifer species. This has implications for both biodiversity and the visual character of the woodland and the immediate surroundings.
SW1: Delamere Forest Character Area
(Including Delamere Forest Park, Little Budworth Country Park, Oakmere and active sand quarries)

This character area extends from Manley Common in the north to Little Budworth in the south. This is a diverse landscape, a rolling landform mostly under mixed agricultural use but containing a variety of large scale elements: large fields, large woodland blocks, large water bodies and very extensive active sand quarries. The separate elements are integrated visually by prominent woodlands. In many areas the extensive hedgerow system and woodland blocks combine to reduce the apparent scale of the landscape, severely restricting views. This provides a strong contrast with those areas of large open fields, many devoted to arable crops, where the views are more extensive. The large expanses of open land and water bodies provide sweeping views and a feeling of spaciousness.

Delamere Forest is a significant feature in the west of the character area where extensive planted areas, largely of conifers, occupy most horizons and create strong visual enclosure. Differences in appearance reflect the variety of woodland type, with the dark greens of conifers and the lighter greens of deciduous woodland. Within the Forest the restrictive enclosure of the narrow rides contrast with the more open areas of woodland heath.

Quarrying is still active in this area and there are a number of large enterprises operating in the Delamere area. Sand extraction has created many new water bodies and areas of heathland which partially offset the losses of natural features. Throughout the character area the standard of landscape restoration associated with the mineral extraction industry differs, but in places blocks of planted trees are beginning to mature and provide effective visual enclosure. Two major highways, the A49 and the A556, pass near a very large operational sand quarry with extensive bodies of water. The combination of established screen planting and earthworks functions very effectively and most travellers will be unaware of the extent, or even the existence, of the dramatic new landscapes created only a short distance away. A similar situation prevails with Oakmere and Nunsmere. For this reason, although the character area enjoys a concentration of large water-bodies typical of the landscape type, their visual impact overall is surprisingly modest.

Leisure pursuits such as walking, riding and picnicking are encouraged by the Forestry Commission who own much of the area and provide visitors with amenities through their car parks and visitor centre. Other facilities include a golf course at Sandiway, and a Country Park managed by Cheshire County Council at Little Budworth Common.
Delamere lies at the geologically significant location of the mouth of the Mouldsworth drainage channel which opened out onto the East Cheshire Plain. It was here that a late glacial lake formed in front of the ice and led to the deposition of outwash sands, whose irregular surface contained numerous hollows in which meres and mosses were to form (VCH 1, 23). Delamere literally means ‘of the meres’ and for over 700 years it was part of the great Royal Forests of Mara and Mondrem. In 1627 it was recorded that Delamere comprised 12,672 acres, of which 8346 were unenclosed.

The popular perception of a forest is of an area densely covered with trees. However, in the medieval period, a forest was an area for hunting deer and beasts of the lesser warren; broad-leaved woodland was interspersed with farmland and even settlement in some areas. Forests were mainly owned by the Crown and they were subject to Forest Law which imposed restrictions upon land use and severely punished poaching.

It has been estimated that 2,200 oaks were available for timber in Delamere prior to the Civil War in the mid-seventeenth century. However by the late eighteenth century there was apparently little or none remaining. Concerns over the state of timber resources in the country led to the start of commercial forestry and the widespread introduction of foreign conifers from the eighteenth century onwards. For example, 133 acres of woodland was created on heath adjacent to the Royal Forest of Delamere, largely heath itself, earning its creator a Gold Medal from the Royal Society for his efforts. This expansion of commercial forestry, at first broad leaf and later coniferous, continued in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, creating large plantations often on areas of former heath.

By the 18th century, the Royal Forest was an area of heath dotted with small mosses. Its enclosure was first proposed in 1796 and it was intended that once the allotments to compensate the claims for common rights had been made, the rest of the land would be owned by the crown. A third of this land could then be leased out, with the rest used for forestry to provide timber for the navy. The enclosure of the forest was finally completed in 1819.

This is the largest area enclosed by Parliamentary Act in Cheshire (3,785 hectares), which led to the creation of this areas distinctive regular field pattern. The numerous mosses were drained and the Forest was extensively planted with oaks. This is marginal land, however, and the poor tree growth led to the Forest being replanted with conifers towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Today, the Forest is managed by the Forestry Commission as a National Forest Park and is the most heavily used recreational site in Cheshire. Some of the mosses are now being actively restored to encourage the re-establishment of their wetland ecology.
Intact mosslands within the Delamere Forest Character Area typically include lawns of bog mosses with specialised species such as insectivorous sundews, cotton grass and trailing mats of cranberry growing in the most wet and acidic conditions. Bog rosemary is another notable plant - reaching the southernmost limit of its range in Britain. Cross-leaved heath, ling, sedges and bog myrtle grow in drier areas. Both dry and wet heath types occur within the area; dry heath often associated with areas of sandy grassland and wet heath predominantly where underlying boulder clay impedes drainage through the sandy surface. Sites with heathland areas often grade into moss and birch/oak woodland, for example, at Little Budworth Common SSSI.

The mosses and relict heathlands that occur throughout the Forest support an exceptional diversity of invertebrates and other animals. Some of the mosses, for example, contain important breeding pools for raft spider and dragonflies such as the white-faced darter and downy emerald. Significant populations of dragonflies also occur at some of the larger meres, such as Hatchmere. The adder is still found in some less disturbed areas, with scrubland birds such as yellowhammer, linnet and tree pipit surviving in the remaining open patches of heath as well as in any newly cleared plantations or quarry edges.

Delamere is a rich archaeological area, with finds known from the prehistoric period such as the group of burial mounds at Seven Lows and an Iron Age enclosure located at Oakmere which utilises the Mere as part of its defences and survives as a prominent earthwork site. At Thieves Moss a section of the Chester to Manchester Roman road survives and many of the 19th century turnpikes were created when the area was enclosed, some of which follow the line of much earlier routes. Also a log boat was found at Oakmere, fashioned from half an oak tree, which was found to date to the late 14th-15th century.

Vale Royal Abbey (to the south of Northwich), founded in 1277, held much of its estate in Delamere Forest, which led to the assarting and enclosure of part of the area. The surviving impact on the landscape of this ownership includes place names such as Abbots Moss. A former ecclesiastical glassworks owned by the abbey survives at Glaziers Hollow. Within this area are the remnants of a number of small enclosures associated with private medieval and later hunting lodges such as Massey’s Lodge.
SW2: Rudheath Character Area  
(Including Rudheath Woods, Shakerley and Newplatt Meres)

This area appears as a flat, large scale landscape due to large fields and large, open bodies of water. Many of the fields are defined by blocks of trees, including conifer plantations, which dominate the skyline and generally restrict views out of the area. A number of substantial properties and grazing enclosures occupy plots which appear to have been cut out of the dense woodland. The only vantage points are provided by the bridges constructed over the busy M6 motorway as it runs north-south through the area and these have a significant impact upon the surrounding landscape. This major highway is not as visually intrusive as one would expect, due to the presence of mature roadside planting, the visual constraint associated with woodland cover and the lack of high view points. However there is loss of tranquillity due to the constant traffic noise.

The sand and gravel extraction industries have had a massive impact on the landscape of this area - woodland such as Old Wood and New Platt has been cleared to make way for large pits, which are now water-filled pools. Although the meres are man-made they provide an illusion of a natural landscape as they are surrounded by a range of natural vegetation types, including marginal vegetation, birch woodland and heathland. The best example of this is the very popular Shakerley Mere Country Park. Industry has now given way to leisure, including the Boundary Water Park and a nearby caravan park.

This area corresponds with an area of heath shown on Burdett’s map of Cheshire published in 1777. It was part of the once extensive medieval heathland forest of Rudheath, which reputedly was one of the areas where incomers to the shire had been able to camp in order to seek protection of the earls. Today only small fragments of this once great heath survive, for example, at Goostrey Heaths and Shakerley Meres.

The field systems of this area are dominated by regular rectangular fields created in the 19th century by Parliamentary Acts and local landowners. As with Delamere a significant amount of the heath was planted for forestry. Settlements such as Allostock, Cranage and Goostrey which either lie in or bordering this area largely developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the south of the area is RAF Cranage a former World War II airfield. During 1940 No.96 Squadron was formed at Cranage and flew in the air defence of Liverpool, later the US Air Force were stationed at Cranage. Six parts of this are scheduled monuments including the Airfield Defence Head and a number of Pillboxes.
SW3: Withington Character Area
(Including Withington Hall, Astley Hall and active sand quarries)

This character area is bound on three sides by the *Lower Farms and Woodland* landscape type and to the east by the *Estate Woodland and Mere* type of the Capesthorne Character Area. This is a medium to large scale landscape with a varied landform; there are many large, gently rolling arable fields, with evidence of field boundary rationalisation and the use of post and wire fences. Blocks of woodland, some very extensive, are visually dominant and many fields are defined on one or more boundary by woodland. This constant woodland presence restricts many views, although some areas of open ground enjoy views out to the Pennine Hills. From such locations this high ground fills the entire eastern skyline and includes the distinctive communication mast at Croker Hill and the summit of Shutlingshoe. From a few limited positions the radio telescope at Jodrell Bank features as a landmark to the south, where it appears to rise out of dense woodland.

A low density of dispersed and isolated farmsteads and properties are linked by a number of minor roads which pass between high but closely trimmed hedges. This not only reduces the immediate scale of the landscape but contributes significantly to the feeling of a well maintained, tidy landscape.

Active and extensive sand quarries form an important but discrete component of this landscape and their visual impact is surprisingly low key. Careful study of the landscape reveals many recently established elements: extensive areas of new woodland planting, low earthworks, new field boundaries and hedgerows. Fortunately much activity is below ground and almost unobserved behind the surrounding screen of dense planting. For this reason a number of very large water bodies arising from sand extraction and dispersed throughout the area have a very limited visual effect upon the surrounding landscape. A fuller view may be provided by the occasional field entrance with a glimpse of sand spoil heaps, conveyor belts and moving machinery. However the new components are woven effectively into the agricultural landscape of arable crops, pastoral enclosures and prominent woodlands. One of the few exceptions can be found on the area’s southern boundary, where the machinery tower of Dingle Bank Quarry is visible above the surrounding tree planting when viewed from the A535.

Prior to the arrival of these extractive industries, this area was more typically associated with ornamental landscapes – estate parkland and gardens for example at Withington Hall and Astle Hall and the field systems created by improvement of the estate farms in the 18th and 19th centuries. Associated with this landscape are small areas of enclosed heath and 18th and 19th century plantations. The parks are now much more hidden features, although some woodland patterns are a hangover from this previous land use. The parkland at Astle Hall is very distinctive, with sheep grazing in fenced enclosures with many large veteran trees standing as isolated specimens. A range of woodland types form a solid backdrop to this pastoral scene.
Sandle Heath is a surviving area of heath and ancient woodland runs along Snape Brook. There has been some benefit from the extraction industries to the local wildlife: Farm Pool, once a sand pit, is now a nature reserve.

Pollen dating from 59,000 BC has been extracted from deposits at Farm Wood Quarry. The pollen indicated that there had been a warmer period (interstadial) within the last glaciation. This interstadial has been named Chelford after this site.

Although this climate could support human habitation, the first evidence of human activity in this area dates to the Bronze Age: Withington Hall Barrow Cemetery, a group of three bowl barrows located south west of Home Farm. Later activity includes the remains of a WWII ammunition store to the north east of Chelford.