Landscape Character Type 16:

Higher Farms & Woods
LANDSCAPE TYPE 16: HIGHER FARMS AND WOODS
Higher undulating farms and woodland

Key characteristics

- Gentle rolling and moderate undulating topography
- A mix of medieval and post-medieval reorganised fields (irregular, semi-regular and regular up to 8ha)
- Hedgerow boundaries and hedgerow trees
- High density of woodland – blocks, coverts and riparian
- Predominantly low density dispersed settlement.
- Ponds
- Small mossland areas

General Description:

This undulating character type has a rural nature, which is defined by a higher than average density of woodland compared with much of Cheshire. It acts as an intermediate zone between the flatter expanses of the East Lowland Plain, the Lower Farms & Woods and the higher ground of the Upland Fringe and Upland Footslopes. It extends from Poynton in the north to Alsager.
Land use is a mix of arable and pasture, while settlement largely retains its dispersed low density pattern. Intensive reorganisation during the post-medieval period saw the break up of medieval field patterns. Small surviving mosses are typical in most areas, as are ponds.

There are some historic estates in this area e.g. Gawsworth, and the area has witnessed some industrial activity in the form of sand and salt production.

**Visual Character:**

This type is characterised by a medium-scale landscape, where views are generally limited by the strong presence of woodland and high hedgerows. Local increases in vegetation are often associated with streams, field drains and ponds. However there are areas of obvious hedgerow loss, often linked to an increased emphasis upon arable farming, where the landscape is of a much larger scale. At its most extreme the remaining hedgerow trees can appear as isolated elements in an open, rolling landscape. Where vegetation is sparse the higher ground in the pronounced rolling topography can offer more extensive views. To the east the Peak District hills provide very prominent and distinctive land marks such as Kerridge Ridge, Teggs Nose and the Cloud, with these high ridges dominating many views. The location of this type, at the transition between the Cheshire lowlands and Peak District uplands, is further emphasised by the gradual appearance of dry-stone field boundaries and stone buildings as one progresses eastwards.

Many areas have a very rural character with small, winding country lanes rising and falling over the undulating ground. This provides a strong contrast with those locations where the landscape exhibits the influence of nearby urban areas such as golf courses, garden centres, horse paddocks and shelters, changes in land use linked to farming diversification and the refurbishment of traditional buildings.

**Physical Influences:**

The topography of this type varies from c 80 -180m AOD. It is gently to moderately undulating, with steeper slopes around streams and rivers and approaching the Pennine Fringe. The solid geology is predominantly made up of one or more types of mudstone e.g. Bollin and Eldersfield, and in some areas this is combined with halite (rock salt) e.g. Northwich and Wilkesley. Superficial deposits are a mix of Devensian till, glacio-fluvial sand and gravel, glacio-lacustrine clay and silt and peat deposits. Soils mainly comprise typical argillic stagnogleys, the finest of which are suited to grass and were a major factor in the development of the Cheshire dairy farming industry.

Field boundaries are delineated predominantly by hawthorn hedgerows with hedgerow trees. The majority of fields are grass leys for pasture, although increasing areas are cultivated for silage or feed crops including cereals and maize.
Woodland levels are high compared with most of the county and are much greater than in the Rolling Farmland type. It occurs on estates of which there are a small number in this landscape type, in blocks, in plantations and along the banks of water courses. A large proportion of this is made up of broadleaves and is ancient woodland. A number are designated as SBIs.

The deposition of glacial sands and gravels and the accumulation of peat in the hummocky topography mean that features such as small mosses, ponds of varying sizes and occasionally meres occur in this type. Rivers and streams are common.

**Cultural Influences:**

With the exception of a small number of nucleated settlements – varying in scale from Warren village to Buerton hamlet, there is a low density of dispersed farms and houses. This character type has not undergone a great deal of change in modern times. Overall it retains its rural nature, despite its proximity to large urban areas i.e. Macclesfield and Congleton.

Field patterns are a mix of medieval enclosure with post medieval improvements and modern adaptation. The overall pattern is therefore a combination of regular, irregular and semi-regular form, varying from small to medium (up to 8ha) in size, with some larger fields (over 8ha). The survival of medieval field systems is fragmentary, resulting from the extensive post medieval agricultural changes and programmes of enhancement that occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The loss of hedgerow boundaries and use of fencing is increasingly common in this landscape type. Heathland and mosses were also enclosed and drained at this time to maximise productivity. Today land is used for arable and pastoral farming.

Accidental or deliberate deposition of objects in wetland areas is typical of prehistory and finds have been recovered from the mosses in this character type e.g. a Bronze Age axe from Marton Moss. Other known prehistoric features include Bronze Age burial mounds. There are some historic estates such as Little Morton and Gawsworth but far fewer than in the Estate Woodland & Mere type which otherwise shares a small number of characteristics e.g. parkland and water features adapted for ornamental purposes.

The geology of the character type has led to limited localised exploitation of certain resources – e.g. sand extraction to the north of Congleton and salt production at Malkins Bank.

Key arterial routes such as the A34 and A50 pass through the character areas but more typical are the network of minor roads and in some places footpaths. The Shropshire Union Canal (main branch) and the Macclesfield Canal utilise stretches of more consistent topography, as do railway lines. The Cheshire Ring Canal Walk passes through a number of the character areas.
Issues affecting the Higher Farms and Woods landscape character type

1. **Increase in demand for equestrian facilities** riding schools etc. including enclosed exercise areas and associated large scale buildings.

2. **Continued pressure for mineral extraction**: current and future operations can present a threat to habitats but also provide opportunities for habitat creation.

3. **Changes in farming** including pressure to diversify and changing patterns of land ownership. The purchase of agricultural holdings by non-farmers is becoming a significant force for change, resulting in conversion of farm houses and farm buildings and changes in farm use.

4. **Changes in farm crops**. Increase in areas under arable or fodder crops and a trend towards silage production. Possible move towards bio-energy crops such as miscanthus.

5. **On-going decline in traditional woodland management practices** leading to under management of farm woodlands, coverts and copses leading to general deterioration. Many hedgerow trees over-mature and in decline.

6. **Reduction, fragmentation and deterioration of habitats**: Loss of ponds through drainage and in-fill plus nutrient run-off from surrounding farmland. Decline in species-rich hedgerows at some locations. Intensification of grassland management leading to loss of species-rich acid grassland. Loss of ancient woodland through inappropriate management, stock encroachment, and erosion of ground flora through informal recreation.

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

8. **Loss of historic parkland** to agriculture and recreational use, e.g. golf courses.

9. **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.

10. **Standardisation of roads**: Upgrading of lanes and minor roads leading to increasingly suburban character of the countryside.
HFW1: Gawsworth Character Area.
Including Rodeheath, Marton & North Rode

The landform in this character area gently undulates in the vicinity of Marton in the west (c. 90m AOD), becoming steeper as it approaches the Upland Footslope type (up to 180m AOD) in the east. This is a medium-large scale landscape where the adjacent high ground is visually dominant, and the distinctive landmarks of the Croker Hill telecommunication mast and The Cloud feature in most eastern views.

Fields are mainly post-medieval in date and are typical of agricultural improvement. Small areas were also enclosed at a later stage e.g. parkland at Gawsworth and former areas of heath and moss. The fields are small (up to 8ha) with some medium and large (4-8, over 8ha). The larger and more regular fields are typical of modern changes to the field pattern.

Although many areas retain an intact field pattern there is widespread evidence of hedgerow loss. There are areas of more open landscape, with large arable fields bound by wire fences, where trees form isolated elements within the field pattern. In such areas woodland can take the form of isolated blocks that have an important local effect upon the surrounding landscape. Some blocks are very large and can fill the local horizon if they occupy the high ground within the undulating landform.

Major roads in the area include the A34 and the A536 – arterial routes from Congleton, but away from the major highways, and the urban influence of Macclesfield and Congleton, the character is very rural and even remote. The greatest impact from urban development is experienced on the edge of Macclesfield e.g. proximity to the Danes Moss landfill site and the modern expansion of the villages of Warren and Henbury. Beyond these, settlement has a low density and mainly comprises dispersed farms connected by narrow country roads which rise and fall with the rolling landform.

Leisure use in the landscape includes a golf course, visiting opportunities at Gawsworth and the Cheshire Ring Canal Walk which runs along the Macclesfield Canal. There is a railway line linking Macclesfield and Congleton and also in this vicinity is the Macclesfield Canal. To the north of Congleton at Eaton hall Quarry is a large sand pit and water-filled extraction site.
Overall this area has one of the highest concentrations of woodland in the county, including some of the largest blocks – Tidnocks, Marton Heath and Cocksmoss are all SBIs and comprise mainly broadleaves with some conifers located on drained mossland. Typical species are birch with rowan and occasional aspen and alder buckthorn. Ancient woodland associated with streams and watercourses include those along the tributaries of the Dane and Heskey Wood on Snape Brook.

The accumulation of peat in hollows created by the glacial process is demonstrated by the usual pattern of peat in basins or valley mires surrounded by pasture. Cocks Moss for example measures c. 30 ha, it has been severely drained and is now planted with trees, while many others measure just 10m across.

Sandy Lane Pit is a derelict landfill site to the west of Macclesfield with ponds and terrestrial habitats that support a large number of amphibians including great crested newts. Grassy banks support Devil’s-bit Scabious and Glaucous Sedge. West of this is an old sand quarry containing a small lake – Whirley Mere, which is surrounded by rough unimproved grassland.

Evidence of early human activity can be traced back to the prehistoric period following the discovery of a range of implements commonly in the moss and former moss areas e.g. a Bronze Age axe from Marton Moss. Sites include a Bronze Age barrow at Woodhouse End.

There are a number of historic estates in this area – Gawsworth, which has a Grade II* park and garden on the English Heritage Register. Gawsworth Old Hall is listed Grade I and in its present form dates from the 15th and 16th centuries with 19th and 20th century alterations. To the north are 5 rectangular ponds which were part of the garden design as well as being used as fish ponds. Other estates include Somerford Booths Hall, a moated house built in 1612 but altered in the 18th century; the moated Henshaw Hall; and Rode Manor House which is a Grade II 19th century building. A local increase in woodland cover is normally associated with such estates.

A small patch of woodland called Maggoty Johnson’s Wood to the south of Warren is managed by the National Trust. Buried in 1773 this is the resting place of Samuel Johnson, who has been described as the last English jester.
HFW2: Little Moreton Character Area.
Including Hassell Green, Rode Hall & Little Moreton Hall

This small to medium scale character area is located east of Sandbach and to the north of Alsager. It is very gently undulating in the west (c. 50m AOD), becoming steeper as it approaches the Upland Footslopes (up to 140m AOD). This dominant high ground terminates all views eastward and some views feature the distinctive elevated landmark of Mow Cop.

In parts of the character area there has been an intensification of agriculture with an emphasis upon arable farming. Such areas can have a different appearance as the removal of hedgerows leads to a more open landscape with an increase in scale. In such areas the remaining hedgerows tend to be closely trimmed and hedgerow trees are sparse, leading to extensive and uninterrupted views across the landscape.

There are a number of historic estates in this area of which Little Moreton Hall is probably the best known, picturesque timber framed manor house in England. An increase in tree cover, often in the form of solid blocks of woodland, is mainly associated with these numerous halls. Such locations also exhibit areas of parkland with its own very localised but distinct character. The large water body of Rode Pool is clearly visible from a public highway within a parkland setting.

Landscape character can be strongly influenced by the close proximity of nearby urban areas, with Sandbach to the west, Alsager to the south and Congleton to the east. A more urban character is particularly evident within the western arm of the character area where there is strong concentration of major highways, including the M6.

Beyond the modern development that has been focussed at Rode Heath, settlement is mainly low density and consists of dispersed farms and hamlets. The field pattern is predominantly medieval enclosure with some post-medieval and modern reorganisation. It is therefore mainly semi-regular and irregular in form and enclosures are small – medium in size (up to 8ha).

Major routes such as the M6 pass through the area, as do the A34 and A50. The remaining routes are minor. There are two golf courses and the Cheshire Ring Canal Walk runs along the Trent and Mersey Canal.
The moated Little Moreton Hall is listed Grade I on the English Heritage register. The present house dates from the early 15th century. Great Moreton Hall meanwhile was built in the 19th century in a castellated gothic style (Grade II*), and is now used as a hotel. Rode Hall, built from red brick c 1700 is listed Grade II* while its park and garden is Grade II. Lawton Hall, now used as a school, is listed Grade II.

Along the canal side, in the vicinity of Malkins Bank were a number of old salt works established in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Lawtons salt works were established in the 17th century and closed following subsidence in 1926. All of these have long since been cleared away and are now either part of meadows or a golf course.

Bratts Wood contains ancient woodland indicator species such as dog’s mercury and ramsons. Chellshill Wood is located in the steep-sided valley of the River Wheelock, while the flat valley bottom is an area of wet grassland. Both are SBIs.

Both the lake at Lawton Hall and Rode Pool at Rode Hall are designated as SBIs. Lawton Woods are dominated by sycamore with oak, ash, beech and wild cherry. The ground flora contains bluebell and wood anemone indicating that this is ancient woodland. Rode Pool is a large lake in the grounds of Rode Hall where stands of reed bed occur around the margins and areas of woodland surround the lake.
HFW3: Adlington Character Area.
Including Poynton Lake, Whitley Green & Butley Town

The underlying geology of this area is sandstone with Chester Pebble Beds and Pennine lower coal measures. There is undulation, rising in height to the east with an altitude of between 80 and 160 m AOD. This character area follows the northern county boundary from Wilmslow, east to Higher Poynton. The River Bollin provides the southern boundary along with Prestbury.

This is an area of medium-scale undulating farmland, predominantly under pasture and increasing in elevation towards the east. The landscape character of this area reflects its location between urban areas such as Poynton and Adlington in the north and Bollington and Macclesfield in the south and the higher ground of the adjoining Upland Footslopes landscape type. In certain areas the rural nature of the landscape has been diminished by the cumulative effect of building conversions and improvements to properties and their surroundings. There are a number of Golf Courses where the loss of rural character is also evident. In places the management of hedges is beginning to be neglected and the field pattern shows signs of deterioration. Elsewhere many isolated settlements and farmsteads are connected by narrow winding roads and the character remains very rural. Where woodlands occur they have an important localised effect on the landscape.

The higher ground to the west is visually dominant throughout the character area and appears to be more heavily wooded. There is a high density of woodland, including ancient woodland e.g. the large Wigwam Wood to the north. There are a number of steep-sided stream valleys – which are wooded in part: Wych Wood, which is located on Red Brook, a tributary of the River Dean; and along Norbury Brook.

In the south of the area the Kerridge Ridge, within the adjacent Upland Footslopes landscape type, feature prominently in views to the south east. This high ground appears as a narrow ridge with the landmark of White Nancy clearly visible over a wide area. The Macclesfield Canal bounds the entire area to the east and provides an attractive small-scale element within the landscape, with characteristic small stone bridges where narrow country roads cross over the canal. An overhead power line traverses the south of the area before turning west near Adlington. This forms a very intrusive element within the landscape as the pylons are visible over a wide area.

Settlement is mainly dispersed linked via minor roads, with one small nucleation occurring at Dean Row. Fields around Dean Row are mainly irregular, small and date to the medieval period. Elsewhere they are mainly post medieval, with some large regular modern fields arising through hawthorn hedgerow boundary loss. Poynton is a large nucleated settlement in the north of the character area.
Adlington Hall (Grade I), half of which is 15th and 16th century black and white timber framed and the other is mid 18th century brick. Woodland in the grounds of the park and garden at Adlington Hall (Grade II* on the English Heritage Register) includes a mix of broad leaves and conifers. There are also a number of small broad leave copses. Foxwist is a medieval moated site and in the north east of the character area is Woodford Aerodrome.

Norbury Brook is a steep-sided minor valley with an area of oak and birch woodland designated as an SBI. The shrub layer is diverse and the ground flora is locally rich including dog’s mercury, woodruff and yellow archangel.
HFW 4: Buglawton Character Area.
Including Crossley, Dane-in-Shaw woods & canal

This is a small character area to the east of Congleton, overlooked from the east by The Cloud, which is situated in the adjoining Upland Footslopes landscape type. This adjacent high ground dominates the character area. It has gentle to moderate undulation across the area (c 90-150m AOD) with the greatest slopes in the vicinity of watercourses.

Field size is small to medium and there is mainly a semi-regular pattern (some irregular and regular). This is typically medieval enclosure with post-medieval reorganisation and improvement. There was some enclosure by Act of Parliament in the vicinity of Buglawton School.

Settlement is limited and mainly consists of dispersed farms and a small number of houses in the vicinity of Key Green.

There is a high level of woodland cover associated with lines of drainage and in many locations this creates a strong sense of enclosure and a small-scale verdant landscape with remnants of ancient woodland on steeper ground. The Dane Valley in particular appears as a solid line of woodland which curtails views in a northerly direction. Where views to the east are available these extend to the high ground of the Peak Footslopes and the telecommunication mast at Croker Hill is visible.

The A54 runs through the area, with remaining roads being of a minor nature. Where the railway crosses the Macclesfield Canal and the River Dane the structures form points of interest in the landscape and the impressive Dane viaduct is a local landmark. A number of designated footpaths follow both the canal and the Dane Valley, e.g. The Dane Valley Way.

Steep sided, wooded watercourses include Timbers Brook and Dane-in-Shaw Brook. Timbersbrook and Bath Vale Woods are both SBIs that contain areas of unimproved grassland in addition to ancient woodland. Here there is a rich ground flora and a varied fauna and the valley sides support species rich neutral unimproved pasture. Dane-in-Shaw Pasture is designated a SSSI, for its species rich neutral and acidic pastures with ponds, stream, marsh, mature hedge and scrub alder. Mute swans breed on the millpond and water avens, fleabane, meadow saxifrage and common centaury occur. The nearby Dane-in-Shaw Brook Meadows are an SBI with further patches of unimproved grassland.

A number of mills were once located in this area associated with cotton and silk spinning. Of these the Dane-in-Shaw Mill, built in 1784, was Congleton’s first cotton mill.