LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT OF CONGLETON BOROUGH

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1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the study

1.1 This study was commissioned by Congleton Borough Council in March 1999. The Borough Council had identified a number of areas of research or study, which would be required to progress the First Review of the Congleton Borough Local Plan for the period up to 2011. In particular it was necessary for the Review of the Plan to take full account of changes to national planning policies since the preparation of the draft deposit version of the Congleton Borough Local Plan in December 1994. In addition, as part of the draft Cheshire Replacement Structure Plan Cheshire 2011, Cheshire County Council is committed to the review of the 'Areas of Special County Value for Landscape'.

1.2 In July 1994, the Secretary of State for the Environment published a discussion document entitled ‘Quality in Town and Country’, followed a year later by the Urban Design Campaign. Since then, the quality of new development and its impact on the environment has become one of the most important planning issues.

1.3 In September 1996, the Countryside Commission published its advisory booklet 'Countryside Design Summaries – Achieving Quality in Countryside Design'. This booklet identifies that the main threat, to diversity of the countryside and it's distinctive sense of place, stems from the common use of standardised building designs and layouts and from the gradual suburbanisation of the rural environment. In consequence, the Commission is seeking to improve the design of buildings in the countryside by promoting new development which is harmonious with its setting, and which respects and sustains local diversity and distinctiveness.

1.4 Planning Policy Guidance Note 7: The Countryside – Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development, supports the adoption of the Character Approach to accommodating necessary changes in the countryside without sacrificing its local character. The approach attempts to ensure that within the countryside, new development respects or enhances landscape character. This is reinforced by the new Planning Policy Guidance Note 1: General Policy and Principles, which identifies good design as one of the cornerstones of the planning system.

1.5 This study forms part of an ongoing process to improve the design of new development within Congleton. The study follows established techniques which have evolved and been guided by the Countryside Commission. It aims to satisfy a number of objectives as follows:

- to provide an analysis of the character of the landscape;
- to describe the way in which the landscape has evolved, identify current forces for change, and identify key issues with regard to landscape management as it affects landscape character;
- to identify the distinctive character of rural settlements and their surroundings to help to ensure that new development fits well with this character;
- to assess the impact of the built environment on the landscape and to identify areas of high vulnerability to new development and other forms of land use change; and
- to make recommendations for conservation of the landscape character of the Borough which will allow principles of sustainable development to be incorporated into emerging planning policies and proposals.

1.6 The study will assist in developing character based planning policies. These will then be used to manage the inevitable change that will occur in the landscape, whilst ensuring that such change is not at the expense of those essential components of the landscape which provide its character and distinctiveness, be they of national, regional or local importance.

2. THE CONGLETON LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT

Approach

2.1 The approach used is based on guidelines by the Countryside Commission in its publication CCP423 – Landscape Assessment Guidance. The methodology is explained more fully in section 4.

2.2 The study has involved an initial desk study including a literature review of historical and geographical guidebooks, internet searches, a review of nature conservation designations, an overview of landuse and land cover, an analysis of landform and of underlying geology together with the review of other documentary material. The desk study has been complemented by field survey work throughout the Borough.

Overview of the Borough landscape

2.3 The Borough of Congleton is located to the north-east of the Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire plain character area, as identified in the Countryside Commission's Countryside Character Volume 2: North West. This is an extensive area of gently rolling plain with gentle changes in elevation between 20 – 50m with the exospol of sandstone ridges, which reach elevations between 150m and 230m. It is a unified landscape with strong field patterns defined by hedgerows with abundant hedgerow trees, which are mostly oak. The plain within Congleton Borough is formed on more variable soils than elsewhere and agriculture is a mixture of arable and dairying in contrast to the majority of the plain, which is predominantly dairying. Particular features of the plain are the many field ponds formed by the extraction of marl to improve soils for the cultivation of crops.

2.4 The River Dane meanders across the Borough in a deep flat-bottomed valley. To the west of the area the salt extraction industry has resulted in a series of flushes around the towns of Sandbach and Middlewich.

2.5 The east of the Borough is a transitional area between the Cheshire Plain and the South West Peak and Potteries/Churnet Valley character areas, as identified by Countryside Character Volume 2. This is a more elevated and wooded landscape associated with the low steeply undulating foothills of the peak fringe.
3. THE SHAPING OF CONGLETON’S LANDSCAPE

Physical influences on the Landscape

Geology
3.1 The Cheshire Plain occupies most of the Borough, being covered with thick deposits of glacial boulder clay, interspersed with deposits of silts, sand and gravel. Localised peat deposits and small mosses have developed in areas of poor drainage. The majority of the Borough lies on deposits of middle keuper marl and lower keuper marl. There are also upper and lower keuper siltaceous beds surrounding Middlewich and Sandbach (Refer to Figure 5 Geology, Appendix D).

3.2 These variations in geology across the Borough have influenced patterns of human activity throughout history. Man’s activities have substantially altered the landcover and landform, notably to create new water bodies. The clays are potentially fertile and have produced the prosperous agricultural landscape typical across much of the Borough. The extraction of marl for agricultural improvements has resulted in the many field ponds that are scattered throughout the Borough. In addition the salt fields had been exploited for thousands of years creating flashes towards the west of the Borough. The extraction of salt deposits from saliferous beds by dissolving it and pumping it out of underground deposits has caused subsidence flashes, particularly around Middlewich. The sands and gravels are of low fertility with poor soils supporting heathland vegetation and a scattering of working sandpits.

3.3 The southeastern edge of the Borough is on harder carboniferous rocks of the coal measures, grits and shales resulting in a more elevated landscape.

Topography
3.4 Much of the Borough consists of a flat plain, gradually increasing in height from the west, at a general height of 50 metres around Middlewich, to meet the foothills of the Pennine Fringe at 100 – 150 metres around Congleton and Alsager. To the south east of the Borough the land rises dramatically to high points in excess of 300 metres at Mow Cop and The Cloud. These elevated locations form prominent landscape features when viewed from the plain to the west and afford panoramic views across the Borough and beyond. The Dane Valley cuts through the relatively flat plain in an east to west direction. The slopes of the valley drop away rapidly from the plain, which restricts views into the valley from the surrounding area and provides a sense of enclosure within the valley.

Natural Drainage
3.5 The principal watercourses in the Borough are the River Dane and the River Wheelock. The River Dane is referred to above whilst the River Wheelock drains the south of the Borough and is smaller in scale than the Dane.

Historical Development of the Landscape

Ancient History
3.6 The Borough has been affected by generations of human activity whose settlement, agriculture, industry, and transport networks have altered the landscape. The underlying geology has had a profound influence on the early settlement pattern of this region. The heavy clay soils of the Cheshire Plain developed a dense impenetrable cover of predominantly oak, elm and alder woodland that made travel and agriculture difficult. In contrast the drier conditions and thin soils typical of the Pennine Fringe and Sandstone Ridges produced a vegetative cover more easily managed and exploited with the aid of the primitive tools of the time. By 12000BC hunters based along the Pennine Fringe hunted within Congleton’s forests. Another constraint to easy transport through the Cheshire Plain was the scarcity of navigable rivers traversing the area.

3.7 During the Neolithic period (4500-2000BC) a systematic clearance of the forest began, enabling land to be used for arable farming. With arable farming and forest clearance came permanent settlements whose communities built monuments on their territory as evidenced by The Bridestones at Congleton. Improvements in tool technology developed during the late Bronze Age resulting in a more rapid depletion of woodland along the Pennine Fringe and Sandstone Ridges. Early Iron Age forts and the tracks that connect them remain as a feature of these elevated areas. The decline of tree cover continued through the growing occupation and into the middle ages.

3.8 Key routes of the Roman road network crossed the Borough. The great highway linking London and Carlisle passed through Middlewich linking with another route from the Trent valley. The road from Middlewich to Congleton (A51) in part follows the line of the old Roman road. Chester, to the west of the region, was a major Roman military and commercial centre. Evidence of such activity within Congleton Borough is limited although early exploitation of the salt deposits did take place near Middlewich, which was known by the Romans as Salinice from the Latin word for ‘salt works’. Middlewich, being located at a major road junction, became the second largest town in Cheshire and an important military site, having a significant industrial centre with thriving salt works. There is also evidence that the Romans exploited rural salt springs at Moston, near Sandbach.

3.9 Woodland clearance continued during Roman occupation and much tree cover was removed. The rural landscape would have been open grassland with arable farming, small wooded areas and dispersed settlement.

Medieval Period
3.10 The development of large settlements within the area was restricted up to the Early Middle Ages due to both the physical constraints and the threat of raids from tribes to the west and invading Danes. Pre-Medieval settlements within the region tended to be in the form of defensive, moated manor houses.

3.11 As the threat from raids became less frequent, settlements became more permanent allowing a greater accumulation of wealth. However the basic settlement pattern of dispersed farmsteads, hamlets and small villages set down in the Celtic and early Anglo Saxon periods remained. The primary settlement pattern was often close to Roman roads.

3.12 This increase in wealth accelerated under the influence of Norman control and lead to the further spread of arable fields with a corresponding growth of markets. Markets of the Medieval Borough were found at Breerton, Congleton, Middlewich and Sandbach.

3.13 Population increase was rapid during the 12th and 13th centuries and required woodland clearance so that more land could be farmed. Some remnants of medieval farming practices, such as ridge and furrow, remain although much has been destroyed by deep ploughing since 1945. With increasing urbanisation, the towns of Congleton and Middlewich expanded from villages and were granted Borough charters. There also occurred an architectural resurgence with the building of many houses. A substantial number of churches of the region can be traced to these times.

3.14 Following the Black Death and falling population, large areas of arable land were abandoned and agriculture moved towards dairying.
Post-Medieval Period

1550 - 1750

3.15 From 1550 onwards, significant changes occurred and industrial and urban growth accelerated. Population increased and new industrial and commercial centres developed. The change from mixed farming to dairy farming continued and the familiar pastoral landscape began to emerge, with cheese production becoming a significant specialisation. The numbers of substantial dwellings throughout the Cheshire Plain testify to the general prosperity of the farming community. The Plain became increasingly regarded as the country's prime dairying area.

3.16 The Salt Industry began to expand from the late 16th century with the discovery of beds of rock salt and advances in technology, which improved efficiency. Further expansion during the 17th century and the high cost of overland transport prompted proposals to make rivers, such as the River Weaver, navigable. Although first exploited by the Romans, Middletown remains even today, one of Britain's chief salt producing towns. The town of Congleton's prosperity, on the other hand, was traditionally based on the textile industry.

3.18 The textile industries began to develop at the start of the 18th century. Coarse woolen cloth and silk were important products manufactured in Congleton. The textile trades increased the prosperity of the region and many of the distinctive black and white merchant dwellings date from this period. The traditional building method used timber frames and many cottages, farmhouses, inns and manor houses from this period still survive. This prosperity continued and many towns were enlarged with elegant Georgian buildings. Associated with this urban growth, construction industries began to develop as the demand for building stone and roofing slabs increased. Quarries such as Mow Cop came into operation. The colour of brick was characteristic of the area - orange/red to the south and red/brown/purple to the north and east of the Borough. Thatch and stone flags were the traditional roofing materials although clay tile or Welsh slate are now commonplace on many historic buildings.

1750 - 1900

3.19 Dramatic changes occurred as urbanisation increased. Small towns expanded and new towns appeared as the region's economy altered from agriculture to industrialisation. Many rural areas became suppliers of labour for industry within growing towns.

3.20 Important improvements came with industrial and commercial growth. Cheshire's first railways developed as tram roads serving mines and quarries. Around 1800, a millitary line was built from the pits in Mow Cop and Biddulph area to Congleton. During the 1830's, construction work began on a regional rail network providing connections to the main towns. Turnpike roads were developed alongside the new railway network. Between 1755 and 1832 a network of canals was constructed, including the Trent and Mersey canal and the Macclesfield canal. However, initial prosperity was short lived due to the increasing competition from the rail network. After 1840, canals operated as railway feeders. Between 1830 and the turn of the 20th century, rival rail companies promoted their own lines to produce a network.

3.21 The landed estates depended on agricultural wealth and income from family and rent. By 1800, dairying had achieved dominance and even smaller farmers were treating dairying as a commercial business. From the 1850's, the dominance of cheese making became challenged by the growing trade in milk, largely the result of the development of railway milk carriers. A further consequence of the railway network was the decline in the number of county fairs.

3.22 East Cheshire became notable for its silk as the 18th century progressed. Congleton developed as one of the three main silk producing areas. Early silk mills were built along the River Dane using the power from the water to drive the mill wheels. Later, in the mid-19th century, steam powered mills were built. These were situated next to railways and canals for trade. Today, mills remain prominent features along the River Dane in Congleton town centre.

3.23 Salt mining became increasingly important with the discovery of deeper salt beds and new extraction techniques. There had always been natural subsidence within Cheshire and some of the meres within the Cheshire Plain originated through this process. However, increasing outputs accelerated the process and led to subsidence in areas not previously affected.

3.24 During the mid-19th century, much of the land within the Borough was owned by large estates. The structure of local society, agricultural management and landscape character was therefore heavily influenced by the landowner's policies. Although many estates have since declined, this imprint is still evident within the landscape. The 18th and 19th century country houses and historical parklands that remain within the borough reflect the wealth of the country society before 1800.

1900 - present day

3.25 Since the turn of the 20th century, many of Congleton's estates have been in decline and their owners have sold off land. Most of the rock salt mills had closed down in Cheshire by the 1960's. The silk industry has declined since the late 19th century and only a few related firms in Congleton and Macclesfield remain. A more varied
industrial base has developed over recent years with the arrival of light industrial, engineering and paper trades.

3.26 Transport improvements since the early 1960's have had a significant effect on the landscape of the Borough. Railways had come under increasing competition from roads since the 1930's. However, as important through routes, the railways carried large volumes of industrial traffic and the network therefore remained largely intact. Since 1960, rail improvements have allowed Holmes Chapel and Sandbach to develop as dormitory towns for Manchester. The railways continue to be used today, although some of the early routes have become disused. Although main road improvements, including new bypasses, have been undertaken since the 1920's the major impact within the Borough has been the development of the M6 motorway. This cuts through the Borough, broadly sweeping between Holmes Chapel, Sandbach and Alsager.

3.27 A distinctive feature of former highway network is the use of painted iron hurdle railings as a road safety feature at junctions and bends. The railings are typical of the whole of Cheshire and are acknowledged as a key characteristic within the county landscape.
4. LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREAS

Introduction

4.1 Following an initial desk study, field survey work was undertaken throughout the Borough, using a structured survey form as promoted by GCP423. The form is used to record the dominant landscape elements and features that contribute to the landscape character, and its various aesthetic qualities, such as colour, texture and enclosure.

4.2 This information has been used to divide the landscape of Congleton in to broadly homogenous units of similar character. The character and quality of each area has been described under the following headings:

- Key Characteristics
- Landcover Types
- Landscape Quality
- Existing Landscape
- Designations
  - Statutory Designations
  - Non Statutory Designations
- Forces for Change
- Future Management

4.3 The description of each area is supplemented by a key plan that highlights the character area within the Borough, aerial photographs, sketches that illustrate key characteristics, and photographs which show typical views of landcover types.

4.4 These descriptions record the character of the landscape at the end of the 20th Century. This character has evolved over thousands of years as a result of a complex interaction between natural and human activity. These forces for change continue to modify and redefine the landscape character and will continue to do so in the future. Present forces for change have been identified for each character area and recommendations formulated for the future management to conserve, enhance or restore the landscape character of Congleton Borough, whilst allowing development to be sympathetically integrated within the overall landscape context. This section identifies eleven landscape character areas within the Borough.