Landscape Character Type 12:

Mosslands
LANDSCAPE TYPE 12: MOSSLAND
The landscape of peat

Key Characteristics

- An accumulation of peat in water-logged depressions and hollows associated with glacial deposition.
- Oligo-fibrous soils with a high suitability for horticulture when drained.
- A distinctive field pattern, typical of the enclosure of mosslands – long linear moss-rooms.
- Areas of broadleaved woodland – alder, birch and oak.
- Heathland with birch and scrub regeneration.
- Peripheral settlement that has encroached upon the former extent of the moss.
- Place names that are indicative of peat e.g. Moss Lane.
- Leisure facilities e.g. playing fields, cricket grounds.
- Landfill sites.

General Description
The Mosses character type relates to the surviving fragments of a Cheshire landscape that was once far more common in the county. Drainage in particular, as well as peat cutting has subsequently reduced the type to a handful of areas that are still of sufficient scale to identify as distinctive character areas.

Chance finds such as the discovery of the body of Lindow Man through commercial peat extraction are indicative of the value of the irreplaceable archaeological and palaeo-environmental resource this type represents. At the same time the decline in the areas of wet peat with active growth of *Sphagnum* moss with its associated flora and fauna represents the loss of what was once a widespread natural habitat in Cheshire.

**Visual Character**

The visual characteristics of this landscape type vary considerably depending upon the dominant land use and the extent of natural vegetation remaining. All character areas within this type are located on the edge of large settlements e.g. Wilmslow, Congleton etc. Where the ground has been drained and cleared of woodland, the lack of natural screening can allow surrounding properties and land use activities to dominate this flat, small-scale landscape. In such situations the prevailing landscape character is that of the urban fringe, but often with extensive views out to distant hills. Elsewhere the type is characterised by dense blocks of predominantly birch woodland providing a high degree of enclosure or open areas of wet grassland. At its most extreme this small scale, intimate landscape of dense almost impenetrable growth and small, dank pools can appear inhospitable or intimidating.

**Physical Influences**

Mosses typically occur in areas of glacio-fluvial sand where the hummocky relief has depressions that reach the water table. The underlying geology is predominantly mudstone – Bollin and Eldersfield. Altitude varies across the type from 70m AOD at Lindow up to 160m at Danes Moss, which is to be expected given that the type occurs where there is a high water table or where drainage is restricted. Much of these areas still remain in a semi-natural condition of boggy peatland dominated by birch, sedges and grasses such as purple moor-grass.

Basin peat forms from the accumulation of partially decayed bog plants such as reeds, sedges and *Sphagnum* with woody remains of birch and alder under the influence of ground water which prevents oxidisation and breakdown of the organic matter. The thickness of peat depends upon the depth of the depression and the length of time that it has been accumulating. Across Cheshire therefore this can vary from a thin peaty surface to about 10m in deep kettle holes. Most have an earthy surface and are classified as oligo-fibrous earthy peat soils. Almost the whole character type is under grassland or semi-natural boggy peatland. When adequately drained this type provides
valuable land ideally suited to arable and horticultural crops. Surface wetness and a high water table are the main limiting factors in undrained areas.

This character type supports a variety of fauna scarce species of damselfly and dragonfly and butterflies such as brimstone. Adder, a rare reptile in Cheshire, is found at Oakhanger Moss.

**Cultural Influences**

Cheshire was formerly dotted with small scale mosses and mires, in some cases only a few metres across but each individually named and known to local inhabitants. This landscape character type refers to the larger mosses that survive today despite intensive drainage and peat cutting. For example, Lindow Moss was originally c 600 ha and formed in a glacial hollow.

Human activity in the mosses can be traced back into prehistory and because of the anaerobic conditions provided by the water-logged peat; archaeological finds have been well preserved. The most famous of these finds is Lindow Man, a ritually deposited body dated to the Iron Age/Romano British period (c 700 BC – AD 500), who was recovered from the peat at Lindow Moss during extraction. A section of an undated timber causeway was also discovered at Lindow and it is likely that other trackways traverse the mosses elsewhere. These were treacherous places to cross and fatalities caused by people getting lost are well documented.

Peat has been extensively cut for fuel in the past, while it continues to be harvested for horticultural purposes e.g. at Lindow and White Mosses. In the medieval period people had ‘rights of turbary’ i.e. the right to cut peat for fuel. Mosses were therefore divided into long, thin strips known as moss rooms, from which turfs were cut. This pattern is fossilised in most of the larger mosses as hedgerows were introduced to enclose this former open area. Other fields in this character type are mainly large and regular in layout and relate to later phases of enclosure. For example, fertile soils for the growth of cereals, roots, *Brassicas* and horticultural crops can be achieved through the drainage and application of sand and fertilisers, while less well drained areas can support grass crops.

The boggy mire has historically provided an unappealing location for settlement. It is the drained periphery of the moss where settlement tends to accumulate e.g. Row of Trees near Wilmslow. Typical place names refer to peat e.g. Moss Farm. Nowadays both Danes Moss and Lindow Moss have landfill sites and other modern features include leisure facilities such as school playing fields and cricket grounds.

**Issues affecting the Mossland landscape character type**

1. **Evidence of increase in horse grazing** with associated changes to field boundaries, use of informal animal shelters, sheds etc
2. **Loss of open character of field system** by inappropriate planting of hedgerows and trees.

3. **Loss and under management of historic drainage systems** threatens the historic character of the area.

4. **Eutrophication** due to nutrient run-off from surrounding agricultural areas,

5. **Drainage improvements in surrounding areas** leading to lower water table and reduction in extent and quality of mossland habitat. Drainage can accelerate the natural succession process towards woodland.

6. **Continued commercial extraction of peat** perpetuating loss of important natural and historical resource.

7. **Areas reduced in extent** through encroachment of surrounding industrial and residential areas
M1: Danes Moss Character Area.
Including nature reserve and active landfill site.

Danes Moss is located to the south of Macclesfield and is designated a SSSI. It is the largest example in Cheshire of a cut-over raised mire and a rare habitat in lowland England. In the south is an area owned and managed as a reserve by Cheshire Wildlife Trust.

When viewed from the surrounding land the remaining mossland appears as a solid block of low, dense woodland occupying an area of flat ground. However a number of public footpaths traverse the area and these allow views of a range of vegetation types and reveal different degrees of enclosure, largely determined by the extent of past exploitation and the current water level. There are extensive blocks of very dense birch woodland and high scrub and even small areas of open woodland with oaks of a reasonable size. These alternate with patches of wet grassland with small shallow water-bodies. Some outward views are available, either from the less enclosed areas of open grassland or channelled along narrow footpath corridors. The high ground of the Upland Footslopes is prominent to the east with the Croker Hill communication mast highly visible beyond that in the Upland Fringe. The distinctive shape of The Cloud near Congleton features in views to the south.

Across the area is a network of drainage channels and a distinctive feature of Danes Moss are the moss rooms in the north of the character area - long, thin fields enclosed by hedgerows. One of the three largest land fill sites in Cheshire is located here, screened by areas of new planting. There are areas of broad leaved woodland and in the north there are playing fields. The residual peat has a depth of up to 5m. In the north by the landfill site it is drying out although small dystrophic pools are present. Scattered scrub covers a large area and this becomes dense in places. The area of least cut peat lies to the south east of the railway line and supports the largest stand of bog myrtle in Cheshire.

A central part of the site has been successfully re-flooded by the installation of strategically placed dams. The depth of water varies because old cuttings, peat baulks and drains have been inundated. The tops of baulks are colonised by purple moor-grass and heather while shallow water contains tussocks of common cotton-grass. Over the site seven species of Sphagnum moss can be found and various rare species in Cheshire are supported here including 11 species of damselfly and dragonfly and brimstone and green hairstreak butterflies. The common lizard is also recorded.

The discovery of Bronze Age hammer stones and an arrow head indicate activity dating back to the prehistoric period. Later features include two WWII pillboxes.
M2: Lindow Moss Character Area.
Peat extraction, country park & bog sites.

Lindow Moss lies to the west of Wilmslow in a much reduced form due to past peat extraction and drainage.

This area is characterised by very flat topography with a landscape of varying scales. There are many blocks of woodland, especially in the north and east, where the urban edge of Wilmslow is completely hidden from view by dense vegetation. Lindow Common is completely encircled by tree growth, precluding any outward views from the numerous footpaths. Relief from total enclosure is provided by the open water of Black Lake and a number of small-scale areas of heathland. On the western boundary Ross Mere provides a similar open landscape on the edge of dense woodland. This is a modern body of water, created through the extraction of peat and drainage of the moss.

In the northern half of the area numerous properties and small plots of grassland are connected by a complex system of straight narrow lanes, bridleways and footpaths where views are almost totally restricted by the enclosing high vegetation. The combination of narrow access ways and the strong sense of enclosure mean this area can appear remote and inaccessible, despite the very close proximity of suburban Wilmslow. The industrial style fencing to a closed waste landfill site appears incongruous but the raised landform is not obvious amongst the maturing tree planting.

By contrast the area of commercial peat extraction near Saltersley Farm on Lindow Moss appears as a large, sunken, open space of raw brown peat surrounded by dense tree growth. The contrast in colour and scale is very striking. Many grassland plots are used for horse grazing, but in places shack-like horse shelters and potholed track surfaces create an impression of neglect and deterioration. The standard of grazing varies greatly and ranges from improved grassland defined by wire fences to the roughest, shrub encroached pasture.

In the centre of the area the field enclosures are larger. In this location the landscape character is similar to surrounding landscape types with low, straight hedges and more expansive views in all directions. In the south the area bound by the Mobberley Road is divided into many long and narrow field enclosures, evoking the distinctive landscape associated with moss “rooms” or compartments, which represent previous phases of peat extraction. Broad leaved woodland is superimposed on part of the moss-rooms and across the northern extent of this area. There are mature hedgerows with oak and ash and poplar is also present.

Most settlement is peripheral to the moss but there has been some encroachment along Racecourse Road and in Baddowhall. In addition there are developments such as poultry farms and kennels.
There are patches of heath near Lindow Common, which was previously used as a racecourse and is designated a SSSI. This is one of the few remaining areas of lowland heath in Cheshire. It includes a mix of wet and dry heath, bog, open water and scattered scrub and woodland. Most of the dry heath is dominated by heather and purple moor-grass, while lower lying areas are permanently or seasonally waterlogged. In the wettest areas bog mosses are dominant. Black Lake in the centre of the site contains peaty, acidic water. Aquatic plants are sparse although several areas of lesser reedmace are present which form an important roost for swallows and house martins.

To the west of Lindow Common is Saltersley Moss SBI – a large raised bog which is extensively cut for peat and so the majority of the site is bare with drainage channels. To the east on abandoned workings scrub and birch wood have developed along with patches of heather.

In the north of the character area at Morley Green Heath is a large expanse of neutral semi-improved and unimproved grassland. This SBI is a patchwork of small, narrow fields and areas of woodland on the former Lindow Moss. A system of drainage ditches runs through the site. There are signs of past peat digging. Plant species include heather, cross-leaved heath, bilberry and wavy hair-grass.

Ivy House Farm Fields SBI is a site of unimproved hay meadows supporting common grass species such as meadow foxtail, sweet vernal grass as well as sorrel and yellow rattle in places. Lindow End is a complex mix of birch woodland, small fields, ditches and an area of dry heath in what was once part of Lindow Common. The southern section of woodland is mature and the unimproved acid grassland has a rich flora.

Most of the woodland is dominated by birch with scattered oak saplings and some holly. The ground flora is poor, dominated by Yorkshire fog and wavy hair-grass. Patches of heather and bilberry occur in the more open areas.

Peat continues to be extracted at Lindow Moss and in the 1980s this led to separate discoveries of Lindow Man, the head of a woman and 70 body parts of an adult male. These were dated to somewhere between the Iron Age and the Romano British period. Part of a timber causeway of unknown date was also discovered, which may be of some antiquity. The discovery of Neolithic flints puts activity in the area firmly back into prehistory. Meanwhile, the earliest written reference to the moss dates to 1423.
M3: Oakhanger Moss Character Area.
Relic wood-covered moss

Located west of Alsager this character area comprises Oakhanger and White Mosses, which are separated by the M6 motorway that runs north-south through the area. This is a flat landscape of mixed land use and varying scales. There are small-scale regular enclosures to the south, elsewhere enclosure is large-scale and reflects where boundaries of earlier small scale enclosure have been removed. This area does not have the typical moss room enclosure pattern, which potentially suggests a later phase of extraction than has taken place at other mossland character areas.

The character is strongly influenced by the M6 motorway, with moving traffic glimpsed through the mature roadside planting scheme, whilst the extensive block of woodland in the west forms another dominant element. Areas of pastoral farmland are defined by straight, generally intact field boundaries with locally abundant hedgerow trees filtering many views. This is a visually diverse agricultural landscape with subtle contrasts provided by the variation in woodland type and the difference in appearance of arable crops and pastureland. Woodland variation leads to changes in the visual character of the landscape, from the lighter greens of the deciduous woods to the darker green and dense shade of the conifer plantations. The extensive area of woodland creates a strong impression of visual enclosure where virtually all horizons appear wooded.

To the east of the M6 an extensive open area of peat and sand extraction at White Moss, a raised peat bog, is well screened from the public highway. The scale of this relatively large plot is not immediately obvious from the surrounding area. An overhead power line traverses the north of the area and forms a conspicuous element in such a flat landscape.

Oakhanger Moss is a SSSI covered with broad leaved woodland. This is one of the shallowest of a cluster of depressions in glacial sands. It is of greatest importance for the range of mire vegetation that it supports. Oakhanger Moss was known to be a mere at least until the 1600s sustained by a flow of water from Alsager Mill to the east. Since that time it has been completely infilled, first with sedge and reedswamp peat and latterly with peat derived from Sphagnum mosses. Birch, alder and willow predominate and adder is found here and just one other known site in Cheshire.

To the north of this is an area of mixed woodland and new planting. Bibby’s Moss and White Moss are SBIs. Bibby’s Moss is a large old mossland, consisting of dried out raised lowland peat bog. Most of the site is now covered with woodland – damp and quite diverse broadleaves in the south and mixed plantations in the north. There are open glades.
M4: Congleton Moss Character Area.
Small dried out moss & historic moss rooms.

This is a very small character area on the southern edge of Congleton. Congleton Moss is a small area of moss surviving at just over 1km in width. This is a tiny remnant of a once huge mossland that extended well over 1000ha in area. It is now thoroughly dried out and experiencing rapid succession to birch scrub. Dominant species are purple moor grass and heather with cross-leaved heath in some ditches. The moss comprises a series of enclosed radiating moss-rooms which form a fan shaped field pattern.

This character area is not breached by any public highway and remains largely hidden from view. Water-filled ditches and areas of wet ground betray the mossland origins of this very flat, small to medium scale pastoral farmland with regular field boundaries and little woodland cover. There is a wide variation in the condition of the hedgerows. In some areas the hedgerow pattern is largely intact, with numerous hedgerow trees providing an element of enclosure and filtering views. Elsewhere the very flat topography, lack of tree cover and gappy hedges with post and wire fences, has led to an enlargement of scale allied with extensive views out of the area. These views extend to the ridge of high ground forming the county boundary in the east. The distinctive shape of the Cloud forms part of this elevated skyline.

To the south are large fields that were formerly unenclosed and a number of boundaries are drainage channels. A cricket ground and school field encroaches upon the mossland.
Congleton Moss

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