Landscape Character Type 5:

Rolling Farmland
LANDSCAPE TYPE 5: ROLLING FARMLAND
West Cheshire undulating enclosed farmland

RF1: Norley
RF2: Oulton
RF3: Aston
RF4: Faddiley
RF5: Malpas
RF6: Wirral
RF7: Frandley
RF8: Helsby to Frodsham
RF9: Capenhurst
RF10: Neston

Key characteristics

- Gently rolling and undulating topography, interspersed with streams
- Irregular and semi-regular small and medium fields (up to 8ha)
- Hedgerow boundaries and hedgerow trees
- Numerous water bodies – mainly ponds created through marl-pit digging
- Low woodland density - mainly riparian
- Unimproved grasslands.
- Medium settlement density - combining nucleated centres and dispersed farms, halls etc.
General Description

This character type is defined by undulating topography and the associated small to medium scale enclosure into which it is divided. These areas sit between the Sandstone Ridge, Sandstone Fringe and the flatter areas of enclosure such as the Delamere Character Area and the East Lowland Plain. Land use is mainly pasture and settlement is a mix of nucleation and dispersion. There is a range of monuments from Bronze Age barrows to post medieval canal locks. Views within this type very much depend upon location and the nature of the immediate topography.

Visual Character

The location of this type is reflected in the prevailing views which extend to adjacent character areas, either out over the low-lying plain or up towards the often dominant Sandstone Ridge. Roads typically follow the rolling topography, offering extensive views from the high points out over the immediate field pattern and extending to the high ground in the far distance, either the Clwydian Hills in the west or the Pennines in the east. At the low points the landscape appears smaller scale due to the increase in enclosure and the contained views. At many locations the tree cover appears to be high, an obvious departure from the adjacent Cheshire plain. This can be attributed to the intact hedgerow system, complemented by numerous small farm woodlands or coverts upon locally prominent areas of high ground.

In certain areas arable farming predominates, especially upon better-drained ground. Where this is associated with loss of hedgerows, post and wire fences and fewer hedgerow trees, the scale of the landscape increases considerably and views become more extensive.

Physical Influences

The topography of this type varies from 10-120m AOD. The solid geology is a combination of one or more of Bollin Mudstone, Eldersfield Mudstone and Northwich Halite. This is overlain by till and glacio-fluvial deposits. Soils comprise stagnogleys, the finest of which are suited to grass and were a major factor in the development of the Cheshire dairy farming industry. In the south of the county around Carden and Overton sandstone outcrops in a series of escarpments and dip slopes, creating a distinctive local landscape.

Secondary calcium carbonate deposits are common at a depth of 1-2m in the till, and before cheap lime was made available in the 19th century this was dug and spread on the surrounding fields to reduce acidity. On sandy soils this practice of marling also increases fertility and moisture holding capacity. The digging of these marl pits led to the creation of ponds as the pits filled with water and were colonised by a rich variety of plants and animals from other wetland habitats of greater antiquity, for example, meres and mosses. Marl was also used in daub in the construction of vernacular structures and later to make bricks.
The natural processes of vegetation succession have reduced many ponds to small, shallow features, over shaded with trees and with little open water. Nevertheless, it is estimated that Cheshire’s 16,000 ponds represent some 10% of all farm ponds in England and Wales, and still provide an important wildlife resource. Characteristic plant species include bur marigold, water plantain, tubular water-dropwort, reedmace, branched bur-reed, water horsetail, common spike-rush, purple loosestrife, water milfoil, various water lilies and pondweeds. Associated invertebrates include all five species of amphibian found in Cheshire, including the European protected great crested newt.

Field boundaries are delineated predominantly by hawthorn hedgerows with hazel, blackthorn and dog rose also present. Oak, ash and sycamore are the main tree species, present as standards within hedgerows. 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 higher than those of the West and East Lowland Plains but still low and concentrated mainly upon former estates such as Oulton and Aston; in riparian locations such as along the River Gowy; in steep sided stream cloughs overlooking the River Weaver, and along smaller stream sides in the south of the county where there are fragments of ancient woodland. Frequently, they are associated with unimproved grassland habitats which have escaped modern farming practices such as the species-rich Carden meadows and the Gowy flushes where ancient grassland indicators such as adders-tongue and wood anemone survive. Copses and coverts are mainly broadleaved and there are mixed woodlands on sandier soils.

The rolling landform supports a complex natural drainage system and in some areas every stream or open ditch supports a line of mature trees.

Cultural Influences

There are some large nucleated villages in the Rolling Farmland type, such as Weaverham and Acton Bridge that are mainly the result of 20th century expansion and reflect the amenity of an area to places of work and the communications network. Elsewhere settlement comprises a mix of small picturesque villages e.g. Eaton, Little Budworth and Malpas, surrounded by a dispersed pattern of hamlets, farms and halls.

This area was divided amongst a number of estates and the holdings of the major land owners such as the Tollemache, the Earl of Shrewsbury, and Cholmondeleys are intermingled. Former large parkland areas are now degraded or converted to recreational use such as golf courses.

Field patterns are small to medium in scale (up to 8ha). Overall this pattern reflects irregular medieval fields created by the assarting of moss, heath and woodland and the regular fields reflecting post medieval improvement. Parts of the type are also enclosed from former Royal Forest. The popular
perception of a forest is that 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.

In many ways this is a type that has undergone a certain amount of change. For example there are two former estates that still contribute to the character of the type but in an adapted form as they are now used for leisure pursuits: Oulton Park includes a motor racing circuit.

Associated with the early fields is a network of footpaths, which may be of some antiquity. This character type is mainly crossed by minor roads, and short sections of major routes e.g. A49, A54 and M6. There are also a number of railway lines and the Shropshire Union Canal passes through one of the character areas.

Traces of past activity include Bronze Age barrows (c 2000 -700BC) e.g. Robin Hood’s, a rare example of a Roman Villa at Eaton (the only one known in Cheshire) and numerous medieval moated sites such as Crowton and Peel. The character of the built environment includes timber framed buildings, some of which date back to the 17th century, and red and brown brick buildings.

The discovery of items such as flints, burnt stones, the tip of a Neolithic axe and Bronze Age pottery indicate that rock shelters and caves located in Carden Park were likely to have been occupied in the prehistoric period. One cave was also deepened in the 18th century to house John Harris, an eccentric who lived on the estate for 20 years.

**Issues affecting the Rolling Farmland landscape character type**

1. **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.

2. **Changes in farm crops.** Increase in areas under arable or fodder crops and a trend towards silage production. Possible move towards biomass crops such as miscanthus.

3. **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.
4. **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.

5. **Loss of historic field pattern** due to decline in hedgerow management, with resulting increase in use of fencing.

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

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

8. **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.

9. **Standardisation of roads**: Upgrading of lanes and minor roads leading to increasingly suburban character of the countryside.
RF1: Norley Character Area
Including Bradley, Crowton, Norley & Gorstage

This character area extends from Frodsham in the west, east to the Weaver Navigation and south as far as Hartford. Topography becomes less undulating as it approaches the Weaver.

This is a small to medium scale landscape where areas of more complex topography combine with a locally intact hedgerow system to create a strong sense of enclosure. This is especially the case where narrow sunken lanes traverse a strongly undulating ground form, comprising small locally prominent ridges and hidden valleys, overlain by high hedges and abundant trees. Most skylines are filled with woodland and many views are filtered by mature trees or hedges. The location of this area on the transitional slopes to the east of the Sandstone Ridge offers views up towards the higher ground of the ridge or more distant views over the lower ground towards the Weaver Valley and even further east. The landscape is generally quiet and rural in character.

Acton Bridge, Cuddington, Helsby, Frodsham, Kingsley and Weaverham are substantial nucleated villages and towns. Of these, a number are ancient settlements in origin, including Kingsley which was mentioned at Doomsday (1086). Meanwhile, Norley is a post medieval dispersed settlement. However, within the settlement pattern much is modern development, for example Cuddington and Delamere Park are predominantly 20th century settlements, while much of Weaverham has grown since the mid-19th century. There is also a scatter of isolated farms and halls. Buildings are characteristically built from red or brown brick. Crewood Hall for example, is a listed II* 16th century hall built from brown brick. This character area has a higher density of settlement and a greater occurrence of large nucleated urban centres than for the rest of this type.

There is a large modern sand quarry to the north of Norbury. The M6 and a railway line run through the north of the character area. Another key route is the A56, while the remaining roads are classified as B and below.

Much of this area was formerly Royal Forest. Fields comprise a mix of ancient enclosure (mainly in the vicinity of Kingsley and Frodsham) and post medieval enclosure. Both are medium scale (between 4-8ha), the former is irregular in pattern, the latter more regular. Hedgerow boundaries and standard trees are typical, as well as scattered former marl pits. Townfields are located in the vicinity of historic settlements. There was regular post medieval planned enclosure of heath to the south and west on the fringe of the Royal Forest, modern conversion of parkland to farmland as well as enclosure by Parliamentary Act.
A number of small linear clough woodlands run north-south towards the River Weaver, including Beechmill Wood SSSI, Bellair Wood and Pike Nook Woods. These are mainly ancient woodland, with a canopy of oak, ash, wych and elm. The well developed shrub layers include elder, hawthorn, crab apple, hazel and guelder rose. The ground flora varies from species-poor bramble, bluebell and bracken on the more acidic upper slopes, to a more diverse flora on the base-rich lower slopes of dog’s mercury, yellow archangel, woodruff, red campion and various ferns. The number and variety of orchards within the character area make a significant contribution to the character of the landscape. They range in size from a number of trees in rows to small groups that are often the remains of larger orchards. These were predominantly small domestic orchards attached to farms.

In places small fragments of unimproved grasslands survive, for example, at Beechmill Pasture, Depmore Farm and Acton Bridge. Sedges, grasses and rushes abound in these scarce habitats together with other grassland species uncommon in Cheshire, such as, bog pimpernel, ragged robin, betony, lousewort and lady’s mantle.

Traces of past land uses include a Bronze Age (c 2000-700 BC) round barrow at Gallowslough Cob, an Iron Age (c 700BC – AD50) promontory fort at Bradley above Beech Brook, and moated sites – at Crowton and Peel Hall. Numerous prehistoric finds include a Bronze Age sword from Kingsley.

There is supposedly a motte and bailey castle to the north of Harthill Bank, but it is more likely that this is an area of former sand quarrying.
RF2: Oulton Character Area
Including Whitegate, Oulton Park & Tilstone Fearnall

This character area is located southeast of the Sandstone Ridge and Delamere Character area. It acts as an intermediate zone between the flat expanses of the West Lowland Plain and East Lowland Plain and extends from the small village of Tiverton in the west to the large urban area of Winsford in the east. The area’s elevated position to the east of the Sandstone Ridge allows distant views across the Lowland Plain to both east and west.

This is a medium to large scale landscape with a relatively simple landform. The rolling land in the west becomes relatively flatter towards the east. In broad terms the scale of the landscape increases as fields generally become larger and the incidence of arable crops more frequent. A number of isolated farmsteads feature prominently in the more open landscape. In such areas there are also more extensive views over the low lying Weaver Valley and eastward to the distant Peak District hills.

In the south both Beeston Castle and the Peckforton Hills, in the adjoining character area, are visually dominant over a wide area. In particular the steep ground to the north of the Shropshire Union Canal provides many vantage points with extensive southward views. The church spire at Over provides a conspicuous landmark due to its elevated position on the edge of Winsford. The A54 in the north and the A51 in the south are the only major highways traversing this area and these have relatively little impact upon the rural atmosphere of the surrounding landscape.

The greater part of this character area comprises a medieval field pattern with irregular shape and medium scale (4-8ha), hedgerow boundaries and standard trees. Two areas are particularly discernible near Eaton and Little Budworth and may relate to the field systems associated with these settlements. Townfields are known for example in the vicinity of Over. This is also an area where enclosure from the Royal Forest occurred. In the southwest, the fields relate to post medieval improvement and reorganisation and there are also large fields (greater than 8ha) that are modern amalgamations of smaller fields. Post war and European C.A.P reorganisation has had a strong impact upon the landscape – destroying historic field patterns. Towards the Cheshire Plain, the frequency of field ponds begins to increase.

There are a small number of ancient nucleated settlements such as Eaton and Little Budworth. Elsewhere settlement is dispersed and comprises halls and farms, interlinked by a network of footpaths that are likely to be of some antiquity given the survival of medieval field patterns in this area. There are a number of timber framed buildings dating back to the 17th century, as well as red and brown brick structures.

Wooded water courses such as the Gowy, the Wettenhall and Shayslane Brook run across the area. The Shropshire Union Canal runs alongside the
Gowy as it passes through the area through the Wharton and Bunbury Locks. Leisure aspects of the landscape include Oulton Park, which is now used as a motor racing circuit (the house has been demolished), and a golf course in the former grounds of Vale Royal Abbey.

Tiverton lodge was the seat of the Tollemache estate, prior to the construction of Peckforton Castle and settlements such as Alpraham and Faddiley were part of the estate. Place names such as Townfield Farm, Flaxyard Farm and Coneygreaves Farm all allude to medieval land use – common fields, linen production and rabbit warrens.

The greatest area of tree cover is at Oulton Park, where there is a combination of broad leaved and coniferous trees. There are two areas of ancient woodland both of which are riparian and designated as SBIs – on the banks of the River Gowy near Tiverton and at Catsclough north of Winsford. Further sections of the Gowy banks are also of ecological interest for the species-rich grasslands that have escaped agricultural improvement. Notable species include tussock and lesser-pond sedges, lady’s mantle and wood club-rush. Elsewhere there are various small coverts and copses spread across the character area.

Other SBIs include: Oulton Park Mere, Budworth Pool and Tilstone Fearnall in the grounds of Tilstone Hall; meadows at Brickhouse Farm and Coach Road Farm, and the Whitegate Way, the dismantled railway that runs from Cuddington to the Weaver.

Scheduled Monuments in this area are rich and varied ranging from Robin Hood’s Bronze Age Bowl Barrow (c 2000 – 700BC); Eaton, the only known Roman Villa in Cheshire; the medieval moated site, settlement remains and field system at Alpraham; Marton Grange cross base, grange site, moat and fishpond; and Bunbury canal locks, bridge and stables.
RF3: Aston Character Area
Including Sutton Weaver, Aston Heath & ancient woodland

This character area is located on the east bank of the Weaver Navigation and to the south of Runcorn. It shares its northern limits with the county boundary. This is an area of post medieval enclosure – regular shaped fields between 4-8ha in size, which are typical of reorganised earlier fields. In the south is an enclosed medieval deer park, as indicated by the place name Park Brow etc.

This is a large scale landscape where a system of large fields with low hedges overlays a simple, gently undulating landform. Much of the area is devoted to arable crops. There are relatively few hedgerow trees and widespread evidence of hedgerow loss, all contributing to the sense of openness. The southern part of the character area slopes down towards the River Weaver and this topography offers extensive views to the south and the east. However there is little inter-visibility with the adjacent Weaver Valley and the river remains hidden. At more elevated locations the open landscapes allow extensive views northward towards the large scale industrial areas at Rock Savage and Stanlow on the edge of the River Mersey. The Peak District hills are visible to the east. The open nature of the landscape on the northern boundary of the character area is strongly influenced by the adjacent industrial areas of Runcorn beyond the county boundary. A number of large buildings are visible to the north east and this, combined with the presence of the very busy M56, overhead pylons and a rail line, diminishes the area’s rural character.

There is a high concentration of woodland, most of which is broad leaved and ancient. A number of large woodlands occupy the lower slopes along this southern boundary with the Weaver Valley and strongly influence the character of adjacent landscapes. These woodlands feature in many views to the south as the canopies provide the foreground to distant views across the valley towards the Sandstone Ridge. A large proportion of the ancient woodland is in the grounds of the former Aston Hall. There is degraded parkland at Aston Park.

Settlement comprises small villages such as Sutton Weaver and dispersed farms and halls e.g. Sutton Hall, a listed medieval timber-framed building, behind which is a golf course. However, buildings are predominantly built from red brick.

The Trent and Mersey Canal passes through the east of the character area, emerging from a tunnel that runs past Whitehouses to the north. The M56 passes through the north of the character area in deep cutting, considerably reducing the potential visual impact of moving traffic.
Ancient woodland includes Bird's Wood, Beckett's Wood, Dell Wood and Rye Grass Pipes. The mixed canopies of sycamore, oak, and cherry, include occasional small-leaved lime and hornbeam. The diverse ground flora includes giant bellflower, wild garlic, wood anemone, bluebells, yellow archangel and wood sorrel.

The scheduled earthworks of Middleton Grange – a moated enclosure with fishponds, survive in Old Moat Wood and there is an anti-aircraft gun-site near Sutton Weaver.
RF4: Faddiley Character Area  
Including Peckforton Moss, Spurston Spar & Larden Green

This character area sits between the upland areas of the Sandstone Fringe and the flat expanses of the East Lowland Plain. This is an area of gentle, broad rolling topography, with shorter slopes and an increase in undulation in the vicinity of High Ash (up to 120m AOD).

This is generally a medium scale landscape with many large to medium-sized arable fields laid over a rolling landform, although the occasional area of flat arable ground possesses similar characteristics to the more intensively farmed areas of the adjacent West Lowland Plain. Hedgerow trees are generally abundant and the occasional large block of woodland is locally prominent.

Fields are small-medium (up to 8ha) and irregular and semi-regular in shape. There is a high survival of medieval fields assarted from moss, heath and woodland. This is interspersed with extensive areas of post medieval improvement possibly associated with the Cholmondley Estate and small areas of post medieval enclosure of moss and heath – some of which is irregular and suggestive of encroachment. Field boundaries comprise hedges and standard trees. A network of footpaths which is likely to be of some antiquity links farms in the Spurstow, Ridley Green area, coinciding with the medieval field pattern.

In the north the woodland at Peckforton Moss is visible over a wide area. Elsewhere woodland is limited to a small number of copses and coverts, with ancient woodland located at Ridley Wood, Wrenbury Wood and Peckforton Wood. In the south the area is bound by the very extensive woodlands of the Cholmondeley Estate in the adjacent character area which fill the low southern skyline. Certain locations further to the east have very distant views of the high ground on the Cheshire-Shropshire border near Marbury. Field ponds in the character area are frequent, but less frequent than in the flatter East Lowland Plain and West Lowland Plain.

Between the major highways of the A49 (north-south) and A543 (east-west), which intersect at Ridley Green, there are relatively few roads. These tend to be narrow, meandering lanes rising and falling with the topography, connecting dispersed and isolated cottages and farms, passing between high hedges which restrict many views.

Settlement has a low density compared with the rest of this character type, and is made up of a small number of hamlets e.g. Corden Green and Chorley and mainly dispersed and isolated farms and halls. Building types include timber framed and red brick structures. The Tollemache Estate extends into the northern part of the area e.g. Faddiley, while to the south the Cholmondeley Estate has exercised a great influence over the landscape.

Where the rolling ground provides a more elevated and open location there are views out over large fields under arable crops with an extensive and intact
hedgerow system. Some vantage points also enjoy extensive views to distant higher ground. To the east the Pennine Hills are visible. To the west the adjacent Sandstone Ridge is very prominent and the heavily wooded Peckforton Hills dominate most views along the area’s western boundary. Beeston Castle provides an unmistakable landmark on the northern skyline.

The sulphur waters of the Spurstow Spa were popular in the 18th century. The Bath House, which stands nearby was used as accommodation for bathers.
RF5: Malpas Character Area
Including Carden Park, Overton Scar & Bradely Common

This character area is located to the east of the West Lowland Plain, from which it affords good views of the Clwydian Hills beyond. This undulating area delimits the West Lowland Plain, running from the Sandstone Fringe to the Wych Brook which defines the county boundary in the south. To the east is the Estate Wood and Mere landscape type, which also has undulating topography. A Regionally Important Geological (RIG) inland sandstone outcrop has been identified at Carden Park on Parkers Hill.

In the north of the character area the woodland and steeper ground of the adjacent Sandstone Fringe Character Area defines the eastern boundary and forms a very dominant skyline in the northeast. Similarly the woodlands on the higher ground near Carden Park are very conspicuous. This area appears to be heavily wooded due to the dominance of trees upon the skyline.

The Carden Estate is located between High Carden and Barton. The estate commands extensive views across the West Cheshire Plain towards Chester and the Clwydian Hills. However views into the estate are restricted by extensive woodland belts and boundary walls. This was previously the site of a 16th century timber framed hall, but Carden Hall burnt down in 1912. Today two lodges and an ice house remain and it is the location of a hotel, golf resort and spa. Much of the former parkland at Carden is now used as a golf course. Blocks of mixed woodland are located throughout the estate and the conifer plantation at Round Hill is a visually strong landmark from outside the area. A small historic estate is located at Chorlton Hall in the west of the character area.

There has been much modern conversion of parkland to recreational use or farmland. Land cover is predominantly pasture enclosed within hedgerows of hawthorn, blackthorn and hazel. Sandstone walls also occur beneath some hedgerows. There is a high density of standard trees and oak, ash, wych elm and sycamore are frequent hedgerow trees. Marl pits (ponds) occur but are less frequent than on the Cheshire plain. This is an area that was once predominantly heathland, as indicated by the place names Hampton Heath and Cuddington Heath. Three areas of common land survive – at Bradley Green, Edge Green and Overton Heath.

Throughout the area the high points of undulating ground provide views out over the surrounding landscape. To the west, Wrexham Industrial Estate is also visible and appears as a massive incongruous element within the agricultural plain that extends either side of the county boundary. The Sandstone Ridge forms the distant skyline in views to the east. Malpas Church provides a significant landmark, especially when approaching the village from the south. Away from the main highways the predominantly narrow lanes weave between high hedges and linear woodlands and the character of the landscape is very rural and tranquil.
Settlement includes the nucleated historic village of Malpas and the more recent settlement at No Mans Heath, which has exploited the location at the intersection of the Malpas road with the A49. There is a reasonably consistent and fairly dense coverage of hamlets, farms and halls across the character area, linked by a network of minor roads. Several roads radiate from Malpas including the B5069 and the B5395, which act as a focus for linear settlement that aligns these routes. Building material types include timber framed and red brick structures.

Townfields are located in the vicinity of historic settlements. There are ancient field systems of irregular form, some of which include ridge and furrow. Subsequently, parts of these fields have been reorganised into more regular field systems in the 18th and 19th centuries – often leaving field trees. There is also post medieval planned enclosure of surviving areas of heath, which is sometimes associated with dispersed settlement.

There are a wide range of archaeological sites located in the character area from the prehistoric rock shelter in Carden Park to Watling Street Roman road, which runs through the area. Medieval moated halls are located at Chorlton Old Hall and Edge Hall and there is also a dismantled railway.

Unimproved grasslands and ancient woodlands are mainly confined to stream sides, steep banks, sandstone outcrops and other places where agricultural improvement has been limited. Hooks Rough (SBI grade A) is a rich mosaic of broadleaved semi-natural woodland including coppice with a diverse ground flora, unimproved grassland, hay meadows and species rich pond. Bradley Brook, Carden Brook, Hooks Brook and their numerous tributaries contain important concentrations of these habitats. In the grasslands knapweed, betony, devil’s bit scabious and meadow grasses such as crested dog’s-tail, sweet vernal-grass and meadow fescue are frequently encountered, with cowslip and quaking grass where the limey influence of boulder clay is stronger, and tormentil, heath bedstraw and sheep’s sorrel on the more acidic soils and sandy outcrops. Scarcer plants include pepper saxifrage, spiny restharrow and petty whin.

Overton Scar (SBI grade A) is a fine example of broadleaved semi-natural woodland. Ancient broadleaved woodland includes a mixed canopy of oak, alder, willow, cherry, with an understorey of field maple, blackthorn and occasionally old coppiced hazel. The field layer is often lush with abundant bluebells, wood anemone, ramsons, lesser celandine and occasional moschatel. Colonies of the purple hairstreak butterfly can be found in well-wooded areas, but also on isolated oaks along mature hedgerows.
RF6: Wirral Character Area
Including Windle Hill, Puddington & Shotwick

This gently undulating character area is located on the Wirral, to the east of an area of Mudflats and Saltmarsh and Neston. It extends from the northern county boundary south as far as Saughall. To the east is the Capenhurst Character Area, also within the Rolling Farmland type.

This is a medium-scale landscape of mixed farmland with a range of field patterns and hedgerow types. Woodlands form an important feature within this landscape and dominate many localities. Where these combine with an intact and prominent hedgerow system the scale of the landscape is effectively reduced by the increased enclosure. The area north of Burton is typical of those locally verdant areas with an obvious wooded character. The topography generally falls from a central ridge that closely follows the route of the A540, sloping down towards the Dee estuary, although there are localised areas of flatter ground. Many of the more elevated and open locations enjoy expansive views westward across the Dee estuary towards North Wales and the Clwydian Hills. There are views to the south towards the Shotton industrial area where both the Connah’s Quay power station and the dramatic new Dee Bridge are visible.

The close proximity of a number of large urban areas, including Neston to the north, Burton in the central area and Saughall to the south, has a significant influence upon landscape character. The urban influence is further reinforced where a number of busy highways such as the A540 to Liverpool and the A550 and A5117 dissect the area. These are particularly intrusive within the landscape at major junctions due to associated commercial development such as petrol stations, car showrooms etc. Two visually dominant overhead power lines traverse the centre of the area.

Settlement is more nucleated than is typical of most of Cheshire. Villages include Willaston and the smaller and picturesque Burton and Puddington. There are a small number of old houses including Shotwick Hall (II*) and Puddington Hall (II). Building materials are commonly brick and in the areas of modern housing expansion this takes the form of a range of colours and textures. There are also occasional red sandstone vernacular domestic buildings and boundaries.

The field pattern is mainly post-medieval, either in origin or resulting from reorganisation of earlier field systems. This is mainly regular in layout and medium in scale (4-8ha). Where there are patches of medieval enclosure, as around Puddington, fields are smaller and semi-regular in morphology. This area was formerly included in the Royal Forest of Wirral.

Boundaries are predominantly hedgerows with hedgerow trees. There are also a large number of red sandstone walls. The large number of hedgerow trees and the unkempt, overgrown nature of many of these boundaries give an impression of a well wooded, verdant area.
There is a high level of woodland cover from conifer plantations such as the large one to the north of Burton, to mixed mature woodlands at Burton, which is managed by the National Trust and ancient broad leaf woodland e.g. Shotwick Wood.

Ancient woodland tends to occur on the steeper slopes such as Shotwick Dale in the steep valley of Shotwick Brook and the sloping land alongside Mudhouse Lane, which is indicated by the species of moschatel, bluebell, wood sorrel and common violet. There is also a strip of ancient woodland on the escarpment of the Old River Dee, which has species rich ground flora. To the east is species rich grassland. There are also a number of small coverts e.g. Gorse Covert and Badgersrake Covert which are broadleaves and designated as SBIs.

The Duckery ornamental plantation contains a lake to the east of Leaswood Farm. It was created c 1915 with stands of broad leaf and conifer and there is also an open marshy area with emergent and marginal vegetation. The Wirral Country Park lies to the southwest of Willaston.

Sites of archaeological interest span a vast period of time and include an Iron Age promontory fort at Burton Point, Shotwick motte and bailey castle, and a heavy anti-aircraft gun-site at Puddington. There are two grade II registered parks and gardens from the English Heritage Register – Ness Botanic Gardens and Burton Manor. The Neston Cutting, which is now a disused railway has been designated as a RIG.
RF7: Frandley Character Area  
Including Higher Whitley, Antrobus & Little Leigh

This character type runs from Higher Whitley in the north to Barnton in the south. This is a small to medium scale landscape dominated by field hedgerows and hedgerow trees. A number of winding minor roads and lanes traverse the area with few distant views. Enclosure consists of small-medium (0-8ha) regular and semi-regular fields bounded by hawthorn hedgerows and standard trees. Medieval fields survive alongside those that have undergone post medieval reorganisation and small areas of modern rationalisation.

There are small broad leave woodland copses as well as woodland on the slopes overlooking the Trent and Mersey Canal, including Dutton Dean and Dutton Dingles and Bradley Meadow Woods. The latter are ancient clough woodlands with mixed canopies, in places badly affected by Dutch elm disease and now dominated by sycamore. The species-rich ground flora includes bluebell, ramsons, wood anemone, yellow archangel, dog’s mercury and moschatel.

In the Whitley area there are a number of pools and ponds resulting from sand extraction, some of the largest, dating from the early 20th century, are almost hidden from view by surrounding trees and hedgerows. Other pits in the area also created through sand extraction have subsequently been filled by the tipping of waste.

To the west of the area the ground falls towards the Weaver Valley. This allows distant views towards the Sandstone Ridge in the west. The ground falls again in the south towards Barnton and views are available towards the lower lying Northwich area with its massive industrial structures.

There are some small villages including Higher Whitley, Antrobus and Little Leigh, as well as hamlets and dispersed farms. Buildings are made of red brick, white washed brick and timber frames are common.

The M56 runs outside of the character area (directly to the north) connected to it (J10) are two main roads - the A49 to Whitchurch and the A559 to Northwich, which cross the character area. The A593 passes through the west and elsewhere there is a network of narrow lanes and minor roads.

Sites of interest include a Bronze Age bowl barrow near Lower Whitley and the Friends Meeting House at Frandley.
RF8: Woodhouse Character Area
Including North slope of Woodhouse Hill

This is a very small character area extending from Helsby to Frodsham. It occupies a gently undulating slope below the steep wooded slopes of the Sandstone Ridge, while overlooking the Drained Marsh of Ince and Frodsham and the Mudflats and Salt Marsh of the Mersey Estuary. The ground generally falls down towards the Mersey from 68m AOD in the south to 6m AOD in the north.

There is low woodland cover. Fields are a combination of irregular medieval enclosure and modern reorganisation and enclosure. The character area is crossed by a railway line and the A56, both of which are visually prominent.

The wooded high ground of Frodsham Hill dominates the southern part of the character area, where the very strong skyline terminates all views in this direction. By contrast the northern boundary is visually indistinct and distant views extend over the Frodsham Marshes to the Mersey. In this direction heavy traffic is very prominent on the M56, just outside the character area, whilst the massive industrial complex at Runcom is also visible.
RF9: Capenhurst Character Area
Including Hooton and Capenhurst

This is a small character area located around the northern and western margins of Ellesmere Port and extending as far as the county boundary with the Wirral. The character is heavily influenced by the urban fringe location and the visual intrusion arising from large scale, man-made structures and a busy transport infrastructure where the Birkenhead-Chester railway and the A550 dissect the area. Where low tree cover and poor hedges allow more extensive views over very gently undulating farmland, such structures can dominate the landscape and detract from the original agricultural character, exerting a strong visual influence over a wide area.

Elsewhere the character is that of a small-scale agricultural landscape and unexpectedly verdant with high hedgerows and abundant and very dominant hedgerow trees. Fields are a mix of medieval and post medieval enclosure, small-medium sized, mostly regular in layout. The villages of Hooton, Childer Thornton and Ledsham remain as distinct settlements connected by minor roads and winding country lanes.

The massive Capenhurst industrial complex lies alongside the railway at the heart of the character area, dominating the surrounding area and acting as a focus for numerous overhead power lines.

Ellesmere Port grew from a small canal port called Whitby Locks at the junction of the Shropshire Union Canal and the river Mersey. It underwent massive and sustained growth from the opening of the Manchester Ship Canal (1894) through much of the 20th century.

Riveracre Valley Country Park is an area of steep valley woodland adjacent to the M53 with a diverse ground flora typical of ancient woodland, with small patches of species-rich neutral grassland.

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RF10: Neston Character Area
Including estuary coastline and historic coal mine

This small character area is enclosed on three sides by the suburbs of Neston, which has a significant visual impact on this location. To the west lies the Dee Estuary, an area of Mudflats and Saltmarsh which provides an opportunity to observe the wildlife of the marshland in the near distance and views of the Clwydian Hills on the horizon.

This is a low lying area (0-20m AOD) which slopes gently towards the coast. There are small woodland blocks and one grassland SBI. The medium-sized fields (4-8ha) are regular in shape, bound by tall hedgerows and post medieval in origin. A series of springs and ponds are located across the character area. Horses are grazed and shelters are evident in a number of fields. A Sewage Works occupies a central location and the higher structures are visible above the vegetation. In the southern corner of the character area a spoil heap remains on the shoreline as evidence of past coal mining activity. This area is now grassed over and supports trees and shrubs.

A popular footpath follows the shore line and this enjoys panoramic views westward across the Dee estuary towards North Wales and the Clwydian Hills. There are extensive views to the south towards the Shotton industrial area where both the Connah’s Quay power station and the dramatic new Dee Bridge are visible. Views inland are curtailed by high hedges and abundant hedgerow trees but the tower of Neston Church provides a landmark. A disused railway line that crosses the area is now wooded and provides a green corridor.

The Intake, a Grade A SBI, is an area of unimproved neutral grassland with yellow rattle and sea clubrush and small ponds with lesser reedmace and cyperus sedge.

The Old Quay or “New Haven” was first mentioned in 1541, located on a tidal creek at the junction of Great and Little Neston. It was used throughout the 17th century but by 1732 it had become known as the Old Quay and had been superseded by the quay at Parkgate.

Coal mining in the area was centred on Denhall Quay. Small scale coal extraction is recorded from the 1600’s but commercial deep mining began in the 1750’s. The original Denna Coal Works or Denhall Colliery became Neston Colliery and finally the Wirral Colliery, which ceased operation in 1928. The line of a railway that linked the colliery with the Birkenhead Railway is still visible in the north east of the area.