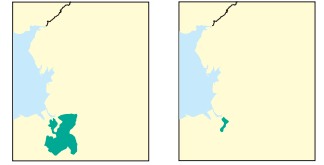


# Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain/ Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Character Area

61/62



## Key characteristics

- Extensive gently rolling plain interrupted by sandstone ridges, the most prominent being the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge.
- A unified rural landscape, with strong field patterns, dominated by dairying which merges with more mixed and arable farming to the north and south-east.
- Mosses, meres and small field ponds are scattered throughout. Subsidence flashes occur to the east of the Cheshire Plain.
- Boundaries are predominantly hedgerows, generally well-managed, with abundant hedgerow trees which are mostly oak. Metal railing fences occur locally on estates.
- Woodlands are few and are restricted to deciduous and mixed woods on the steeper slopes of sandstone ridges, and some of the wetter areas. There are also locally extensive tracts of coniferous woodland. The plentiful hedgerow trees, particularly in Cheshire, give the appearance of a well-wooded landscape.
- Large farmsteads regularly spaced throughout with dispersed hamlets and few market towns.
- Buildings are predominantly red brick with warm sandstone churches and, in the national park, occasional very distinctive black and white half-timbered buildings.
- Extractive industries generally small-scale but widespread - sand, gravel, salt, sandstone, peat.

## Landscape character

### The Plain

The Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain extends from the broad Mersey Valley in the north, with its urban and industrial development, to the Shropshire Hills in the south. To the west, it is bounded by the hills of the Welsh borders, and to the north-east are the Pennine foothills. To

the east and south-east are the developed areas of the Potteries, Needwood and Cannock Chase. The character of the Plain owes much to its glacial origins. Clay, sand, gravel and pebble beds all owe their occurrence and distribution to glacial activity and retreat.

Much of the Plain is gently rolling, with only gentle changes in elevation between 20 m and 50 m. The series of small sandstone ridges, while only reaching elevations of between 150 m and 230 m, are very prominent features within this open landscape. They are characterised by steep sides and a very different vegetation from the Plain. The Mid-Cheshire Ridge, the Maer, and the Hanchurch Hills are the most significant.

Throughout, the predominant land use is the production of grass for dairy cattle; fields are put down to grass for grazing, silage or hay. The water-retention and fertility of the widespread clay soils support lush pastures and thick hedgerows. In the southern parts, farming is more mixed but still with an emphasis on dairying. Field sizes range from small to medium, in irregular field patterns, and are bounded by full, well-maintained hedges. Hedgerow trees, mainly oak with occasional ash and sycamore, are plentiful and are large and mature. This can give the appearance of a landscape with a lot of woodland cover even though woodlands are generally few except in some of the heathy areas and on the ridges. There are parkland estates scattered throughout the Plain, with large, usually over-mature, specimen trees in pastures.

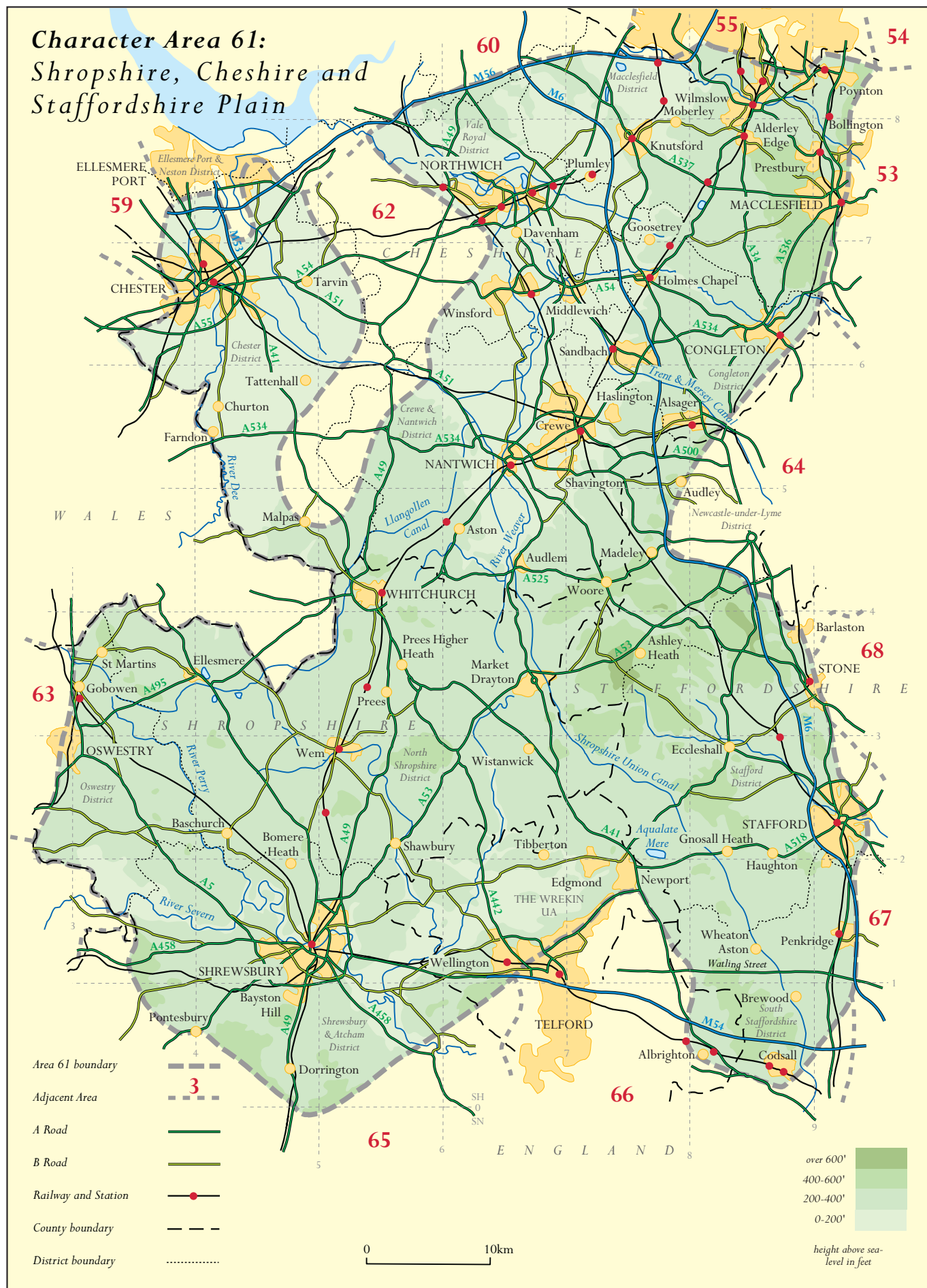
Meres and mosses are widespread local features of the Plain. Patches of willow scrub or clumps of willows and alder, set in amongst the pastures, reveal the presence of peat-filled mosses in boggy, shallow depressions, or water-filled meres, often with abundant marginal vegetation. Small ponds are scattered throughout the Plain but they are rarely seen; rather, they are indicated simply by a clump of sheltering trees, sometimes with scrub and rushes, which punctuate the pattern of hedged pastures.

Large farmsteads, typically a brick or sandstone farmhouse surrounded by several large barns for storing fodder and overwintering stock, are frequent and are spread



throughout the area. Market towns are widely spread out across the Plain. Other settlements, small villages and hamlets are few and dispersed. The hamlets tend to be

loosely clustered, with houses spread out along the network of hedged lanes, in the open countryside. Occurring throughout the Plain, in open countryside as well as in



towns and villages, are occasional older, half-timbered, distinctive black and white houses.

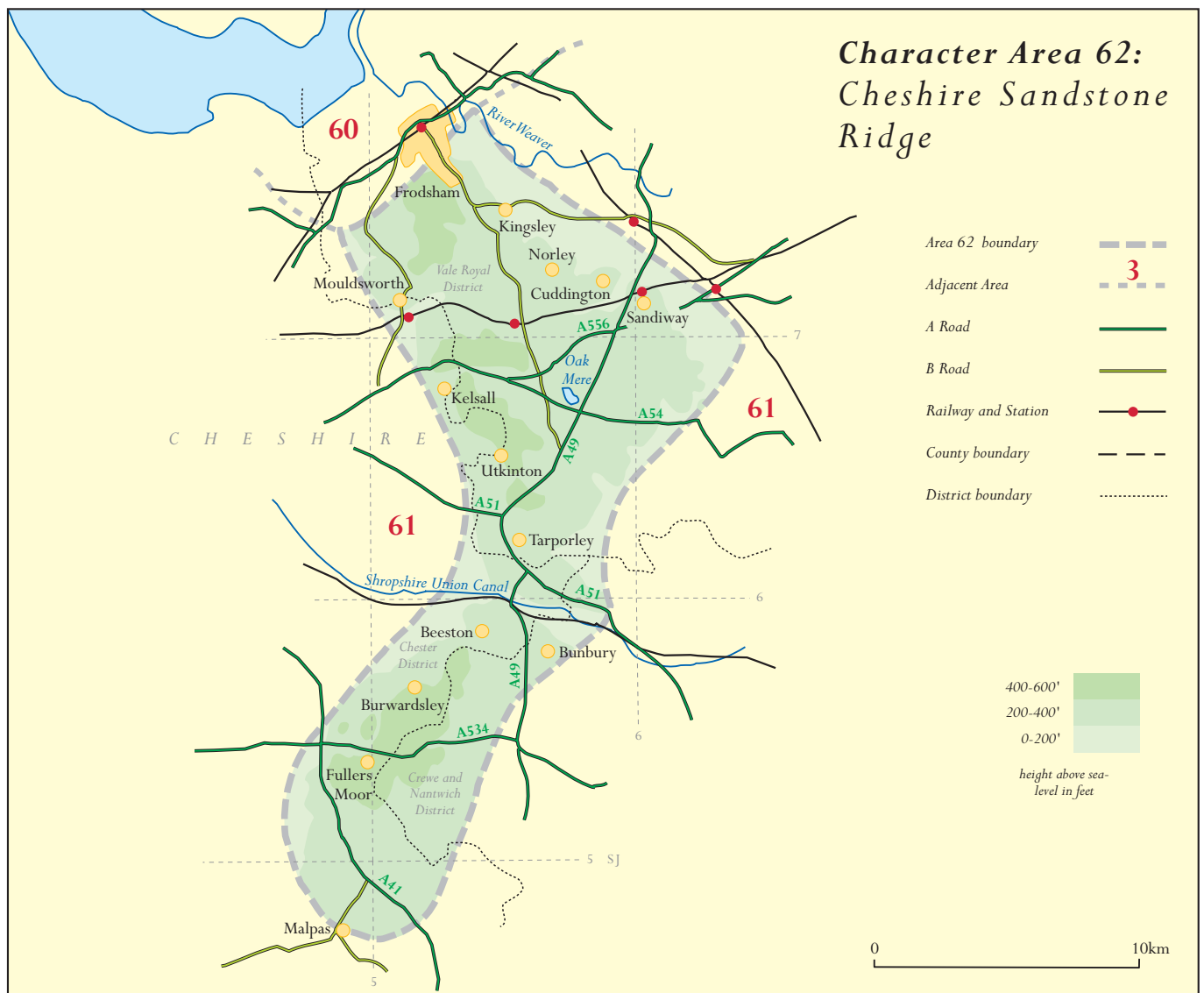
The general appearance is one of a lush, productive and well-managed farmed landscape. Within this landscape, however, there are other, subtle changes arising from the nature of the underlying soils. In places soils are thin, sandy or gravelly and support woodlands of oak, birch and scrubby willow. Bracken occurs in the road verges and hedgerows and there is a heathy feel to the local landscape. Such variation is seen in the open area of extensive mosses north of Telford, ringed by sandy soils and former heathland. Woodlands of birch, oak and pine, with birch and bracken in the hedgerows grow on the sands. The Weald Moors are characterised by a network of rush-filled drainage dykes between damp pastures and wet woodland. Further towards Whitchurch, the Whixall Mosses contain peat-filled meres, with associated alder, birch and marsh vegetation, giving a fen-like feel aptly described as 'desolate and brooding'.

Stretches of substantial water-bodies have been formed by subsidence, resulting from the extraction of salt, and are most notable in the north of the Plain around Nantwich and

Middlewich. Other meres have been formed by deep depressions within morainic deposits notably around Ellesmere in north-west Shropshire. Here a group of seven large meres, some fringed with woodland and contained within the hummocky hills of the moraine, create a distinctive local landscape known as the 'Shropshire Lakeland'.

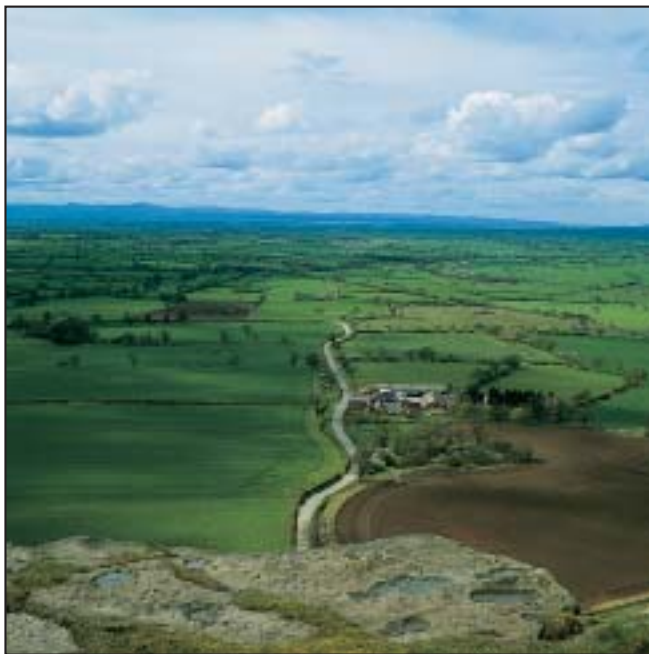
The larger rivers, such as the Severn, meander through wide valleys of flatter and lower land than the surrounding Plain. The rivers thus tend to be unseen and are not major features within the landscape, except at notable locations such as the tight meander of the Severn through Shrewsbury. The Shropshire Union, Trent and Mersey and Llangollen Canals run through the Plain but have only a limited, local effect on the landscape. The M6 runs north-south along the east side. Development pressures are constrained to limited areas and the Plain generally retains a quiet and strongly rural feel. Of greater impact are the extraction industries, exploiting the resources of sand, salt, clay, peat and sandstone, which introduce industrial elements into the landscape locally throughout the area.

Estates and parklands, with their associated parkland trees, metal rail fencing, woodlands and estate buildings, are a



feature of the Cheshire and Staffordshire parts of the Plain as well as the area beside the river Severn as it flows through Shropshire.

The Plain is visually contained by the higher land around it. In the south, there are frequent long views from the Plain to the prominent hills of south Shropshire, notably the Wrekin and Wenlock Edge. The distant backdrop of the foothills of the Welsh mountains can be seen from areas in the west. Similarly, in the east, the Pennines and Peak District can be seen to rise in the distance.



MIKE WILLIAMS/COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION

This view from Beeston Castle looking west shows that grass production, primarily for dairy farming, is the predominant land use in the north of the area.

### The Ridges

Rising up from the Plain are a number of small sandstone ridges and scarps, the main one being the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge which runs north-south across the Plain. It is a small, irregular ridge, only reaching heights of 123 m at Helsby and 227 m at Raw Head in the Peckforton Hills to the south. It is, however, very prominent as it rises sharply up from the Plain.

Permanent pastures, of poorer quality and rougher texture than the lush green fields of the Plain, extend over the Ridge. The steeper slopes are covered with deciduous and mixed woodland, the trees growing to large sizes. Arable crops are grown on some of the better-draining, gentler slopes of the Ridge. There is evidence of quarrying for sandstone and extraction of sand and gravel. The latter gives rise to large water-filled pits which now create a local recreational landscape.

Gently undulating, elevated areas occur to the east of the sandstone, with thin and infertile soils. Extensive tracts of woodland, mostly pine with some birch as well as conifer plantations, give a distinctive feel to the area, notably at

Delamere Forest. Small-scale features, such as river valleys, meres and mosses, and fragments of heathland occur between the large-scale forestry and the larger farms devoted to mixed farming.

Other sandstone ridges and groups of hills occur within the Plain. The main, discontinuous Cheshire Sandstone Ridge reappears as groups of small hills at Nesscliffe, Grinshill and Hawkestone. Thus views across the Plain north of Shrewsbury are often interrupted by these wooded hills with the trees forming striking silhouettes along the skylines. Other small hills rising abruptly from the flat Plain, as at Lilliehall, support similar combinations of rough-textured pastures and broadleaved woodland. Less abrupt ridges occur to the east with more open, arable land on the gentler slopes. They provide expansive views out across the Plain.

The Maer and Hanchurch Hills form the largest block of uplands over 400 metres. The landform is varied and undulating but on a small scale. Low ridges contain small valleys. Steep slopes are bracken-covered or abundantly wooded and there are large hedgerow and parkland trees.

A particular characteristic of all the ridges, because of their elevation above the Plain, are the features punctuating the ridge lines. These include castles, follies (such as Peckforton Castle), monuments at Hawkestone and Lillieshall and communications masts.



MIKE WILLIAMS/COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION

Although woodlands are few, the extensive hedgerows and trees typically give the gently rolling plains a wooded appearance, as seen here at Congleton.

### Physical Influences

The Plain is formed from Triassic sandstones and marls but these are overlain by glacial deposits, largely consisting of boulder clay, with local deposits of silt, peat, sand and

gravels. The reddish-pink sandstone forms the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge which is a discontinuous ridge of Triassic sandstone running from north to south. It is most prominent in the north where it rises to over 150 m. Further south it narrows to form small but abrupt ridges with gaps at Beeston and near Bickerton. Flanking the northern part of the Ridge are fluvioglacial deposits of sands and gravels, Pebble Beds of the Bunter Series, which broaden and extend the elevated land of the Ridge to the east.



JOHN COCKS/COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION

The Cheshire Sandstone Ridge rises sharply from the plain near Beeston. Peckforton Castle is a prominent feature. As with many of the sandstone ridges and hills in the area, the steeper slopes are covered with mixed woodland. Rough pasture and arable crops are commonly found on the gentler slopes.

The Ridge becomes more broken further south where it forms a series of small but prominent hills within the Plain, at Nesscliffe, Grinshill and Hawkestone. The influence of the underlying sandstone ridge continues north-east to Woore forming a gently undulating topography and dipping down between Crewe and Stoke.

Less abrupt sandstone ridges occur north and west of Macclesfield with scarp slopes, such as Alderley Edge, rising from the plain. A further broken line of sandstone runs south from Ashley to Gnosall and Albrighton. These outcrops of hard sandstone have been softened by glacial deposits which together form a gentle ridge rising from the Plain.

Close by are the sandstones of the Carboniferous Coal Measures which have been affected by glacial activity and have formed small-scale hummocky ridges and valleys, as around Maer. These sandstones run south-west from Newcastle towards Shrewsbury.

Glacial activity has affected the whole Plain by rounding off the hard outcrops of sandstone, creating meltwater channels and lake beds and depositing a variety of materials from boulder clay to marls, sands and gravels. These deposits have in places caused the formation of a number of shallow meres, some peat-filled, and mosses. Depressions within the morainic deposits form the remarkable series of meres

at Ellesmere whilst the largest mosses, at Weald Moor and Whixall Moor, are on a complex mix of sands, gravels, silts and peats. Aqualate Mere is within a pocket of peaty glacial deposits, whilst Ercall and Chetwynd Heaths lie on the slightly elevated landforms of the Pebble Beds of the Bunter Series. These deposits tend to be more diverse in the Shropshire part of the Plain. A post-glacial lake stretched from the Welsh border to Newport, across the south of the character area, leaving an aftermath of meres and wetland features associated with the river Severn and its tributaries.

Elsewhere human activities in extracting sand, gravel and peat has substantially altered the landform, notably to create new water-bodies. The extraction of salt, by dissolving it and pumping it out of underground deposits within the Triassic Mercia Mudstone, has caused subsidence flashes particularly around Northwich and Middlewich in Cheshire. Numerous field ponds have originated as sand and marl pits for agricultural improvement. The resulting widespread meres, mosses and ponds, both natural and manmade, form a series of wetlands of international/national conservation importance as well as being a unifying characteristic of the Plain.

Although relatively low-lying, the Plain forms a watershed for several major river systems. The Whitchurch Moraine creates a sub-division between the north and the south of the Plain. It forms a gentle undulating landform, rising only 100 m or so, but exceeding 160 m at Wirswall. It marks the limit of one of the many glacial advances and, although low and unobtrusive, the gentle rise forms the watershed between the catchment areas of the Dee and Gowy which drain to the Mersey Valley in the north and the Severn to the south.

To the south-west, the river Perry drains south to join the Severn as it meanders eastwards through a wide, flat, alluvial valley before tightly twisting through Shrewsbury and turning south. Here it is joined by the rivers Roden and Tern which drain much of the Plain north and east of Shrewsbury. On the east side, however, the rivers Sow and Penk flow towards Stafford and are part of the Trent catchment to the south-east. They include the important wetlands of the Doxey and Tillington Marshes.

### Historical and Cultural Influences

Inhospitable dense woodland of oak, elm and alder on the heavy clays of the Plain discouraged access in prehistoric times. In addition, most of the rivers were unnavigable and thus did not act as transport routes. Clearance of the woodlands only began in the late Bronze Age and even then settlement was concentrated on the drier lands of the Pennine Fringe and the Sandstone Ridges. Early Iron Age hillforts were constructed here and connected by a trackway following the higher land. There is also evidence of small settlements of a similar date on the higher, drier ground of

the Weald Moors. Intriguing clues to the area's prehistory - including mammoth bones and preserved human bodies - are occasionally uncovered by extractive industries.

The influence of the Romans can be seen through the notable roads built to cross the Plain particularly Watling Street which linked London to mid-Wales. Chester was the most significant Roman settlement. The clearance of woodlands for agriculture was widespread during the period of Roman occupation.

The Plain was subject to raids from tribes to the west, giving rise to a number of defensive settlements such as moated manors. By the time of the Domesday survey, much of the Shropshire part of the Plain was cleared of woodland except for isolated patches. It was not until this time, when raids became less frequent, that wealth could be accumulated and settlements made more permanent. The increase in wealth led to the spread of arable fields, the growth of markets and the building of churches, monasteries and merchants' dwellings. Many of the market towns, and their churches, can be traced back to Norman times.

From the 16th century the wool and cloth trades brought increasing prosperity to the area. The distinctive black and

white merchants' dwellings date from this time. This prosperity continued into the 18th century when the towns were enlarged with elegant brick Georgian buildings.

The area was not subject to enclosure of land enforced through Parliamentary Enclosure Acts as were other regions of central England. Enclosure occurred, apparently through agreement, without the strife recorded elsewhere. Thus, for instance, by the beginning of the 19th century all but 10 per cent of Shropshire had been enclosed, but less than 10 per cent of these enclosures were due to Parliamentary Acts. A population of relatively prosperous yeomen, or small holders, grew up and their dwellings were the precursors of the present scattered farms and hamlets.

Timber was always an essential product of the area. It was used for charcoal in the salt industry and, in the south-east before the widespread use of coal, for iron smelting. Timber was also the prime construction material and Shropshire oak, in particular, was sought after for ship-building. Delamere Forest was a Royal Forest until 1812 and in 1919 the remaining Crown woodlands were passed to the (then) Forestry Commission to be managed for timber production.



Meres, mosses and ponds are widespread throughout the plain as shown here at Shipbrookhill near Northwich. Many of the water-bodies in this area have been formed by subsidence resulting from the extraction of salt.

## Buildings and Settlement

The basic settlement pattern, of dispersed farmsteads, hamlets and small villages was set down in the Celtic and early English periods. Many of these settlements were located on slight elevations of sandstone or free-draining glacial deposits. Two of the largest settlements of the Plain - Chester and Shrewsbury - are strikingly located in defensive positions on sandstone bluffs above tight meanders on the rivers Dee and Severn respectively. Stafford Castle is similarly located above a tributary of the river Trent.

The prosperity of the medieval period, and in particular the rise of the cloth and wool trade in the 16th century and onwards, consolidated this pattern with some villages developing into small market towns. The typical three-storey brick farmhouses were built from this time onwards as the land was enclosed and agriculture became more prosperous.

Chester and Shrewsbury, as major market centres, continued to develop and expand but still retain the tight-knit narrow streets in the town centres. These are lined with buildings, notably from the 17th and 18th centuries, resulting in an intricate and attractive mix of half-timbered, brick and red sandstone buildings. The centres of small market towns such as Market Drayton and Wem, comprise narrow lanes lined by brick-built buildings from the 18th century.

The county town of Stafford was a product of later times with elegant and dignified 18th century housing and fine 19th century municipal buildings dominating the town centre. In the countryside, too, the Staffordshire part of the Plain has mostly Georgian and Victorian farm and country houses which had replaced less substantial dwellings. Here, around Shrewsbury and in north-east Cheshire, several estates were established. Some of these have extensive associated parks. Eminent landscape and garden designers, including Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, William Shenstone and Humphry Repton, were involved in their layout. Brown had a major influence at Chillington, while Repton was responsible for the park at Aqualate in 1800.

The towns of the north expanded through industrial activity and tend to be larger, sprawling settlements. Sandbach, Middlewich and Nantwich developed as a result of the salt industry while Crewe arose as a result of the new network of railways. More recent 20th century development has resulted in the expansion of towns such as Winsford. Telford, on the very edge of the Plain, has expanded considerably as a New Town. To the north-east of the Plain, towards Macclesfield, are some of the wealthiest villages in England.

The predominant building material is brick ranging from orange/red in the south, to reds/browns/purples in the north and east. The latter can give rise to a very attractive mottled effect which is enhanced when combined with the typical dark

Welsh slate roofing material. Some of the older farmhouses are, like many churches, constructed of the attractive red sandstone. Of particular note are the half-timbered black and white houses, sometimes thatched, that are scattered throughout the Plain in open countryside as well as in towns and villages. The many large and small dwellings throughout the Plain testify to the general prosperity of farmers.

## Land Cover

The predominant land cover is grass particularly in the north of the area. Leys, improved grassland and permanent pasture, all produce grass for grazing, silage or hay. It is a prime dairying area based on the widespread fertile and productive clay soils and the relatively high rainfall that promotes good grass growth. In Staffordshire, livestock rearing combines with dairying which gives way to significant arable and mixed farming on the more easily drained soils. Maize and other fodder crops are grown to provide winter feed.

Arable predominates in the north, towards the Mersey Valley, and on some of the gentle, freer draining side slopes of the sandstone ridges. Potatoes are grown on some of the lighter, sandier soils in Shropshire.

Hedges are predominantly of hawthorn. Blackthorn and other shrubby species are less frequently found. Hedgerow trees are mainly oak, generally mature or over-mature, with some ash and sycamore as well as willow in damper conditions.

Woodland cover is generally low, only about 4 per cent, and is restricted to small broadleaved or mixed woodlands on the steeper slopes of the sandstone ridges or along the sides of watercourses. Small copses and clumps of trees, mainly oak, ash, willow, alder and scrub, occur around meres and ponds. Oak, sycamore and beech are commonly found within the estates and parklands.

Woodland cover is higher on the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge particularly in Delamere Forest where there are more extensive broadleaved and mixed woodlands on the slopes, and large blocks of conifers on the gravelly soils to the east. Pines commonly occur in the woods, plantations and along hedgerows and roadsides. Commercial forestry is carried out here, as it is in some parts of the south-east of the area, where conifers are grown on poorer soils.

The heaths and mosses are comprised of poorer quality pastures with woodlands of birch, oak, pine and alder. These trees also occur in the hedgerows and alongside ditches and roads. In places there are stretches of heath comprised of ling, gorse, bilberry and birch.

Field ponds are frequent - some 25 per cent of all the field ponds of England and Wales are found in Cheshire and most of these will be within the Plain. Some of the meres are substantial, the largest being Rostherne Mere with an area of 153 ha.

## The Changing Countryside

- Over recent decades, there has been a steady process of intensification of grassland management resulting in the loss of herb-rich hay meadows and pastures and wet grassland. In addition, the pastoral character has been reduced through the introduction of fodder crops such as maize to provide winter feed. Associated with this process of general intensification is improved drainage which, along with infill, encroachment and mismanagement, has resulted in the loss of field ponds, bogs, and mosses. Heathlands, once widely distributed, particularly in the south, are now limited to a few isolated fragments.
- The move to arable farming in parts of the Plain has led to an increase in field size coupled with either the loss of hedgerows and hedgerow trees or the mismanagement of remaining hedges. An increase in farm size, and diversification of farm activities, is now leading to the conversion of farmsteads, or parts of farmsteads, to non-farming uses.
- Woodlands have been felled locally and replaced with conifers or new conifer plantations have been planted. Conifers and non-native broadleaved species have been introduced into existing semi-natural woodlands. Many woodlands, and the majority of hedgerow trees, are mature or over-mature.
- Apart from Telford, on the fringe of the area, development has largely been confined to the few major towns and there have been a number of developments in the open countryside in response to the increase in tourism and the demand for recreational facilities. The proximity of large conurbations means that development pressures are likely to continue. The demand for infill sites for waste disposal from the conurbations is also an issue.



MIKE WILLIAMS/COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION

Large farmsteads are scattered throughout the area. Many are built from the local red sandstone. Some still have a traditional timber framed appearance.

## Shaping the Future

- The Plain has a distinctly rural, pastoral character that would benefit from maintenance and enhancement where possible. The most significant means of achieving this would be the introduction of lower-intensity farming methods including improved hedgerow management, the retention of pasture land and the restoration of wetland habitats and riparian vegetation.
- Means of retaining the strong pattern of hedgerows, including ensuring a young stock of hedgerow trees to replace the predominantly over-mature trees, need to be addressed.
- The improved management of the limited woodland cover would ensure its retention and sustainable continuation. Management might also include the replacement of non-native species by native broadleaved species. Woodland grants are available to assist in both managing existing woodlands and planting new ones. As the conifer plantations mature, and are ready for felling, the opportunity arises to replant with predominantly broadleaved species which would improve the landscape quality locally. Forest strategies could assist in identifying priorities and directing effort.
- Opportunities for enhancing drainage channels and water bodies need to be considered. This might include more natural bank treatments, the introduction of buffer strips and wetland restoration.
- The diversification of farm activities, and the introduction of a range of farm-related enterprises is welcome as a means of ensuring the viability of farming. However, it needs to be handled carefully to ensure that inappropriate developments do not occur that would disrupt the rural landscape character.
- The restoration of waste disposal sites on low-grade agricultural land, and the restoration of mineral extraction sites, may provide opportunities for land uses other than agriculture but these need to be handled sympathetically to ensure their integration into the pastoral landscape.

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## Glossary

- flash*: a water body caused by mining subsidence
- mere*: lake or pond