

Landscape descriptions relevant to the Neighbourhood Area of Chapel & Hill Chorlton, Maer & Aston, and Whitmore Parishes

Extracts from *Planning for Landscape Change: Supplementary Planning Guidance to the Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Structure Plan, 1996–2011, Volume 3: Landscape Descriptions*, Staffordshire County Council, Development Services Department, 2000

Chapter 2: Regional Character Area 61 – Staffordshire Plain

The Staffordshire Plain (page 9)

1. Not all of Staffordshire's regions have clearly defined borders and this area of rolling farmland, with its small towns such as Eccleshall and Brewood, shares many characteristics with its neighbouring counties to the west. This is a gently rolling lowland landscape, unified by its deposits of glacial drift, which has been a major influence on the soils, ecology and land use of the area. At the end of the last glaciation the ice sheet, which had been up to 1 km thick, began to retreat, dumping unsorted boulder clays and sands and gravels in the glacial outwash and creating the kettleholes in which developed the meres and mosses that are characteristic of the Staffordshire-Shropshire border. That part of the plain within Staffordshire is now an intensive agricultural landscape of dairy farming, with some stock rearing, but it is now giving way to arable farming in places. The more intact areas of landscape show the irregular pattern of hedged fields, ancient hedgerows and large numbers of over-mature hedgerow oaks characteristic of this part of the county. A distinctive character is imparted by the extensive network of small, often sunken, winding lanes, by the dispersed pattern of small rural towns and by the traditional red brick architecture.

2. The scale of the landscape is enlarging in many areas, as a result of the change to arable cropping, compounded by a general decline of hedgerows and hedgerow trees. In these areas, and especially where landform becomes stronger, views across the landscape become more evident, fences become more common and ancient broadleaved woodlands give way to newer plantations.

3. The plain as a whole is not homogeneous, as discrete sandstone areas are elevated above the clay lowlands. For this reason it is helpful to describe the character area with reference to subdivisions based on those geological differences, as follows.

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The Woodland Quarter (page 11)

13. This is a local name, of unknown provenance, for a distinctive region of sandstone hills and large woodlands to the south west of Newcastle-under-Lyme. At its core is an area of strongly rising landform, culminating in the Maer and Hanchurch hills, with their extensive conifer plantations and remnant heathland character, resulting from the acidic sands and brown soils overlying Permo-Triassic sandstones. The agricultural land quality here is mainly average at Grade 3, with some Grade 2. This is predominantly a livestock farming area with dairying the main farm type. Cereals and other more demanding arable crops including potatoes are grown mainly in the south and west of the area where land quality is generally better than further north.

14. The undulating landform is a unifying feature; to the west of the core area, approaching the boundary with north Shropshire, it supports a medium scale landscape with an intact field pattern and conifer woodlands on a pronounced rolling landform, whilst to the south it develops into an elevated plateau of intensive farmland and dispersed hamlets. This is an area of scattered woods and regular to semi-regular medium sized fields, where the mixed arable and pastoral farming, with few trees, sculpted hedges and strong landform, results in extensive views across the landscape. The landform reduces to a much smaller scale the landscape around Copmere in the extreme south, where it becomes strongly incised by steep sided wooded valleys. In the intensively farmed arable areas the landscape becomes very much more open in character. Broadleaved woodlands have more effect in dictating scale in these areas, though never enough to interrupt views across them. Small winding lanes are a general feature of the quarter.

15. There is some evidence for prehistoric and Roman settlement, but the irregular field pattern, the lack of nucleated villages and the preponderance of woodland-type names all suggest that the present landscape is the result of gradual colonisation of an area that was once wooded. No particular date can be determined for this colonisation, but it may have continued up until the early modern period. In effect, it may have ended with the final

enclosure, by agreement or by Act, of the remaining open heaths and commons.

Encroachment since the middle ages is reflected in such settlement names as Woodwall Green and Shortwood Cottages. Panelled timber-framed buildings dating from this period can be found, for example in Hanchurch. Later brick was used, although some houses still incorporate sandstone, which reflects the availability of stone in this area. The designers of the parklands, laid out around halls such as Keele, Whitmore, Maer and Swynnerton in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, made good use of the rolling character of the area. There are long-established mills at Offleybrook and Walk Mill, in the valleys near Eccleshall, although their surviving buildings are largely of nineteenth century date.

16. There are large Forest Enterprise woodlands, mainly of Corsican pine [*Pinus nigra* var. *maritima*], at Burnt Wood, Bishops Wood and Swynnerton Old Park on the Hanchurch hills, and similar privately owned commercial woodlands on the Maer Hills and at Burnt Wood. The Maer Hills plantation, and possibly that at Swynnerton Old Park, occupy former heathlands, whilst Bishops Wood and Burnt Wood are ancient woodland sites. A semi-natural remnant of former simple oak coppice with both native species and hybrids survives in the latter woodland. With the exception of the ancient woodlands, the areas of greatest nature conservation interest are probably the valleys of the Rivers Tern and Sow, and the Coal Brook. Two tree species which impart a particular local character in the upper Sow valley are bird cherry (*Prunus padus*) - usually thought of as an upland species - and the nationally-rare Plot elm (*Ulmus carpinifolia* var. *plotii*) now relegated almost to the status of a shrub as a result of Dutch elm disease.

Detailed descriptions of landscape character types

Ancient redlands (pages 29–31)

This is a rather ill-defined landscape type in Staffordshire. Occurring on older rocks than any of the landscapes described above, it is characterised by Upper Palaeozoic mudstones and sandstones and a dissected undulating topography with a muted upland feel. The non-calcareous brown soils support stock rearing with mixed farming in an irregular pattern of hedged fields with a good scatter of small woodlands, most of which are of ancient origin. The settlement pattern is dispersed, with hamlets and scattered farmsteads.

Visual character

This is a landscape of mixed arable and pastoral farmland, very much dependent on the interaction of a rolling landform with numerous woodlands in determining its scale. Field pattern varies, from being intact and a strong element in the landscape in areas where it continues its stock control function, to being a fairly weak visual element in other areas as the hedges are replaced by lines of fencing. Landform variations are very important in defining the differing scales and character, with areas of rolling or strong small-scale landform undulations allowing or controlling views across the landscape. These give way to areas of more pronounced steep sandy slopes of sheep pasture in places.

The woodlands, predominantly broadleaved but some with a conifer content, have a large visual influence on the landscape as a result of their interlock and relative position on the higher ground and in valleys. Adjacent large areas of broadleaved and coniferous woodlands also have a large impact on the appearance of the landscape, enclosing views and giving the whole area an impression of being well wooded in character. The numerous mature hedgerow oaks that coalesce visually in places reinforce the landcover pattern and wooded appearance of the landscape, whilst elsewhere a more open character is given by a much lower density of hedgerow oak and ash. Here, small-scale woodlands associated with stream corridors, ridge tops and farm buildings provide localised relief from an open smoothly textured landscape.

Settlement within this landscape reflects its ancient character, with narrow winding lanes, often sunken, linking hamlets, scattered houses and farms. Medium sized farms of Staffordshire red brick and halls with associated parkland impart a localised, distinctive character, as do parcels of more regular field pattern and straight roads.

Generally, this is a landscape where everything is on view, including intrusive elements such as commuter properties, main roads and electricity pylons.

Characteristic landscape features

Hedgerow field pattern with mature hedgerow oaks and some ash; broadleaved woodland; pronounced rolling landform; narrow sunken lanes; steep sandy slopes; well treed stream corridors and field ponds; parkland and pasture farming; isolated red brick farmhouses; straight lanes.

Incongruous landscape features

Expanding urban edge; busy main roads; power lines.

Factors critical to landscape character and quality

The critical factors which currently limit landscape quality are the relatively poor survival of historic elements that contribute to landscape character, such as field, settlement and road patterns, and the poor survival of characteristic semi-natural vegetation (i.e. ancient woodland, semi-natural grasslands and riparian and wetland vegetation).

Potential value of new planting

Very high. New planting, especially of larger woodlands, would be of value to direct views away from adjacent urban edges, and to restore a wooded landscape structure to the more open areas. The strategic siting of new native woodland could be of great value in reducing the effects of fragmentation and isolation of ancient woodland. A significant part of the area falling within this landscape type is also within the boundary of a Community Woodland Zone as defined in the Newcastle under Lyme Local Plan. Within this area the Borough Council will encourage the establishment of new woodlands with similar objectives to those of Community Forest Areas, albeit on a smaller scale.

Potential value of other habitat provision and management

The following Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan Targets are relevant at landscape scale:

<i>Habitat type</i>	<i>Objective or target</i>	<i>Priority</i>
Ancient/semi-natural broadleaved woodland	maintain and enhance	very high
	restore degraded sites	very high
	recreate/regenerate	medium
Arable field margins	maintain, improve and restore	medium
Canals, lakes and ponds	maintain and enhance water bodies and catchments	high
	increase the number of such features	high

Lowland acidic grassland	maintain, enhance, restore and buffer	high
	prevent further losses (except to heathland restoration)	high
	increase the number of such sites	high
	link fragmented sites through habitat creation	high
	re-create or create new heathlands	very high
Peat bogs	maintain and enhance	very high
	restore former raised bogs	very high
Reedbeds	maintain and create	high
Rivers and streams	maintain and improve the quality and quantity of water	high
	maintain the quality of all natural existing channel features	high
Unimproved neutral grassland	maintain and safeguard existing areas	high
	restore	medium
	link adjacent sites through habitat creation	lower
	create/re-create new areas	lower

Further details of these habitat targets can be found in the Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan

Specific guidelines

Tree and woodland planting

Care should be taken to ensure the survival of existing hedgerow tree features. There is the capacity to take a wide range of woodland sizes, from small to medium scale associated with existing vegetation patterns, to larger scale on the flatter ground. Any new areas of woodland should be designed to retain long distance views through the landscape from important viewpoints. A conifer element is appropriate, but with attention to softening the edges with a broadleaved character. Care is needed on the steeper slopes with woodland shape and internal design.

Design in villages

The village of Madeley, which falls largely within this landscape character type, has produced its own Village Design Statement.

Sandstone hills and heaths (pages 39–41)

This landscape type occurs at rather higher elevations than the sandstone estatelands: it has the same underlying geology and range of soils but the landform is more pronounced, comprising hills and dissected plateaux. Significant areas of this type in Staffordshire - in particular Cannock Chase - have the original heathland vegetation or coniferous forests established on heathland.

Where conversion has been to farmland stock rearing is the predominant land use, in large hedged fields of a regular pattern, indicating relatively recent enclosure. Significant clusters of ancient woodlands are characteristic. The settlement pattern is generally dispersed, with expanded hamlets. The 'type-landscape', described below is farmed: estatelands, forest and parkland are treated as variants of the type.

Visual character

This is a landscape varying from intensive arable and pastoral farming, where hedgerows are closely trimmed and in decline, to small-scale intimate areas in which large grown-up intact hedges and numerous hedgerow oaks limit views through or across the landscape. In the more intensively farmed arable areas hedgerow tree cover of oak and occasional ash is sparse. This results in an open, smoothly textured landscape with extensive views across. A pronounced landform, strongly undulating but flattening considerably in parts, results in the landcover elements being viewed as individual components of the landscape and field pattern showing up from elevated viewpoints. Woodland cover in these areas of medium to large scale tends to be small broadleaved or conifer plantations providing more localised relief along stream corridors and ridge tops. Small woodlands and copses are also often associated with farm buildings. Characteristically, where landform becomes more strongly rounded the intimate nature of the steep sided valleys and associated extensive broadleaved woodlands become the important factors in controlling scale. In these smaller scale valley landscapes there is little evidence of any agricultural pressure which would lead

to further changes, but commuter pressures are apparent and these are subtly changing the character of settlements.

The network of winding ancient lanes, linking the small to medium sized farms, hamlets and individual properties of typical Staffordshire red brick, are often sunken and have extensive sandstone banks in the areas of more pronounced landform. These dictate views and give a very rural feel to the landscape. Areas of former heathland are apparent by the presence of a more regular field pattern, straight lanes, bracken and birch woodland, and these areas are often associated with newer rural properties. Generally, this is a landscape where distinct characters are determined by different landform and woodland characteristics.

The open flatter areas where everything is on view - including intrusive elements such as commuter properties, main roads and electricity pylons - are characterised by medium sized farms and large estates, whilst the ancient pattern of small fields and predominantly pastoral land-use of the steep valleys imparts a more peaceful character to the areas of smaller scale.

Characteristic landscape features

Strongly undulating landform with steep sided valleys; a well treed landscape of field ponds, stream valleys and meres; ancient narrow sunken lanes; farms of traditional red brick; intensive arable and pasture farming; hedged field boundaries; hedgerow oaks; broadleaved and conifer woodlands.

Incongruous landscape features

Introduction of extensive post and wire fencing; field trees; modern housing; industrial development; busy main roads.

Factors critical to landscape character and quality

The critical factors which currently limit landscape quality are the loss of characteristic landscape features, the poor condition of those that remain, and the introduction of the incongruous features noted above. The area between Standon and Chapel Chorlton has been identified as a 'landscape at risk' of sudden loss of quality (see Section 7.18 et seq. of the Supporting Documentation) and measures to meet the BAP targets listed below will be critically important in preventing such a loss. This landscape character type is locally sensitive to the impacts of development and land use change.

Potential value of woodland planting

Generally of high value, to restore a landcover structure to areas becoming more open as a result of agricultural intensification, and to screen modern housing and industrial developments. In some of the more heavily wooded parts the management and conservation of existing woods – especially those of ancient origin – would generally be a higher priority than new planting. However, the strategic siting of new native woodland could be of great value in reducing the effects of fragmentation and isolation of some ancient woodlands.

Potential value of other habitat provision and management

The following Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan Targets are relevant at landscape scale:

<i>Habitat type</i>	<i>Objective or target</i>	<i>Priority</i>
Ancient/semi-natural broadleaved woodland	maintain and enhance	medium
	restore degraded sites	medium
	recreate/regenerate	lower
Ancient/diverse hedgerows	Maintain and manage	very high
	Maintain trees	very high
Hedgerows	Plant species-rich hedges	lower
Arable field margins	maintain, improve and restore	lower
Canals, lakes and ponds	maintain and enhance water bodies and catchments	high
	increase the number of such features	high
Lowland acidic grassland	maintain, enhance, restore and buffer	high
	prevent further losses (except to heathland restoration)	high
	increase the number of such sites	high
	link fragmented sites through habitat creation	high
	re-create or create new heathlands	very high

Lowland wet grassland	maintain and enhance existing areas	medium
	restore degraded areas	medium
	create new areas	lower
Peat bogs	maintain and enhance	very high
Reedbeds	maintain and create	high
Rivers and streams	maintain and improve the quality and quantity of water	high
	maintain the quality of all natural existing channel features	high
Unimproved neutral grassland	maintain and safeguard existing areas	high
	restore	lower
	link adjacent sites through habitat creation	medium
	create/re-create new areas	lower

Further details of these habitat targets can be found in the Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan

Specific guidelines

Tree and woodland planting

Planting should reflect the scale of the landscape, from large scale field sized plantations in the more open areas, to no more than small scale field corners or hedgerow planting in the more intimate areas. The predominantly broadleaved character should be retained but a carefully designed coniferous content to the woodlands could be included. Planting should be visually linked to existing hedgerows and woodland features whilst maintaining a careful balance between woodlands and surrounding open spaces.

On the lower ground, planting should be of a smaller scale and reflecting field pattern, but increasing in scale on the higher slopes. Care is needed with shape and internal design on the steeper slopes as the woodlands need to be designed to landform.

Sandstone hills and heaths: estatelands (pages 42–44)

This is the landed estate variant of the basic landscape type. Plantations on ancient woodland sites are particularly well represented in these landscapes.

Visual character

This is a landscape of mixed arable and pastoral farmland, the scale of which is very much dependent on the interaction of the strongly rolling landform with numerous plantation woodlands.

The predominantly coniferous woodlands, with some broadleaved content, have a large visual influence on the landscape as a result of their interlock and relative position on the higher ground. This often results in only edges and skylines being visible.

Field pattern, of a small to medium scale, is intact and a strong element in the landscape, with little signs of deterioration as it continues its stock control function in most areas. The large number of mature hedgerow oaks reinforces this landcover pattern.

The scale of the landscape is reduced considerably in areas where the landform becomes more pronounced and divided by steep slopes and incised valleys.

Settlement of this landscape reflects its ancient character, with narrow winding lanes, often sunken, linking large farms and tied cottages. Several halls with associated parkland impart a distinct character to specific areas.

Characteristic landscape features

An intact hedgerow pattern with hedgerow oaks; well treed stream corridors; large plantation woodlands; intensive mixed arable and pasture farming with large farms; strongly rolling landform with steep sided small valleys.

Incongruous landscape features

Hard edges to, and lack of diversity of single species conifer plantations.

Factors critical to landscape character and quality

The single area falling within this landscape character type is of high landscape quality. The factor which is currently most limiting to that quality is probably the loss of characteristic semi-natural vegetation, in particular heathland and semi-natural ancient woodland, to coniferous afforestation.

This landscape character type is very sensitive to the impacts of development and land use change.

Potential value of new woodland planting.

Relatively low. The conservation and management of existing woodland is a higher priority. However, the strategic siting of new native woodland could be of value in reducing the effects of fragmentation and isolation of ancient woodland, especially if it were linked to the restoration of semi-natural character of those woods. Such planting would also help to maintain the present well-treed landscape and improve visual links to surrounding, predominantly broadleaved areas, and could introduce some variation in age structure and species to existing woodlands.

Potential value of other habitat provision and management

The following Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan Targets are relevant at landscape scale:

<i>Habitat type</i>	<i>Objective or target</i>	<i>Priority</i>
Ancient/semi-natural broadleaved woodland	maintain and enhance	very high
	restore degraded sites	high
	recreate/regenerate	medium
Ancient/diverse hedgerows	maintain and manage	lower
	maintain trees	lower
Hedgerows	plant species-rich hedges	lower
Arable field margins	maintain, improve and restore	lower
Canals, lakes and ponds	maintain and enhance water bodies and catchments	high
	increase the number of such features	high
Lowland heathland	protect existing heaths from development and damaging activities	very high
	re-create or create new heathlands	very high
Lowland wet grassland	maintain and enhance existing areas	high
	restore degraded areas	medium
	create new areas	lower
Lowland wood pasture and parkland	maintain and safeguard	high
	restore degraded sites	high
Reedbeds	maintain and create	high

Rivers and streams	maintain and improve the quality and quantity of water	high
	maintain the quality of all natural existing channel features	high
Unimproved neutral grassland	maintain and safeguard existing areas	high
	restore	lower
	link adjacent sites through habitat creation	lower
	create/re-create new areas	lower

Further details of these habitat targets can be found in the Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan.

Specific guidelines

Tree and woodland planting

The current spatial relationship between woodlands and open space should be maintained by keeping woodlands to a small to medium scale. Coalescence of woodlands, visually linking them together and disturbing the balance with open spaces, should be avoided. Both broadleaved and conifer planting are acceptable but surrounding broadleaved areas must be taken into account in the design of woodland edges and links to hedgerows.

Sandstone hills and heaths: forest (pages 45–46)

This is a variant of the basic landscape character type in which forestry is the visually-dominant land use.

Visual character

This landscape type is dominated visually by large conifer plantations with a general heathy character, planted on areas of pronounced landform. The broadleaved component to the plantation edges and small outlying plantations helps integrate these wooded areas into the surrounding countryside, but they remain a strong dominant feature within the landscape. The surrounding farmland is an important element in defining the external appearance of these large blocks of woodland.

The open character of the surrounding countryside is interrupted in places by parkland, considerably reducing the scale of the landscape and giving those areas a distinctive character.

This is a landscape much visited for recreation.

Characteristic landscape features

Large conifer plantations; oak woodland; parkland; pronounced sandstone ridge and rounded hill

landform.

Incongruous landscape features

Wire fencing associated with deteriorating field pattern; horseyculture; modern and improved housing; agricultural set-aside; powerlines ; busy roads.

Factors critical to landscape character and quality

The critical factors which currently limit landscape quality are the relatively poor survival of historic elements that contribute to landscape character, such as field, settlement and road patterns, and the poor survival of characteristic semi-natural vegetation (i.e. heathland and related habitats, including heathy ancient semi-natural woodland). The Hanchurch Hills have been identified as a 'landscape at risk' of sudden loss of quality (see Section 7.18 et seq. of the Supporting Documentation) and measures to meet the BAP targets listed below will be critically important in preventing such a loss.

This landscape character type is very sensitive to the impacts of development and land use change.

Potential value of new woodland planting

Relatively low. The conservation and management of existing woodland is a higher priority. New planting could strengthen links between large-scale conifer plantations and surrounding open countryside, and help to restore structure to those landscapes where a decline in hedgerow pattern is occurring as a result of farm intensification.

Potential value of other habitat provision and management

The following Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan Targets are relevant at landscape scale:

Habitat type	Objective or target	Priority
Ancient/semi-natural broadleaved woodland	maintain and enhance	very high
	restore degraded sites	high
	recreate/regenerate	medium
Ancient/diverse hedgerows	maintain and manage	lower
	maintain trees	lower
Hedgerows	plant species-rich hedges	lower
Arable field margins	maintain, improve and restore	lower
Canals, lakes and ponds	maintain and enhance water bodies and catchments	high
	increase the number of such features	high
Lowland acidic grassland	maintain, enhance, restore and buffer	high
	prevent further losses (except to heathland restoration)	high
	increase the number of such sites	high
	link fragmented sites through habitat creation	high
Lowland heathland	protect existing heaths from development and damaging activities	very high
	re-create or create new heathlands	very high
Lowland wet grassland	maintain and enhance existing areas	medium
	restore degraded areas	medium
	create new areas	lower
Lowland wood pasture and parkland	maintain and safeguard	medium
	restore degraded sites	medium
Peat bogs	maintain and enhance	high
Reedbeds	maintain and create	high

Rivers and streams	maintain and improve the quality and quantity of water	high
	maintain the quality of all natural existing channel features	high
Unimproved neutral grassland	maintain and safeguard existing areas	high
	restore	lower
	link adjacent sites through habitat creation	lower
	create/re-create new areas	lower

Further details of these habitat targets can be found in the Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan.

Specific guidelines

Tree and woodland planting

Extension of the existing woodland would have to be of small to medium scale and with a greater broadleaved content to help integration of the large plantations into the surrounding landscape. Planting should respond to landform to retain the current interlock between woodland and open space and to avoid simplification of the edges. There is the capacity to accept field sized planting, provided views through the farmland are maintained. Both broadleaved and conifer planting are acceptable. Particular care should be taken not to interrupt the parkland character where this is distinctive in places.

Sandstone hills and heaths: parkland (page 47)

Trentham Park falls within this variant of the general landscape type. Each parkland is a unique product of its original design and its evolution over time. Consequently, any proposals for development or land use change which would affect such a landscape should be informed by a detailed historic landscape appraisal. English Heritage maintains a Register of Parks and Gardens which contains some of the more significant sites, and local authority conservation officers and the County Sites and Monuments Record may be able to provide further advice on these and other parks and gardens. Particularly important Biodiversity Action Plan targets applying to this landscape include the conservation and management of existing ancient woodland, wood pasture and parkland, and the conservation, management

and restoration of lowland heathland. Further details of these habitat targets can be found in the Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan.

This landscape character type is very sensitive to the impacts of development and land use change.