

Broad Character: Enclosed Land

Character Type: Reclaimed Land

Irish Sea Regional Perspective

Introduction: Defining/Distinguishing Attributes

Areas of coastal enclosed and reclaimed land behind north–west England’s Irish Sea coastline can be very extensive and extend far inland. All the land of this character type was enclosed, drained and improved in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, and almost all was taken in from either tidal marsh or adjacent wetlands. Both Lancashire and Cumbria have extensive areas of low-lying wetlands, most of which were enclosed at this time, but only those areas considered to have a link to a maritime environment have been included within HSC. In north Cumbria, for example, there were, and are, widespread wetlands around Drumburgh Moss and Solway Moss, but these have no particular maritime character connection to the nearby Solway coast. Conversely the wetlands of the Lyth Valley and Kent Estuary at the north end of Morecambe Bay, were mapped as they are extensions of the deeply incised inlets which define the peninsulas around Morecambe Bay. Even though these would have been wetlands, rather than saltmarsh, extreme high tides and weather events would have led to inundation by the sea. Reclamation from tidal marsh covers a smaller area than enclosed wetlands, and are concentrated in the Ribble estuary flood plain.



Land reclaimed from wetland, Leighton Moss, Arnside Silverdale AONB

All types of reclaimed land are defined by regular field patterns, sometime laid out in a grid, and defined by networks of embanked drainage ditches. In some cases, such as on Hesketh Marsh, time depth can be discerned from ditch patterning and the successive lines of former sea wall. Some areas of reclamation, such as the Lyth Valley, Cumbria, are maintained by pumping stations, transferring water into larger channels enclosed by levees draining major areas. Near Leighton Moss, near Silverdale in Lancashire, sea defences to reclaimed wetland have been breached and new ditches cut to reintroduce water. As well as acting as managed realignment, this aims to recreate wetland for nature conservation purposes (<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/>).

Historical Processes; Components, Features And Variability

The most extensive reclamation and enclosure of land took place from the late 18th century onwards, through parliamentary enclosures. Particularly in north-west England which had large areas of common waste, this period saw the systematic enclosure, draining and improvement of coastal marshes and wetlands, as well as reclamation from the sea. Around Morecambe Bay, Lancashire and Cumbria, for example, extensive tracts of salt marsh were enclosed, along with the draining of wetlands in the lower reaches of rivers valleys stretching up towards the Lake District mountains.

The widespread enclosure of the common wastes, including the wetlands and saltmarshes of the coastal fringes, appear to have been undertaken largely with the consent of the tenants who used them. North-west England had a long history of pastoral farming, and the unenclosed areas of the coast played an important part in the common grazing of animals, along with other common rights, such as peat cutting. The enclosure and drainage of saltmarshes and wetlands often went together with the enfranchisement of customary tenants, who were granted the freehold or leases of the newly improved land (Newman and Hardie 2007, 58-9).

Values And Perceptions

The drained and improved fields in coastal areas are seen as having poor biodiversity and little value for nature conservation purposes. Current (2011) Environmental Stewardship targets include the active rewetting reclaimed land and the creation of wetland habitat by blocking drains and breaching defences. This process is already underway in some areas around Morecambe Bay, for example. Drained and improved coastal land is also perceived as expensive to maintain, and allowing it to revert to wetland as a way of managed realignment. Conversely, reclaimed land is a highly valued agricultural resource. In north-west England, it can be extremely productive arable land in areas of West Lancashire, whilst in the more pastoral landscapes of Morecambe Bay it provides good quality grazing land for dairy cows and other stock.

Research, Amenity And Education

Multi-disciplinary projects can offer opportunities to investigate the reclamation of saltmarsh and wetlands from medieval times onwards. This might explore farming processes, such as irrigation systems as well as phenomena like the relict field systems and ridge and furrow on the commons.

Condition And Forces For Change

In some areas, reclamation of land to the seaward creates a sharp transition between land and sea, giving an artificial edge and reducing the sense of interconnection between the water and the shifting mobile coast.

The increase in the use of managed realignment to control rising sea levels and storm surges, along with the reversion to saltmarsh and wetlands for improvements to biodiversity, are one of the major forces for change to this Character Type. At Silverdale, Lancashire, on the east side of Morecambe Bay, large areas of drained and improved former saltmarsh have had existing drains blocked and areas of open water created to create wetland habitats for the internationally important wetland bird population of the Bay. Under Environmental Stewardship schemes, the 'rewetting' of former wetlands and saltmarsh remains a priority for this area but such management is often strongly contested by local inhabitants and land-owning interests.

Rarity And Vulnerability

The Irish Sea is bordered by large areas of improved and enclosed land behind its coastline. Much of this land was enclosed in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century out of once-extensive areas of lowland moss and saltmarsh, and which provided valuable farmland capable of being more intensively farmed. In a region with large areas of poor-quality agricultural land (<http://www.magic.gov.uk>), good-quality arable or pastoral land is highly valued. Reclaimed land is often protected by levees built at the time of reclamation, and is vulnerable to rising sea levels, storm surges and sea erosion. This vulnerability is likely to increase with policies of managed realignment, where pumping systems and existing defences are no longer actively maintained.

Published Sources

Newman C. and Hardie C. 2007. *The Cumbria Historic Landscape Characterisation Project. The Lake District National Park*. Kendal: Cumbria Historic Environment Service

Websites

<http://www.magic.defra.gov.uk>. Retrieved February 2011

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