

NCA 59 Wirral

Overview

The NCA covers the western half of the peninsula formed by the Mersey and Dee estuaries. It is distinguished by a sandstone ridge, which runs up the centre of the peninsula and which forms the eastern boundary of the NCA. Away from the ridge, it is a coastal landscape made up of a mosaic of coastal settlements and countryside. The NCA is included within the Western Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, and the undeveloped areas are predominantly mixed agricultural land, with areas of improved pasture, arable farming and market gardens. Land across the north end of Wirral is low lying, with numerous drainage ditches. It is largely used for grazing for cattle and horses, but with some horticulture. Fields across the NCA are medium-sized and bounded by mainly by hedges, though replaced by fences in places. Settlement takes the form of small towns and villages, many of which grew as dormitory settlements. Hoylake is now largely a commuter town, but developed as a resort for the Merseyside conurbation and has international-standard golf courses. Woodland cover is very low across the NCA, at only 5%, less than 1% of which is ancient woodland. Woodland, which is largely broadleaved, is found mainly on the sandstone ridge, in country parks and on country estates.

The Historic Environment Character

Human activity is known on the Wirral from the Mesolithic period, with archaeological evidence for settlement at Greasby. There is a small Iron Age hill fort at Burton in the south-west of the area, and there was a Romano-British presence on the Wirral, with Roman roads near Willaston and Ledsham. The roads were probably leading to Meols, on the north coast of the Wirral, which appears to have operated as an entrepôt from the Iron Age and through the Roman period. Meols continued to operate as a trading centre into the medieval period. The medieval settlement pattern was one of nucleated villages with common fields, some of which are still legible in the modern landscape through preserved strip fields. There were also individual farmsteads scattered across the peninsula associated with ancient closes. The predominant surviving field pattern, however, is of planned and regular late post-medieval enclosures dating from the late 18th century, when agriculture developed to provide meat, dairy, arable and horticultural products to serve the growing needs of the urban populations. Numerous field ponds were dug to extract the calcareous marl deposits to be used as mineral fertiliser. Tower windmills and the remains of mills mounds are a distinctive feature of the Wirral, indicating a thriving arable economy in the 18th and 19th centuries. Development along the south-west coast of the Wirral was stimulated by the Port of Chester, particularly as the River Dee silted, with anchorages established along the Dee Estuary at Shotwick, Neston, Parkgate and Caldy. With industrial expansion across Merseyside, the Wirral attracted rich industrialists who established small county estates on the peninsula. With the development of the railway in the mid-19th century, it also became attractive for commuters, leading to the development of existing villages as dormitory settlements. Hoylake developed, too, as a seaside resort serving the industrial populations of the Wirral.

