

NCA 60 Mersey Valley Merseyside Conurbation

Overview

The NCA is a wide and low-lying valley landscape, incorporating the River Mersey, its lower estuary and tributaries. It extends between the Merseyside and Manchester conurbations, covering large areas of former mosses, as well as the extensive urban areas of Warrington, Runcorn and Ellesmere Port. It is included within the Western Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type. Agricultural land is generally high quality, though it is intermixed between urban and industrial development and is often fragmented. To the north of the Mersey, the farmland has a large-scale, open character dominated by arable fields. To the south, the area is a mix of arable and dairying. Between Warrington and the Manchester conurbation, the open, flat landscape of former mosses produce rich, dark peaty soils in a highly cultivated landscape dissected by a complex network of drainage ditches. The field pattern is generally regular and large-scale, but within an inherited framework of earlier irregular boundaries. Fields are often defined by hedges with isolated hedgerow trees, though hedgerows are intermittent and many have been replaced by post-and-wire fencing. Ditches form the field boundaries on the mosses. The area is highly urbanised and industrialised with the towns of Warrington, Widnes, Runcorn, Ellesmere Port, Frodsham and Irlam. There are also extensive villages such as Culcheth and Lymm, which have developed as commuter settlements for Liverpool and Manchester. Urban areas are often interspersed with greenbelt. The area is a major transport corridor, crossed by numerous arterial roads, including the M6, M56 and M62, the West Coast main railway, railway lines between Liverpool, Manchester and Chester, and canals. The Manchester Ship Canal is a major feature cutting through the flat landscape, and the Thelwall Viaduct, carrying the M6 over the canal and River Mersey is a major landscape feature. Woodland accounts for 8% of the NCA, though less than 1% of this is ancient woodland. Trees and woodland are mainly associated with settlements, and there are some trees along field boundaries and watercourses, and isolated woodland blocks particularly in the east. The area is covered by Mersey Forest and Red Rose Forest community forests, created to enable new woodlands to be created, adding to the greenspace a resource for local people and improving the image of the area.

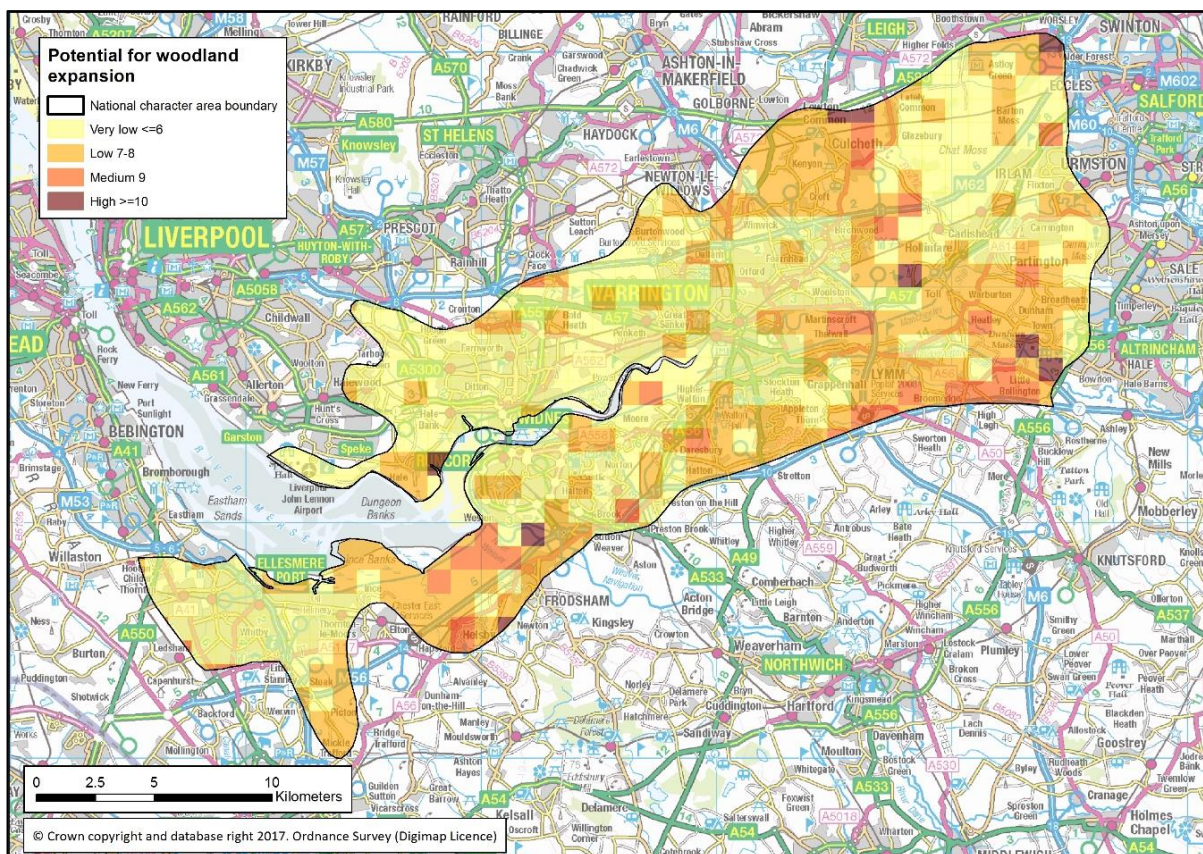
The Historic Environment Character

The wetland nature has had a major influence on the nature of settlement in the area. Prehistoric settlement appears to have been located close to the River Mersey or its tributaries, and on minor promontories, which in the east avoided the areas of mossland. A Roman industrial settlement was established at Wilderspool, Warrington, at a convenient crossing point across the Mersey, and a Roman road running between Northwich and Wigan crossed the Mersey Valley at this point. In the medieval period, towns were established at Warrington, Halton, Hale and Widnes, whilst rural settlement was characterised by moated sites. The medieval field patterns are not very legible in the landscape, having undergone continual improvements and modifications from the 18th century, and large areas lost to urban development. In the late 18th century and 19th centuries, estate improvements created a regular pattern of enclosed fields south of the Bridgewater Canal and extending south into the Cheshire Plain, utilised for dairying as part of the intensification of the cheese industry. The drainage and enclosure of the mosses for agricultural land began in the late 18th century, accelerating in the 19th and 20th centuries, to help to supply food for the

growing population of Manchester. The growing industrial importance of Manchester, and the need to transport goods between Liverpool and Manchester, led to improvements to the navigation of the River Mersey and River Weaver in the 18th century, alongside the construction of the earliest canals in the area. Ports connected to the canal system were established in the 19th century at Runcorn, Widnes and Ellesmere Port. The railway network linking Manchester and Liverpool opened in 1830. The Manchester Ship Canal, built between 1887 and 1894, allowed seagoing vessels to navigate from Ellesmere Port to the newly constructed docks at Salford. Alongside the development of the transport network was the industrial development of ship-building, engineering, tanning, breweries and the manufacture of chemical, soap and alkali at Warrington, Runcorn and Widnes. During the 20th century, the manufacture of chemicals remained a significant industry centred on Runcorn, while at Widnes many former chemical plants were redeveloped for new industrial uses.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The potential for woodland expansion, as defined by the mapping of historic and natural environment attributes is very low. The main opportunities lie in creating woodland in urban and industrial areas and on former industrial sites which have been remediated, particularly as part of the Community Forests initiative. There may also be opportunities to create wet woodlands around surviving areas of lowland moss.



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