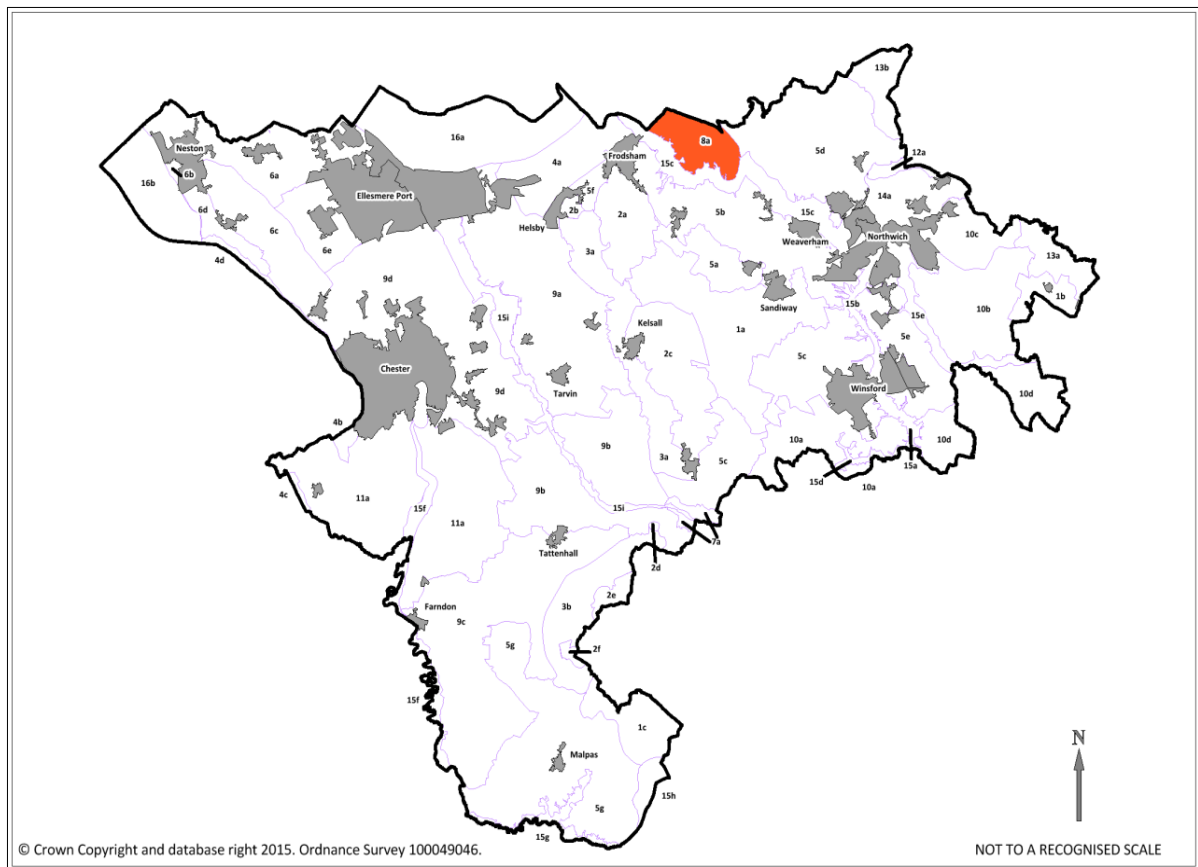


## LCT 8: HEATHY FARMLAND & WOODLAND



### General Description

A large scale, mostly open arable farmland landscape to the immediate north of the River Weaver, influenced by the presence of glacio-fluvial deposits of sands and gravels which historically supported heathland. This landscape is distinguished from the *Undulating Enclosed Farmland* landscape type by its field pattern which is much larger in scale and arable use, resulting from late post-Medieval agricultural improvement and 20th century field re-organisation.

### Visual Character

The location of this type is reflected in the prevailing views which extend to adjacent character areas, either out over the low-lying plain or up towards the dominant Sandstone Ridge. Roads typically follow the rolling topography, offering extensive views from the high points out over the immediate field pattern and extending to the high ground of the Pennines in the east. At the low points the landscape appears smaller scale due to the increase in enclosure and the contained views. At some locations the tree cover appears to be high, an obvious departure from the adjacent Cheshire Plain East. This can be attributed to small and medium scale farm woodlands or coverts upon locally prominent areas of high ground.

In certain areas arable farming predominates, especially upon better-drained ground. Where this is associated with loss of hedgerows, post and wire fences and fewer hedgerow trees, the scale of the landscape increases considerably and views become more extensive.

### **Physical Influences**

This character type occurs at an intermediate elevation, lying between 15m AOD at the river bank and rising evenly to a gentle brow across the central to northern parts of the LCT at around 65 m. The solid geology is a combination of one or more of Bollin Mudstone, Eldersfield Mudstone and Northwich Halite. This is overlain by till and glacio-fluvial deposits.

Secondary calcium carbonate deposits are common at a depth of 1-2m in the till, and before cheap lime was made available in the 19th century this was dug and spread on the surrounding fields to reduce acidity. On sandy soils this practice of marling also increases fertility and moisture holding capacity. The digging of these marl pits led to the creation of ponds as the pits filled with water and were colonised by a rich variety of plants and animals from other wetland habitats of greater antiquity such as mosses. Marl was also used in daub in the construction of vernacular structures and later to make bricks.

The natural processes of vegetation succession have reduced many ponds to small, shallow features, over shaded with trees and with little open water. Characteristic plant species include bur marigold, water plantain, tubular water-dropwort, reedmace, branched bur-reed, water horsetail, common spike-rush, purple loosestrife, water milfoil, various water lilies and pondweeds. Associated invertebrates include all five species of amphibian found in Cheshire, including the European protected great crested newt.

Field boundaries are delineated predominantly by hawthorn hedgerows with hazel, blackthorn and dog rose also present. Oak, ash and sycamore are the main tree species, but are far less numerous as hedgerow trees than neighbouring LCTs. The majority of fields are cultivated for silage or feed crops including cereals and maize.

Woodland levels are higher than those of the *Cheshire Plain West* and *Cheshire Plain East*. Copses and coverts are mainly broadleaved and there are mixed woodlands on sandier soils.

The gently sloping landform and sandy soils supports a limited surface natural drainage network.

### **Cultural Influences**

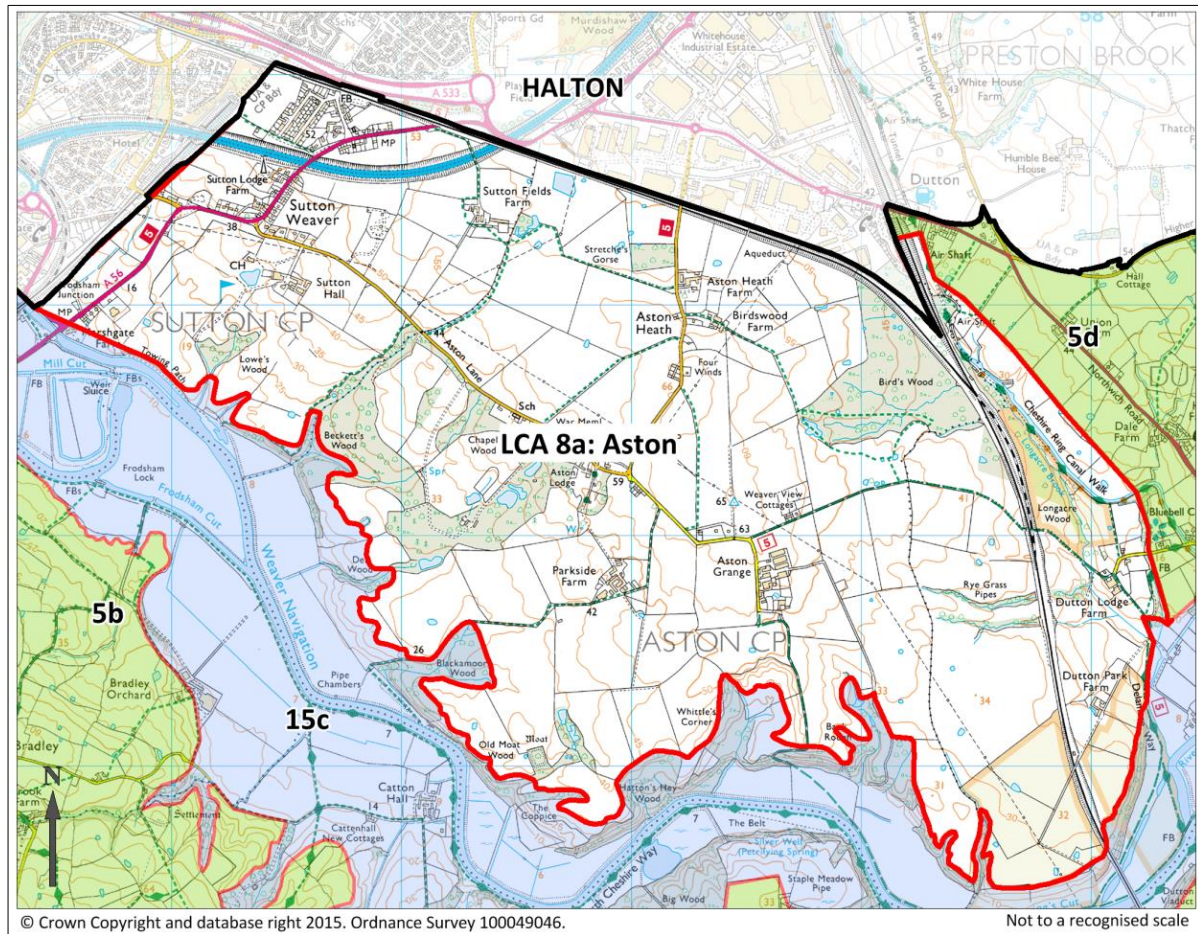
This is an area of late post-medieval enclosure; regular shaped fields between 4- 8ha in size, which are typical of reorganised earlier fields, from agricultural improvements / estate management associated with Aston Hall. In the south is an enclosed medieval deer park, as indicated by the place name Park Brow etc. Settlement comprises small villages such as Sutton Weaver and dispersed farms and halls e.g. Sutton Hall, a listed medieval timber-framed building, behind which is a golf course. However, buildings are predominantly built from red brick.

The Trent and Mersey Canal passes through the east of the character area, emerging from a tunnel that runs past Whitehouses to the north.

There is only **one Landscape Character Area** within LCT 8:

**8a: Aston**

## LCA 8a: Aston



### Location and Boundaries

This character area is located on the east bank of the Weaver Navigation and to the south of Runcorn. It shares its northern limits with the Cheshire West and Chester boundary. This is an area of post medieval enclosure – regular shaped fields between 4- 8ha in size, which are typical of reorganised earlier fields. In the south is an enclosed medieval deer park, as indicated by the place names such as Park Brow.

### **Key Landscape Characteristics of LCA 8a: Aston**

- An 'island' of farmland cut off from its context by a combination of railway lines, the M56 motorway, the Trent & Mersey Canal and River Weaver
- Bedrock geology of Bollin Mudstones (forming part of the Mercia Mudstone Group) forms a prominent flat-topped ridge reaching 65m AOD
- Sand, gravel and boulder clay deposits produce a mixture of slowly permeable clay soils and lighter sandy soils that support pasture, arable and former heath
- Numerous brooks drain towards the Weaver into often in steep wooded valleys immediately to the south and east of the LCA; some have extensive displays of bluebells
- Large areas of ancient deciduous woodland on the ridge slopes and along Longacre Brook provide some enclosure and changing colour with the seasons
- Dutton Park, 281ha woodland managed by the Woodland Trust with a rich mixture of habitats from open grassland, ponds, ancient woodland and grazed riverside meadows
- Large poplar plantation at Dutton Lodge Farm
- The designed parkland surrounding the former Aston Hall (now demolished) contributes to the wooded character of the ridge and is a locally important historic site
- Field ponds are a feature of the landscape - formed by the digging of marl pits before the 19th century, they now form important landscape and ecological features
- Relatively large scale fields resulting from late post-medieval agricultural improvement and 20th century field re-organisation / estate management associated with Aston Hall
- Recreational opportunities are provided by public rights of way, and area of open access land at Longacre Wood and a golf course and driving range at Sutton Weaver
- The scale of the landscape is large as a result of the large scale field units and sense of openness, emphasised by the low hedgerows, the lack of hedgerow trees and long distance views from the ridge in all directions
- Part of the Trent and Mersey Canal passes along the eastern edge of the area adjacent to the railway, providing a link to the River Mersey
- Settlement is sparse – scattered farms and the rural hamlets of Aston, Aston Heath and Sutton Weaver are linked by narrow lanes and tracks
- Buildings are typically constructed from red brick and sandstone, with slate roofs
- A peaceful 'island' in a busy context – surrounded by the M56 motorway, roads, railways, built development and industry
- The 'ridge' forms a strong skyline in views from outside the character area, including from the *Frodsham to Northwich Undulating Enclosed Farmland* and the *Whitley & Comberbach Undulating Enclosed Farmland*
- From the ridge views are influenced by industry, located to the north and west.

### **Key Landscape Sensitivities, Qualities and Value**

#### **Natural / Physical**

- The Mercia Mudstone bedrock geology gives rise to a large scale flat topped 'ridge' reaching 66m AOD;
- The landscape is partially overlain with drift glacio-fluvial and till (boulder clay) deposits, with glacio-fluvial sand and gravels notable along the ridge top where they produce well drained and coarse loamy soils;
- These soils support intensively farmed arable fields that are bounded by low, gappy hedgerows. There are few hedgerow trees and the name Aston Heath indicates that this area is likely to have formerly been heathland;

- The more clayey soils that occupy the slopes of the ridge support some large blocks of ancient deciduous woodland e.g. Birds Wood and Beckett's Wood that are of recognised as local wildlife sites- some of these may be remnants of the original post-glacial forest;
- Beckett's Wood is dominated by sycamore while Birds Wood is distinguished by its open canopy of small-leaved lime and hornbeam;
- These woodlands are interspersed by large scale fields that are typically a mixture of arable and pasture and are divided by low-cut hedgerows, some gappy and discontinuous, with occasional hedgerow trees;
- Dutton Park is a 281ha woodland managed by the Woodland Trust with a rich mixture of habitats from open grassland, ponds, ancient woodland and grazed riverside meadows – managed by the Cheshire Wildlife Trust for conservation with a herd of Longhorn cattle;
- Large poplar plantation at Dutton Lodge Farm;
- The past digging of marl pits (to extract marl to improve the fields) has resulted in the presence of a number of field ponds, particularly between Sutton Fields Farm and Aston Heath Farm;
- Numerous streams flow through areas of woodland into the Weaver, the most notable being Longacre Brook that flows in a steep-sided, wooded valley containing neutral unimproved grassland.

### Cultural / Heritage / Historic

- Distinctive large-scale straight sided fields, resulting from late post-medieval agricultural improvement and 20th century field reorganisation / estate management associated with Aston Hall ;
- An area of parkland south of the hamlet of Aston is a remnant 18th century Repton parkland and woodland;
- The original house and gardens have been demolished but its parkland contributes to the wooded character of the ridge and contains a 17th century Dovecote whose historic importance is recognised through designation as a Scheduled Monument. The walls are listed structures;
- Field ponds are a feature of the landscape, formed by the digging of marl pits before the 19th century – they now form important landscape and ecological features and are UK priority habitats;
- Part of the Trent and Mersey Canal passes along the eastern edge of the area, within the valley formed by Longacre Brook. This Canal, constructed in 1777 by James Brindley, links the navigable River Trent to the River Mersey;
- This area provides passive recreation in the form of public footpaths that form links with the Weaver Valley; Dutton Park provides open access through land managed by the Woodland Trust;
- Part of the Cheshire Ring Canal Walk follows the towpath of the Trent & Mersey Canal along the eastern edge of the area;
- This also links with the Delamere Way long distance recreational route;
- There is also a small area of open access adjacent to Longacre Brook which lies adjacent to the Cheshire Ring Canal Walk;
- Moated sites were once a feature of the landscape and the site of a Moated Monastic Grange at Middleton is now a Scheduled Monument;
- An anti-aircraft gun site lies on the ridge top at Sutton Fields Farm – this is recognised for its historic interest as a Scheduled Monument.

### Built Development and Settlement Pattern

- A sparsely settled landscape with are three small hamlets – at Aston, Aston Heath and Sutton Weaver;
- Buildings are typically constructed from red brick and sandstone, with slate roofs;
- Sutton Hall and its barn are listed structures;

- There is also a cluster of listed buildings at Aston, including the remnant of Aston Old Hall;
- There are also a number of large farms, dispersed across the ridge and reached via narrow lanes or tracks.

### Perceptual / Visual

- This is a simple landscape, with a consistent and unified character as a result of the consistent land use and field size/pattern;
- The scale of the landscape is large as a result of the large scale undulating topography and relatively large field units;
- There is a sense of openness as a result of the low hedgerows, lack of hedgerow trees and long distance views from the ridge in all directions;
- The presence of arable crops and deciduous woodland provides changing colour with the seasons;
- The perceived naturalness of this landscape is diminished by the presence of intensive farming, electricity pylons, the M56 motorway, roads, railways, and proximity to built development and industry;
- This area is perceived as a peaceful 'island' in a busy context. However, the tranquillity is fragile on the edges of the character area (particularly to the north-west, north and north-east) due to proximity to infrastructure and industry;
- This upstanding 'ridge' forms a strong skyline in views from outside the character area, including from the edge of Runcorn;
- The ridge (and its pylons) are inter-visible with adjacent landscapes, particularly from the *Frodsham to Northwich Undulating Enclosed Farmland* and the *Whitley & Comberbach Undulating Enclosed Farmland*;
- There is little inter-visibility with the adjacent Weaver Valley due to the steep topography of the valley sides and its hidden nature;
- From the top of the 'plateau' there are views to large scale industry at Rocksavage and Preston Brook;
- The elevated, open character of this landscape and its inter-visibility with adjacent landscapes makes it visually sensitive to change. However, the area has a relatively low settlement density and therefore relatively few potential residential receptors that may experience visual impacts;
- Although public rights of way cross the ridge, the main recreational opportunities (Cheshire Ring Canal Walk and open access land at Longacre Wood) are located in the Longacre Valley where views are constrained by landform. The presence of woodland provides some potential for mitigating visual impact of low level elements without the mitigation measures in themselves having an adverse effect on the character of the landscape.

### Landscape Condition

The *Aston Heathy Farmland and Woodland* LCA is in active agricultural use and is managed for this land use. However, there are some gaps in the hedgerow network and hedgerow tree loss, particularly in areas of more intensive arable agriculture.

### CWaC Local Plan policies with an influence on the character of LCA 8a: Aston:

- Green Belt;
- Countryside;
- Area of Special County Value (ASCV) across the southern half of the LCA;
- Natural heritage sites of regional and/or local significance;

- Nationally designated heritage assets (on Historic England's National Heritage List for England) and locally significant heritage assets;
- Flood risk / water management.

### ***Forces for Landscape Change***

#### **Past Change**

- Limited evidence of boundary management and evidence of decline in hedgerow boundaries. In addition hedgerow trees may be damaged/lost due to intensive flail mowing or ploughing too close to the hedgerow boundary;
- Increase in the number of fences to replace hedgerow boundaries;
- A shift from grassland to crops, fallow and set-aside and a general reduction in number of farm units, accompanied by an increase in the proportion of larger holdings;
- Growth of potatoes and maize in traditionally pastoral areas resulting in soil erosion as a result of exposure of bare soil;
- Past loss of orchards – in the past nearly all farms would have had an orchard;
- Farm diversification including introduction of polytunnels, stables, riding centres and paddocks and change of use of farm buildings, including residential use, with erection of modern portal sheds to replace the lost space;
- Improved drainage and in-filling has led to the loss of field ponds and wetlands over the years;
- Some of the broadleaved woodland on the slopes is currently under-managed, but the Mersey Forest strategy aims to bring existing woodlands into better management;
- Significant changes to the landscape have arisen from the recently planted extension to Longacre Wood and acquisition of Dutton Park Farm by The Woodland Trust in partnership with The Cheshire Wildlife Trust and The Mersey Forest with resulting new woodland planting;
- The M56, A56, West Coast main line across Dutton Viaduct and industrial development immediately to the north have had a significant impact on the character of this landscape, eroding tranquillity along its northern, eastern and western sides;
- Steady intensification of grassland management in the 20th century has resulted in the loss of species rich grassland;
- A56 at Sutton Weaver used by motorway traffic as a 'short-cut';
- Pressure for wind turbine development owing to favourable location and elevation.

#### **Potential future change / key issues affecting LCA 8a: Aston**

- Woodland and hedgerow tree planting around Aston and as a buffer between settlements and the motorway and to connect ancient semi-natural woods (planting policy within the 2014 Mersey Forest Plan);
- Pressure for small scale residential development, particularly around Sutton Weaver.

## ***Overall Landscape Management Strategy for LCA8a: Aston***

The overall management objective for this landscape should be to **enhance** the condition of the hedgerow, tree and woodland network, and **restore** and link former habitats such as woodland and heathland.

### ***Landscape Management Guidelines***

1. Maintain an intact hedgerow network through management of hedges, planting lost hedge lines, and re-planting a young stock of hedgerow trees. Consider a programme of replacement hedgerow tree planting to re-instate those that have been lost over the years.
2. Avoid over-intensive flail mowing or ploughing too close to hedgerow boundaries – protect saplings and encourage trees to grow up at intervals along the hedgerow.
3. Reduce soil erosion by minimising exposure of bare soil associated with crop growth.
4. Promote appropriate management of arable farmland to create a wildlife-rich habitat supporting farmland birds, including retaining areas of fallow land, over-wintering stubbles, maintaining an unploughed margin around arable land, and management of existing hedgerows.
5. Increase the biodiversity of intensively managed grassland – create and link buffer strips along linear features such as hedgerows to create a continuous network of wildlife corridors.
6. Encourage sympathetic integration of horse paddocks through maintenance of hedgerow field boundaries, rather than sub-division of fields and erection of high visibility fencing - ensure the land use does not break up traditional field patterns.
7. Conserve and manage the remaining field ponds and wetlands along the valleys – seek opportunities to extend areas of wet woodland and species rich unimproved grassland.
8. Consider opportunities to re-create areas of heathland habitat in areas where this would have no detriment to anything else (e.g. archaeological sites).
9. Promote traditional woodland management techniques of the deciduous woodland to ensure a diverse (indigenous) species and age structure.
10. Seek opportunities to expand and link existing woodlands in areas currently of low ecological value – support plans to create additional large woods in balance with the open agricultural landscape, ensuring no detriment to historic assets.

11. Seek opportunities to restore and create orchards at the farm scale – in the past nearly all farms would have had an orchard.
12. Minimise the impact of existing major roads and industry on the area by using native planting to screen, but maintain panoramic views, for example those from the ridge top across the Mersey Estuary.
13. Seek to conserve and restore historic designed landscapes and their settings, such as the historic parkland at the former Aston Hall and consider opportunities to enhance access to, and appreciation of, this landscape.
14. Avoid road ‘improvements’ (such as addition of kerbs and lighting) that would alter the rural character of the lanes.

### ***Built Development Guidelines***

1. Conserve the low settlement density and rural character of the hamlets. Avoid ‘suburbanising’ features such as gate posts, kerbs and close board fences around gardens. Ensure new built development fits with the local built vernacular, including use of materials (sandstone and red brick). Use indigenous planting to integrate any new built development into the landscape.
2. Maintain the external fabric, appearance and setting of farm buildings and promote the use of local materials.
3. Ensure conversion of farm buildings is sensitive to the rural landscape and vernacular building style. Pay particular attention to the features which accompany the conversion such as driveways and gardens, ensuring that these features do not ‘suburbanise’ the landscape.
4. Ensure riding schools, stables and equestrian development do not accumulate to detract from the rural character of the area – ensure sensitive integration of fencing, tracks, jumps and ancillary buildings.
5. Consider the effects of any development on adjacent landscapes, particularly the *Frodsham to Northwich Undulating Enclosed Farmland* and the *Whitley & Comberbach Undulating Enclosed Farmland*.
6. Consider views from public rights of way, but particularly the Cheshire Ring Canal Walk long distance recreational route, when considering any new built development.
7. Preserve the industrial aesthetic of the Trent and Mersey Canal and its setting, including associated structures and artefacts of industrial archaeology. Consider views from the canal in planning new built development.

