

Appendix 14.7

Lancashire and Amounderness Plain National Character Area 32

Lancashire and Amounderness Plain

Character Area

32



Key Characteristics

- Relatively flat and gently rolling plain broken by isolated hills such as Parbold Hill, Beacon Park and Ashurst's Beacon.
- Large-scale agricultural landscape with a patchwork of pasture and arable fields and blocks of wind-sculptured mixed woodland.
- Medium- to large-scale field pattern with a high density of field ponds to the east and extensive drainage systems of raised ditches and dykes to the west.
- Remnants of lowland mires and mosses in the west.
- Salt marshes are prominent at the heads of estuaries.
- A rectilinear network of lanes and tracks, usually without fences or hedges.
- Predominantly isolated brick farmsteads in rural areas with the main urban settlement concentrated in the planned Victorian coastal resorts and inland towns.

Landscape Character

This is an area of high grade agricultural land which extends southwards from Morecambe Bay in the north to the outskirts of Liverpool in the south. The eastern boundary of the Plain is contained by the Bowland Fringe. It is divided from the industrial landscape of the Lancashire Coal Measures in the southeast by the Upholland ridge, a Millstone Grit outcrop, which punctuates the plain. The southern boundary is formed partly by the city of Liverpool which extends from the Mersey Estuary beyond the hills of Anfield and Walton.

The plain is a rich patchwork of lush pasture and arable fields on a relatively flat to gently rolling coastal landscape. This rural landscape is dissected by a complex network of drainage channels which reinforces the angular form of the field pattern and is a reminder of the area's heritage of mosses and meres. Winmarleigh Moss SSSI is the only substantial area of lowland

peat mossland which remains today, although there are other small isolated examples across the plain. The Ribble Estuary bisects the plain at Preston.



MIKE WILLIAMS/COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION

A long distance view towards the coast from Harrock Hill showing typical features of the reclaimed mosslands of the southern plain. Improved pastureland gives way to predominantly large-scale, open arable farmland, with infrequent hedgerows and woodland.

The northern plain is, predominantly, improved pasture with isolated arable fields. It is a neat, ordered landscape of medium-sized fields with field ponds, clipped hedgerows and drainage ditches. This is a medium- to large-scale landscape with blocks of wind sculptured mixed woodland that punctuate the relatively flat to gently rolling plain. The combination of woodland blocks and isolated individual trees create a well composed parkland character. Views to the east are seen against the dramatic backdrop of the Forest of Bowland.

The southern plain has a different physiographical history to that of the plain north of the Ribble and this is reflected in the land use of the area. It is predominantly highly productive arable land with large fields. There is widespread loss of hedgerows and many field boundaries are simply ditches in areas where there is no need for

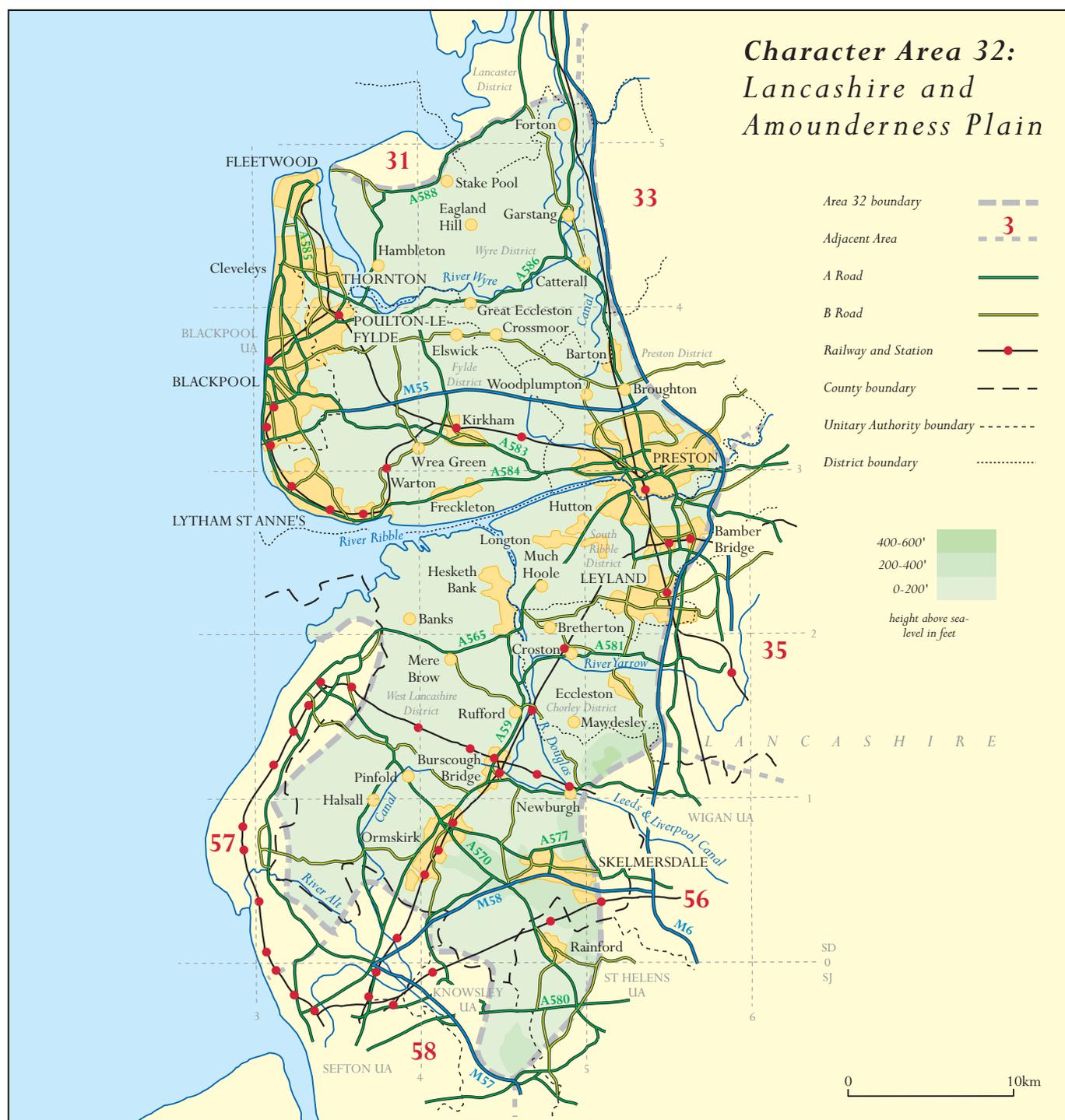
stockproofing. The boundaries to the network of lanes and tracks which criss-cross this area, are commonly without fences or hedges. The lack of hedgerows and hedgerow trees, combined with the essentially flat topography and large arable fields creates a large-scale sweeping landscape. Views to the coast are highly influenced by urban fringe development in the Sefton Coast at Formby, Ainsdale, Southport and other settlements. Trees and woodland tend to be large angular blocks of mixed species which accentuate the regular field pattern.

The plain to the east is predominantly formed by clay soils and contains much ancient wood-pasture of an unplanned nature with a high density of field ponds formed by the extraction of clay for agricultural use.

There are extensive long-distance views across the plain which are punctuated by woodland blocks and brick-built farmsteads. These provide vertical accents in an otherwise flat, horizontal landscape. The surface texture of the plain is a continually changing patchwork of colour and texture related to the various crops and changing seasons.

Physical Influences

Although Permo-Triassic red mudstones, siltstones and sandstones ('New Red Sandstone') constitute much of the floor of the Lancashire lowlands, the solid rock geology rarely emerges from beneath its thick covering of glacial and post-glacial deposits. The plain's lush green pasture and rich arable land are a creation of the last two centuries.



Prior to this, the area was predominantly marshland formed by rising sea levels after the last glaciation. As the ice-sheet retreated it left behind a blanket of glacial till which now forms the coastal cliffs north of Blackpool. It also created many badly drained hollows which soon became filled with post-glacial peat giving rise to the mosses and meres which dominated the area until only recently. Place names incorporating 'moss' and 'mere' are numerous today and are associated with an abundance of well-maintained ditches and drains.



JOHN COCKS/COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION

View from Scorton looking towards Blackpool. In the northern plain, lush pasture bordered by hedgerows interspersed with small blocks of woodland are typical features.

The plain to the south of the Ribble Estuary has a similar post-glacial history to that in the north. Again, glacial deposits, soils and contours combine to produce the gently

sloping plain flattening out to fenland at the coast. A low cliffline in the till plain a few miles inland marks the old shoreline of the former lake of Martin Mere and is still traceable intermittently from the river Ribble to the river Dee. It is best seen at Hesketh Bank near Preston and at Hill House east of Formby. The drift geology hereabouts is mainly windblown Shirdley Hill Sand with small patches of underlying till and marine clay. In addition, there are major areas of basin peat in the east around Simonswood Moss and coastal peats south-east of Hightown. The basin and coastal peats together with podzolic soils overlying the Shirdley Hill Sands produce high quality Grade 1 and 2 soils over much of the area.

Agricultural drainage systems of steep-sided ditches with localised reed beds and steep embankments are a dominant feature of the Lancashire and Amounderness Plain and are responsible for the dramatic transformation from marshes to a rich and ordered landscape of neat fields.

Historical and Cultural Influences

The western coastlands of the Lancashire and Amounderness Plain remained sparsely populated until the end of the 18th century. There is some limited evidence of the area first being settled in the Mesolithic period and later by the Vikings and Angles and there is evidence of a Roman fort at Kirkham. However, the barren sand dunes of the present coast, the mosslands studded with meres and the heavy clay soils of the densely forested glacial drift plain combined to make this an inhospitable landscape not conducive to early settlements.



The salt marshes of the Wyre (seen here) and Ribble estuaries are important for their landscape and nature-conservation value. Heavy industrialisation of parts of the coast is common.

DAVID WOODFALL/WOODFALL WILD IMAGES

The drainage of the mosslands and coastal fens during the 19th century transformed the marshes into high-grade pasture and arable land and saw the development of Victorian resorts such as Blackpool. A striking feature of the plain is the lack of historical links to the distant past. Another factor which has influenced the development of the modern landscape, relates to the drainage schemes of the 18th century. A few isolated windmills built to drain the water and grind the first crops of corn have also survived on the plain.

Buildings and Settlement

The development of settlements on the plain is a relatively recent occurrence and coincides largely with the drainage of the marshes in the 19th century and further expansion during the industrial revolution. However, the plain still remains rural in character with isolated brick farmsteads, small villages and numerous manor houses located along the network of country lanes.

The main areas of settlement which influence the plain are located at the planned Victorian coastal resorts such as Blackpool, Lytham St Anne's and the large inland towns of Ormskirk, Kirkby and the new town of Skelmersdale. The city of Liverpool forms part of the southern boundary to the Lancashire and Amounderness Plain as it rises beyond the hills of Anfield and Walton from the Mersey Estuary.

Land Cover

This is mainly an area of open, high-quality farmland. The plain in the north is predominantly lush green pasture supporting a high density of livestock within a landscape of well-trimmed hedgerows and carefully enclosed copses and spinneys. The plain in the south is Grade 1 and 2 agricultural land. The coastal fens are intensively farmed for vegetables, potatoes and cereals. Further inland the slightly higher ground is also farmed for cereals and vegetables.

The field pattern in this area is large-scale with widespread loss of the field structure of hedgerows and hedgerow trees. Woodland is sparse outside of historic estates such as Knowsley Park. The varied range of crops on the Lancashire and Amounderness Plain gives a seasonally changing surface texture and colour.

The Changing Countryside

- Disused airfields and former RAF and army camps.
- Changes in land use including increased numbers of golf courses, motorbike scrambling, horsification and caravan parks.
- Changes in agricultural practices resulting in loss of traditional field structure.

- Loss of localised reed beds and field ponds.
- Loss of hedgerows and hedgerow trees.
- Lack of woodland management resulting in the significant loss of woodland cover.
- Urban encroachment and expansion of greenhouses.
- Conflict between boat activity and other recreational users in the Wyre estuary.

Shaping the Future

- The retention and appropriate management of hedgerows needs to be addressed.
- The conservation of remaining lowland mosses is important for the character of the area.
- There is scope for the conservation and management of field ponds.
- The retention of contrasting landscape types within the character area should respect the differences between the Fylde and the South Lancashire Plain.



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Marton Mere is one of the few remaining meres in the area. Blackpool (one of the major conurbations) and its tower are visible from many parts of the area.

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Glossary

podzolic: resembling a podzol in possessing a leached layer of soil



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Many of the smaller settlements on the plain remain rural in character. The canals have historically provided important communication routes.