

LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT

THE CANNOCK CHASE LANDSCAPE

COUNTRYSIDE
COMMISSION

THE CANNOCK CHASE LANDSCAPE

A landscape assessment prepared by
Ashmead Price and Steven Warnock
for the Countryside Commission,
in association with Forest Enterprise
and Staffordshire County Council.

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FOREWORD

Cannock Chase is an area of high, sandstone heathland, with oak and birch woodland and extensive pine plantations. The remnants of a medieval royal hunting forest, extensively shaped and changed by the hand of man, it was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1958. Many people see its rounded plateau as they drive along the M6. It is the second smallest of the AONBs. But as a green lung, its location close to the West Midlands conurbation makes it an extremely popular destination for day visitors.

The Countryside Commission wants to raise awareness and understanding of the special character and national importance of the area. It is hoped that this report will help to guide and influence the management of the Chase. In particular the Commission is keen to support the Joint Advisory

Committee, established in November 1993. The Commission also looks forward to developing its partnership with the local authorities, Forest Enterprise and voluntary sector, all of which have a vital role to play in the future shaping of the area.

This assessment is one of a series published by the Countryside Commission, which aims to document the distinctive character and natural beauty of the AONBs.



Sir John Johnson
Chairman

PREFACE

The Cannock Chase AONB covers 68 sq km, and is bounded by the towns of Stafford and Rugeley to the north and Cannock and Burntwood to the south. Since the AONB was designated there have been continuing and significant landscape changes, due partly to the exploitation of the extensive sand and gravel reserves, and the rapid expansion of the surrounding population who have more leisure time to visit the Chase.

In recent years the local authorities, and particularly Staffordshire County Council, have been involved in creating and managing what has become one of the largest Country Parks in Britain. The County Council now has wide experience of directing and managing pressures to change within the Country Park, in a positive way. Similarly, Forest Enterprise have responded to the changes by managing their extensive pine plantations for recreation and nature conservation, as well as for timber production.

The primary aim of this landscape assessment is to identify and describe the basis for designation, that is the special character and national importance of the Cannock Chase landscape. The assessment is also intended to raise awareness of the AONB. It should assist the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) to develop policies, to administer and manage the AONB, and to contribute to the development of the AONB management strategy.

The method of landscape assessment has been based on the Countryside Commission's guidelines and has included research and desk study of background material, analysis of map data, historical papers, aerial photographs, and field work. In addition, meetings have been held with acknowledged local experts and organisations and the JAC to review the pressures on the landscape and assess future policies.

The report includes descriptions of:

- the special character of the Cannock Chase landscape;
- the historical evolution of the Chase landscape, and of the physical and human influences that have shaped the present day character;
- the landscape character of the Chase, illustrating the variety of landscapes in and adjacent to the AONB;
- how the landscape has been perceived and appreciated over time;
- the pressures for change in the landscape, and how they may affect the area's scenic quality and ecological value in the future.

The appendix includes a summary of management recommendations for the different landscape types and features.

Ashmead Price
November 1994

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CANNOCK CHASE LANDSCAPE

Cannock Chase is an area of high sandstone heathlands and pine plantations fringed by historic parklands and enclosed farmlands, which was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1958. With an extent of only 68 square kilometres, it is one of the smallest AONBs, yet with its adjoining conurbations and coveted mineral resources, it is potentially one of the most threatened of these special areas (Figure 1).

Cannock Chase is today commonly perceived to mean the area of open land and forest within the AONB, but the understanding of this name has changed considerably through time, and in the past it had both a different legal meaning and extent. Often it is wrongly confused with the Royal Forest of Cannock, a formerly much more extensive area, sometimes also referred to as Cank Wood. The name Cannock Chase originally referred to that part of the Royal Forest (namely the manors of Cannock and Rugeley) that was granted to the Bishop of Lichfield by the King in 1290.

Between 1600 and 1850, however, the use of this name changed to mean the open lands in the manors of Haywood and Longdon, as well as Cannock and Rugeley. Following extensive enclosure of heathland during the 18th and 19th centuries, the extent of these open lands was greatly reduced and today all that remains is the relatively small area, much of which has been afforested, which forms the core of the present

AONB. Enclosed agricultural landscapes are also a component of the AONB, and these make an important contribution to the overall character of the Chase.

The word 'forest' is now commonly used to refer to an extensive area of woodland, but in medieval times, the term 'Forest' was a legal definition meaning an area of land that was managed for hunting by the King. It could be generally wooded or completely open with varying amounts of land used for habitation and farming. This historical dimension is implied wherever a capital letter is used for the term Forest in this publication.

A national landscape resource

The character of Cannock Chase and its associated landscapes reflect a distinct combination of physical, ecological and historic factors, which define the area's special quality and sense of place. The pattern of vegetation, land use and settlement within and around the Chase is strongly influenced by the nature of soils in the area, which in turn reflect the underlying geology and topography. The dissected sandstone plateau and associated poor sandy soils, have historically made the Chase unattractive for agriculture, and this may explain why the area was used as a Royal hunting Forest by the Norman kings. Agricultural expansion fuelled by population pressure, however, gradually made inroads into the once extensive Forest, until only the poorest land remained on the high plateau of the Chase. Each of the different periods of settlement and enclosure can be distinguished from the varying patterns of fields, roads and habitation around the edges of the Chase today.

This pattern of vegetation and land use history can be found elsewhere in the country and, as in Cannock Chase, the character of such areas is strongly influenced by the physical nature of the land. Nationally similar areas include the New Forest and the Forest of Dean. While it is recognised that these areas each have their own unique characteristics and cultural associations, the more obvious differences in appearance are due to visual considerations such as the extent of 'open' land and the balance between coniferous and broadleaved woodland. The pattern of factors that has created the basic character of the landscape, has many parallels in all three areas. Since both the Forest of Dean, and in particular the New Forest are recognised for their outstanding qualities, it is appropriate that Cannock Chase should also be regarded as a national landscape resource, despite its smaller size.



Mature stand of pines at Beaudesert.

Cannock Chase is also significant in a Midlands regional context. The Midlands here refers to the geographical region, extending from the Welsh Borders to the Fens and from the Peak District to the Chilterns and Wessex Downs. In 1991, a landscape classification was produced for the Midlands showing the pattern of land character types across the region [1]. This classification identifies the high plateau of the Chase (the greater part of the AONB) as sandstone hills and heaths. This landscape occurs elsewhere in the region, notably: the eastern part of the old Forest of Cannock between Hopwas Hayes and Sutton Park; the northern part of Worcestershire in the vicinity of the Clent and Lickey Hills; and in west Staffordshire around Ashley Heath and the Hanchurch and Maer Hills. All of these areas are characterised by dissected sandstone 'uplands', with varying amounts of woodland and heath within a late enclosure pattern of geometric fields, farms and expanded settlements. These represent the once extensive high heathland landscapes of the Midlands.

When compared with other similar landscapes in the Midlands, Cannock Chase has a range of outstanding qualities that make the area a unique and very special landscape resource. The survival of such a large tract of unenclosed land is perhaps the most

important quality. Unenclosed, semi-natural, landscapes are a particularly scarce asset in a Midlands context. These apparently natural areas provide a valuable contrast to the ordered agricultural landscapes dominating the region. The opportunity to stand in an area of open heathland and not be able to see farmland, buildings or moving traffic is a unique experience in the Midlands. This wilderness quality is all the more remarkable given the geographical location of the Chase, in the heart of such a densely populated region.

The direct historical association with a former Royal Forest further enhances the importance of the Chase as a landscape resource, as well as providing a distinct regional identity. This extends to the peripheral agricultural landscapes, each of which reflect different stages in the enclosure of the forest. Although quite different in appearance, each of these landscapes retains distinct visual, ecological or historical links with the remaining unenclosed land. Much of this unenclosed land has been planted with conifers, but in many ways the overall effect of these plantations is to echo the heavily wooded appearance of the old Royal Forest, when the Chase is viewed at a distance from the surrounding agricultural lowlands.



The wilderness quality of Brocton field, surrounded by heathland, birch scrub, and pine plantations.

Scenic qualities and sense of place

The character and quality of Cannock Chase can be attributed to its sense of being a semi-natural oasis close to the heavily populated centres of the Midlands. The transition from hard, urban landscapes to the remote high heathland is very short, and this immediate wilderness is highly valued as a local resource. The

contrasts within the AONB are also very marked, ranging from the spacious, windswept nature of Brocton Field where there is little evidence of the hand of man, to the intimate scale and enclosure of the forestry plantations. The sensations of prospect and refuge, or the feeling of being able to see out over the landscape, contrasting with the feeling of safety and enclosure, succeed each other around almost every corner. This has the effect of making the Chase seem much larger



Old oaks at Brocton Coppice.

than it actually is, which is a very positive asset for the thousands of visitors who are regularly accommodated in the various attractions within the AONB.

The changing seasons on the Chase remind visitors of the constant cycle of renewal in nature; the bright greens of the bracken shoots and bilberry in spring; the hazy sunshine and dappled shades of summer under the oaks of Brocton coppice; the expansive purple carpet of heather in early autumn; and the orange brown bracken and white birch stems of winter. Seasons in the forestry plantations are marked by the growth and die back of the understorey beneath the older stands of conifers, while the larch in Beaudesert and the belts of beech, provide a welcome splash of colour within the dark green canopy of the forest.

The Chase is a landscape of favourite places, and the public can either choose to join the crowds having fun en masse at Milford Common, or find a remote spot to sit among the heather, looking up at the sky and listening to the larks. Others may choose to walk the ramparts of Castle Ring, and pause to take in the spectacular view over Beaudesert Park, watching the shadows move across the smooth forms of the cooling towers at Rugeley Power Station. Cannock Chase is a place to be at peace in quiet glades, or woodland walks, and the experience is heightened by a glimpse of fallow deer moving noiselessly through the trees. Other places for reflection include the war cemeteries, which have a unique atmosphere in the setting of the Chase, and the Katyn Memorial, almost hidden in a woodland glade. In the surrounding agricultural landscapes there is a sense of man's mastery over nature. This is most apparent in the historic parkland of Shugborough, a theatrical landscape of symbolic monuments and carefully placed clumps of trees. It is this great variety of scenic qualities, and the strong sense of place that the Chase evokes, which leaves a lasting impression in the minds of its many visitors.

Ecological value

Cannock Chase comprises by far the largest surviving area of heathland in the Midlands (684 hectares) and this is of great significance for nature conservation. A number of other smaller heathland sites bring the total area within the AONB to almost 1,200 hectares. A substantial part of this has been scheduled within the Cannock Chase Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The largest site outside this area is Gentleshaw Common in the south-eastern corner of the AONB.

All heathland is now recognised as being of international importance as a scarce and declining habitat. The heathlands of Staffordshire, and especially those on the Chase, are of particular interest, due to

their transitional nature between the high altitude moorlands in the north and the lowland heaths in the south of the country. Species such as cowberry and crowberry are generally characteristic of higher moorlands for example, while bell-heather is mainly confined to lowland heaths. All of these species occur on the Chase, which is also the main British site for the hybrid bilberry, or 'Cannock Chase berry', a plant of very restricted occurrence in central and northern England. In this connection it is significant that the 1977 Nature Conservation Review [2], which assesses the value of natural history resources throughout Britain, lists the Chase as being of national importance.

The Chase heathlands, by virtue of their size and diversity, provide important nesting and feeding grounds for a wide variety of interesting and often rare animals, in particular specialised and nationally declining heathland species such as slow worms, adders and common lizards. The most significant breeding bird is the Nightjar, which can be heard churring over areas of open heath and felled or recently re-planted conifer plantations. The Chase supports approximately 1 per cent of the British population of this particular species. The forestry plantations support the only remaining population of red squirrels in central England. Sightings are rare, but research is being carried out to determine how best to conserve this species.

The heathlands are also important from several other points of view. Much of the natural history interest derives from the fact that an ancient pattern of land use has persisted on the high plateau of the Chase. The remaining heathlands and their associated plant and animal communities are part of a landscape that has an historical continuity going back at least 1,000 years. It is likely that the managed herd of fallow deer found on the Chase are descended from the original herd that was hunted by the Normans. With an estimated population of between 600 and 900 animals, the Chase is also probably one of the best places in the country to observe fallow deer in a truly wild state.

Recreational value

The Chase is a particularly valuable recreational resource. Cannock Chase Country Park, owned and managed by Staffordshire County Council, is one of the largest country parks in Britain. The location of the Chase close to the West Midlands conurbation, results in it being used almost entirely by day trippers. The bulk of recreational visits are spontaneous, localised and ephemeral, simple unorganised and informal, although organised pursuits do take place throughout the year. In addition to the Country Park, the public have access to the freehold areas of the Forestry

Commission woodlands. In total the area of land with open public access is almost 3,900 hectares (58 per cent of the AONB).

In a regional context, other open access areas within 20 kilometres of the conurbation include the Clent and Lickey Hills, Kinver Edge, the Wrekin and Wenlock Edge. Cannock Chase is the largest area of this group, and has relatively easy motorway access, thus making it a favoured target for many thousands of day visitors. The variety and choice of destinations within the AONB means that the public return to the area time and again. The AONB is also used extensively as an educational resource. At Shooting Butts, Birches Valley Forest Centre, Marquis Drive Visitor Centre and many other sites on the Chase, local schoolchildren and the general public are given the opportunity to experience the Chase landscape first hand.



The Chase is popular for a leisurely stroll or an energetic hike.



Part of the afforested domed profile of the chase, viewed from the forest fringe.

2. EVOLUTION OF THE LANDSCAPE

The present day landscape of Cannock Chase is a product of the physical and human influences that have shaped its basic structure and appearance. In particular the underlying geology has had, and continues to have, a marked effect on the landscape, influencing not only landform, soils and vegetation, but also the human activities dependent upon or affected by it. In turn, the basic appearance of the landscape is shaped by the results of man's activities, changing natural vegetation patterns to suit human needs, and introducing man-made elements into the landscape.

The shape of the land

To understand the physical influences that have shaped the character of Cannock Chase, and that distinguish it from surrounding areas, it is necessary to look at the AONB in its wider regional context (Figures 2 and 2a). The Chase lies on a northern spur of the Birmingham plateau — an extensive, but often vaguely defined 'upland' area in the heart of the Midlands. This area, underlain by a faulted block of Palaeozoic strata, consists of two uplifted units — the South Staffordshire and North Warwickshire plateaux — overlain by younger Permo-Triassic rocks. A more recent covering of glacial drift was deposited over the central part of the area during the last Ice Age. In Staffordshire, these Palaeozoic strata, which consist mainly of Middle and Upper Coal Measures, extend northward from the Black Country in a roughly triangular block to an apex at Brereton. The presence of coal, which has been extensively worked in the Cannock coalfield since the mid-10th century, has had a major influence on the development of land use and settlement in this area. Coal bearing rocks are exposed on the Chase itself and these were formerly worked at Brereton. To the south of Rawsley, however, the coalfield is covered with an almost unbroken sheet of gravelly boulder clay. This flattens the landform creating a large-scale rolling topography, which slopes away southward to the A5.

The Cannock Coalfield is overlain to the north and east by younger Permo-Triassic rocks. The most widespread and characteristic of these are the so called Bunter Pebble Beds, which underlie the greater part of the AONB. This name is derived from the German word meaning brightly coloured, and red or yellow pebbly sandstones are common in the deposits found on the Chase. It is from the character of the pebble beds that the scenic quality, and the natural and man-managed vegetation are derived. Within Cannock Chase, they form a heavily dissected high plateau which



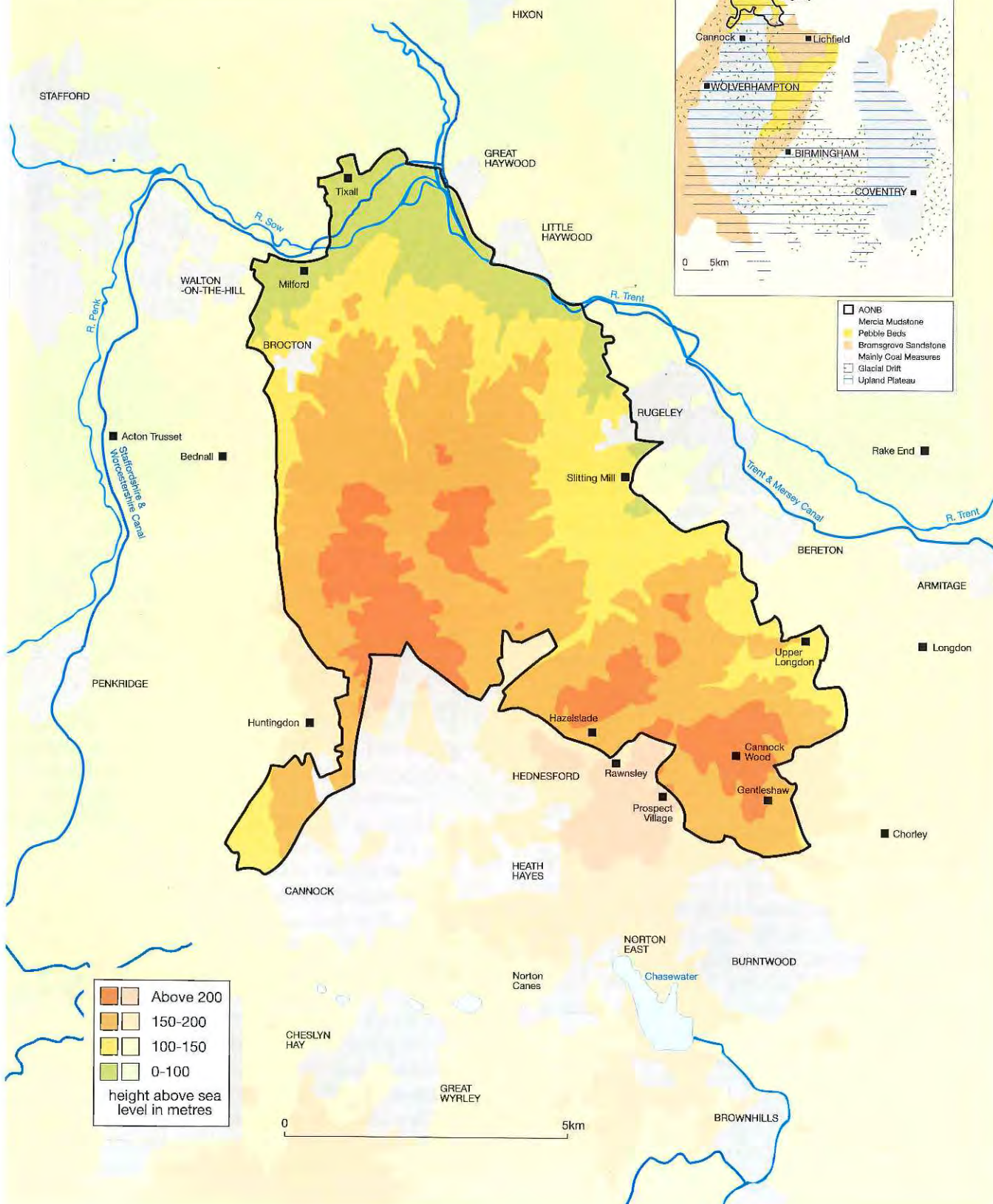
Oldacre Valley, showing the dissected landform and heathy vegetation.

is drained by numerous small streams (Figure 2a). This plateau rises steeply along its northern and western boundary and is perceived as a dome-like structure from the surrounding lowlands. The pebble beds are a source of high quality sands and gravel, which are actively quarried in three locations in the AONB. The pebble beds are also an important source of underground water, because of their formation over the impervious coal measures, and this resource is increasingly tapped for public use.

Pebble beds occur elsewhere on the Birmingham plateau, notably in a crescent-shaped belt running from Hopwas Hayes through Sutton Park and back up to Brownhills. The Cannock Coalfield, Triassic sandstones and pebble beds form a relatively unified physical unit, which makes up the broad tract of countryside that was the original Forest of Cannock, resulting in the area having a similar dissected topography and land use history to that found on the Chase.

Sandstones and Pebble Beds continue in a narrowing belt to the north-west of the Chase, where they form an area of low, rounded hills, bisected by the river Sow as it flows eastward to join the Trent at Great Haywood. The Trent itself forms a narrow alluvial valley, flanked in places by deposits of river terrace. The river cuts into the high plateau of the Chase between Shugborough and Wolseley, creating a very prominent slope along the northern edge of the AONB. This looks out north-eastward over the elongated rolling plateau of Needwood. To the west of the Chase lies another belt of sandstone, overlain for the most part by sandy drift. As in the Cannock Coalfield, this flattens the landform, creating a gently rolling topography extending into the Penk Valley. Beyond this lies an extensive area of Mercia mudstones, which define the rolling agricultural lowlands of West Staffordshire.

Figure 2a. Physical features





Gateway to the Chase: The river Trent off Wolseley Bridge.

Glacial activity in recent geological times has also shaped the structure of the Chase. During the last one million years or so, glaciers moved in from the east, north-east and north-west, bringing an enormous mass of materials from northern Britain. When the ice melted this was deposited as glacial drift, although there is now little drift remaining on the surface except in the south-eastern corner and on the western fringe of the AONB. Perhaps the most remarkable relic of the ice sheets is the glacial boulder at Brocton Field. Approximately 1 metre in length, this boulder was carried for more than 240 km by the ice sheets, from its place of origin at Criffel in south-west Scotland.

The most striking effects of the ice on the Chase scenery are those due to glacial meltwater. It is thought that while ice was backed up against the south-western margin of the Chase a meltwater lake formed in the Cannock-Hednesford area [8]. As the water escaped westward to the Trent Valley, it cut a narrow valley as it did so. This 'overflow valley', which is today used by the main road and railway line connecting Rugeley with Cannock, divides the high plateau into two separate parts. The largest part of the Chase to the north west, comprises the areas known as Brindley Heath, Brocton Field and Wolseley Park. This is an area of convex ridges, small hills and deeply incised valleys mostly containing north flowing streams. To

the south east, lie Beaudesert Park, the Rawnsley and Hednesford Hills and Stile Cop. The land is higher in this area, rising to 244 metres at Castle Ring, and drainage is mainly to the north east.

Soils and land use

Soil formation is directly related to the underlying geology, and over much of the Chase the Pebble Beds have weathered to produce well drained, thin stony soils of low agricultural value. This is one of the reasons why the Chase remained an area of woodlands and wood pasture until relatively recent times. Once cleared of their natural woodland cover, however, these thin soils quickly became impoverished as mineral and organic matter were leached out by rainfall. The resulting nutrient poor, acidic soils, known as podzols, could only support a restricted range of plant species, typically dominated by dwarf shrubs, bracken and various grasses. This dry heathland habitat is now the dominant semi-natural vegetation type on the Chase. In places it is associated with small areas of wet heath and bog, where drainage is impeded.

On Cannock Chase, the heathland is dominated by heather, cowberry and crowberry, mixed with bilberry and wavy hair grass. Bracken tends to dominate large

areas, more often in valleys where the soil is deeper. Along valley bottoms and in hollows, where wet conditions bring about the accumulation of peat, the vegetation is usually dominated by purple moor-grass, in places associated with cross-leaved heath and cotton grass. Afforestation of the Chase heathlands during the 20th century, has largely been with Scots and Corsican pine, as these are the most suitable commercial softwoods.

Bromsgrove Sandstone occurs around the fringes of the Chase and forms quite different, mainly well-drained sandy brown soils. These relatively fertile, easily worked soils usually support good quality arable or mixed farmland, such as that around Bednall, Tixall and in the Lichfield area. Where the sandstones are overlain by glacial drift the soils tend to be more variable and often have impeded drainage. Mixed farming and dairying are more prevalent in these areas. Clayey brown earths are the main soil type associated with the Mercia Mudstones on the eastern fringe of the Chase. These imperfectly drained soils are mostly under temporary grass leys and dairying is the main land use around Chorley and Longdon.

Alluvial soils occupy the flat valley floors along the Trent and its tributary rivers. These mainly silty clay soils are affected by fluctuating groundwater levels and occasional flooding. Most of the land is therefore under permanent pasture, and used for dairying or stock rearing. The adjoining river terraces usually produce well-drained brown soils, similar to those found on the Bromsgrove Sandstone. These deep, sandy soils are typically utilised for arable cropping.

Unstratified, gravelly boulder clay covers most of the Cannock Coalfield, producing rather stony, but mostly poorly drained stagnogley soils. There is some mixed fanning but agricultural potential is often limited due to pressures arising from the nearby urban fringe. This has led to subdivision of land into smaller units in many places, to create pony paddocks and smallholdings servicing the nearby population. Remnant wet heathland is also associated with these soils, which in many places have been disturbed by coal mining. Seasonal waterlogging leads to anaerobic conditions, which favour acidification of the soil and, locally, the development of a thin layer of peat. The wet heathland vegetation on such sites is typically composed of cross-leaved heath, purple moor-grass, cowberry, cotton grass and heather.

Virtually all the better quality land around the Chase today has been enclosed and improved for agricultural production. Originally, however, oak woodland would have been the natural vegetation cover throughout the region. On most soils derived from Permo-Triassic rocks, or from glacial deposits overlying them, English oak



Pony paddocks below Raunsley Hills.

was the dominant species in association with sessile oak, birch, hazel and rowan. Sessile oak and holly may have been dominant on the poorer acid soils on the Chase.

Early history of the Chase

In contrast to southern and eastern parts of England, there are relatively few prehistoric finds within the Chase area, indicating that the locality was not particularly attractive to the earliest inhabitants of Britain during the Stone Age and Bronze Age periods. It seems likely, however, that early Stone Age tribes used the high points of Stile Cop and Castle Ring as strategic viewpoints. Flint chipping grounds have been discovered around Cannock Wood, and it is possible that this area was a focus for ancient tracks through the forest. A number of Bronze Age burial mounds have also been discovered on the Chase, as well as mounds of shattered stones, which it is thought were used for cooking. Perhaps the most significant prehistoric feature is the Iron Age hill-fort situated on the highest point of the Chase at Castle Ring. Covering about 3.5 hectares, this is the largest of the seven known Iron Age hill-forts in Staffordshire. The fort lay on the boundary between the two major tribes of the Midlands — the Cornavii and the Coritani.

The Romans appeared in the region around 45AD, as part of their general expansion towards Wales and the north of England. Watling Street (the present day A5) to the south of the AONB was built at this time. The Romans, it seems, did not attempt to penetrate the heavily wooded high plateau of the Chase, but instead established themselves into already settled parts of the countryside. Following the contraction of the Roman empire during the 5th century, Staffordshire was penetrated by Anglo-Saxon peoples, but the Cannock area remained sparsely populated due to its poor soils. The Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Mercia emerged from this period of settlement and became the dominant

kingdom north of Wessex. This part of Mercia was on the frontier between Saxon England to the south and Viking England to the north. Some local place names may date from this time, notably Cannock from Cnoc, meaning a hill or hillock; Bednall, meaning Beda's nook of land; and Rugeley, a woodland glade on a ridge [3]. The first references to the County of Staffordshire date from the 10th century.

William of Normandy seized the English Crown in 1066, but the full force of his presence was not felt in Staffordshire until 1069–1070, when he twice suppressed Mercian revolts, building a motte and bailey castle at Stafford to deter further revolts. *Domesday* refers to the high plateau of the Chase as 'terrae vastae', meaning empty or unpopulated land, and Staffordshire as a whole, had a low population density. Even the more settled Trent and Tame Valleys had a recorded population of only 4.6 persons per square mile, compared with 11 in parts of Warwickshire, while the Cannock area had less than 0.3 persons. The general impression of *Domesday* Staffordshire therefore, and in particular of the area around Cannock, was of extensive areas of forest in which were scattered small settlements and isolated farmsteads.

The Royal Forest of Cannock

The Norman invasion changed the pattern of land ownership, but this had little direct impact on the appearance of the countryside. Like their Anglo-Saxon predecessors, the Norman Kings prized deer hunting, and for this purpose created extensive Royal Forests throughout the country. The Royal Forest of Cannock was created during William the Conqueror's reign, and in this period Forest laws were imposed, and strictly enforced.

At the time of *Domesday*, the Royal Forest of Cannock covered an area of some 700 sq km, and in the 11th century its boundaries were defined as stretching from the River Penk in the west, along a southerly line passing through Coven and Wolverhampton, beyond which it followed the River Tame, through Tamworth to its confluence with the Trent. The city of Lichfield was included, and in the north the boundary followed the River Trent and then its tributary the Sow to rejoin the Penk again at Stafford (Figure 3).

The four beasts of the forest were the hart (deer), hare, boar and wolf and until the reign of Henry II, when Forest laws were relaxed, the penalties for killing one of these animals were severe. Medieval Forest did not imply continuous tree cover, though Cannock Forest was probably well wooded throughout the Norman period. Much of this woodland may have been

'open' in character with a heathland ground vegetation.

Cannock Forest had its own hierarchy of officials and for administrative purposes, was divided into nine bailiwicks, or 'hayes', some of the names of which remain today — including Cheslyn Hay and Ogley Hay. The officers employed to protect the beasts of the Forest included the chief forester or seneschal, with an under-forester responsible for each Hay. Beneath these were a second group of officials — the verderers, agisters, woodwards and reguerders — responsible for controlling the use of the Forest land. They were concerned with collecting dues from the locals for the use of herbage (grazing for cattle), pannage (forage for pigs), timber, firewood and fences respectively. They also dealt with offences by landowners. The control exercised under the Forest laws was therefore very strict, although the freeholders did retain the right of common pasturage for their cattle in the Forest. Some of the local family names surviving today, such as the Wrottesleys, Wolseleys and Littletons of Teddesley, were predominantly Forest families.

The present area of Cannock Chase was carved out of the much larger Royal Forest of Cannock in 1189 by Richard I, for the Bishops of Lichfield, in return for money for a crusade. The Bishops Chase as it became known, comprised the hayes of Cannock and Rugeley (Figure 3). The area was then no longer subject to Forest laws, and the Bishops became entitled to hunt on the Chase. Bishop Meuland was given the rights of free chase in 1290, which gave him permission to enclose land providing he did not construct any deer leaps or one-way passages for deer into the enclosed area. He granted the title of hereditary Master and Ruler of the Game of Cank Wood to Roger of Aston, at Tixall. This title remained into the 18th century, and was only relinquished in 1712 by the fourth Lord Aston. The Bishop built a hunting lodge at Beaudesert, and possibly also a manor house at Haywood Park. Both residences later acquired parkland, and were developed as estates.

Royal Forests were particularly vulnerable to emparking throughout the Middle Ages. This involved local landowners taking Forest land, often illegally, and enclosing it with a bank and ditch to keep in game, especially deer. These medieval deer parks, which had little in common with their Georgian and Victorian successors, were also exploited for timber and pasture. Deer parks were an obvious means of utilising areas of poorer soil in a county that was relatively underpopulated until the 18th century. Not surprisingly, therefore, a series of parks developed around the edges of the Chase during the medieval period. One of these was Teddesley Park developed by a member of the Littleton family who was Head Keeper of the Chase in

Figure 3.
The Changing Forest

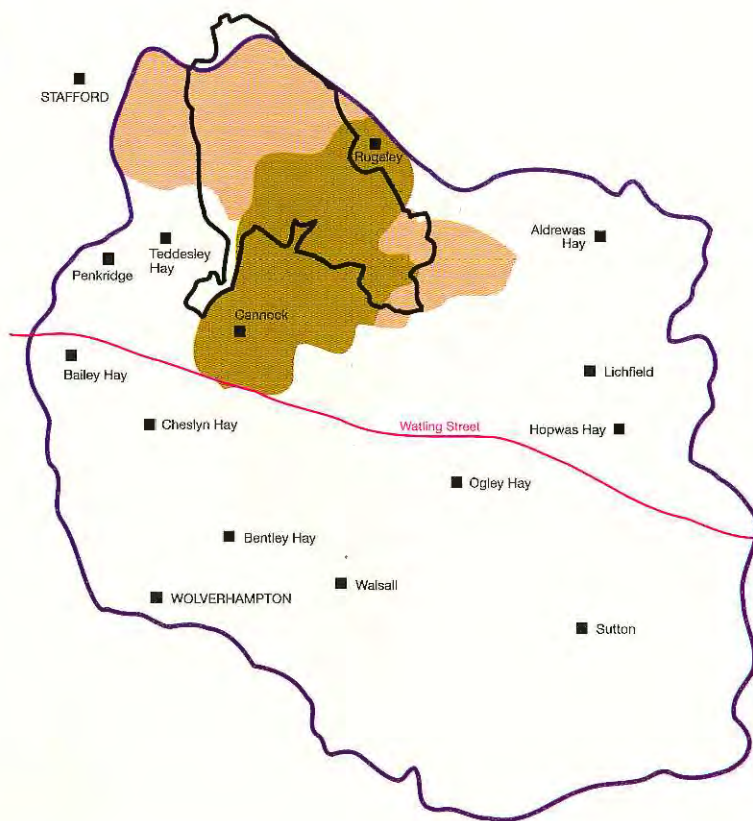
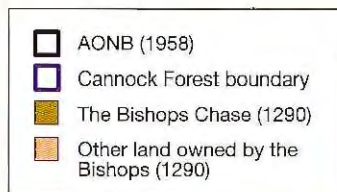
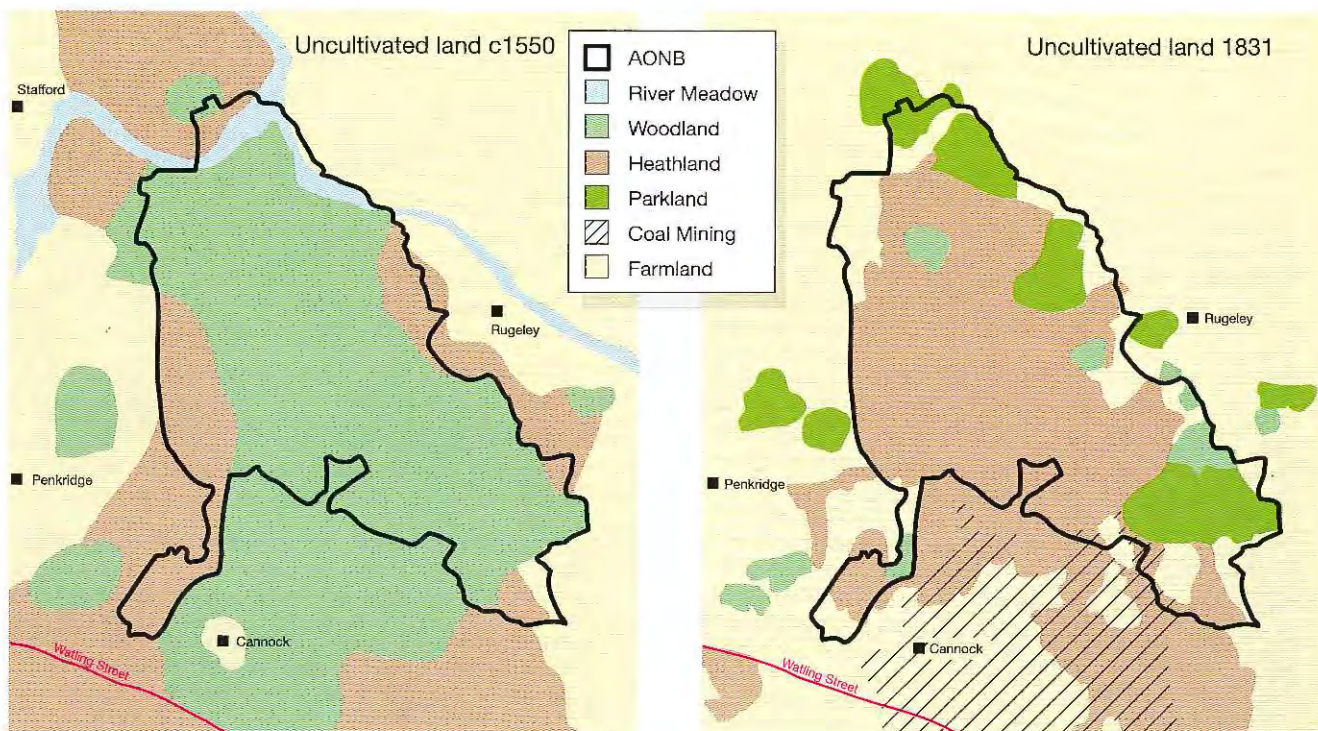


Figure 4. Land Use Change



the 15th century. Another was Hagley Park, near Rugeley, commenced in 1327. Perhaps the most significant of the Chase Parks, however, were Beaudesert Old Park, Haywood Park and Wolseley Park. The latter was emparked by Ralph Wolseley, after he obtained a license granted by King Edward IV in 1469. Wolseley constructed a number of deer leaps, one of which operated until the last century and is now renovated and protected. Commoners were often excluded from these newly emparked areas, as grazing rights could easily be overturned by powerful landowners.

The pattern of land use at the end of the medieval period more or less reflected geographical limitations, and the Royal Forest of Cannock was still largely a region of woodland and waste. Inroads had been made in some places, notably the area of better soils to the west of Lichfield. This area has all the hallmarks of a landscape cleared piecemeal in the Middle Ages — a tangle of narrow winding lanes linking small hamlets and scattered farms. The name 'Green' in particular, is a common sign of clearance from woodland, as in Creswell Green, Goosemoor Green and Longdon Green. The Bishops Chase, however, remained heavily wooded, while large areas of heathland and waste existed around its edges (Figure 4). Although largely uninhabited, this area was of vital importance to the people of the surrounding villages and their dependent hamlets. It was a source of domestic fuel and materials for building, hedging and tool making, as well as providing pannage for pigs and grazing for sheep and cattle.

The decline of the Forest

The grazing of commoners' animals through the Chase woodlands during the medieval period progressively stopped regeneration of tree seedlings. As trees died out and were not replaced, the soils became impoverished and heathland developed. By the mid-16th century a large area of land within the manor of Cannock had become heathland. This represented a transitional zone between the cultivated areas around the towns and villages, and the more remote woodlands and wood pasture of the higher lands on the Chase. These woodlands continued to survive because they were periodically enclosed by local landowners to allow regeneration after cropping.

During the latter part of the 16th century, the effect of enclosure and widespread tree felling began dramatically to change the character of the remaining forest. Population pressure was gradually extending cultivation into the waste, and together with the enclosure of existing open fields, this created hedged

landscapes in some areas around the Chase. Temporary agriculture was also practised, where an area of waste was cultivated for a few years before moving on to another area. This was combined with the burning of natural bracken cover as a fertiliser. Bracken appears to have been spreading on the Chase at this time, possibly linked to a change in woodland character.

The increase in tree felling on the Chase was mainly due to the activities of Sir William Paget, a courtier who obtained Cannock Chase and the Manors of Haywood and Longdon from Henry VIII in 1547. This land had been transferred to the crown from the Bishop of Lichfield in the preceding year, following the onset of the reformation. In 1560 Paget was licensed to fell trees for charcoal fuel for ironmaking. This exempted him from a general Act to protect stocks of good timber for ship building, which had been in effect since 1558. To maintain a renewable supply of fuel for his iron furnaces Paget managed his woodlands by coppicing. Coppiced areas were fenced off to allow regeneration of the vegetation, and new areas were also enclosed and brought into timber production. At the same time, grazing pressure was also increasing and this began to conflict with the more intensive utilisation of woodland on the Chase. This often resulted in coppice hedges being broken down by commoners.

Between 1589 and 1610 the Paget lands were leased to Sir Fulke Greville, who was responsible for the destruction of the Chase woods. Greville exploited the woodland resource for ironmaking and by 1600 he had felled 950 hectares out of a total of 1,265 hectares granted to him under licence from the Crown [4]. The only oak woodland to survive on the Chase were remnants at Brocton Coppice and parts of Beaudesert Park. Ironically, even the graziers lost out in this action, as Greville removed all the holly trees which were supposedly protected in his lease, thus removing valuable winter feed.

Grazing pressure combined with soil impoverishment prevented regeneration of the former forest, and by 1650 the high plateau of the Chase had become a large area of man-made heath. The main use of the great heaths, which at this time stretched more or less continuously from Stafford to Sutton Park, was for sheep grazing. It is estimated that the grazing intensity on Cannock Chase may have been as high as one sheep per hectare. The Chase even developed its own breed of sheep, the 'Cannock Greyface', which died out early this century.

Rabbit grazing also prevented the natural regeneration of trees. Rabbits were originally introduced by the Normans, as a source of fresh meat, and were carefully guarded in enclosed warrens. They, like deer, belonged to the local Lord and from 1690 Baron Paget

tried to expand his rabbit warrens but this again conflicted with the commoners' grazing of sheep. In 1751, the rabbit riots brought to a head the conflict of interests, and many thousands of rabbits were killed over a period of two weeks. A ruling in the high court in 1766, declared that the commoners could not be allowed to 'destroy the estate of the Lord, in order to preserve his own small right of common' [5]. As a result the dispute continued, but because the commoners could not prove their age-old commoners' rights in the courts, large areas of the Chase were enclosed by local landowners and common grazing lost. Rabbits continued to graze on the Chase, and it was only the outbreak of myxomatosis in 1953 that reduced numbers.

The trend towards enclosure of the open lands of Cannock Chase, continued into the 18th century, and local acts were passed to permit specific areas of the open Chase commons to be enclosed. The 18th century was the era of the agricultural improvers, spurred on by high grain prices, as the population of the towns increased. The introduction of new techniques made possible and profitable the cultivation of waste and pasture. In 1845, the General Enclosure Act was passed by Parliament to accelerate the enclosure of common

land, thus bringing about the end to a way of life for common people, which had sustained them since the Middle Ages.

Despite these periodic incursions, the Chase was still very extensive in the early 19th century (Figure 4). A wide tongue of heathland extended southward from Hednesford through Norton and Aldridge, and across the ridge of Barr Beacon almost to the open expanse of Sutton Park. William Pitt, writing in 1796, estimated the extent of this great heath at about 100 sq km [6].

In all no less than 7,890 hectares of Chase commons and waste were enclosed and improved for agriculture in the period between 1773 and 1885. The last two enclosures on the Chase were both very large — Rugeley parish (1,935 hectares, enclosed 1864) and Cannock parish (1,215 hectares, enclosed 1868). It is thought that the characteristically straight roads in these areas date from this final period of enclosure. Although the Rugeley enclosure extended westward to the Sherbrook Valley, little of this land was improved for agriculture. The metal boundary fence still remains intact in places and marks the limit of enclosure on the Chase. The land that the County Council now controls, from the western boundary of the AONB to the Sherbrook



Trees can serve as an attractive backdrop, or as competitors for space with heather.



Historic monuments feature in the landscape of Shugborough.

Valley, was never enclosed, and neither were the smaller areas of Shoal Hill and Gentleshaw Common.

An exception to the movement in favour of agricultural improvement was the creation of ornamental parks. Lakes and copses, decorative landscape features, and formal garden layouts were created simply for the owners' enjoyment. At Shugborough, the park was laid out by Thomas Anson from the mid-18th century onwards, with the help of Thomas Wright of Durham, and Samuel Wyatt the architect. Anson had a new channel cut for the river Trent and diverted the London road out of the Park. A number of notable monuments were erected in the parkland, including the Chinese House, completed in 1747 and modelled on a house in Canton visited by Admiral Anson. The architect Stuart is thought to have designed the Doric Temple, the Tower of the Winds and the Lanthorn of Demosthenes, all erected between 1750 and 1771.

The rise of industry

Small industries, such as mining, ironworking, charcoal burning and quarrying had developed on the Chase by the end of the 13th century. Evidence of a significant medieval glass industry has recently been revealed by an excavation at Little Birches, near Rugeley [7]. The

raw materials were crushed white pebbles, bracken (which was burned to provide a potash flux) and wood fuel, probably birch. Glass re-cycling was also carried out, as fragments of scrap glass or 'cullet' have been found at the furnace sites. The industry's significance may be judged by the fact that glass was sold to York Minster by a Rugeley glass maker in 1417. The main output appears to have been 'crown' window glass, of very high value at the time.

Other industrial activity, particularly iron making, was developed on a large scale on the Chase in the latter half of the 16th century. This was instigated by Sir William Paget who developed coal mining and ironworking on the Chase, and built what may have been the first blast furnace in the Midlands. Remains of the Paget ironworks are still visible along the Rising Brook Valley between Cannock and Rugeley, chiefly in the form of slag heaps. There was also a furnace on the site of the present day Slitting Mill, built about 1625. This made bar iron into rod iron, which was then transported elsewhere to make nails. However, the iron industry suffered a major setback following the destruction of its fuel supply by Sir Fulke Greville, but survived on the Chase into the early 19th century.

Records of coal mining on the Chase go back as far as 1298 and in the 14th and 15th centuries, several mines were established in Beaudesert Park and near

Castle Ring. These comprised both shallow 'bell' pits, as well as a number of deeper shafts, and their remains can still be seen as regular bowl-shaped depressions. Up to the middle of the 19th century the mines in and around the Chase mostly served local markets.

Throughout the 19th century, the agricultural and industrial revolutions interacted, as landowners invested in new industry, canals and railways, and used their enhanced wealth to buy and improve landed estates. The face of the countryside was thus transformed, especially in the late 19th century as the populations of the towns around the Chase increased rapidly in size. The expansion of the coal industry in particular, started a cycle of population growth and urban expansion that continued unchecked into the present century, gathering momentum as mining technology and transport was developed to exploit the resources more effectively. Coal from the Cannock area was not suitable for ironmaking however, and the Chase was spared the worst ravages of the heavy industrialisation, which occurred in the Black Country to the south.

The most intensive period of mining development began after 1850 in the area to the south of the Chase. This was stimulated by the decline of coal reserves in the Black Country and the rise of the railways. As a result, the centre of mining activity moved north of the Watling Street, to the areas around Cannock, Hednesford and Burntwood.

The pattern of settlement within the Coalfield was completely transformed. Old villages mushroomed into sizeable towns. Cannock itself grew from a population of 3,000 to 24,000 in the last 40 years of the 19th century. Completely new mining settlements, such as Hednesford, also came into existence at the same time. These continued to increase in size well into this century. The increasing population created a subsequent need for more agricultural land and further inroads were made into the heaths all along the southern edge of the Chase. New mining settlements were often built on land recently enclosed from the Chase, creating the typical rectilinear pattern of terraces enclosed by straight boundaries. Some of these settlements may therefore originally have been surrounded by heathland and must have looked rather stark in such an 'open' landscape setting.

The 20th century — change and consolidation

The Chase survived the worst ravages of the industrial revolution, albeit in diminished form. In parallel with industrialisation and the growth in population, was the rise in awareness of the value of open spaces for public

recreation. Towards the end of the 19th century, with the large urban population on its doorstep, the Chase was ceasing to be a leisure area of the privileged few. There were increased demands for public access, and throughout the first few decades of the 20th century, those parts of the Chase that had escaped enclosure started to be used unofficially for public recreation. Opposition had also been growing to the Enclosure Movement, which during the previous 250 years had dramatically changed the face of the English countryside.

The two world wars in the 20th century also brought about profound, albeit mostly temporary, changes to the Chase landscape. Military use started as early as 1872, when large-scale training exercises were carried out, arousing much public interest. During the Great War (1914–1918) permanent military camps, military hospitals, and prisoner of war camps were established at Brocton and Rugeley. Railway supply routes were established and roads were upgraded to service the camps. Contemporary photographs illustrate the desolate scene of the regularly spaced huts across an open landscape, unprotected by trees or other vegetation.



The bleak setting of Brocton Camp during the First World War.

After the war the huts were demolished, but bases and trackways still remain, although largely hidden in the forestry plantations. During the Second World War (1939–1945) a 69 hectare RAF camp was built at Marquis Drive, as well as a prisoner of war camp below Stile Cop, and other facilities on and around the Chase. Military use continued between 1945 and 1951 in the Sherbrook Valley and at Anson's Bank. Other areas of the Chase were also used for operations and training, until the Hednesford Camp was acquired by the County Council in 1964. The only remaining military use today is by the Territorial Army at Rugeley Rifle Ranges.

The two military cemeteries at Broadhurst Green serve as reminders of the two World Wars. The German Cemetery in particular is a fine example of sensitive and appropriate landscape design, down to the detailed planting of heathers between the memorial stones.



The German cemetery, Broadhurst Green.

The cemeteries evoke a strong sense of place and have become much visited features of the Chase.

With the general decline in the wealth of the old landed estates in the 20th century, many of these landscapes, and indeed the country houses themselves, have been destroyed.

A further competing claim on the much reduced land area of the Chase arose after the First World War. In 1919, in response to the fears over the depletion of the nation's strategic timber resources, the Forestry Commission was established. The Commission acquired extensive areas of land on Cannock Chase, including all the poor quality land in the 1864 Rugeley enclosure, which proved better suited to forestry than to agriculture. The first Forestry Commission Scots Pine plantation was established in 1921, on about 185 hectares of land leased from the Hatherton Estate. Regular planting of the Chase continued up to 1940, with Corsican Pine superseding Scots Pine as the principal species in later plantings. In the 1930s, the heavier clay soils of Beaudesert Old Park were also planted, with Japanese Larch chosen as the favoured crop. Fire damage was common in the early stages of the establishment of forestry, and in 1938 fire claimed 140 hectares of young trees when a heathland fire spread from the Sherbrook Valley. Since 1945, only three further leases have been taken, totalling 500 hectares, bringing the total area managed by the Forestry Commission to some 2,540 hectares within the AONB (35 per cent of the total area).

The initial aims of the Forestry Commission were to create a strategic reserve of timber for the nation. Today the wider aims of nature conservation, environmental protection and public enjoyment now rank alongside timber production. Forest trails have been created in woodlands owned and managed by Forest Enterprise, together with car parks and picnic sites. Since the AONB was designated in June 1958, extending to some 67 sq km, the forest has been an integral part of a designated landscape, which satisfies many needs ranging from economic timber production, agriculture, recreation and leisure, mineral extraction, nature conservation, military training and built development.

The most recent development on the Chase has been the acquisition and management of land by local authorities. Staffordshire County Council own and manage around 1,490 hectares of land with public access, including the Country Park. The most significant parcel of land was the 850 hectares of land in Brocton Parish, which was donated to the county in 1957 by the Earl of Lichfield. A total of 945 hectares have been designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). This land is managed specifically to maintain and enhance its nature conservation interest. A local nature reserve has also been established at Hazelslade. A summary of land use and land ownership on the Chase today is shown below.

Land ownership	Land use	Size of holding (ha)
Staffordshire County Council	Woodland and heath	1,490
Other local authority	Woodland and heath	308
Forest Enterprise	Forestry and unplanted land	2,540
Private	Forestry	205
Private	Agriculture	1,560
Private	Mineral extraction	120
Private	Amenity uses	529
Private	Built land	299
Private	Other land	140
Total		7,191

Publicly owned land — 60 per cent of the AONB land area.

Source: Staffordshire County Council.

3. CHARACTER OF THE PRESENT DAY LANDSCAPE

Cannock Chase is perhaps best known for its heathlands and pine plantations, which together represent all that remains of the original unenclosed Forest landscape. This forest heathlands landscape forms the core of the AONB, making up three-quarters of the total land area. However, the adjoining peripheral landscapes, each have their own special characteristics that contribute to the overall identity of the Chase. As they were originally part of the Royal Forest of Cannock, there are many historical and cultural associations linking these peripheral landscapes with the present day forest heathlands. A map showing the distribution of the different types of landscape within and around the AONB is shown in Figure 5. It should be remembered that the boundaries between these landscapes are usually transitional and only occasionally are defined by marked changes on the ground.



Panoramic view from Castle Ring hill-fort.

Seven different types of peripheral landscape can be identified. Two of these, the forest fringe and the historic parklands, lie mostly within the AONB and are closely linked, both visually and ecologically, with the forest heathlands. The Cannock coalfield abuts the southern edge of the Chase and has been superimposed onto a former heathland landscape. The remainder of



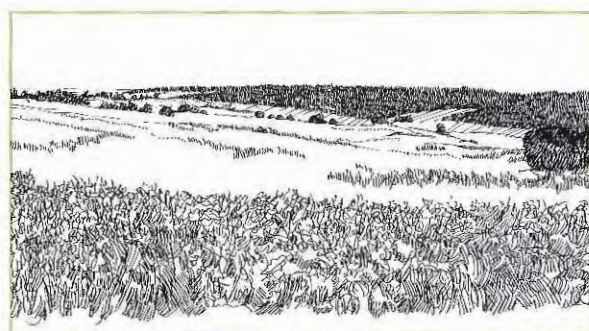
The varied, human-scale landscape of the settled farmlands.

the AONB, just over one-tenth of the land area, is made up of farm and estate landscapes, which adjoin the northern, western and south-eastern fringes of the Chase. These settled and often intensively managed agricultural landscapes provide a welcome contrast to the more remote, heavily wooded character of the forest heathlands.

Forest heathlands

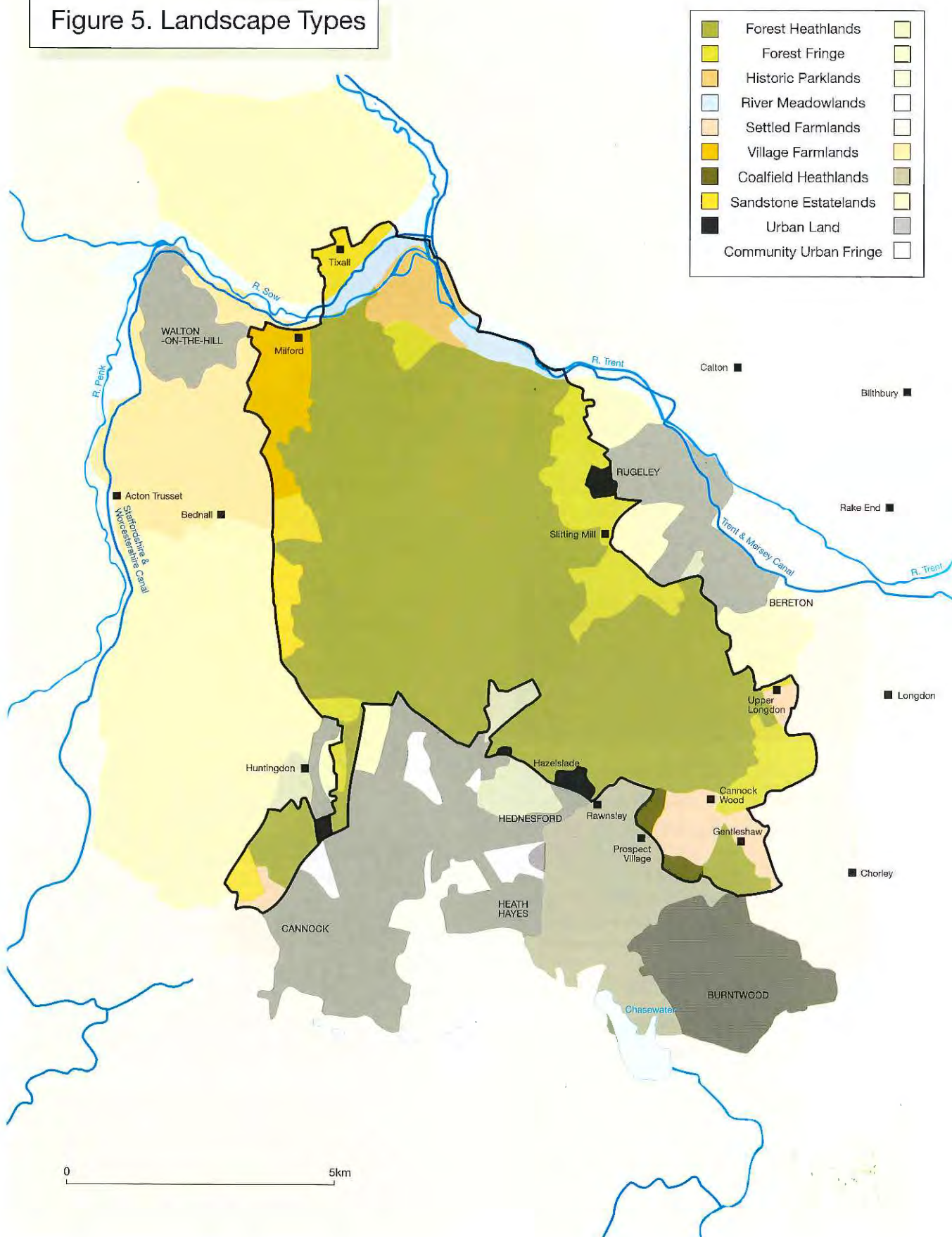


An unenclosed, heavily wooded landscape with a varied steeply sloping dissected topography, characterised by heathland and forestry plantations.



The forest heathlands is a heavily wooded landscape, within which there are significant areas of open heaths, associated with the dissected high plateau of Cannock Chase. This is a remote, unenclosed landscape of heathlands, pine plantations and semi-natural oak and birch woodlands. The underlying pebble beds have weathered to produce a deeply dissected topography characterised by flat summits, convex slopes and small incised valleys — known locally as 'slades'. Most of these summits lie above 150 metres and rise to almost

Figure 5. Landscape Types



250 metres at Castle Ring. The plateau falls off steeply on three sides, affording many fine views over the rolling lowland countryside surrounding the Chase.

Commercial forestry plantations are the dominant feature within the forest heathlands. These typically comprise large blocks of Scots and Corsican pine, which form an ordered pattern, within a more natural and diverse heathland setting. Larch have also been planted on the heavier soils associated with the underlying coal measures at Beaudesert, while belts of beech line many of the roads crossing the Chase. These provide a seasonal change of colour within the afforested areas.

The internal landscape of the conifer plantations is varied, ranging from the open spaces of the newly planted areas, through the gloom of the mid rotation to the high canopy and more open stands of trees in the older plantations. For the most part the scale of planting compliments the large-scale nature of the underlying landform. This often creates a sense of grandeur, especially where the landscape can be viewed from a suitable vantage point. Large tracts of open heathland strengthen this effect as well as providing visual diversity and a welcome relief from the rather monotonous appearance and colour of the pine plantations.

The extent of planting in many places creates a strong impression of visual enclosure, where virtually

all horizons appear wooded. Even in heathland areas, open middle-distance views are typically framed by the dark edges of distant conifer plantations. Where the landform is not pronounced, as in the area around Brindley Heath, afforestation has produced a very confined landscape where the roads seem to pass through a long tunnel of trees. Elsewhere, the varied nature of the topography creates an ever changing sense of visual enclosure, ranging from the spacious character of the open heathland summits, to more intimate scenes along forest edges and in valley bottoms.

The association with heathland is a recurring visual and ecological theme throughout this landscape, even in the most heavily afforested parts of the Chase. Remnant heathland vegetation survives along rides, roadsides and in clearings in virtually all conifer plantations, while birch and bracken are an ever present reminder of the underlying free draining acidic soils. The open heathland areas have a rough, almost wild, character with wide expanses of open heather, peppered in places with birch, and giving way in others to dense stands of bracken. The appearance of these areas changes with the season but is most dramatic in late summer and early autumn, when the purple blooms of the heather give way to the golds and oranges of the dying bracken. Large tracts of open heathland create



The expanse of Sherbrook Valley and the forest heathlands with views of the north, from Anson's Bank.

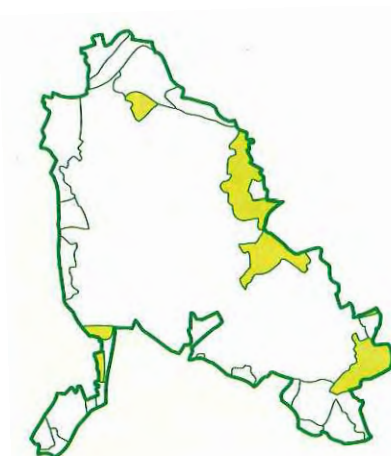
an impression of spaciousness and a sense of wilderness. This wild remote character is most apparent in the isolated valleys of the upper Sherbrook and Oldacre.

The remaining areas of open heath provide a stark contrast to the dark, enclosing masses of the surrounding conifer plantations. This is especially apparent where there is a solid edge of trees, all of the same age and type. The most extensive tract of unbroken heathland is at Brocton field. This is the only area on the Chase where there are wide sweeping views over open heathland. Other smaller areas survive at Penkridge Bank, White House, Brindley Heath and Moors Gorse. Outlying heaths also survive at Shoal Hill, Gentleshaw Common and Hednesford Hills. In most of these areas, the open heathland character is restricted due to colonisation by self-seeded trees or fragmentation of the heathland area. Groups of trees provide visual diversity in heathland areas and help to create a more enclosed intimate feel around the edges of the open heath.

Broadleaved woodlands, and in particular, semi-natural oak woods, are a restricted but very special feature of the forest heathlands landscape. Most of the remaining ancient semi-natural woodland is confined to the north-west corner of the Chase in the Brocton area. Of particular importance are the several hundred ancient pollard oaks which survive in Brocton coppice. These majestic old trees, some of which have been aged at over 350 years, may provide a link with the original wooded Forest. Much secondary birch woodland and scrub has developed more recently on former heathland sites.

The forest heathlands include several small areas of land that have been improved for agricultural use. These areas, mainly enclosed from open heathland this century, can be distinguished by large geometric fields typically defined by fence lines. Patches of rough grassland or scrub are often a feature within or around the edges of the reclaimed fields. Such areas, despite the change in land use, inevitably still retain a forest heathland character.

Forest fringe



A marginal agricultural landscape, often with a strong urban fringe character, but always closely associated with the adjoining forest.



Along the eastern side of the Chase, the high plateau falls away in a series of ridges and valleys towards the River Trent. Much of this area, which was enclosed from the open Forest before the 18th century, is underlain by sandstones and pebble beds. This is reflected in the variable and often marginal character of the agricultural landscape. This landscape is characterised by a mixture of wooded estatelands, arable farmlands and small pastoral fields, often used for horse grazing. Urban influences, associated with Rugeley, are also a feature, especially where new development abuts open farmland. This mix of different land uses has created a rather fragmented landscape, with little sense of internal unity. The undulating landform and proximity to the forest heathlands, however, mean that this landscape is often dominated by views to surrounding woodland edges. Such views are a key visual element in the forest fringe and help to create a close association with the adjoining forest.

A smaller area of the forest fringe occurs on the western edge of the Chase around Huntington. The growth of this former mining settlement along the A34, has in effect separated the area of farmland to the east of the village from the sandstone estatelands to the west. Of particular note in this area is Huntington Belt, a group of mature pine forming a prominent skyline feature along the edge of the adjoining forest heathlands. Although the land behind has been reclaimed for agriculture, the appearance of this belt of trees creates a strong impression of being on the edge of the open heath.

Historic parklands



A designed, estate landscape characterised by mature parkland and historic buildings in an enclosed, heavily wooded setting.

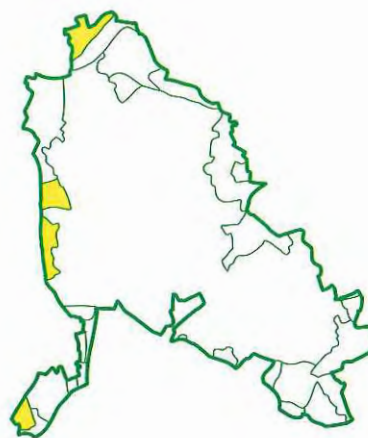


During the period of agricultural improvement in the 18th and 19th centuries, many large landowners created extensive areas of ornamental parkland around their place of residence. The main area of historic parklands within the AONB is Shugborough Park,

near Great Haywood. A smaller area, which lies within the adjoining sandstone estatelands landscape, can be found around Hatherton Hall to the west of Cannock.

Shugborough is a designed estate landscape, characterised by mature parkland and historic buildings. Permanent pasture and grazing animals create a peaceful pastoral impression, and together with the many large parkland trees, ensure that this is a well-unified landscape with a strong identity. The historic parkland at Shugborough is very much a self-contained landscape, being surrounded almost entirely by woodlands and belts of trees. This strong sense of enclosure and the historic character of the park, creates an impression that this is a landscape unaffected by the passing of time, or the pressures of modern life, despite the sometimes forceful presence of the two mainline railways passing through it. Individual features of note within the park are the many monuments, the model Park Farm, and of course Shugborough Hall itself, with its grade I listed garden.

Sandstone estatelands



A gently rolling, well-ordered estate landscape, characterised by large arable fields, coverts and belts of trees.



A broad belt of estatelands, closely associated with an area of Triassic sandstone, lies along the western fringe of the Chase between Hatherton and Teddesley and again to the north of the River Sow in the area around Ingestre Park. This well-ordered estate landscape is characterised by large arable fields, coverts and belts of trees. Fields are typically defined by straight hawthorn hedges, reflecting the late enclosure of this area from former heath. The weakness of the field pattern ensures that the scale of the landscape is controlled by woodland edges. These divide the area into a series of large linked spaces where the eye is drawn through gaps between woodlands. This allows middle distance views towards the heavily wooded rising ground along the edge of the Chase.

The sandstone estatelands are characterised by sandy, free-draining soils, which originally supported an open heathland vegetation, until this was enclosed and improved for agriculture during the 19th century. The existence of this former heathland landscape is reflected today in the 'empty' character of the countryside, and the occurrence of many place names ending in 'heath'. The presence of roadside bracken and birch trees around woodland edges, emphasises the remnant heathy character, and provides a visual association that links this landscape to the Chase.

Village farmlands

The continuity of the sandstone estatelands is interrupted to the south-east of Stafford by a landscape of older farmlands and small villages, centred on the ancient parish of Baswich. Baswich itself, although now a suburb of Stafford, has never been a village. The old centres of population in the Parish were the townships of Walton, Brocton, Acton Trussell and Bednall. The existence of this nucleated settlement pattern is associated with common field agriculture at the time of village formation. Most of these fields were enclosed at an early date by private agreement. This is reflected in the network of winding lanes and the semi-regular field pattern, which distinguishes this landscape from the adjoining estatelands.

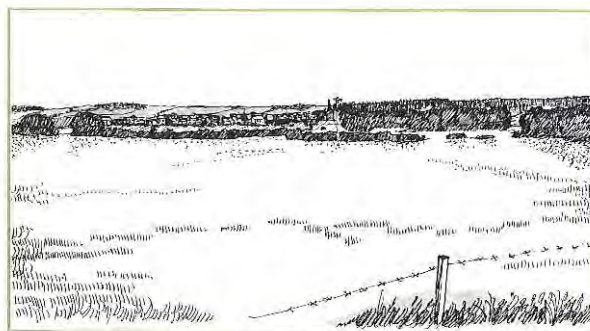
The village farmlands have a varied rolling topography, characterised by low rounded hills. The relatively deep, free-draining soils support an area of mixed farming characterised by large, hedged fields



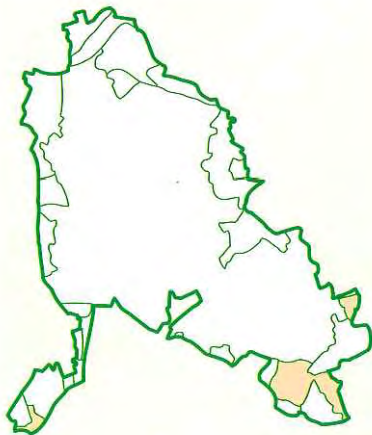
An open, rolling agricultural landscape, characterised by large hedged fields and small, nucleated villages.

and manor farmsteads. This is an open landscape with few woods or trees, allowing wide views to the open heathland summits, which mark the edge of the Chase in this area. These wide views often emphasise the lack of foreground features within the landscape, particularly where the hedgerow pattern is breaking down.

Many of the settlements in the village farmlands have expanded to accommodate new residential development. This has imprinted a suburban character on the landscape, which is emphasised by commuter traffic along rural lanes. All of the villages have a nucleus of older houses. At Brocton Green, for example, a group of timber-framed houses date from the 16th and 17th centuries. The hamlet of Milford grew up around the Milford Hall estate. Many of the cottages along the main road and overlooking the common were built from the late 18th century onwards.



Settled farmlands



An intimate settled landscape, characterised by small, hedged fields, narrow winding lanes and dispersed pattern of farmsteads and roadside cottages.



A very different type of farmed landscape occurs to the east of the Chase, in the vicinity of Chorley and Longdon. This is a much more intimate, settled landscape, characterised by small, hedged fields, narrow winding lanes and a dispersed pattern of farmsteads and roadside cottages. Many of the farms are little more than smallholdings, often surrounded by corrugated iron sheds and small paddocks. Such features are particularly apparent in the area around Gentleshaw and Cannock Wood. The character of individual buildings varies widely, with many extended and improved cottages, and more recent dwellings. Brick, often rendered and painted, is the most common building material.

The settled farmlands generally have a peaceful rural character despite the many dwellings and the proximity to large urban areas such as Burntwood. This is partly influenced by the nature and scale of the landform, which is characterised by a dissected undulating topography that falls away eastward towards the Trent

Valley Lowlands. This ridge and valley topography controls the scale of the landscape and creates a series of constantly changing viewpoints. Around Cannock Wood, Upper Longdon and along the forest fringe at Beaudesert, views are dominated by the heavily wooded edge of the Chase. Elsewhere, secluded valley scenes, or more distant views over the lowlands to the east, are more common.

One of the special features of this landscape, are the many narrow, winding lanes and trackways, often confined by tall hedge banks. These form a network of intersecting routes, characterised by wedges of rough grassland at road junctions. Roadside hedgerows typically comprise a mix of species including holly and bracken.

River meadowlands



A narrow, meandering river corridor landscape, with an undisturbed pastoral character associated with alluvial meadows and grazing animals.



The high plateau, which forms the core of Cannock Chase, falls off steeply into the Trent Valley and its tributary the Sow, along its northern edge. Where these slopes are wooded, they are especially prominent and provide a sharp contrast to the flat alluvial

floodplain below. The slopes are steepest where the river has cut into the plateau at Wolseley Park, Beggars Hill and along the northern side of Stafford plantation. River crossing points have been made where the floodplain narrows at each of these points, providing a 'gateway' for traffic approaching the Chase from the north.

The low-lying alluvial floodplain of the River Trent and the Sow forms a distinctive river meadowlands landscape, which winds through the northern part of the AONB. The main features of this narrow river corridor landscape are the flood meadows, which flank the river channel. Most of these remain unploughed and are characterised by grazing animals and undisturbed pastoral scenes. Field pattern is frequently poorly defined by ditches or wire fences, but in places the edge of the floodplain is marked by a prominent hedge line. The historic parkland at Shugborough includes part of the Trent river corridor and divides the River meadowlands landscape into two separate areas.

The river channel is a key feature of this landscape, especially where it has a varied bank profile with much marginal vegetation or fringing alders and scrub. Such habitats provide valuable nesting and feeding areas for wildlife and where they are associated with unimproved meadowland they create a strong sense of place and feeling of naturalness. The sound and movement of water add to this feeling of tranquillity. There are few buildings within the river meadowlands, a feature which contributes to the peaceful undisturbed character of the riverside environment.

Coalfield heathlands

The expansion of deep and opencast coal mining into the Cannock area has created an untidy landscape, which is neither countryside nor town. Old hamlets and villages have been swallowed up and completely new mining settlements created. Mining settlements are characterised by rows of red-brick, terraced houses, typically fronting directly onto busy streets. These roads often run in straight lines for many miles, reflecting their relatively recent origin. The Chasetown to Cannock Wood road forms a particularly striking feature where it crosses the Redmoor Valley. While all of the deep mines have now closed, large-scale opencast workings continue to be a feature in this area.

Two types of landscape can be distinguished within the Cannock coalfield. One of these, the community urban fringe, which includes the area around Cannock, Hednesford and Norton Canes, does not impinge directly into the AONB. It does, however, abut the southern boundary of the Chase and influences the character of the adjoining forest heathlands. The



A large-scale open urban fringe landscape, characterised by old coal workings, wire fences and remnant heathlands.

community urban fringe is a heavily urbanised landscape characterised by a mixture of old mining settlements and new housing estates, separated by disused mine workings, new industrial development and pockets of remnant farmland.

To the east of Heath Hayes lies a quite different landscape, termed the coalfield heathlands. This is closely associated with the former south-eastern extension of the Cannock Chase heathlands. The present day appearance of this landscape is that of an open rolling plateau, characterised by wide views, disused mine workings, wire fences and remnant heathlands. There is a much greater proportion of open land than in the adjoining community urban fringe, although large urban areas are also a feature of this landscape. Much of this land has been worked by opencast mining in the past, and the present day farmland is characterised by poor quality pasture, often rush infested, and enclosed in large poorly defined fields. This weak field pattern and general lack of trees, other than occasional wind sculpted hawthorn and willow, emphasises the large-scale rolling topography, creating the impression of a rather bleak, featureless landscape. Patches of remnant heath and birch scrub reinforce the overall remnant, barbed, character.



4. PERCEPTIONS OF THE LANDSCAPE

Literature, descriptive writings and works of art, usually provide information about the way people have perceived the landscape of an area in the past. More recent studies of public perception help to understand people's preference for different landscapes today. Although there is little in the way of art and literature, writings by travellers and contemporary historians provide a valuable source of evidence of landscape change on Cannock Chase. The writings often link physical conditions with man's management of the landscape and illustrate the historic context for the changes.

Written impressions of the Chase

There are few surviving written records of the Royal Forest of Cannock Chase. However, in the *Land Chronicles of 1086 AD* [12] there is a vivid description of what the English thought of the Norman kings who created and ruled over the Royal Forests:

"He set apart a vast deer preserve and imposed laws concerning it,
Whoever slew a hart or a hind,
was to be blinded. He forbade the killing of boars.
Even as the killing of harts,
for he loved the stags as dearly
As though he had been their father.
Hares also he decreed should go unmolested.
The rich complained and the poor lamented
But he was too relentless to care though all might hate him,
and they were compelled, if they wanted
to keep their lives and their lands
And their goods and the favour of the king
to submit themselves wholly to his will."

Although the rights of free chase, in the manors of Cannock and Rugeley, were given to Bishop Roger Meuland in 1290, the character of the Forest remained largely intact until the reformation. The 16th and 17th century travellers, who chronicled so much about the condition of the English landscape, gave some evidence of change. John Leland writing between 1535 and 1543 [13] referred to "many springs and heades of brookes" at Cannock Chase, and of the surrounding landscape he remarked:

"Where as of ancient tyme all quarters of the country about Lichfield were as forest and wild ground and naturally somewhat bereyne now... the woods be in many places so cut downe that

no token is that even any were there."

Leland's comments illustrate how the extension of cultivation in the 16th century was gradually pushing the waste and woodland back on to the higher and poorer land. The activities of Sir Fulke Greville, however, who stripped most of the Chase of timber, appear to have caused considerable outrage at the time. This is reflected in *Poly-Olbion* written by the poet Drayton, who regularly visited Tixall in the early part of the 17th century. Drayton mourned the state of "Great Ardens eldest child, o wofull Canke" [14]:

"When as those fallow deer, and jug-haunched
stags that grazed
Upon her shaggy heaths, the passenger amazed
To see their mighty herds, with high palmed
heads to threat
The Woods of o'ergrown oaks; as though they
meant to set
Their horns to th'others' heights. But now those
and these
Are by vile gain devoured: so abject are our days."

By 1686, Robert Plot wrote of the Chase [15]:

"...now the woods are most destroyed, and the wind and sun admitted in so plentiful a manner between the Coppices, which at due distance now only crown the summits of some few hills, such as Gentle Shaw, Stile Cop ... the plains or Hays below in great part being covered only with the purple odiferous 'ling'."

Plot was obviously not in favour of the great expanse of heath at this time. He also described a shifting cultivation pattern on the heathland, which was fertilised by burnt bracken:

"It is seldom enclosed, but when they intend it for tillage, which is never far above five years neither, and then it is thrown open to the commons again."

Celia Fiennes, another traveller who rode through England on a large white horse, observed in 1695 [16] "a great deal of wood and deer and goates" on the Chase. She also made comments on the economic uses of bracken, which had spread at the expense of woodland:

"In Kank Wood, there is quantetys of fern, wch tho' it runs over the ground and so spoils ye grass, yet ye usefullness of it renders it necessary to be preserved... ye whole county are employed in cutting it up and burning it in heaps for ye sake of ye ashes wch they make fine and rowle them up in balls and so sell them or use them all ye year for

washing and scouring and send much to London.”

The concern for felling of the forests was overtaken by an enthusiasm for agricultural improvement throughout the 18th century, and into the 19th century. Large areas of ‘waste’ were enclosed and improved by drainage and modern crop rotation methods. The improvements in Staffordshire were described by William Pitt [16], whose report is a valuable gauge of the views of ‘improving’ landlords at the end of the 18th century. Pitt was enthusiastic about extending and improving cultivation by all possible means:

“...upon the whole, to the eye of the intelligent agricultural stranger, Staffordshire would convey the idea of a county fast emerging from a state of barbarism.”

Of the Chase he wrote that it may be “wild and romantic, but its continuance in its present state is certainly indefensible”. Sheep grazing was so extensive that he remarked “The Common ...being now in many places perfectly whitened with them”.

Although uncultivated land was regarded as ‘waste’, which needed to be brought into agricultural production, the creation of landscaped parks was allowed simply for enjoyment. As the agricultural improvers grew in stature and wealth, they invested heavily in the fashionable pursuit of ornamental landscape design around their grand country houses. At Beaudesert, the Pagets created a landscaped parkland setting for Beaudesert Hall, and this was described by Stebbing Shaw (1798–1801) [17] as:

“a princely seat... boldly situated on the side of a lofty sloping eminence... emblossomed with rich foliage, commanding in front, over the tops of far subjacent woods, a most extensive and delightful prospect. The park, replete with deer, exhibits a continued series of hills and dales alternatively tossed about in a wild and beautiful disorder.”

Repton was consulted over landscape improvements in 1810 [18] and he made a plea for beauty before profit, advising against:

“spiral spruce firs and larches, according to the modern fashion of plant making plantations. It has always appeared to me that the miserable consideration of trade has introduced these quick growing trees, to make a speedy return of profit; but, if the improvement of such places as Beaudesert is to be computed by the rule of pounds, shillings and pence, it would certainly be better to cut down all the trees, kill the deer and plough up the park.”

In 1796 William Pitt wrote about Teddesley Park, Sir Edmund Littleton’s Estate [6]:

“The house at Teddesley is a commodious, modern built elegant mansion, commanding an extensive view of a well cultivated landscape to the west, and of hills and extensive waste of Cannock Heath to the east.”

The major change in the 19th century was brought about by industrial expansion, and the exploitation of the coal reserves under the Chase. To many people, this was the beginning of the end of the Chase. Evershed, writing in 1869, observed and regretted the change [19]:

“the ominous tall chimneys which rise here and there, beside the peculiar tackle which, like skeleton arms, overhang the shafts of the coal pits, and the little villages which are springing up around them bespeak the wealth which lies below the surface. The straight roads, newly made, and making prove that the Chase is doomed.”

By 1910, Charles Masefield in his book entitled *Staffordshire* summed up the county [20]:

“it contains two frankly hideous manufacturing districts, much pleasant undulating, well wooded country, and two areas (the Moorlands and Cannock Chase) which hardly suffer by comparison with the loveliest inland scenery in England.”

The billeting of thousands of army recruits in the Great War Camps at Brocton and Rugeley evoked a response from the temporary residents, who were destined for even harsher conditions in Flanders. In *A town for four winters* [21], there are many graphic accounts of life in the camps. These accounts, written before afforestation of the Chase, give a vivid impression of the open heathland landscape at this time. The extracts which follow are particularly evocative:

“We saw the green brightness of the birches in spring, and the slow clouds dappling Sherbrook in summer; in autumn came the richness of the heather, then the rain and misery of winter.”

“There were sounds of boots in unison, of parade ground shouts and constant bugles, the pop and mutter of musketry from the ranges, and often, in a lull, the heart breaking sweetness of a skylark.”

“This is a horrible place on the top of a hill 4 miles from Rugeley. The cold is dreadful and always a wind blowing and dust flying about.”

An officer of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade was moved to write a poem about the Chase [21]:

“At Brocton when the sun sinks low
And the hills are bathed in twilight glow
The ‘diggers’ put on their belts and go

To stroll on the moors, or drown their woe
In government beer at the Barley Mow”

Surprisingly there is little obvious evidence of the camps today, as many sites are within forestry plantations. The emotional and cultural link with the forces is retained at the war cemeteries at Broadhurst Green, and at the territorial army rifle range at Penkridge Bank.

Images of the Chase

Thomas Anson laid out the park landscape at Shugborough in the mid-18th century. The painting by Nicholas Dall (1775) illustrates the picturesque nature of the monuments in the parkland setting. It also shows the open heathland of the Chase to the south of the park, in contrast to the wooded backdrop seen today.



The ruins at Shugborough by N T Dall. (Reproduced with kind permission of the National Trust Photographic Library/Geoffrey Shakerley.)



Supported ancient tree in Shugborough Park, 1863.

Two albums of photographs from the 19th century give a clear image of the Cannock landscape. In 1863, William Warren Vernon visited Shugborough, and the two photographs reproduced here show the condition of the parkland with old trees remaining and a deer leap fence enclosing a coppice, with open heathland adjacent.



Deer leap fence enclosure, 1863.

The second album, dated 1892, shows scenes of the working landscape of the Chase. Plates reproduced here include a view of a commoner's farmhouse on the Chase and a gravel pit. The photographs of Milford Common and the Milford to Rugeley Road are readily identifiable, and can be compared with the present day views of these areas.



Commoner's farmhouse on the Chase, 1892.



Gravel pit, 1892.



Milford to Rugeley road, 1892.



Milford Common in the foreground looking towards Shugborough entrance gates, 1892.

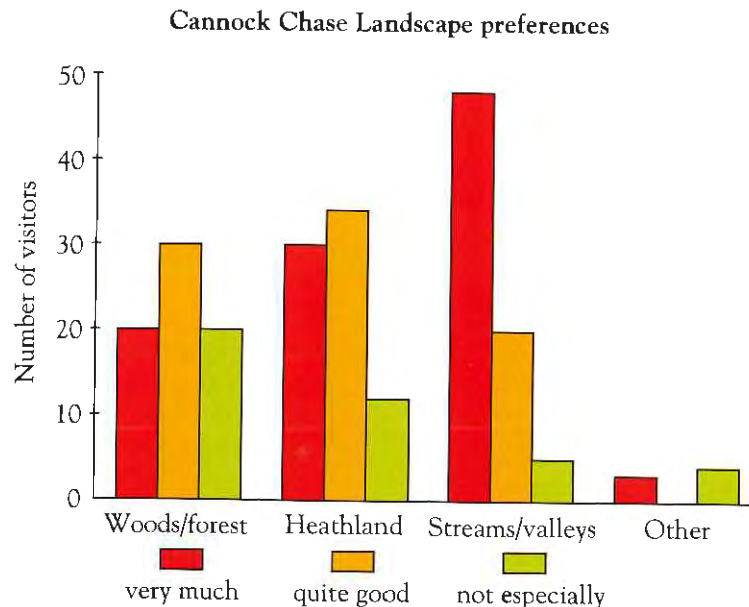
Public perception of the Chase today

Recent attempts to quantify and understand the public's perception of the Chase have met with mixed success. In the late 1970s a questionnaire survey was carried out, asking among other things, for preferences in the types of landscapes found on the Chase. The analysis produced some variable results, but there was a general preference for mixed forest, followed by parkland and canals, then pine forest. Open grassland, and scrub grassland did not attract much interest from the respondents.

Current research, by an undergraduate student of Staffordshire University [22], has attempted to link recreation patterns with landscape preferences on the

Chase, and to gauge public opinion on more contentious forms of recreation, such as mountain biking. Visitors were willing to identify favourite sites visited, such as Milford Common, Seven Springs and Marquis Drive Visitor Centre, however the results on landscape preference are not as clear.

The following graph illustrates the responses of a small sample of 78 visitors on site. Public preference, and perception of landscape quality is notoriously difficult to measure. However, it is obvious that the popularity of the Chase as a place for quiet recreation is increasing each year, and the problem of managing the visitors, while conserving the character of the Chase is uppermost in the minds of the authorities responsible for the AONB.



5. FORCES FOR CHANGE

It will be clear from preceding chapters that evolving patterns of land use have played a major part in shaping the Cannock Chase landscape over many centuries. Much of this change has been gradual, and different periods of settlement and enclosure are reflected in the different agricultural landscapes that have been created around the fringe of the Chase. Only a small relict of the once extensive tract of unenclosed land has survived, but even this remnant has undergone a series of profound changes culminating in the extensive afforestation of the Chase this century. Afforestation has created a completely new wooded landscape where before there had been an almost treeless expanse of open heath. This former heathland landscape was itself a product of human activities resulting from the clearance of the original wooded landscape at the end of the 16th century. Both of these historic events occurred over a relatively short space of time and dramatically altered the visual appearance of the landscape.

Since the Chase was designated as an AONB in 1958, changes to the landscape have mainly been subtle and incremental, rather than dramatic. However, such change tends to be insidious and can be just as damaging as sudden change over the longer term. This raises many planning and management issues that need to be addressed by positive intervention to ensure that the special character and qualities of the Chase are conserved for future generations. This chapter looks at the major forces for recent and future change within and around the AONB and describes some of the existing proposals for managing change.

Forestry and woodlands

Forestry and woodlands cover around 40 per cent of the land within the AONB, compared with a county average of just under 7 per cent and are therefore a very significant element in the landscape. The proportion of surviving semi-natural deciduous woodland is tiny compared to the historical extent of Cannock Forest. The most important example of semi-natural oak woodland on the Chase is at Brocton Coppice. Several hundred ancient trees, with wide crowns, and burred trunks, are scattered over a wide area, and interspersed with birch. The trees are over 350 years old and the site seems to possess many of the characteristics of primary woodland. No natural regeneration of oaks is taking place, and the County Council have initiated a replanting programme using stock raised from local acorns, in an attempt to perpetuate this feature.

Forest Enterprise manages some 2,745 hectares of plantation in the AONB, and the annual timber production is presently around 20,000 tonnes of softwood. The majority of the timber is sold to saw mills for use as fencing materials and for the construction industry, while the annual Christmas Tree sale is an established event in many Midlanders' calendars. The yield from the forest is held artificially low, due to a policy of landscape conservation and recreation throughout the Chase. However, this might not always be the case, especially if the forest was to be sold into the private sector, where economic priorities could become more important.

Forest Enterprise have drawn up forest design plans, which are intended to move away from the traditional forestry approach of geometric single-species plantations, towards a more diverse forest of mixed species and age structure. The forest design plans aim to take into account environmental protection requirements, key viewpoints, recreational needs and nature conservation opportunities, thus changing the forest to function as a multi-purpose resource. The long-term objective is to achieve a forest structure that has approximately equal proportions of all ages of trees. The balance between commercial forestry and open heathland is also a subject of much debate by the agencies responsible for managing the AONB and proposals in the forest design plans allow for a limited opening up of views through existing plantations and for restoring heathland corridors.



Even-aged plantation with straight edge (Pye Green Tower behind).

At Shugborough the mixed woodlands, owned by the National Trust are being managed by the County Council to an agreed management plan, and their future seems assured. Visual amenity and wildlife conservation objectives are ranked alongside timber production. Other semi-natural woodlands are small in

area, but locally form significant landscape features. For example, Georges Hayes Wood near Longdon, on the south-eastern edge of the AONB is managed as a nature reserve, and is a distinctive skyline feature, when viewed from the east. Beaudesert still contains some mixed woodlands on the heavier clay soils of the coal measures. These woodlands are managed as part of an estate owned by the Girl Guides.

The most recent initiative for forestry and woodland planting has emerged in the strategy for the proposed Forest of Mercia. This covers around 8,500 hectares, and will link Penkridge to Lichfield, and the West Midlands conurbation to Cannock Chase. The proposed Forest will be located mainly to the south of the AONB in the coalfield belt, but there is some overlap notably at Huntington, Pye Green and Rawnsley. The aims of the Forest of Mercia are primarily for landscape improvement on land despoiled by the former coalfield and for increasing woodland cover on farmland. The plan for the Forest also proposes to develop woodland-based recreation, and access opportunities, which may release some of the pressure from the AONB itself.

Vegetation and wildlife

Heathland is the dominant semi-natural vegetation type on the Chase and this is now regarded as a valued resource, both locally and at a national level. Only a relict of the once extensive Cannock heaths have survived, but the remaining area within the AONB includes the largest continuous tract of open heathland in the Midlands. Many smaller areas also survive within and around the Chase, but on most of these self-seeded birch and pine have invaded the heath. In some areas, this has resulted in the development of secondary woodland and scrub. Pine colonisation has spread from adjoining plantations, and is particularly dense on Brindley Heath. It is only through regular management by flail cutting, burning and active scrub clearance that the main area of heath at Brocton field and the Sherbrook Valley survives in its present state. Traditionally, the grazing of sheep suppressed the invasion of the heath by other species. Since the local Cannock Heath sheep died out early this century, little or no grazing has taken place on the Chase, other than by deer and rabbits.

The heathland management programme being carried out in Cannock Chase Country Park, was initiated in 1974 by Staffordshire County Council. Considerable success has been achieved in halting the decline of heath vegetation in certain areas. Since 1990, this work has been supported by English Nature



Birch and pine regeneration on heathland.

and other works, such as the clearance of invading birch and pine, have also been carried out. The long-term success of this programme, however, depends on a sustained financial commitment by those agencies involved in managing the Chase.

In an effort to encourage others to adopt similar measures, a heathland project officer was appointed in 1992 to promote an 'Action for Staffordshire Heathlands' initiative. By raising public awareness of heathland habitats, it is hoped that this will provide an appropriate framework for initiating conservation management work on other publicly and privately owned heathlands.

Deer management is a major consideration on the Chase, and is the joint responsibility of the Forest Enterprise and the County Council. The numbers of fallow deer have increased since the Chase has been reafforested (currently estimated at 600–900 animals). An annual census and agreed cull is undertaken to ensure that the herd stays at a sustainable size and can find enough food on the Chase. Management of the herd has to take into account the needs of forestry, recreation pressure and the distressing problem of road casualties. Deer lawns have been established in certain areas to provide secluded grazing and to attempt to reduce the number of deer foraging in gardens and on surrounding farmland.

The extensive pine plantations on the Chase are also thought to support a small population of red squirrels. This is considered to be the only known location in central England and a current research programme aims to determine the exact number of red squirrels on the Chase. It is also hoped that the study will identify practical ways for maintaining suitable habitats.

Recreation and access

The forest and open heath are an important recreational facility for the surrounding towns, and it has been estimated that over four million people live within 30 minutes driving distance of the Chase. Over the last ten years, the number of people visiting the AONB has increased significantly, and the number of day visitors each year now exceeds 2.5 million. The most common recreational activity is informal walking, but organised events such as orienteering, sponsored walks and nature walks are also frequent. Horse riding and the rapid growth in off-road cycling, however, are an increasing source of path erosion and damage to the heathland vegetation, resulting in ground erosion in certain areas.



The AONB is an attractive venue for mountain bikers and others wanting to get away from it all.

Land management policies apply to all areas in public ownership and the plans aim to accommodate public use commensurate with landscape conservation and enhancement, and the protection of environmental resources. The Ranger Services, operated by the County Council and Forest Enterprise are fundamental tools used for visitor management. The level and type of service offered by these agencies has increased and become more sophisticated to cope with the increasing impact of recreational activities on the Chase. Selective waymarking of paths, for example, has been used to reinforce a network of paths that do not disturb the most sensitive areas.

Alongside the increasing visitor use, there has been a parallel increase in the volume of traffic using the roads through the Chase. This has had a direct impact on the wilderness qualities of the forest and heathland areas and has led to a steady increase in the number of



Straight roads encourage motorists to drive fast through the Chase.

deer killed on roads. Traffic calming measures are to be introduced to try and reduce deer casualties, while the closure of Chase road is to be tried as an experiment to create a large area of uninterrupted heathland. Land use planning has already been successful in moving car parking to the edges of the heathland core, rather than allowing free access throughout the more sensitive areas.

Changes in farming

Agriculture accounts for less than one-quarter of the land area of the AONB, and is mainly concentrated in the peripheral landscapes outside the forest heathlands. The impact of agricultural change has thus been less of an issue on the Chase than in other areas, where farming is the dominant land use. Nonetheless, the changes that have taken place reflect national trends towards agricultural intensification and a general decline in the traditional character of the farmed landscape.

Major changes in farming practice have taken place throughout the country since the 1940s, stimulated primarily by agricultural subsidies to produce more food. This has led to an increase in arable land, usually at the expense of permanent pasture, a trend that can be seen in most of the agricultural landscapes surrounding the Chase. In parallel, there have been changes in grassland character with the making of silage rather than hay. This has resulted in many traditional pastures being reseeded or improved by artificial fertilisers and herbicides, greatly diminishing their floristic interest.

The general intensification in agriculture has also resulted in the removal of hedgerows and hedgerow trees, in places creating open, fragmented landscapes. Where mixed farming has given way to arable cropping many hedges are now redundant and often these are poorly managed and gappy. Such scenes contribute to the appearance of a neglected agricultural landscape.

To some extent the general condition of field hedgerows may be an unavoidable part of the evolution of the countryside — an effect of the continuing

demographic and agrarian change that created the enclosed landscape in the first place. This is by no means the case everywhere, however, and hedgerows still have a function in many areas, despite the often poor condition of individual hedges. This is particularly the case in landscapes such as the settled farmlands.

Where the farmed fringe of the Chase is under pressure from urban development, agricultural holdings have tended to become fragmented. This has often resulted in a change in the pattern of land use, and a general decline in the traditional fabric of the landscape. This pressure has had the greatest impact close to Rugeley on the eastern boundary of the AONB, and in the coalfield area to the south of the Chase. Here much of the farmland that survives is on a modified landscape worked for coal and iron. These restored fields support only low-grade pasture, often used for horse grazing.

Although further agricultural expansion is unlikely, declining incomes and continued uncertainty in the short term may result in intensification of production on existing farmland. This could lead to continued agricultural improvement of older grasslands and further loss of hedgerows. Diversification into alternative enterprises is another option into which farmers are



Golf driving range development adjacent to the Chase.

being encouraged by recent changes in agricultural policy. The physical expression of this has been the development of golf courses and other enterprises such as pick-your-own fruit farms. In the longer term, new incentives may encourage more environmentally sensitive farming, with perhaps a return to more traditional mixed farming regimes.

Social change

Buildings and settlements are an integral component of the agricultural and mining landscapes around the fringe of the Chase. However, the character of the built environment is threatened by a number of underlying population trends. In the agricultural

landscapes, traditional rural communities have largely been replaced by incomers. Such people are taking advantage of increased mobility to live in a quality environment within commuting distance of their urban work place. The desire for 'character' rural properties has stimulated the break-up of farms and the conversion of redundant barns into residential dwellings. The knock-on effect of this trend has been to increase the cost of housing beyond the reach of people who are in local employment and who have skills that may be essential to the rural community.

The loss of rural skills, the availability of mass produced building materials and standard building designs, and the imposition of suburban tastes, have resulted in a gradual erosion of local vernacular character and a deterioration in the visual quality of the built landscape. The impact of these changes has been a gradual suburbanisation of the landscape. This is reflected, not only in modern dwellings, which do not incorporate vernacular features, but also in street layouts, successive infilling of internal village space and unimaginative ornamental planting. Conversion of redundant farm buildings, the amalgamation of small cottages into larger dwellings and the 'gentrification' of buildings, have also had a subtle cumulative impact by introducing a new appearance of affluence into the countryside.

With increasing numbers of people wanting to live in rural areas, there is almost certain to be continued pressure for new development throughout the area. Declining support and continued uncertainty in farming may result in an increasing number of farmers looking for development opportunities to supplement their incomes. As in the past, these pressures are likely to be concentrated near transport corridors and around the fringe of the urban areas surrounding the AONB.

Social change is also affecting the Cannock coalfield. Although mostly lying outside the AONB, the changes that have taken place in this area continue to influence the character of the Chase. Most of the communities



Typical historic mining community terraced housing, Rawnsley.

in this area grew up to serve the local coal industry. With the sharp decline in coal mining since the war, these closely knit communities have one by one lost their primary source of employment. This has brought about considerable economic and social change.

The need to attract investment to create new jobs, combined with a rising demand for new housing, has resulted in a transformation of many of these communities. New retailing complexes and light industrial units have been built throughout the area, often on reclaimed mine sites. Modern housing estates have grown up around former mining settlements, and in places impinge into the southern edge of the Chase. Much of this new development has a characterless suburban appearance and is threatening to swamp the identity and distinctive character of the old mining communities.

Other development pressures

Legislation and recent planning policies have protected the AONB from development, and there has been a general consensus by all the planning authorities, to keep tight control of any development that threatens to impact on the AONB landscape. However, as stated above there is increasing demand for housing and industrial development around the Chase. This in turn is creating further urban fringe pressures on the AONB itself. Earlier studies introduced the concept of a planning 'buffer zone' around the Chase, where restraint would be imposed on new development. Unfortunately, this concept has been rejected by the Secretary of State, and can no longer be enforced as a policy. Examples of very recent development, which has had an adverse effect on the Chase and its setting, include the new housing at Huntington. This has severed the agricultural landscape to the east of the village from the estatelands to the west. Green belt and countryside policies need to be applied rigorously to protect the AONB from such pressures.



Recent development affecting the setting of the Chase at Huntington (Littleton colliery tip in the background).

There has been a significant reduction in mineral extraction activities on the Chase in the last ten years. The former West Cannock No 5 colliery has been reclaimed as an extension to the Country Park, and the pit head buildings have been refurbished as an Enterprise Centre. The only other coal mine close to the AONB at Littleton has recently closed. The impact of the closure of this mine on the local economy is only just being felt. It is especially significant, being the last of the South Staffordshire Coalfield deep mines, with a history going back over 100 years.

Many of the coal seams from the Cannock Collieries were worked under the Chase itself, and have been the cause of fissures and subsidence in many places. These may have contributed to a general lowering of the water table, which in turn has had a deleterious impact on wetland habitats. There is an active British Coal restoration programme filling in and making safe pit breaks and fissures.

The quarrying of sand and gravel continues in the AONB at three locations — Bevins Birches, Pottal Pool and Huntington. There is an intention gradually to phase out extraction of sand and gravel within the AONB, and the only extension to quarrying that has been approved in the latest Staffordshire Aggregates Local Plan, is at Pottal Pool quarry. The impact of quarrying on the Chase is largely as a result of heavy goods vehicles using roads that are not suited to large lorries. The visual scars of the often very deep excavation can usually be reduced during operations by screening with conifer plantations. However, the



Active sand and gravel quarrying at Pottal Pool.

restoration of these quarries, poses a challenge. There are potentially quite exciting opportunities to create new heathland or woodland on restored quarries, and the large amounts of shale spoil from nearby disused mine workings is a possible source of filling material. Continued large-scale quarrying is clearly incompatible with the AONB designation, although the Chase represents one of the largest reserves of sand and gravel

in Europe, and there is likely be continuing pressure from the minerals industry to exploit this resource in preference to shallow alluvial gravels.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to raise awareness of the key characteristics and special features that make Cannock Chase an area of outstanding natural beauty. Allied to its importance as a landscape resource, is the high ecological, historical and recreational value of the Chase. These confirm the national status of the AONB and highlight the need to protect it from inappropriate change. This is not to say that the countryside within the AONB should be set aside from the present, as something to be viewed but not used. A healthy diverse countryside must be allowed to continue to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances. The aim should be to strike a balance between necessary change, and the conservation and enhancement of the essential character and features that cause the Chase to be valued.

There is a significant amount of land within the AONB in public ownership. There is now a great opportunity through the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) that has been established from representatives of local authorities, government agencies and other interested parties, to coordinate and promote local

planning and management policies throughout the AONB. The JAC's role is to ensure that the AONB is conserved and managed effectively, to provide a forum for the exchange of information and ideas, and to make recommendations for new initiatives. The needs of most individual land users have already been identified and management plans have been formulated to achieve the aims of many activities, such as forestry, nature conservation and recreation. *The plan for Cannock Chase*, published in June 1993, sets out the most recent policies.

This chapter has looked in detail at the pressures for change within and around the AONB. The following appendix identifies a series of key management issues. The recommendations put forward seek to provide a framework for conserving and enhancing the overall character and special qualities of the Chase. Some have already been identified in existing management plans, and are in the process of being implemented. Others will inevitably need more consideration and may not happen immediately. The recommendations are therefore forward looking, and endeavour to offer creative inspiration and a shared vision for the future of the AONB.

It is acknowledged that the way forward may not be easy, but it is hoped that a clear vision of what can be achieved will help to overcome problems of implementation.

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Photographs are by Philip Dunn, except for those on pages 9, 17, 23 and 36, which are by Rob Fraser.

APPENDIX 1. KEY ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout its history, Cannock Chase has been changing in response to natural processes and pressures imposed by human activity. These pressures for change continue to have an impact on the landscape, but today they occur at a greatly accelerated pace. Change must therefore be controlled and managed to ensure that the essential character and special qualities of the AONB are conserved for future generations.

Cannock Chase is unusual in that there is a significant amount of land within the AONB in public ownership. This is in contrast to most other designated areas, where privately owned agricultural land is the dominant land use. This provides a unique opportunity to guide and influence future change, especially in the forest heathlands. On the fringe of the Chase, pressures for change are more likely to be controlled through the statutory planning system, although government incentives for woodland planting and other land management activities are also available for promoting appropriate action on privately owned land.

On the basis of the landscape assessment carried out for this study, a series of planning and land management issues have been identified. These are described by landscape type, as this allows specific conservation and enhancement strategies to be highlighted for each of the different landscapes in the Chase. A number of opportunities for strengthening the overall character and unity of the Chase are also proposed.

Forest heathlands

The present day landscape is a mosaic of open heathland, conifer plantations, scrub and semi-natural woodlands. The forestry plantations represent a working landscape, while the majority of the open heathland and semi-natural woodland is managed by the County Council for nature conservation and public recreation. This is a landscape where there are positive opportunities for instigating change, but where natural regeneration and the impact of people are also creating pressures for change.

Overall, the strategy should be to develop a more unified landscape characterised by forests in a heathland setting.

Conifer plantations currently dominate the visual appearance of the forest heathlands, and planting has fragmented the continuity of the remaining heathland areas. Although the plans drawn up by Forest Enterprise should go a long way to diversifying the forest area, further opportunities should be sought for adjusting the balance between forested and open land. The process of restoring heathland corridors between the main areas of surviving heath is likely to be an ongoing process and monitoring will be needed to determine the optimum size and design of such corridors. The aim should be to maximise the visual and ecological benefits without unduly restricting the viability of the forestry operation. Particular attention should be given to the design of edges, and to retaining woodland to soften the impact of visually intrusive features. New woodland planting in the forest fringe could compensate for any reduction in the area of forest within the heathland core. These measures would greatly enhance the visual and ecological unity of the Chase.

The working nature of the forestry operation is appreciated and welcomed by the majority of visitors to the Chase. The uniformity and shape of the conifer plantations, however, has a very great visual impact on the wilderness character of the forest heathlands landscape. This is especially prominent when the crop is reaching maturity. The forest design plans drawn up by Forest Enterprise should better integrate these forest areas into the wider landscape by re-designing and softening the edges of plantations. This is much needed, and should help to achieve a more natural relationship between the forest and adjoining heathland. The benefit of this approach is that forest edges are particularly attractive to visitors, and the boundaries between plantation and open heathland can be used to soak up large numbers of people without spoiling the visual amenity of the Chase.

The re-design of the forest area also allows the opportunity for creating more ecologically diverse forests. For example current knowledge suggests that red squirrels prefer stands of Scots pine, 30–35 years old, and therefore corridors of suitable trees may need to be retained and created in forest design plans. The habitat requirements of other species have also been studied and attempts are being made to accommodate these in relevant management plans. In the case of the nightjar, for example, it has been found that this species utilises recently felled or newly planted forest areas for feeding and nesting. An actively managed forest, with an ongoing regime of clear-felling and replanting is therefore clearly beneficial for nightjars.

Semi-natural broadleaved woodland was once the dominant vegetation type on the Chase. This was traditionally utilised as wood pasture — more or less widely spaced oak trees with a hearty ground flora. Oak is failing to replace itself even in the small remnants of semi-natural woodland that still survive on the Chase. Although a programme of replacement planting has been initiated, there is scope to expand this scheme and create new areas of wood pasture. Such an initiative would necessarily favour the reintroduction of grazing as a management tool. Some of the best areas to target may be those adjacent to existing oak woodland, that have become heavily infested with bracken or birch. The re-creation of wood pasture would not only diversify the existing woodland resource, but it could help to restore some semblance of the original Forest landscape.

The open character of the Chase heathlands is threatened by the regeneration of pine and hirsch scrub, while the invasion of bracken has changed the ecological character of the heath. There is a need for more sustainable management by sheep and cattle grazing throughout the forest heathlands, to restore and maintain extensive tracts of open heathland. The present day management regime of flail cutting, controlled burning, and hand removal of unwanted invasive species can only be sustained in its present form with the continued financial support of outside agencies. It is unlikely that such a regime would be a realistic option for managing all the heathland on the Chase, especially if new areas were to be created on forestry land.

Grazing animals, with unrestricted access over open land, are now an uncommon sight in the lowlands, but where they

are still found, in areas such as the New Forest, they create a strong visual image and sense of place. The reintroduction of grazing would restore this ancient pattern of land use on the Chase. If grazing were to be reinstated during the summer months, the animals could possibly be over-wintered on farmland adjoining the Chase. The New Forest provides a good example of this type of management regime. On Cannock Chase, there may be an opportunity to develop such an 'in-bye, out-bye' system at Shugborough using the rare breeds of sheep and cattle that are already kept in the park.

To achieve the overall aim of a more unified heathland landscape it will be necessary to have a unified management regime for all the open land in the forest heathlands. Fencing off selected parts of the Chase and reintroducing grazing in these areas, other than on a temporary or experimental basis, will not achieve this aim. In any case it is likely that there could be considerable public resistance to fenced enclosures appearing on the open heath. The best long-term solution may therefore be to ring fence the entire forest heathlands, perhaps dividing the area into two parts along the busy A460 and building cattle grids at other road entrances. This would involve a large initial capital expense, but the ongoing costs of management should be much reduced. Although there are many problems in fencing the Chase and reintroducing grazing, these can be overcome through a coordinated approach by the managing agencies, backed up by an information campaign to promote the benefits of this course of action. However, careful planning, supported by experimentation will be an essential pre-requisite for taking this proposal forward.

The presence of large numbers of visitors can have an impact on the remote wilderness character of the Chase, especially in the open heathland areas. Woodland and forestry plantations are much better at absorbing large numbers of people, simply because they are hidden. There is a need to create a hierarchy of footpaths and bridleways throughout the forest heathlands, thus providing a diverse, interesting landscape experience, while being as far as possible visually unobtrusive. Where possible these should link into the existing footpath network around the Chase and with any new routes created in the Community Forest area to the south of the AONB.

The impact of motor vehicles in the core of the Chase could also be reduced by traffic management, speed restrictions and possibly through the closure of some roads, while heavy goods vehicles servicing the quarries should continue to be restricted to particular routes. Other traffic calming measures that may be considered, include cattle grids at the main 'gateways' to the Chase, and improved signing to highlight the special character of the area. Such measures should also have an indirect benefit in reducing deer casualties on the Chase — a distressing and costly problem to manage.

Within the forest heathlands, there remain a great diversity of historical/archaeological features, which have survived largely intact because this area has never been intensively managed for agriculture. Of particular importance are the remains of early industrial sites for glass working, iron making and coal mining. These and other historic features are still being discovered, but they should be fully recognised in any overall management plan for the Chase. This should not just

be to preserve them for their own sake, but also to help raise public awareness about specific aspects of the Chase that are perhaps little known about, such as its early industrial history.

Forest fringe

The character of the forest fringe is in decline due to the continuing impact of urban expansion towards the AONB, and the fragmentation of the structure of the farmed landscape. Views towards the adjoining forestry plantations in the core of the Chase, however, are a dominant visual theme in the landscape.

The strategy should be to enhance the structure and wooded character of the landscape.

Stream lines and primary hedge lines along roadsides, and parish and farm boundaries, form a key structural element in this landscape. The wooded character of such primary linear features should be conserved and strengthened wherever possible, either through replanting or regeneration of hedgerow trees. The structure of this landscape could also be greatly strengthened by new broadleaved or mixed species planting, designed to link into the adjoining forestry plantations. This may in turn release land within the forest heathlands for heathland restoration, but care should be taken not to add so much woodland that the identity of the forest fringe is lost.

The interface between new development and the surrounding landscape can often appear sharp and stark. Tree planting within and around new development is one of the best ways to soften hard edges. The aim should not necessarily be to hide buildings, but rather to integrate them into the landscape. Opportunities should be sought for off-site woodland planting to help link development into the wider landscape pattern.

Historic parklands

The historic parkland of Shugborough is managed primarily for the benefit of the public who visit the site, rather than as an agricultural enterprise. The impact of diversification and the subsequent large numbers of visitors attracted to the park are the main pressure for change.

The strategy should be to conserve the integrity of the historic designed landscape.

The volume of visitors has necessitated the introduction of new elements into the parkland landscapes — for example, car parks, kiosks and additional fencing to direct the movement of people in the park. It is the design detail that adversely affects the visual qualities of the parkland. Historic photographs illustrate simple iron rail fencing to contain grazing animals, and although this element is still a feature, there is a distracting amount of foreground clutter in many views. The management plan for the park and its woodlands, should also emphasise the physical links with the core of the Chase, as well as restoring the integrity of the parkland area. Shugborough has much potential for giving visitors a real insight into the social and economic organisation of a large period estate.

Sandstone estatelands

The strong effect of visual enclosure in this landscape is created by the presence of large woodlands and belts of trees. These create a series of linked wooded spaces, which define the scale and character of the landscape. The continuity of tree cover is often fragmented, however, and in places many areas of former park have been taken into intensive agricultural production.

The strategy should be to conserve the wooded agricultural estate character of the landscape.

Where tree cover is weak, particularly near the edge of urban areas, there is a need for significant new woodland planting. Belts of trees should be broadleaved in character, although mixed planting would be suitable for larger blocks of woodland. Particular attention should be given to the location and shape of new planting, and to the space it encloses. Planting should not be so extensive as to close off views through the landscape.

Demands for sport and recreational facilities in the countryside have increased, especially around the fringes of the larger urban areas. Traditional estate landscapes are often able to accommodate new facilities, such as golf courses, providing they are carefully sited, and designed to take on the appearance of modern day parklands as they mature. The selection of appropriate locally occurring trees should be favoured over quick growing, or smaller amenity species. There may also be scope for heathland restoration and this should be considered alongside tree planting as a landscape enhancement option. Particular attention should be given to conserving the sparsely settled character of the landscape in all such diversification schemes.

Village farmlands

The most important feature in this agricultural landscape is the historic pattern of fields and settlements. Where the pattern has become fragmented, the overall structure of the landscape is in decline. In addition, the suburbanising influences associated with new development are an increasing pressure on the traditional character of rural villages.

The strategy should conserve and restore the unity and historic character of the landscape.

Where the structure of the landscape is in decline, it is particularly important to conserve primary hedge lines along roadsides, bridleways, footpaths, and farm and parish boundaries. These features should be strengthened by allowing hedges to grow thicker and taller, and by planting-up gappy hedges. A tagging scheme to encourage the regeneration of trees in primary hedge lines may also be appropriate in this area.

Development pressure is having a subtle cumulative impact on village character. This is reflected in the external modernisation of buildings, the erection of illuminated road signs, the replacement of roadside hedges with quick growing ornamental screens, and standardised highway improvements. In Brocton for example, there has been much modern infill, which visually dominates the core of older buildings in the village. More sensitivity to local character is needed when

applying design standards in the rural environment. Conservation of village character should be a priority and all new development should seek to harmonise with the local vernacular style.

Settled farmlands

The varied, small-scale, settled nature of this landscape is its essential characteristic. This diversity is due in part to the undulating topography, but also to the small-scale field pattern and the network of narrow winding lanes. The pressures for change reflect the influence of a wealthy urban population moving into the countryside close to the towns.

The strategy should seek to conserve the diversity and local distinctiveness of the landscape.

The pattern of small, hedged fields is a key feature of this landscape. In places, where hedgerows have become gappy or have been replaced by post and rail fences, this pattern is in decline. Hedgerow replanting and management should be a priority in this area, along with the regeneration and replanting of hedgerow trees. Many hedgerows have seedlings, which at little cost could be selected and allowed to grow.

The irregular network of narrow winding lanes is also a special and very distinctive feature of the settled farmlands. Of particular importance are the areas of rough grassland at road junctions, thick roadside hedges and hedgebanks. All of these features should be conserved, while highway improvement schemes should only be undertaken where absolutely necessary. The aim should be to conserve the distinct identity and historic character of the road network.

River meadowlands

Narrow meandering rivers, flanked by grazing meadows and riverside trees, are the distinctive features of this landscape, and with the exception of some recent attempts at cultivating the floodplain, this traditional pattern of land use remains largely intact.

The strategy is to conserve the special character and continuity of the river corridor.

The floodplain of the river Trent forms a narrow alluvial corridor along the length of the Trent Valley. The continuity of this corridor is sometimes disrupted by road and rail routes crossing the valley. The noise and movement of traffic can be particularly intrusive in this generally undisturbed river landscape. New development along the edge of the river floodplain can also be visually intrusive, and consideration should be given to more appropriate siting and screening of such development.

Permanent pasture is still the dominant land use along the alluvial floodplain, but river drainage and agricultural improvement have resulted in a species poor grassland sward in many areas. Restoration of a more diverse sward, combined with the creation of a more varied riverside habitat would help to strengthen the distinct character of this landscape. The long sinuous hedgerows defining the historical boundaries to the river floodplain should also be retained and managed as landscape features.

Coalfield heathlands

Although this is an urbanised, and in places, degraded landscape, it has a distinctive character associated with its former land use and its long history of coal mining. There are many abandoned workings and spoil heaps, as well as mining settlements.

The strategy should be to conserve and enhance the unity and distinctive identity of the landscape.

A key feature of this landscape are the pockets of unenclosed heathland. These are remnants of a time when the Chase formerly extended into this area and beyond to Brownhills. Landscape enhancement and restoration schemes should seek to reflect these historic and ecological associations with the aim of linking this area more closely with the adjoining Chase. There are likely to be opportunities for

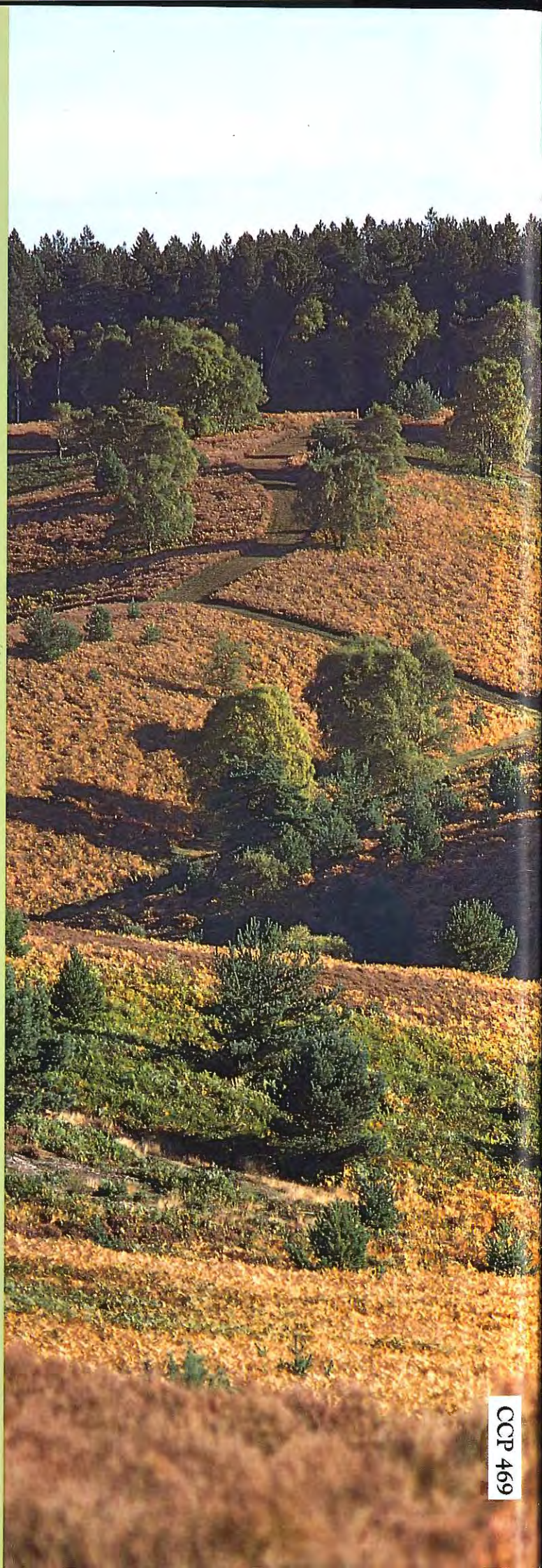
quite large-scale landscape enhancement schemes, particularly in the area just outside the AONB. This may involve heathland creation, particularly on restored open cast sites. Woodland planting may also be appropriate to improve the quality of the landscape around the urban fringe and to create stronger visual links with the Chase.

Modern suburban development is threatening to swamp the identity and distinctive character of the former mining communities in this area. Conservation of village character, particularly the older rows of red-brick terraced houses, should be a priority. New development should seek to reinforce the identity of individual communities and avoid the amalgamation of separate urban areas. Particular attention should be given to developing an architectural expression of community identity, which reflects something of the existing settlement character.

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