

# CHARACTER TYPE 6 - MOSSLAND LANDSCAPE

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## Description

Mossland areas are located mainly in the south east of the Borough and constitute a part of a much wider mossland landscape extending to the south into Chat Moss and to the east into Worsley Moss. The mossland areas are represented by Bedford Moss and Astley Moss.

Smaller remnant areas of mossland are located at Highfield Moss south of Golborne and as highly altered and disturbed parts of Ince Mosses. The latter is described under Landscape Character Type 5C.

The mossland landscape constitutes a distinctive character comprised of almost flat land divided geometrically into a series of rectilinear small to medium sized fields and moss woodlands separated by deep open drainage ditches. These areas often fill with low lying mists and fogs on cooler nights. Hedgerows are notably absent from the core areas.



Photo. 180 Fields south of Messuages Farm, Astley Moss.

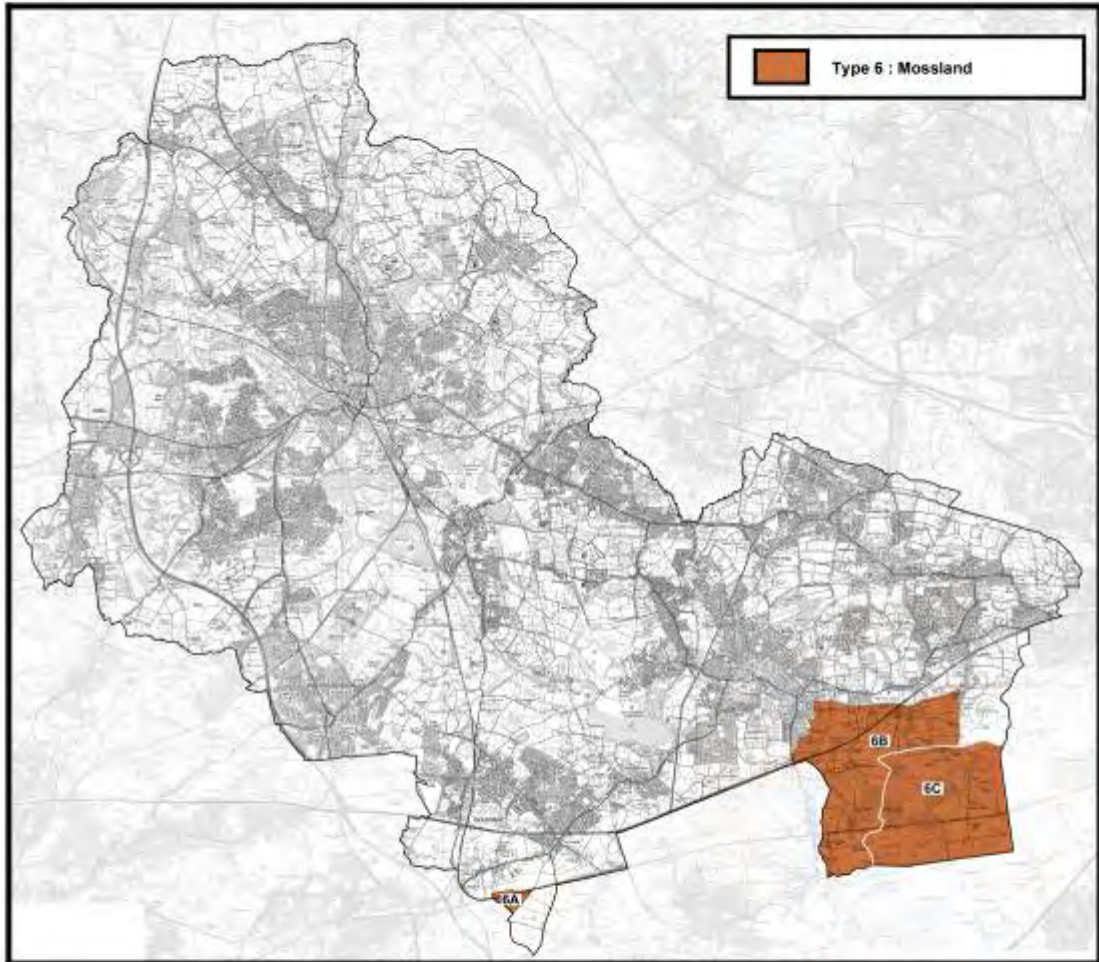
The advent of large scale mechanisation enabled farmers to undertake substantial drainage and ‘reclamation’ schemes resulting in the straight drainage ditches and tracks seen today. Shrinkage of the drained peat (which, after cultivation, also tends to blow away in summer winds) has resulted in land levels being lower than they were when first drained. Lanes and tracks within the mossland, reinforced with hardcore and hard surfacing are therefore often noticeably higher than adjacent land.

The presence of houses and farms is infrequent due to the difficulty of construction on the deep peat. Major roads also tend to avoid the mosslands leaving tranquil areas favoured by wildlife.

The mossland areas are defined by their dark, organic, peat soil although mossland landscape characteristics often tend to fade imperceptibly into adjoining areas. For the purpose of this study, the 'mossland landscape' therefore includes areas of peripheral land, which displays the same or similar character as the mossland type proper.

### **Key Characteristics :**

- Relatively flat land
- Arable fields or 'moss' woodland
- Absence of hedgerows and hedgerow trees
- Wide expanse of sweeping views
- Open and exposed between woodlands
- Often containing tranquil areas
- Dark peaty soil to mossland proper
- Frequent occurrence on calm days, through autumn, winter and spring of low-lying mists and fogs
- Lack of important roads through the area
- Elevated farm tracks
- Use of open ditches as field boundaries
- Importance to wildlife



## Cultural History

In ancient times the mosses were regarded as dangerous wildernesses, with deep dark pools of acidic water, treacherous areas of boggy ground, mists and fogs and the haunt of wild animals. As such, these areas were good for hunting (on foot) but were to be avoided at other times. The spiritual dread with which these wildernesses were regarded may readily be guessed at with the discovery of a corpse known as the 'Druid Prince', whose amazingly well preserved remains were dug out of the peat at Lindow Moss to the east. The fact that he appears to have been possibly drugged and then ritually sacrificed gives some indication of how Iron Age man may have regarded the mosses. In 1958 the severed head of what was believed to be a local Celt was found in Chat Moss near Worsley.

In 1726, the writer Daniel Defoe passed through to south of the area, journeying from Warrington along Manchester Road, recording his visit in a book published a year later.

*'From hence, on the road to Manchester, we passed the great bog or waste called Chatmos, the first of that kind that we see in England, from any of the south parts hither. It extends on the left-hand of the road for five or six miles east and west, and they told us it was, in some places, seven or eight miles from north to south. The nature of these mosses, for we found there were many of them in this country, is this, and you will take this for a description of all the rest. The surface, at a distance, looks black and dirty, and is indeed frightful to think of, for it will bear neither horse or man, unless in an extremely dry season, and then not so as to be passable, or that any one should travel over them. What nature meant by such a useless production, tis hard to imagine; but the land is entirely waste, except for the poor cottager's fuel, and the quantity used for that is very small.'*

Defoe, Daniel 'A Tour Through The Whole Island of Great Britain' published in three volumes 1724 – 1726.

Defoe's opinion of the mosses shows that perhaps little had changed in nearly 2,000 years. The mosses were still dreadful places, to be avoided at all costs.

Defoe mentions the 'poor cottager's fuel' and this is perhaps a reference to peat, which had a widespread use as a low quality fuel

The large chain of mosses along the Mersey effectively channelled many of the roads through the area into the gaps between them. In the Wigan area the B5212, runs north-south, following a line of higher ground to the west of the River Glaze avoiding the great expanse of Chat Moss and Holcroft Moss. The A580 East Lancashire road runs along the north side of the mossland on similar higher ground. To the southeast of the present Wigan town centre, the now largely vanished Ince Moss had similar effects upon local roads, the A49 north-south road running to the west and the A577 east-west road running to the north.

The strategic importance of these mosses was extremely high, as the blocking of these road gaps would cause major problems for troops moving north or south through them. Added to the formidable obstacle of the River Mersey, the mosses acted as a gigantic barrier to forces moving north or south through North West England. For example, in 1745, the Jacobite army of Bonnie Prince Charlie marched south through Carlisle and Preston towards Warrington, but at Wigan the army turned east towards Manchester. This is almost certainly because news had reached the Jacobites that on 25<sup>th</sup> November 1745 Brigadier Douglas and the Liverpool Blues (a militia unit) had demolished the two central arches of the Warrington Bridge.

Most of the mossland areas of Wigan were reclaimed in the mid to late C19th, particularly following George Stephenson's successful crossing of Chat Moss with the Manchester to Liverpool railway line. The use of light railways with lightweight steam locomotives meant that material could be moved with ease to and from the mosses. Drainage ditches were dug through most of the mosses, but their construction was still based on human labour and this was a limiting factor.

In the early C20th, farmers finally had the tools to deal with the mosslands. Mechanisation meant that long, deep drainage trenches could be cut through the mossland in a relatively short period of time, allowing the moss to dry out enough to support the weight of a tractor. The rich peaty soils, once drained, were very productive. Farmers who had land on the perimeter of the mossland, as well as in the mossland itself, benefited greatly and were able to remove hedges and trees on the perimeter land to facilitate mechanised farming. Many of the mossland farms, especially on the reclaimed areas were relatively small, reflecting the high quality of the land, the ability to grow high quality crops and especially the proximity of good local markets.

Much of the mossland, once drained, achieved an Agricultural Land Classification Grade 1 or Grade 2. In the second half of the C20th farmers continued to grow high quality crops on this land, extensively using inorganic fertilisers. However, with the advent of supermarkets and their colossal buying power, the farming of vegetable crops on the mossland appears to have taken a downturn. Farmers were unable to produce the volume, consistency and out of season availability which supermarkets demanded.

The improvements in drainage and particularly deep drainage, which came with the use of steam in the Industrial Revolution, meant that coal deposits hitherto unavailable to miners could now be accessed. As a result collieries were established at Astley and particularly in Ince, with massive disturbance impacts on the adjacent mosslands. Some of the disturbance prolonged the life of adjacent mossland as land was inundated through subsidence, but in general the colliery spoil covered and contaminated the mossland and it disappeared.



Photo. 144 Moss Lane, Astley Moss.

The current situation of farming on the mossland is subject to some fluctuation. The high quality of the drained land remains, but drainage has to be renewed after five to ten years. This is because the drying of the peat and soil loss through wind-blow and shrinkage slowly makes the existing drains shallower in the soil. This in turn inevitably means that drains end up being ploughed out. Drainage costs are relatively high. Traditionally, farmers alternated their crops on the mossland, so that they would not be too vulnerable to financial hazard through risks associated with monoculture.

Recent weather patterns increasingly pose a problem for mossland farmers. Periods of exceptionally heavy rain make the mossland incapable of withstanding the weight of farm machinery as well as causing rot in root crops and mildews in grain crops. Exceptionally hot, dry summers cause problems for farmers in irrigating their crops. Although water is present in the deep drainage ditches, it has to be pumped onto the crops for irrigation. This reduces the water table under the peat, causing further ground shrinkage etc.

The mosslands are extremely important for wildlife. In Europe, intact lowland raised bogs are one of the rarest and most threatened habitats. (They are listed in Annex 1 of the EC Habitats and Species Directive.) North West England had the largest proportion of this habitat, although the total area has fallen by 94% since the beginning of the C19th. There is a much specialised range of both flora and fauna in the mosslands, including birds such as the nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*), curlew (*Numenius arquata*) and snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) and insects such as the downy emerald dragonfly (*Corulia aenea*) and the large heath butterfly (*Coenympha tullia*).

It is particularly noticeable that there is a lack of footpath provision through the deeper mossland areas, reflecting the centuries through which the mosslands were impassable. This lack of visitors is to the benefit of the wildlife, which remains relatively undisturbed.

For the last two hundred years, mosslands have been seen as the perfect place to tip waste materials, with very clear deleterious effects on the landscape. These effects include polluted runoff into the mossland and especially the visual intrusion of what are often very high and artificial landforms.

### **Key cultural elements in the landscape:**

- Extremely valuable and increasingly rare habitat
- Regrettably common use for landfill sites
- Historically forbidding, dark appearance and sense of dread felt by visitors
- Strategic value of the impassable nature of the mosses
- Lack of agricultural use prior to 'reclamation' in the late C19th.
- Disused peat cuttings
- Long, deep drainage ditches of the C19th reclamations
- Presence of buildings exhibiting various degrees of subsidence

## AREA 6.A HIGHFIELD MOSS

### Description

This is a small mossland of 21.3 ha. located in the extreme southern tip of Wigan Borough. It is a triangular area surrounded by agricultural land and crossed to the north by the Manchester-Liverpool railway line. The land adjacent is slightly higher and peat moss is found in a natural basin. It is surrounded by open ditches.

This mossland has not been reclaimed or farmed, although farming takes place close to its edges. The construction of the railway line to the north has removed part of the moss, but has in part protected the remaining areas from reclamation.



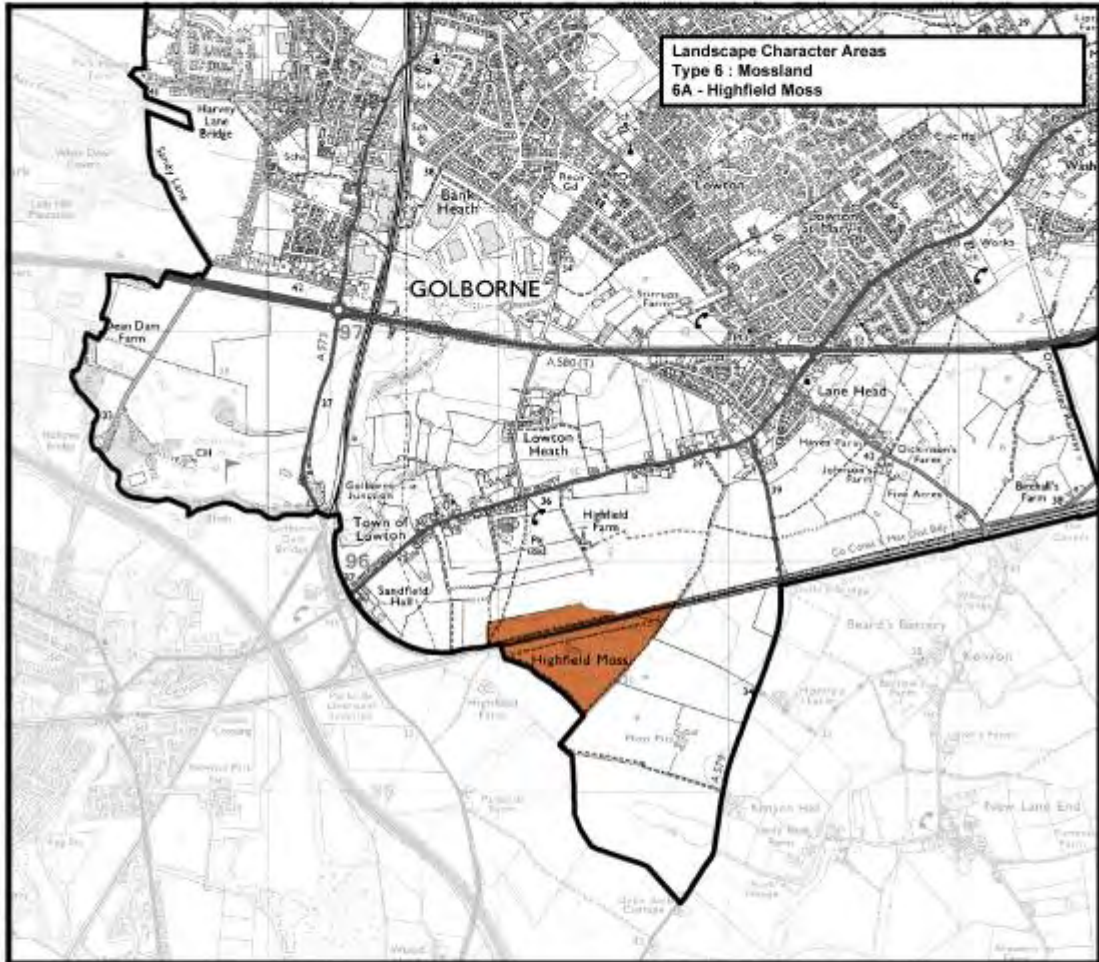
Photo. 11a Highfield Moss from near the railway line.

Small areas of open water are present in the centre, with marsh and carr woodland to the fringe. Although a footpath is present to the northern boundary, the mossland is comparatively undisturbed and rich in wildlife. Views are fairly limited and internal and the moss is relatively hidden from view.



**Key Characteristics:**

- Sunken, peat mossland
- Wetland, marshland and carr woodland
- Comparatively hidden from external view
- Relatively undisturbed
- Area of wildlife importance



## Cultural History

The railway through the moss was constructed in the 1820s by George Stephenson. Although destroying a section of mossland, the vegetation on the embankments now provides a valuable wildlife corridor in and out of the moss. In 1986, the moss was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest for its biological interest. It is a good example of a raised peat bog, once so common in the northwest. At 21.3 ha, this moss is one of the smallest in the north-west. It is however still of great value and has not been subject to reclamation.

Habitat and species associated with the area are:

- acidic grassland is a habitat for the rare marsh gentian (*Gentiana pneumonanthe*).
- wet heath with colonies of cottongrasses, sphagnum mosses and cross-leaved heath. The rare cranberry (*Vaccinium oxycoccus*) and the star sedge (*Carex echinata*) and the carnation sedge (*Carex panicea*) also grow here. There are many dragonflies on the site together with representative breeding and wintering bird populations.

## Key cultural elements in the landscape

- Manchester – Liverpool railway line
- Area of wildlife importance (Site of Special Scientific Interest)
- The last representative of a raised lowland peat bog in the north-west remaining untouched by agricultural improvements

## Landscape Sensitivity and Change

The mossland is partially enclosed by higher farmland to the south and east and therefore subject to field drainage and potential run-off from herbicides, pesticides and fertilisers. These could all adversely affect the delicate eco-system of the moss and, in turn, its flora and fauna. The mossland is similarly dependant on a stable water table and this again is partly dependent on the surrounding farmland. The somewhat secluded nature of the mossland and its associated woodland has benefited wildlife, but in this respect the area would be sensitive to disturbance. The mossland has remained relatively unchanged although reduced in size following the construction of the railway which now cuts through the northern edge of the moss.

In an agricultural context, the mossland has progressively become a more isolated habitat as surrounding fields have been enlarged and hedgerows lost as more intensive farming is practised.

## Key elements of landscape sensitivity:

- Sensitive to changes in water table
- Sensitive to run-off from farm herbicides, pesticides and fertilisers
- Sensitive to disturbance

### **Key elements of landscape change:**

- Construction of railway
- Intensification of farming practices

### **Recommended Management and Landscape Objectives**

Highfield Moss is a highly prized, rare and valuable habitat. It is also very small and extremely vulnerable to outside influences with its continued existence to date only achieved through sympathetic and enlightened management of surrounding farmland. Maintaining the mossland water table is essential and dependant on surrounding farmland field drainage. The mossland could also be adversely affected by fertilizer and pesticide runoff from the adjoining fields. As a Site of Special Scientific Interest the mossland is carefully managed to conserve a balance of its acid grasslands, wet heaths, carr woodland and open water.

### **Management of the Landscape:**

- Landscape objectives should be to continue the ongoing site management together with the helpful relationship with the adjoining farmers.
- Establishment of linking hedgerows with associated ditches as wildlife corridors should be considered.
- Site management should be primarily for habitat and wildlife conservation

## AREA 6.B BEDFORD MOSS AND MOSS SIDE, ASTLEY

### Description

These areas are situated on the north and west fringe of Chat Moss and were historically the earliest parts of the mossland to be reclaimed for agriculture. They are accessed to the south by a small cul-de-sac road through Astley Green off the A580 and via Old Hall Lane off the A574 Warrington Road at Glazebury. To the north of the A580, the mossland is accessed via Marsland Green and Hooten Gardens. Bedford Moss and Moss Side form a very distinctive landscape character comprised of almost flat land divided into medium to large sized arable fields occasionally interspersed with blocks of moss woodland.

The land is low lying at between 20 and 25 metres AOD, but there is clear dip in the ground as it falls towards the deeper areas of core mossland. This is caused by the shrinkage of peat in the core areas as a result of reclamation works. During the colder winters and autumns, mists and fogs are characteristic of the area.



Photo. 178 The Bridgewater Canal embankment from Town Brook.

The mossland edge is sharply defined to the west by the River Glaze at the boundary with Warrington Borough and to the north by residential development, the Bridgewater Canal and the A.580. It should be noted that the mossland landscape character extends further north beyond the peaty soils of the moss. This reflects a similar situation in neighbouring Warrington, where the margin of the moss has often become blurred through the imposition of 'Prairie farming' in the mid to late C20th. This entailed the removal of many hedges and trees, the piping of ditches and the creation of far larger fields ideally suited to mechanised farming. To the east the mossland continues of a similar character into the Borough of

Salford towards Irlam and Worsley. To the south and south-east lies the core mossland of Chat Moss.

Black or Moss Brook runs from the east of the area in a westerly direction to its confluence with the River Glaze near Hawk Hurst Farm. As one of the few defined natural watercourses in the moss area, it is unusual. It appears to have become canalised or straightened in the C20th. The Bridgewater Canal, which forms the northern boundary of this area, runs for a considerable distance on a high, largely treeless embankment and is particularly prominent when viewed from around Morley's Hall.

Hedgerows and hedgerow trees are either relict or absent from these area as a result of C20th farming practices, when hedges were removed on a large scale. They were clearly present however on the O.S. maps of 1849. The resulting mainly open nature of the land allows sweeping views broken only by mossland woodlands. Many areas remain as tranquil spaces favoured by wildlife. Houses and farms of masonry construction on the mosslands are infrequent due to the difficulty of construction on the deep peat.

Agricultural field patterns are angular and defined by numerous open ditches confirming the continued wetness of the area. The land appears flat with open views towards developed areas to the north. Some hedgerows with scattered hedgerow trees are found on the mossland edges to the north.

The farmland is generally very fertile and is used for mixed farming. To the north of the area the fields are larger and used for arable crops, principally cereals but also some root crops. To the west of the area there are several areas of permanent pasture, often used for sheep grazing. The south and east of the area merge into the wetter soils of the mossland core with a farming regime of cereals and root crops, particularly potatoes.



Photo. 174 Light Oaks Hall with sheep grazing on the fields in front.

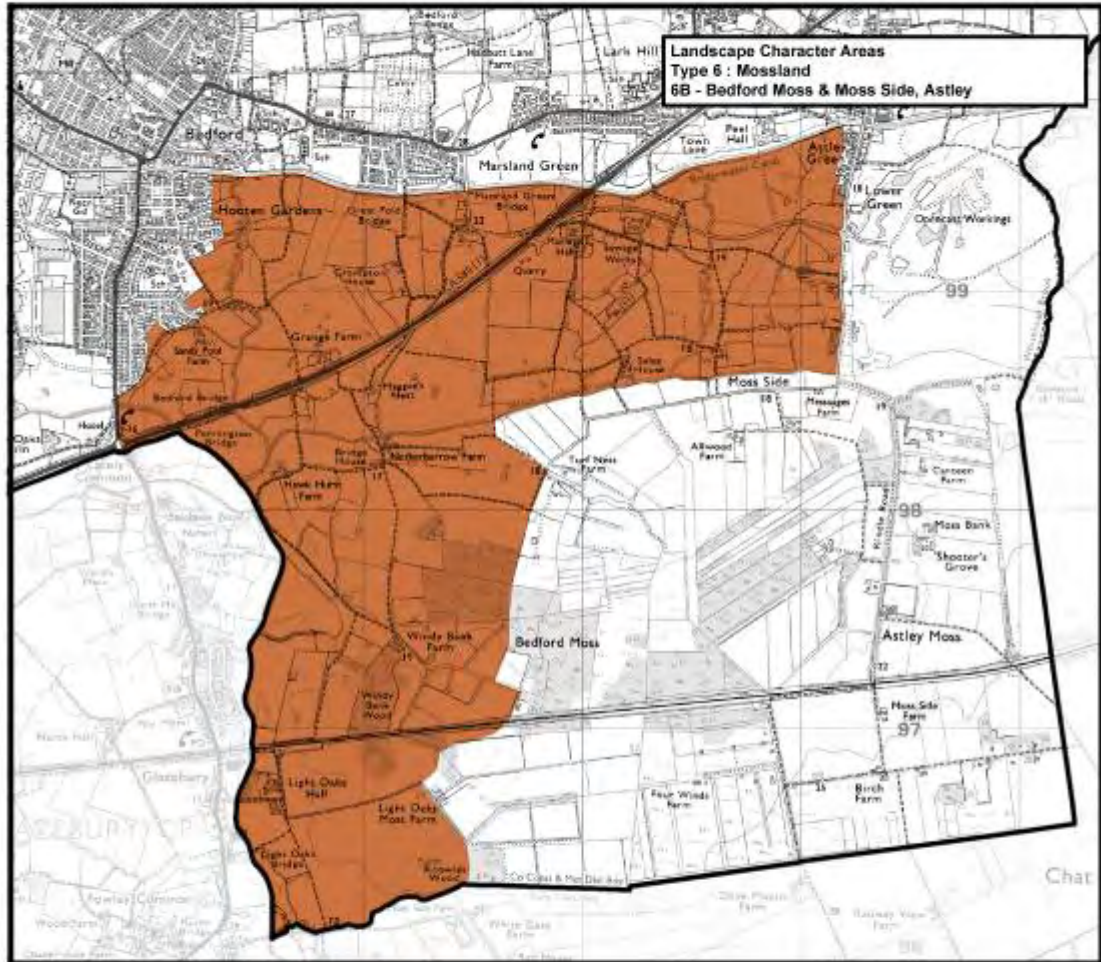
Just west of Morley's Hall and south of the A580 is an extensive sand and gravel pit, which exploits deposits laid down around the time that the peat deposits of the moss were beginning to be formed.

There are a surprising number of derelict or unmanaged land parcels within this area, which may relate to the size of the holding and the value of farming returns from it.

Landfill operations are currently taking place at Lower Green to the north east corner of the mossland creating high mounded areas alien to the flat mossland landscape. These were originally open cast coal mining extraction areas which have encroached into the mossland area.

### **Key Characteristics:**

- 'Level' form to mossland areas, but with distinctive 'fall' into the deeper areas of the moss
- Situated around the mossland fringe.
- Expansive views between moss woodlands.
- Hedges and fences only defining fields to the north and east.
- Water-filled ditches defining rectilinear fields to the south and east.
- Dark peaty soil frequently exposed due to intensity of cultivation
- Views of Astley Green Colliery Winding Gear.
- Scattered presence of market garden crops and polytunnels
- Elevated trackways, usually flanked by deep ditches.
- Open and exposed
- Presence of woodlands with a high conservation/wildlife value.
- Imposition of high mounded areas associated with landfill operations





## Cultural History

This area is the oldest part of Chat Moss to be reclaimed for agriculture. It is probable that this reclamation commenced in the C17th, but in some places may date to an earlier period. 'Moss rooms' as these early fields are called are rare survivals in the landscape and are normally seen as 'wedge' shaped plan fields, which were created as the fields advanced into the moss from the perimeter.

Black or Moss Brook would have been invaluable to drain the marginal fields into prior to the large-scale Victorian reclamation projects. It is therefore likely that the fields to the north of the brook, on shallower peat soils have been subjected to farming longer than those to the south. Similarly, the fields adjacent to the valley of the River Glaze to the west are likely to have been in agricultural use long before those further east. To the north of the area, extensive reclamation was carried out by a Colonel Ross of Astley Hall and Mr Ormerod of Tyldesley during the period 1840 – 1870.

The 1849 OS map of area shows clearly the fringe of reclaimed land around Chat Moss, with a mass of hedged fields at Morley's Hall and Light Oaks Hall. Equally clearly, it shows that the great mass of Chat Moss to the south and east was not yet reclaimed.



Photo. 177 – Morley's Hall.

Morley's Hall, a C16th building which is located in the north of the area, is a prominent moated site, listed Grade II\* and was the seat of the Tyldesley family. It was from here that Ambrose Barlow, a Catholic priest, was seized by a Protestant congregation led by the Vicar of Leigh in 1641. He was taken to Liverpool, hung, drawn and quartered. He was canonised as St Ambrose Barlow in 1929. The Tyldesley family, who had other land holdings in Lancashire, were extremely wealthy and Sir Thomas Tyldesley was a strong Royalist supporter, raising at his own cost, regiments of horse, dragoons and foot. Tyldesley fought at Edgehill and in other major actions before being killed at the battle of Wigan Lane in 1649.

Light Oaks Hall dates to the early C17th and is listed Grade II\*

Both these halls are located on the edge of the moss and it is likely that their owners were capitalising on the reclamation works being undertaken on the fringes of Chat Moss. Outside the Borough, similar halls, such as Great Woolden, Holcroft and Little Woolden Halls to the west of the moss made similar agricultural reclamation incursions into the mossland margins.

The northern boundary of this area is formed by the Bridgewater Canal. In 1759, the famous engineer James Brindley commenced construction of the Bridgewater Canal for Francis Egerton, the third Duke of Bridgewater. It was later extended to meet the Leeds and Liverpool Canal at Leigh. The canal was used as major carrier of coal to Manchester and Liverpool.

Immediately east of Morley's Hall is a sewage works and sewage farm, which serves the area to the north.

Astley Green Colliery was commenced in 1908 by the Clifton and Kersley Coal Company and built to access coal under the mossland. The moss and clay was 30m thick and it was the technical inability to mine through this which had, until this date, protected the coal reserves there. The shaft was sunk using a 'drop shaft' method, which used an iron cylinder with teeth at the base to be forced into the ground with hydraulic jacks, counterweighted by a large masonry thrust pillar. The pit closed in 1970 and demolition of the colliery began that year. Only the winding gear and building the Astley Green Colliery Museum remain.

The A580 trunk road was opened by King George V in 1934 and was England's first intercity highway, linking Manchester and Liverpool.

Opencast mining has taken place in the area around the Astley Colliery, north of the Bridgewater Canal as well as to substantial area to the south of the Bridgewater Canal. Part of the site to the south of the canal is subject to landfill. This is for the disposal of non-hazardous household, domestic and industrial waste material. It intended that the site will be restored for amenity purposes, including nature conservation. The Astley Sand and Gravel workings, just west of Morley's Hall, commenced work relatively recently, but has greatly expanded in area, with heaps of excavated material around its perimeter.

### **Key cultural elements in the landscape:**

- C17th or earlier fields reclaimed from the mossland
- C16th and C17th halls and associated reclamation landscapes
- Coal mining heritage.
- Sand and Gravel workings.
- Opencast workings

### **Landscape Sensitivity and Change**

The peaty soils of the mossland are unsuitable for traditional masonry buildings and many of the farms are surrounded by steel-framed ancillary buildings. There are a number of masonry buildings, such as the old halls which have clearly been located on better ground, as have the farms north of the A580 East Lancashire Road, which is not all peaty soil. Elsewhere on

the peat soils subsidence is common and telegraph poles, in particular, are often seen leaning at varying angles.

This landscape is visually sensitive in that views are extensive and the topography fairly flat. A number of existing features are visually prominent, such as the landfill tip at Lower Green, the winding gear at Astley Green Colliery and Morley's Hall. These can be seen at various points at distances of over 3km. This strongly implies that similarly visually intrusive elements in this landscape could not be adequately screened. The roads within the areas are small and incapable of taking large vehicles, with the exception of a new private road between the A580 at Morley's Hall and the landfill site at Lower Green, built to service the landfill site. Other routes within the area are single track, often gravel roads.

There are several footpaths within this area, but the area cannot accommodate many visitors without some adverse visual or physical impacts. The peaty soils of the eastern and southern parts of this area are incapable of taking heavy traffic without reinforcement.

The wildlife value of the area and its specialised nature is particularly vulnerable to disturbance. Ground nesting birds are especially vulnerable to dogs etc and the lack of cover in many areas exacerbates this.

The mossland areas have changed over a period of perhaps 1,000 years. The moated site of Morley's Hall may date back to around 1200, when many moated sites in the Wigan area appear to have been built. It is probable that the earliest reclamation of the mossland would have been in these areas around this date. The Domesday book describes 'Assarters' in other nearby areas, individuals whose role was to create agricultural land through clearing woodland or mossland to create agricultural land.

C20th mechanised farming of the mossland margins has resulted in the removal of the hedges and hedgerow trees which were so clearly indicated as well-established on the 1849 O.S. map of the area. This parallels similar hedgerow clearances on the adjacent undulating enclosed farmland landscape type and as a result the northern boundary of this landscape type 'fades' into the adjacent areas.

At the end of the C19th, deep mining to the east of the area at Astley Green created a large area of colliery spoil. This has been reworked and appears to be processed currently. More recently open cast coal mining has taken place both within this landscape type and in the adjacent landscape Area 1E to the north. The tipping of domestic refuse has created a new landscape with a substantial impact to the Lower Green area. Large mounds are currently being created with evidence of some 'soil' capping and 'restoration'. Landscape restoration for coal extraction has regraded and returned the land more approximately to its original levels although there is evidence that land levels have locally increased. Conversely certain areas appear to have locally experienced minor subsidence.

South of the Bridgewater Canal this land has been regraded and left to return to a semi-natural state of grassland, marsh and scrub woodland. It would appear that little control was exercised in the stripping of the over burden before open cast mining resulting in a contaminated mixture of sub-soil, stone, coal and topsoil. The result is often poorly drained land of little agricultural value and bearing no relationship to its original mossland character.

An area of Open Access has been designated on Bedford Moss, presumably recognising heather beds in the area as indications of non-cultivation.

### **Key elements of landscape sensitivity:**

- Prone to subsidence of structures and buildings
- Open, unrestricted views to the north
- Potential footpath erosion on the peat
- Mossland woodlands and little frequented areas are a haven for wildlife but sensitive to disturbance
- Sensitive to the imposition of high structures and/or mounding

### **Key elements of landscape change:**

- Drainage of the mossland areas altering the landscape from marsh and wet woodland to mainly agricultural land.
- Creation tracks and footpaths, with assorted open drainage ditches, accessing the area
- The importation of landfill tipping
- The extraction of coal and associated poor quality land restoration
- Construction of the Bridgewater Canal and the A580

### **Recommended Management and Landscape Objectives**

The mossland landscape is very distinctive and special. It is also extremely sensitive to change and should be managed carefully to maintain an environmentally stable and sustainable landscape. The fringe mosslands of Bedford and Moss Side provide a rich agricultural resource but also provide invaluable and diverse habitats for wildlife. Unfortunately some small areas are becoming left unmanaged or used for the storage of scrap metal.

This area includes a section of woodland planted using Forestry Commission grants and has been designated as an area of Open Access. While welcome in principle, open access land should be subject to careful monitoring to ensure that public access does not result in disturbance of wildlife habitats.

Attention is drawn to 'The Mosslands Project – The Vision' produced by the Mosslands Action Group which proposes a joint vision for the wider mossland area around Chat Moss and indicates possible land uses for these areas. One issue to be addressed is the relatively low agricultural production from these areas and this will be considered as part of the agenda for The Mosslands Project.

### **Management of the landscape:**

- Retain, monitor and adjust current water levels within the mosslands to avoid fluctuations, drying out and potential wind erosion.
- Consider the balanced needs of both agriculture and wildlife habitat.

- Consider the merits of higher water levels in areas of less productive mossland, promoting greater habitat diversity and wildlife value.
- Retain the existing quiet and tranquil character of the mosses without encouraging excessive recreational use or built development.
- Consider methods of mitigation to reduce the visual impact of the landfill tip at Lower Green.
- Encourage the management of derelict parcels of land and discourage the use of land for scrap metal storage or tipping.
- Remove eyesores such as small areas of tipped materials, particularly when these are easily viewed from footpath routes.
- Discourage routing of overhead cables through the mossland areas
- Retain the basic landscape structure of the mossland fields and ditches, whilst encouraging a greater diversity of native flora to the ditches and trackway verges.

## AREA 6.C ASTLEY MOSS

### Description

Astley Moss forms an area of core mossland more related to the inner areas of Chat Moss proper to the south and east, continuing into the Borough of Salford. It is an isolated area accessed by a small cul-de-sac road through Astley Green and via Old Hall Lane off the A574 Warrington Road at Glazebury. The area forms a very distinctive landscape character comprised of flat land divided into small to medium sized arable fields interspersed with blocks of moss woodland.

Hedgerows and hedgerow trees are notably absent from this area and replaced by a rectangular pattern of ditches forming the field and woodland boundaries. The resulting mainly open nature of the land allows sweeping views broken only by the woodlands. The presence of houses and farms on the mosslands is infrequent due to the difficulty of construction on the deep peat. The Liverpool to Manchester railway cuts through the southern area of the moss. Due to the difficulty of access and the lack of footpaths many areas remain as tranquil spaces favoured by wildlife.



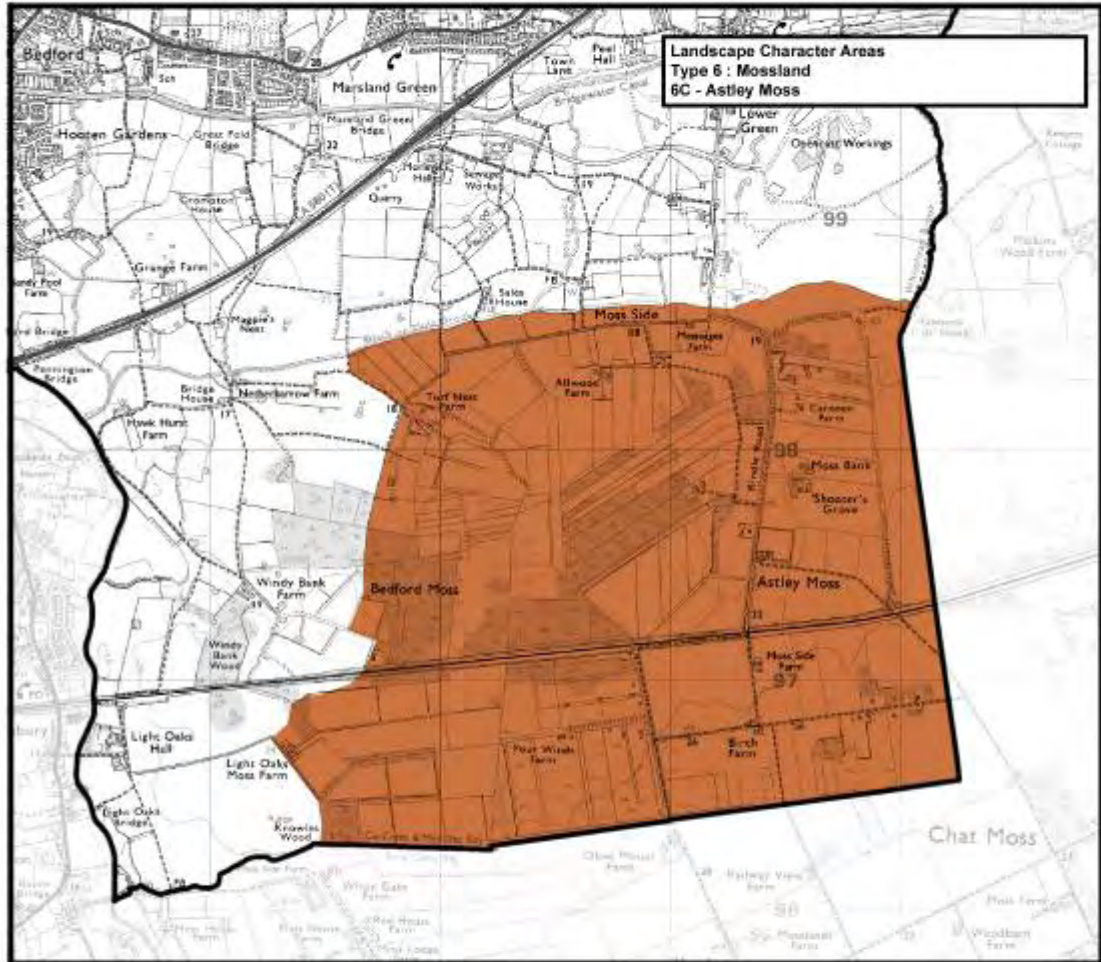
Photo. 144 Astley Moss from Moss Lane.

Agricultural field patterns are rigidly angular, defined only by numerous open ditches confirming the continued wetness of the area. The land appears flat with open views towards developed areas to the north.

Settlement within the area comprises of scattered farms and smallholdings, usually of light construction, and often showing signs of settlement.

### **Key Characteristics:**

- 'Level' form to mossland areas
- Sensation of isolation
- Expansive views between moss woodlands
- Straight water-filled ditches defining rectilinear fields
- Dark peaty soil frequently exposed due to intensity of cultivation
- Leaning telegraph poles and property subsidence
- General absence of hedgerow and hedgerow trees to core areas
- Elevated trackways, usually flanked by deep ditches
- Tranquility within core areas
- Open and exposed
- Presence of woodlands with a high conservation/wildlife value





## Cultural History

This area of mossland was throughout historic times one of the most remote and frightening areas of the countryside, a trackless wilderness with its black pools and bogs. The mosses were historically used as a source of peat for fuel and especially for hunting. Hunting, in the form of shooting, continued down to early modern times and there are still pheasant shoots in the adjacent Botany Bay Woods of Salford. There are pheasant rearing pens within the area of Astley Moss.

There is some evidence that the great reservoirs formed by this mossland did in historic times on occasions fail. In Henry VIII's time,

*'Chat Moss brast up within a mile of Mosley Haul, and destroyed much ground with mosse thereabout, and destroyed much fresh-water fishche thereabout, first corrupting with stinking water Glasebrooke, and so Glasebrooke carried stinking water and mosse into Mersey water, and Mersey corrupted carried the roulling mosse, part to the shores of Wales, part to the isle of Man, and some unto Ireland'.*

John Leland, Quoted in Robert Chambers' *The Book of Days; A Miscellany of Popular Antiquity*

Whether the same event is being described again below or whether another such catastrophic flood occurred is uncertain.

*'Thus Chat Moss burst, with an eruption of peat mud, a little before the time when Camden visited Lancashire during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, when, as he tells us, 'the great peat moss or swamp of Chat Moss burst, and sent down a torrent of peat, earth and water, into the River Irwell,' through the pretty little valley of Glazebrook'.*

Quoted in Baines, T. 'Lancashire and Cheshire' Vol.1.1867.

This description may relate to Flow Moss, one of the deeper areas of the moss whose name may describe one of its characteristics.

'Reclamation' of the mosses, through drainage schemes, commenced in 1793 with the efforts of a William Roscoe. In 1813, having proved that he could successfully carry out reclamation, leased 3,000 acres of the land from the De Traffords of Trafford Park. A Mr Edward Baines leased from Roscoe some 1,200 acres of unreclaimed land and in turn, sublet it to Mr Edward Evans, formerly of Haigh Foundry (which built steam locomotives). Evans made great progress, between 1822 and 1850, in reclaiming the heart of the mossland north of the Liverpool to Manchester railway line, using light railways and light steam engines to move material along temporary rail tracks. Much of the moss was marled by excavating the underlying alkaline clay and spreading it on the moss surface to neutralise the natural acidity of the peat.

'Night Soil' was tipped on the mossland areas during the period 1895 – 1923. This was sewage, collected by cart from toilet closets in Manchester and transported at night to barges on the Manchester Ship Canal. From here it was transhipped to Boysnope Wharf, where it was loaded onto a light railway for delivery into the moss. Tenancy agreements obliged the mossland farmers to accept such material onto their land and it is probable that huge quantities were accommodated. It is estimated that by 1880, Manchester was producing 150,000 tons of night soil annually. The practice of importing bulky organic manures into the mosses ceased in 1966.

Reclamation of the mosses accelerated through the later C19th and C20th, when the latent fertility and added nutrients from the sewage was exploited for food crops. Salads and vegetables were grown on the mosses and sent for sale in the Manchester markets. The introduction of powerful diesel-powered excavators meant that the labour-intensive excavations of the C19th were replaced by more efficient methods.

The Liverpool – Manchester railway line was opened in 1830, designed and built by George Stephenson and used as the world's first steam-powered passenger line. The traversing of Chat Moss was by far the greatest engineering challenge of this railway. Stephenson tried to drain the mosslands, but found this impossible. He then resorted to having a large number of hurdles made of timber and heather as a base for a stone and clay embankment which slowly sank into the moss until it attained equilibrium. At one point, the tipping went on for several weeks until the embankment began to rise out of the moss. This embankment is still in use and carries many times the weight of the 'Rocket' and its passenger trains.

An area of Chat Moss of 92 ha was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1989. Astley and Bedford Mosses are part of the 'Manchester Mosses' a European Union designated Special Area of Conservation

Recently a group of organisations, including Mersey Forest and Red Rose Forest, the Councils of Warrington, Wigan and Salford, Natural England North West, the North West Development Agency and a number of other parties, created a project called the 'Mosslands Action Group' to look at the mosslands. The Action Group appointed consultants to produce a 'Draft Vision for the Mosslands' to resolve current conflicts and produce a sustainable land use pattern for the area. Their report, 'The Mosslands Project – The Vision', deals with the group of mosses to the south of Wigan as well as the mosses in Warrington and Salford.,

### **Key cultural elements in the landscape:**

- An ancient mossland with much associated history
- Exceptionally valuable wildlife habitat
- Pheasant rearing and pheasant shoots
- One of the largest areas of mossland in north-west England
- C19th reclamation works – accelerated and improved throughout the century
- George Stephenson's famous Liverpool to Manchester railway, 'floated' across the mossland.

### **Landscape Sensitivity and Change**

The mossland farmland is very fertile and intensely used for arable crops, particularly potatoes and other root crops. The peat soils are unstable when structures are placed on them and cannot support weight without foundations extending down to the clay beds beneath. This accounts for the sparsity of buildings within the peat moss areas. Telegraph poles, in particular, are often seen leaning at various angles.

The flat open landscape, without the protection of hedgerows, can be prone to soil erosion under dry and windy conditions and is also visually sensitive to expansive views with little opportunity to screen features in the landscape. The mosslands are therefore also poorly equipped to absorb any large scale recreational use and would suffer from erosion of

footpaths based directly on the peat. Public footpaths within the core of the mossland are few. Only narrow cul-de-sac roads serve the isolated farmsteads.

The mossland woodlands are also very sensitive to changes in water level. The water table in the peat woodlands is normally high and can support only surface rooting species such as birch, rhododendron and goat willow. These species dominate in such areas but often die before reaching maturity if the water levels are too high.

The flat mossland landscape is also very sensitive to the visual impact of high development or mounded structures.

This core mossland area has changed dramatically over the last two hundred years, originally presenting hostile or dangerous, swampy and unhealthy areas, devoid of habitation and difficult for construction. Originally the mosslands would have been lightly wooded with birch and interspersed with heath, swamp and open water.

Progressive stages of drainage 'reclaimed' the mosses for agricultural use and much of the woodlands felled and grubbed out. The mossland landscape of today is entirely man-made. Previous peat cutting and agricultural reclamation have contrived to create today's landscape of intricate, geometric patterns consisting of open ditches, long rectangular fields and associated raised hardcore tracks forming straight line routes. Even the retained woodland areas are constrained within sharply geometric boundaries.

Drainage of the moss has shrunk the peat volumes, to the extent that where originally the moss may have been several metres deep, it is now only one or two metres deep. This has been exacerbated by wind erosion in dry periods and by the cessation of bulk organic fertiliser deposition.

Other changes include the construction of the 1830 Liverpool – Manchester railway line, which must have been a morale boost for those engaged in mossland reclamation. The introduction of light railways into the area and the marling of the mossland would also have had a substantial impact on the landscape. Some areas of Chat Moss had 'night soil' (the contents of privies in Salford and Manchester) tipped on the area, having been transported to the moss via a light railway.

### **Key elements of landscape sensitivity:**

- Very sensitive to water levels and drying out
- Prone to windblow and erosion
- Prone to subsidence of structures and buildings
- Open, unrestricted views to the north
- Potential footpath erosion on the peat
- Mossland woodlands and little frequented areas are a haven for wildlife but sensitive to disturbance
- Sensitive to the imposition of high structures and/or mounding

### **Key elements of landscape change:**

- Drainage of the mossland areas altering the landscape from marsh and wet woodland to mainly agricultural land
- Little or no change experienced to the nature of the mossland woodlands.
- Ceasing of peat cutting
- Creation of raised hardcore tracks, with assorted open drainage ditches, accessing the area
- The extraction of coal and associated poor quality land restoration
- Construction of the Liverpool – Manchester railway`

### **Recommended Management and Landscape Objectives**

Astley Moss forms the central core of the mossland landscape and is equally an important as the mossland margin. It provides a particularly quiet area of exceptional value both for agriculture and for wildlife. It is also extremely sensitive to change and should be managed carefully to maintain an environmentally stable and sustainable landscape.

Attention is drawn to 'The Mosslands Project – The Vision' produced by the Mosslands Action Group which proposes a joint vision for the wider mossland area around Chat Moss and indicates possible land uses for these areas. One issue to be addressed is the relatively low agricultural production from these areas and this will be considered as part of the agenda for The Mosslands Project.

### **Management of the landscape:**

- Retain, monitor and adjust current water levels within the mosslands to avoid fluctuations, drying out and potential wind erosion.
- Remove eyesores such as small areas of tipped materials, refuse etc. particularly when these are easily viewed from footpath routes.
- Discourage routing of overhead cables through the mossland areas
- Consider the balanced needs of both agriculture and wildlife habitat.
- Consider the merits of higher water levels in areas of less productive mossland, promoting greater habitat diversity and wildlife value.
- Retain the existing quiet and tranquil character of the mosses without encouraging additional or excessive recreational use or built development.
- Retain the basic landscape structure of the mossland fields and ditches, whilst encouraging a greater diversity of native flora to the ditches and trackway verges.