


Features



Breaking New Ground in Burwardsley: Testing the Landscape Character Assessment Guidance at Parish Level




 Burwardsley village from Pennsylvania

The value of community participation in assessing and managing the landscape has been highlighted in a recent study by the Cheshire Landscape Trust with the University of Salford, supported by the Countryside Agency. Entitled the 'Parish Landscape Statement Project,' the study seeks to test the application of the Countryside Agency/Scottish Natural Heritage Landscape Character Assessment methodology at parish level, by working with local residents in two Cheshire parishes, namely Weaverham and Burwardsley. This article focuses on the Burwardsley Landscape Statement, where the success of the project has surpassed the expectations of both the facilitators and the local community.

A Snapshot of Burwardsley

The parish of Burwardsley has a population of 170 people, occupying 76 dwellings. It lies some 10 miles south east of Chester, set amongst the undulating western slopes of the Peckforton Hills on the central section of the Mid Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. The 961 acres (389 hectares) of the parish are within an Area of Special County Value (ASCV) and within a Core Area for Nature Conservation, as identified by the Cheshire Life EConet Project.



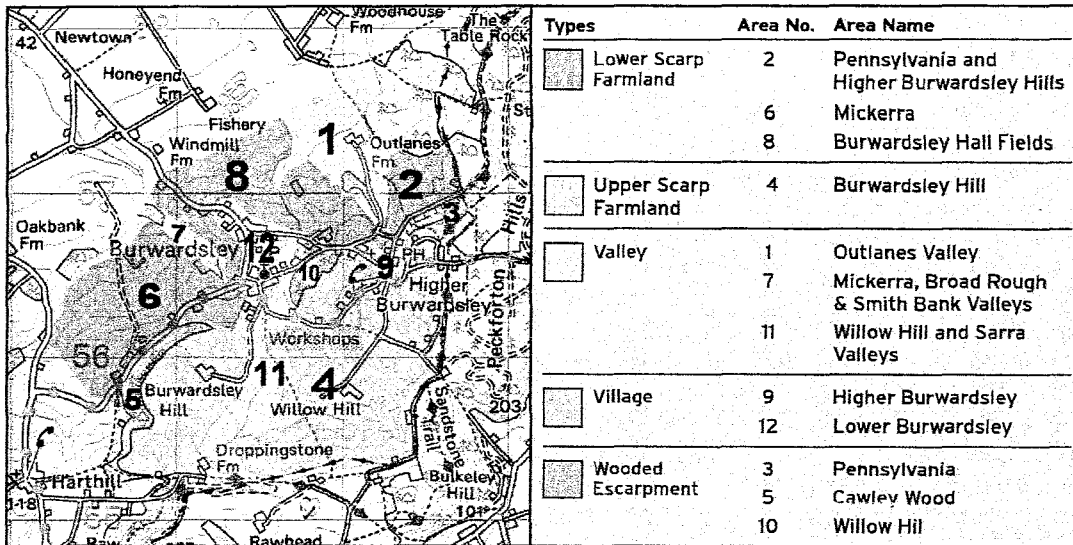
 Aerial view of Burwardsley

Land ownership in the parish still follows the traditional English model, with around 90% of the land forming part of two family estates: the Peckforton Estate, which owns most of the land in the north east corner and to the east of the village, and the Bolesworth Estate, which owns over 80% of the land to the south, west and north. This continuity of ownership has helped to prevent over-development in the parish, and moreover, plays a key role in shaping the character of the local landscape.

Evolution of the Project

In June 2002, the Cheshire Landscape Trust (CLT), the project coordinator and facilitator, approached Burwardsley Parish Council to invite the participation of parishioners in the Parish Landscape Statement Project. This was agreed, following which a working group was established, jointly facilitated by John Gittins from CLT and Dr Philip James from the University of Salford.

Following an open community workshop in October 2002, the extended working group was sub-divided into separate working teams, each one assigned a working area, based upon local knowledge and expertise. Once briefed in the methodology, the teams were equipped with maps, field sheets and cameras, and under the



■ Burwardsley landscape character types and areas

careful guidance of the facilitators, set about undertaking a Landscape Character Assessment of the parish.

Fifteen months and many a lively discussion later, the working group produced a draft of Burwardsley's Landscape Character Assessment (LCA). The group had identified 5 Landscape Character Types and 12 Landscape Character Areas in the parish (see map), which they used to develop a Landscape Strategy. The views on the Landscape Strategy were sought from a range of stakeholders - including parishioners, property owners, regular visitors to the village and neighbouring parishioners - at a public exhibition and workshop held in January 2004.

Developing a Strategy

Burwardsley's Landscape Strategy is a statement of what change the parish considers to be desirable. As such, it provides a series of general statements for the parish as a whole, followed by more detailed recommendations relating to each of the five Landscape Character Types. Key aims include:

- To conserve, maintain and enhance a distinctive landscape of small and medium sized fields, hedges, hedgerow trees, dry stone walls, ponds and natural watercourses.
- To conserve and maintain the variety of land use (arable, grazing and rough grazing).
- To provide a sustainable natural and man-made landscape for the parish as a whole
- To conserve and maintain a biologically diverse countryside throughout the parish that will create a framework for the welfare of the community, local agriculture, rural tourism, recreation and wildlife habitats.
- To balance the needs of the local community and those using the countryside for tourism and leisure.

- To conserve and maintain the narrow and sinuous network of roads, verges and associated hedgerows within the parish.
- To create a vibrant village community allowing for limited population growth.

The Landscape Character Assessment and Strategy are to be incorporated into a Village Design Statement. Discussions between the Cheshire Landscape Trust, the working group and the local planning authorities indicate that this statement is likely to be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance in support of the Chester District Local Plan.

Reflection and Discussion

The Parish Landscape Statement Project is drawing to a close in Burwardsley, yet the enthusiasm it has harnessed will no doubt remain in the village for many years to come. A final exhibition and workshop was held on 31st January, which proved to be a resounding success - not only in terms of the number of attendees (roughly 40% of the total village population), but also in terms of the quality



■ Parishioners at the Burwardsley LCA presentation



of the outcomes, and the clear sense of ownership and pride amongst the local participants. Here follows some excerpts of discussion with members of the Burwardsley working group:

George Bramall - Working Group Leader

"We did it our way, with a little help from John and Philip. The local landscape is already well defined, so it leant itself well to the Landscape Character Assessment methodology, which was fairly easy to pick up once we'd all had a go at it. The working group was made up of a good cross-section of people, including those born and bred in the village, as well as newcomers, visitors and people from nearby parishes. To some extent, I think that's why it worked so well, because we had a good mix of new and old perspectives and values. Most importantly, perhaps, we all recognise that the village has got to change, whilst retaining its unique character and sense of community - so in many ways, this is just the beginning. The working group will certainly continue to feedback into the strategies, and now that the initial project has been put to bed, we'd like to look at a broader scale involving all the local parishes along this section of the Sandstone Ridge, and tie them all together. That would really be something!"

Audrey Ryder - Chairman of Parish Council

"A great deal has come out of the project in terms of community spirit and identity. The methodology was a lot to take on board to start with, but everyone has been very enthusiastic about it, and in the end it's turned out to be a fabulous success. We've all learnt so much more about the village, and I think it helped to inspire people from the neighbouring parishes to do the same, as there's been a lot of local interest. The next step is to use this information to help manage future changes, as we need to increase our population in order to maintain a viable and vibrant village."

Valerie Henderson - Working Group Participant

"We've had some lively discussions over the course of the project, and I think everyone has ended up closer together as a result. Best of all, we now have a core group of local people who can help out with future work, and encourage others to get involved, so there's plenty of life left in it. We realise that the parish has got to change, and probably faster than we would like, but if we can preserve the underlying character ... that's the most important thing."



Parishioners enjoy an alternative view of the landscape, presented by Philip James from the University of Salford



John Gittins - Project Facilitator (Cheshire Landscape Trust)

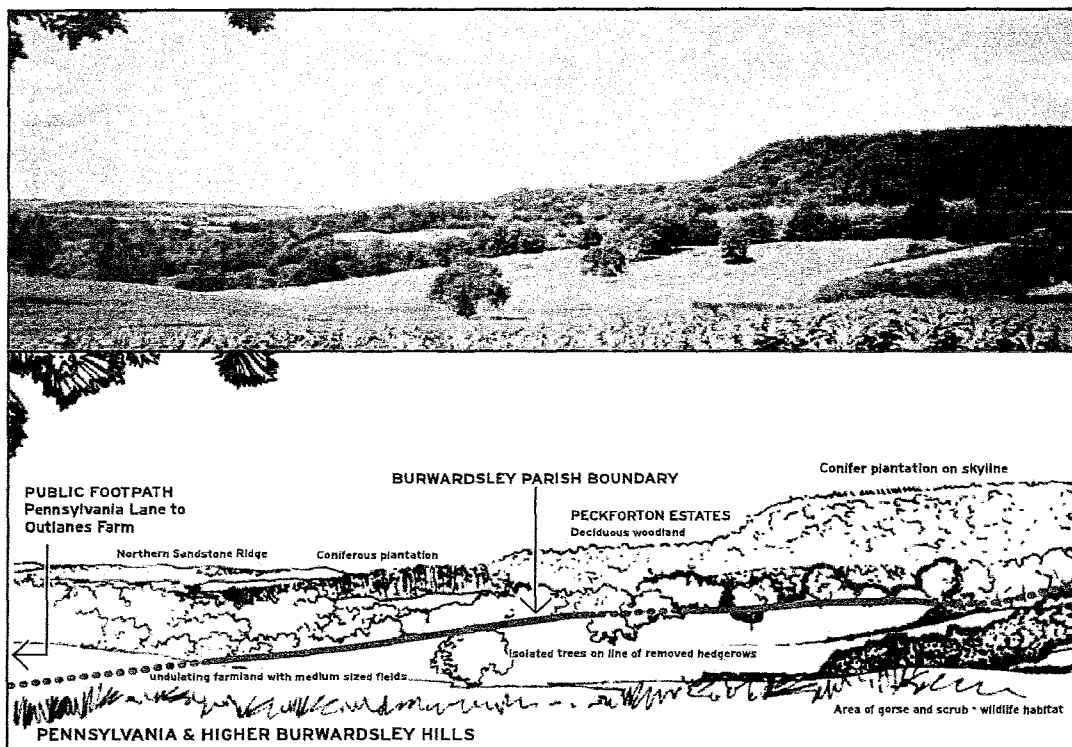
"It's been an ongoing learning process. Working at grass roots means that you have to be a good listener and careful guide, while at the same time, you have to be able to stand back and not impose your own views. In short, it has to be a win-win situation for everyone involved - the community, the estate, the local authorities and so on. That said, Philip and I have been very careful in facilitating the project, and to a large extent, we've been able to pull back from it and let the working group do it on their own - especially at the Character Area level, where the value of local sense of place really comes into its own. I suppose it's a case of the age-old question, who are the experts? Certainly, local people with local knowledge can be considered as experts, and by the same token, I think that Philip and I have gained a sense of insiderness, or belonging, that we would otherwise have

missed out on. Of course, the whole process has been very time consuming, and on occasion, somewhat difficult to fit easily into people's lives. Nonetheless, we have proved that the Landscape Character Assessment Guidance can be worked at parish level, so in that sense, it's been an investment that has rewarded everyone involved."

Further Information

'Preparing a Parish Landscape Statement' and 'Burwardsley Parish Landscape Statement' will be available to download in pdf format on the Countryside Agency's website by late summer (the weblink will be published in a forthcoming issue of CCN News).

For more information about the Parish Landscape Statement Project, contact the Cheshire Landscape Trust on 01244 376 333, or email cheshire@landscapetrust.fsnet.co.uk



Key Characteristics

- Undulating land with medium sized fields of improved grassland and significant areas of gorse.
- A public footpath crosses the area which also contains several scattered properties.
- The area is rich in wildlife