

## Chapter 3: Features of the Leeds Landscape

### Introduction

- 3.1 As illustrated in Chapter 2, both physical and human influences have helped shape the basic structure of the area around Leeds. These influences have led to the gradual evolution and development of many landscape elements or features, which together contribute to the character and sense of place of the Leeds landscape. This chapter draws out the most significant of these elements, in terms of farmland, semi-natural habitats such as woodland, heathland and moor, amenity and semi-natural grassland, rivers and wetlands, and buildings and infrastructure.

### Farmland

- 3.2 The broad patterns of agriculture and farmland in the district largely reflect land quality, topography and underlying geology. To the north and west of Leeds the higher lying and lower quality of land, particularly Grade 3 and Grade 4 land (MAFF Classification Map 1977), typically supports an agricultural regime of predominately pasture and livestock farming. The character of the pastoral farmland typically consists of small to medium sized fields, bounded by a mix of hedgerows and traditional drystone walls. To the east, the agricultural regime changes into a lowland cereal based regime in the better quality (mainly Grades 2 and 3), lower lying north easterly and easterly areas of the district. Much of the farmland here is typically characterised by large hedged fields. To the south of Leeds, the farmland is largely dominated by the needs of the urban area and comprises a mix of land quality and activities. The main agricultural regimes include market gardening, vegetable growing and rhubarb production.

### Semi-natural habitats

- 3.3 The Leeds district contains a variety of natural and semi-natural habitats, many of which make an important contribution to the character of the landscape and are important for their nature conservation interest. This varied pattern of vegetation cover is a reflection to some extent of the wide diversity of geology and topography within the district, but has also been heavily influenced by man's activities. The importance of many of these areas of semi-natural habitat has already been recognised, with 16 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), 31 Sites of Ecological and Geological Importance (SEGIs) two Local Nature Reserves (LNRs), and numerous locally valuable areas, designated within the Leeds district. The most important types of habitat found within the district are summarised below, highlighting the contribution that the habitat makes to the landscape.

#### *Woodland*

- 3.4 Woodland is a landscape feature which occurs throughout the Leeds district, amounting to approximately 2,650 hectares of a total area of 552 square km, (Leeds Draft Countryside Strategy 1993). This equates to 4.7% of land cover within the district, of which 1,120 hectares (42%) is deciduous, with the remainder being mainly mixed and approximately 5% coniferous. With the exception of some of the highest hill tops, most of the area would have been wooded in prehistoric times although centuries of cultivation have meant that most woodland is now confined to steep slopes such as the Chevin, within large parkland estates such as Harewood, Bramham and Parlington, or along river valleys, such as Meanwood and Calverley.

- 3.5 The influence of geology and soils on woodland types, although still detectable, has been lessened in the Leeds district due to modification by man. The majority of the woods have undergone management at some time and many originate from planted stock. These planted woodlands generally occur in regular, rectilinear blocks or discrete stands, separated abruptly from their surroundings by stone walls or fences. They also tend to be dominated by one or two species such as sycamore and beech and occasionally form an even aged canopy. A large proportion of these woods are under private ownership, with many being part of the large parkland estates in the east of the district. Coniferous plantations also occur within the Leeds district, although to a relatively small extent. These woods tend to be of low ecological value, their dense and dark character combining with the effects of a monoculture to discourage colonisation by plants and animals.
- 3.6 There are however, a number of woodland areas present within the district which are shown on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey maps of 1810/1830. Some of these woodlands are ancient woodlands such as Parlington Hollins, West Wood, Calverley Woods and Middleton Woods and have had continuous woodland cover since at least 1600. A provisional inventory of Ancient Woodland in West Yorkshire indicates that the total area of ancient woodland sites in the Leeds district is less than 540 hectares, equivalent to around 20% of the woodland. These woodlands are particularly important in terms of nature conservation, supporting a more diverse range of plants, birds and mammals than more recent regenerated or planted woods. Ancient woodlands often contain important historical and landscape features such as boundary banks and ancient pollards.
- 3.7 Other areas of old but not necessarily 'ancient' woodland have had their natural growth of trees replaced by plantations of broadleaf, mixed or coniferous trees, some of which took place in response to wartime timber demands. Spontaneous regeneration, of species such as oak, birch, sycamore and ash, has also taken place in many of the woodlands, with the nature conservation value varying with the proportion of broad leaved trees and the degree to which natural regeneration has occurred. In landscape terms, replanted 'old' woodland maintains the continuity of tree cover, which in other places has been lost. Where replanting with broadleaves has taken place, the overall impact on the landscape may be negligible, but where solid ranks of dark conifers replace more open and varied woods, the impact can be significant.

#### *Heathland and moor*

- 3.8 Heathland is a rare habitat type within the Leeds District, occurring in isolated locations such as the Chevin and on the upland area of Hawksworth Moor, which forms part of the larger Rombalds Moor. In landscape terms, the dense swathes of heather, along with cotton grass, purple moor grass, and crowberry, form a colourful contrast with the surrounding areas of improved and semi-improved pasture, particularly where they are separated by the strong line of a drystone wall. The importance of the moorland areas in terms of their nature conservation value is reflected in the designation of Hawksworth Moor as a Site of Ecological and Geological Importance.

#### *Amenity and semi-natural grassland*

- 3.9 The Leeds district contains extensive areas of amenity grassland in the form of sports pitches, golf courses, and parklands, such as at Roundhay, Temple Newsam, Middleton Park and along the green corridors such as Wyke Beck. These are located predominantly within and around the fringes of the main urban area, but also lie scattered throughout the countryside and adjacent to the many small towns and villages which lie within the district. The predominant vegetation within these amenity areas is short mown grassland, with occasional shrubs and trees. These areas provide an important recreational resource, particularly where they occur around the fringes of urban areas.

However, in rural locations large areas of amenity grassland with ornamental or exotic tree species, for example in golf courses, can lend a manicured sometimes alien feel to the landscape, particularly if poorly designed. This is often the case in the countryside around Leeds.

- 3.10 Small pockets of semi-natural grassland occur within the district, their species composition varying with the underlying geology, between the acidic rocks of the Millstone Grit and the base rich soils of the limestone belt. Ruderal or marginal grassland habitats also occur throughout the district, mainly in areas of past human disturbance. Many of these types of habitats exist within the green corridors or areas of encapsulated countryside which extend far into the heart of the urban area, such as the Kirkstall and Meanwood valleys. They also occur along railway embankment, and cutting sides and can form important linear 'semi-natural' landscape features within a cultivated landscape. Where these areas of ruderal grassland are beginning to develop scrub and tree cover due to natural regeneration, this can further increase their prominence within the landscape. This type of vegetation also occurs where land has been disturbed, due to past industrial or mineral extraction activities, for example in the Lower Aire Valley and in small pockets of land where constraints such as steep gradients or drainage problems preclude other types of land use.

#### *Rivers and wetlands*

- 3.11 Rivers and wetlands are major features within the Leeds district, occurring mainly along the valleys of the Wharfe, the Aire and the Calder. To the north, the meandering River Wharfe forms much of the district's northern boundary, except where it cuts through the Magnesian Limestone Belt to the east of Wetherby. The River Aire and the adjoining Leeds-Liverpool canal and the Aire and Calder navigation cut right through the centre of Leeds, from the Calverley and Kirkstall valleys in the west to the Lower Aire Valley in the east. The Calder forms part of the south-eastern boundary. Numerous tributaries feed into these two main watercourses, their valley topography and bankside vegetation forming important features within the landscape.
- 3.12 Areas of still water are also major landscape features within the Leeds district as well as providing important habitats for wildlife and areas for recreation. Many of these wetland areas are by-products of industrial activity. such as mill ponds and reservoirs, for example at Eccup, which were purpose built to generate power or store water. Others have been created by mining or quarrying, such as Fairburn Ings along the Lower Aire Valley, and today form important habitats for wildlife, particularly birds.

#### **Industrial, disused and restored land**

- 3.13 There are areas around Leeds which remain despoiled or degraded by industrial activity and mineral extraction, particularly opencast coal mining. Such activities have led to the loss of landscape features such as hedgerows, mature vegetation, and topographical and historical features. They have also led to the development of many landscape features or elements, such as spoil tips, which are characteristic of areas such as the Lower Aire Valley. Where these areas have naturally re-colonised with vegetation they can often be varied and rich in species and provide important landscape features in their own right. In restoring such areas, there are considerable opportunities for enhancement, whether it be to agricultural, nature conservation or recreational after-uses.

## **Buildings and infrastructure**

- 3.14 The diversity of the Leeds landscape is also reflected in the diversity in the character of settlements and the built environment. Although the main urban concentration is centred around the Leeds, Horsforth and Pudsey area, there are also a number of free standing market towns and settlements. Many of these such as Otley are agricultural in origin, having originally been established as market towns. Some, such as Scarcroft, Thorne and Boston Spa have expanded into commuter or dormitory settlement', with only a few residents still engaged in farming practices. Others, such as Ledsham and Harewood have experienced more modest change. The settlements in the south and south-eastern parts of the district, such as Garforth, Allerton Bywater, Great Preston, Rothwell and Morley have arisen largely from mining and industrial activities such as textile manufacture.
- 3.15 The diverse geology around Leeds means that building materials change throughout the district, from the creamy coloured stone and red tiled roofs in the north east of the area, through the harsher Millstone Grit of the urban and industrial area. The Millstone Grit, commonly used as a building material in and around Leeds, is architecturally the most important as well as topographically being the most characteristic of all the rocks in the district. Although the gritstone is a tough and coarse stone to work, it has been used from earliest times in large structures, notably long bridges across rivers and many castles and churches. In later years, the grits tone formed the basis of the rapid expansion of urban Leeds, with many warehouses, mills, factories, town halls, hospitals, and large mansions, all built largely of this coarse stone.
- 3.16 In the eastern area of the district, the Magnesian Limestone has had a long history of use as a building stone, and has been used in the building of the many large houses and churches. Country houses such as Ledston Hall, the churches and cottages in Aberford, Ledsham, Bramham and Boston Spa are built of this softer stone, although since the Industrial Revolution, brick has supplanted the traditional stone as a building material. Brick is now used extensively, along with a range of other materials, in modern residential, commercial and industrial development.
- 3.17 One of the major landscape features in the Leeds district is the extensive area of historic parklands, both around the urban fringe, such as Temple Newsam and Roundhay, and further afield, such as Harewood and Bramham. All of these parklands were designed around large houses or mansions, the majority of which still stand today, although their original use may have changed. The largest of the estates, Harewood and Bramham, were designed during the 18th century, when great fortunes were being made by landowners benefiting from the exploitation of coal and other minerals on their land, or by the industrialists owning factories in the major urban areas.
- 3.18 One of the most significant developments in the 20th century has been the construction of a major road and motorway network within and around Leeds. The canal and rail systems of the 18th and 19th centuries tended to follow the valleys and helped concentrate residential and industrial areas along the valley bottoms. The modern day road network does not follow such constraints, and major roads and motorways around Leeds, such as the M1, the M62 and the M621, now form prominent features. High tension power lines and pylons are another aspect of 20th century infrastructure, which have become prominent elements within the Leeds landscape.