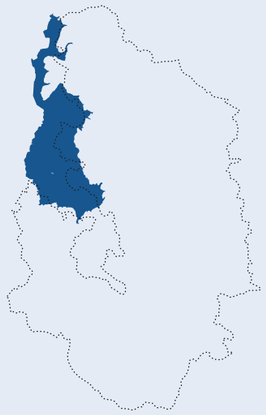
The Dark Peak Western Fringe

Pob Green Uppermill © Peak District National Park Authority

Introduction

The Dark Peak Western Fringe comprises the sloping and lower lying landscapes of the Goyt, Etherow and Tame valleys. It contrasts with the Dark Peak in that, although it includes enclosed moorland landscapes, it is more settled and has been cultivated to a much greater degree than is the case in the adjoining wilder uplands. Equally, the early industrial character of the former mill settlements is very different from that of the adjoining coalfields in the Manchester Pennine Fringe. Mills are a prominent feature of this area exploiting local power sources: firstly employing the streams running off the Dark Peak for power and from the 18th century using some of the coal mined locally.



Physical influences

As in the other areas surrounding the Dark Peak, the physical structure of the Dark Peak Western Fringe is strongly influenced by the underlying geology. This comprises a sequence of shales and gritstones belonging to the Millstone Grit series, which have been eroded in different ways to produce a distinctly undulating topography. The upstanding, higher ground tends to be formed from gritstone, while the valleys and other lower lying areas are cut into the underlying, softer shales. These beds then pass beneath the more rolling Lancashire Coal Measures that extend from the west towards the lower slopes of the Dark Peak particularly between Glossop and Whaley Bridge. The Coal Measures consist of interbedded grey shales, siltstones and sandstones with occasional beds of coal and ironstone.

The steep slopes of the adjoining Dark Peak give way to lower lying valleys and adjoining floodplains in the valley bottoms of the Dark Peak Western Fringe. Deep and narrow, steep sided cloughs, often a characteristic feature within this sloping ground, carry water that has drained off the moorland summits down into larger rivers, such as the Goyt, Tame and Etherow.

Glaciation had a strong impact on the form of this landscape. During the last ice age, the Dark Peak was a peri-glacial tundra with snowfields and frozen ground. The Peak District Western Fringe was influenced by this glaciation with the erosion of ice stream valleys and the deposition of significant deposits of glacial till. During the peri-glacial conditions wind eroded the Millstone Grit creating a dust, known as loess, which was deposited across the Peak District.

Ecological influences

For the most part the soils of the Dark Peak Western Fringe are seasonally waterlogged, gleyed soils found over the shale beds on lower lying land, where they are used for improved permanent pasture. These are often associated with deep, loamy and clayey soils that have developed on glacial deposits and in places on alluvial deposits on the valley floors. On the upper slopes of the gritstone hills shallow, in places impoverished, mineral soils can be found which tend to produce agriculturally poor pasture land containing occasional rough patches and remnant moorland vegetation that reflect the original semi-natural character of these landscapes. On hill summits such soils are often impoverished and have peaty topsoils, giving rise to patches of enclosed acid grassland and moor often used for rough grazing.

On the enclosed moorland heather dominates, with varying amounts of bilberry, cowberry and crowberry. These upland heaths support birds such as red grouse, meadow pipit and curlew. Where there has been prolonged grazing acid grassland has replaced the heathland. Associated areas of bracken are important in places for breeding whinchat. Acid flushes have developed locally, with carpets of sphagnum moss, sedges and rushes.

Fast flowing streams have created deeply incised cloughs and valleys whose sides are clothed with acid grassland and bracken, with occasional relic heathland vegetation such as bilberry. The numerous flushes and springs arising at the junctions of gritstone and shale on clough sides support particularly botanically rich communities whose species composition varies according to water chemistry. The banks of clough streams and upland rivers support small numbers of grey wagtail, while wet streamside shale crags are often rich in mosses, liverworts, ferns and insect life. Some cloughs and moorland slopes support areas of upland sessile oak wood. Associated species include birch with holly or hazel in the under storey. On the more base rich soils these woodlands can support a variety of ground flora, including dog's mercury and yellow archangel on shale soils and wavy hair-grass and bilberry on the more base poor soils. Characteristic birds of these woodlands include pied flycatcher, redstart and wood warbler.

In lower areas, as the cloughs widen, the lower valley slopes are characterised by enclosed land on slowly permeable, seasonally waterlogged soils that support some unimproved pastures and hay meadows. The former typically comprise acid grassland dominated by fescues and bents, with herbs such as tormentil and heath bedstraw and patches of gorse and bracken, while the hay meadows provide a range of flora such as yellow rattle, knapweed, eyebright, bird's foot trefoil and common cat's ear. On less well drained land, where the ground is wetter, the pastures often support soft rush and can provide a breeding ground for wading birds, notably lapwing, curlew and snipe.

Human influences

The Dark Peak is renowned for its remote, isolated moorland summits, however, the lowlands of the Western Fringe have been settled for a long time: land has been cultivated for agriculture, mainly pastoral land uses with some small scale quarrying and coal mining.

Fast flowing rivers have been used as both water supply and to power early industry.

There is a Roman fort at Melandra Castle, to the north of Gamesley, and no doubt there were Romano-British farmsteads scattered in the valley around, but little archaeological evidence for these has been found. During medieval times, much of the Dark Peak Western Fringe was managed as a Royal Hunting Forest with severe penalties for trespass or poaching. The Royal Forest of the Peak ran through the southern parts of this fringe area, from the Etherow southwards and the Goyt eastwards, and was managed as a hunting forest with Chapel-en-le-Frith as one of the administration centres for this. Indeed, the name means Chapel in the Forest and reflects the building of a chapel by foresters during the medieval period.

The upper slopes of the landscape are settled with occasional, dispersed gritstone farmsteads associated with pasturing, with improved pastures and enclosure, while small hamlets are found further down in the less exposed, but wetter, valleys. Dispersed farmsteads were common here prior to industrialisation and are sometimes located close to coal mining and small scale quarrying which would presumably have played a part in the local economy before the 19th century. Relatively large scale quarrying was carried out on the moorland and slopes, such as at Chinley Churn and Cown Edge, while coal mining was widely carried out in the area, from Saddleworth southwards through Glossop and New Mills to Whaley Bridge, with particularly important evidence surviving from early mines at Ollersett Moor.

The river valleys, that higher up the slopes consist of relatively undisturbed clough heads, widen out into land that has long been managed for both stock pasturing, settlement and industry. The valley slopes and bottoms have been used as a resource for grazing and stock rearing. The fast flowing rivers provided power and water for, at first small scale and then larger, industrial sites. Such was the case around Uppermill and New Mills where, over time, many mills were eventually located along the riverbanks and included cotton mills, woollen mills, dyeing and bleaching works, paper mills and print works. As urban populations surrounding the Dark Peak increased, people settled mainly around the lower lying land of the valleys near the larger mills, with hamlets growing into towns associated with the growing industry. For example, Glossop originated as one of several closely-spaced but small medieval hamlets with open fields which were partly subsumed in the 19th century by urban development. Routes cross over the moorland through this fringe landscape and other routes run along the valleys, joining up fringe settlements and providing access to wider markets outside of the area.

Although these lower lying areas are on the fringe of the Dark Peak, the development which has taken place here is closely linked to the opportunities provided by the Dark Peak landscapes, for instance building materials from gritstone, and water power. The adjacent coal measures meant that these settlements were ideally placed to exploit two resources: the water running off the Dark Peak and the coal that existed around the mills and in mines further west in the lowlands, particularly to the north-west around Bolton and Oldham.

This location, at the interface between two significant topographical regions, gives these fringe landscapes a unique character different from those further east within the Dark Peak and those further west.

Sense of place

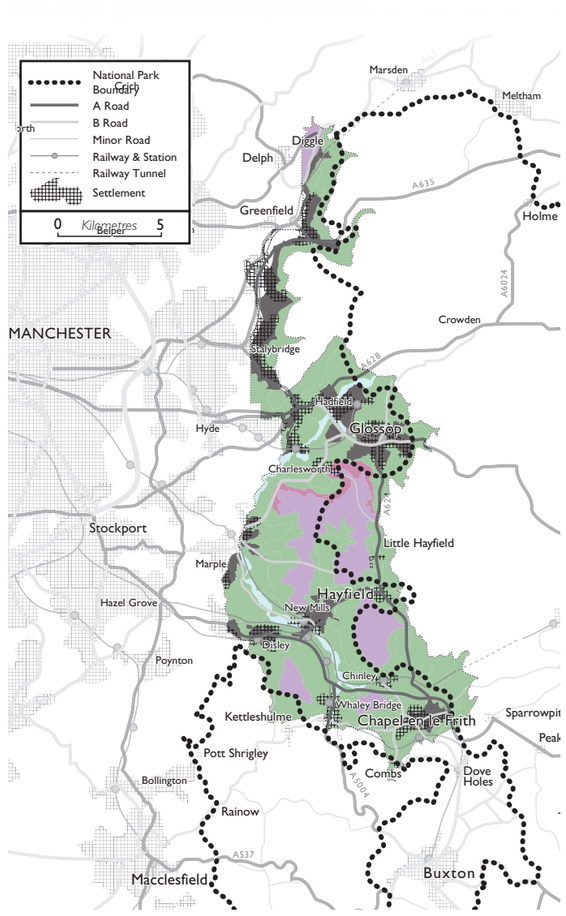
Some areas of remote moorland in the Dark Peak Western Fringe are very picturesque, such as Dovestones. The landscape becomes more enclosed and pastoral away from the remote moorland tops of the Dark Peak. Within the National Park the landscape remains peaceful but the sense of remoteness and isolation diminishes as the landscape becomes more intimate and settled with gritstone walled enclosures and isolated gritstone farmsteads, often with associated field barns and sheep pens. The improved fields and level of tree cover increase towards the valley bottoms creating variety in the landscape and intermingling with gritstone buildings that become more dominant towards the main areas of settlement. Relict patches of moorland vegetation, such as bilberry, are often found along field boundaries and verges.

In places the landscape remains unsettled, particularly on steeper ground and up into the narrow, steep cloughs where access is limited. These locations can be important habitats for nesting birds and other species.

Settlements tend to be larger here than in the core of the Dark Peak, with several small urban centres including Glossop, Stalybridge and New Mills. These settlements, often with gritstone terraced properties are strongly associated with past industry, and include old mills and remnant industrial sites. Although these settlements often have an industrial association they also have a strong link with the Dark Peak. Long distance views west, towards these settlements, and Manchester and the Cheshire Plain are important.

The Dark Peak Western Fringe can be sub-divided into a number of different landscape types, each of which is characterised by a particular aspect of the wider Dark Peak Western Fringe character. They have been defined by their broadly repeating patterns of natural elements and cultural factors:

- Moorland Slopes & Cloughs
- Enclosed Gritstone Uplands
- Valley Pastures With Industry
- Riverside Meadows

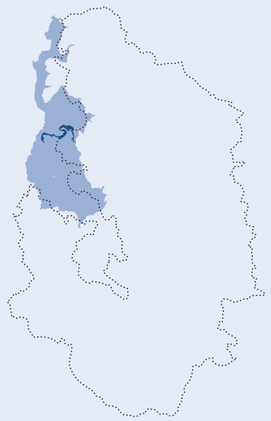


Moorland slopes & cloughs LCT

Coombes Edge, Charlesworth © Peak District National Park Authority

Steep slopes and cloughs rising to precipitous gritstone edges and scree slopes, with rough grassland and heather moor grazed by sheep. This is largely an exposed, unsettled landscape with views over lower ground.

This landscape occurs in one location within the Dark Peak Western Fringe, in the west of the area, along Coombes Edge and around Long Clough.



Key characteristics

- Steep slopes and cloughs, in places rising to precipitous edges with prominent gritstone outcrops, boulders and scree slopes
- Rough acid grassland and heather moorland grazed by sheep
- Exposed views over lower ground, sometimes limited by clough sides

Geology, landform and soils

This is a sloping landscape, strongly influenced by the underlying Millstone Grit which forms the upper slopes fringing the moorland summits. The resulting landform creates a sense of elevation with panoramic views over surrounding countryside and settlements. The slopes were eroded by freeze-thaw processes, land slips and down washing from streams. There are some outcrops of gritstone, on steeper slopes most notably where it forms distinct edges with precipitous rock faces as at Coombes Edge.

Soils are coarse, loamy and very acid over the gritstone bedrock. Surface water drainage is often impeded by the formation of a thin ironpan and in less steeply sloping areas the soils can have a wet peaty surface horizon.

Species and habitats

This is a landscape with patches of semi-natural vegetation with a mixture of heather and bilberry, and acid grassland where mat grass and purple moor grasses are dominant.

Upper slopes and steep clough sides have gritstone outcrops. Some support fern banks while on land that is inaccessible to grazing, such as ledges, tall vegetation species can flourish.

Tree cover

Grazing on these moorland slopes has restricted tree regeneration, resulting in low levels of tree cover over much of the area. However, scattered trees and patches of scrub occur within cloughs and occasional small coniferous plantation woodlands are found on moorland slopes.

Land use

Owing to its elevation and poor quality soils, this is a marginal agricultural landscape used primarily as rough grazing for sheep; there are some improved pastures but these tend to be small and localised. The slopes support a range of recreation such as walking on footpaths and bridleways that cross this character type, particularly along Coombes Edge.

Enclosure

Not all of this landscape character type is enclosed reflecting its steep nature. Of the areas that are enclosed, their date is uncertain as there is no map coverage before the 19th century. Fields are generally irregular in shape and enclosed by gritstone drystone walls.

Settlement, buildings and monuments

This is a very sparsely settled landscape with only occasional isolated gritstone farmsteads with stone tile roofs on lower slopes.

Transport, access and recreation

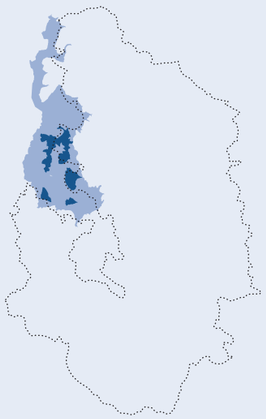
The moorland slopes and cloughs are largely inaccessible to transport with the exception of routes that cross over the moors, such as Monks Road, which may have Roman origins. There are smaller tracks throughout the landscape mainly providing access to farms. Braided hollow-ways provide evidence that this landscape was once more widely travelled through. There are pathways and bridleways, often following the contours, particularly around the western facing slopes. Some of this landscape character type is access land.

Enclosed gritstone upland LCT

Knarrs Nook nr Hollingworth Head © Peak District National Park Authority

An enclosed upland landscape associated with high, gently undulating upland tops. This is a landscape of isolated stone farmsteads, straight roads and regular fields enclosed by drystone walls. Patches of remnant moorland vegetation are a feature in places within this landscape character type.

This landscape occurs on the edge of the moorland core, on the western margin of the Peak District, on the uplands centred on New Mills and to the west of Hayfield.



Key characteristics

- High rolling upland with some steeper slopes with localised pockets of peat which support remnant patches of rough land with bracken and gorse, some heather and bilberry
- Regular pattern of medium to large pastoral fields and rough grazing enclosed by gritstone walls
- Straight roads with wide verges of grass and, in some places, heather
- Scattered gritstone farmsteads with stone slate roofs and some relict quarry and coal mining sites. Trees often grouped around farmsteads

Geology, landform and soils

This landscape is associated with a high, gently undulating gritstone upland top. The underlying bedrock is Millstone Grit, which is often exposed as rock outcrops particularly on the steeper slopes where it sometimes forms small gritstone edges.

The variable nature of the geology and landform gives rise to a variety of soil types ranging from free draining podzols on steeper slopes to wetter, more peaty soils on gentler summits. All the soils are characterised by their impoverished, acidic origin.

Species and habitats

Although most of the land is now improved for pasture, many patches of semi-natural vegetation still exist along verges, on steeper slopes and even as isolated patches within some fields. There is moorland vegetation in some locations, in places on Marley Moor. Heath-associated species, such as heather, bilberry and gorse, are a common feature in places.

Where the soils are wetter, species such as purple moor grass tend to be more common. There are some patches of soft rush on the wetter soils, which often support small populations of breeding birds such as snipe.

Tree cover

Sheep grazing has restricted tree growth and regeneration so tree cover is limited in this landscape. However, there are occasional tree groups of mainly broadleaved species such as oak, ash and sycamore. Tree groups are planted adjacent to some farmsteads to create shelter around properties. There are some shelterbelts and occasional blocks of 19th or 20th century coniferous plantation woodland within this type.

Land use

This is a landscape of mostly improved permanent pasture with sheep and cattle grazing and some rough grazing. There are some reseeded grass leys and very occasional arable fields. However, the soils are mostly nutrient poor. Acid grassland exists where the soils have not been improved and some fields are dominated by rushes or are reverting to moorland habitats providing ecological interest.

Historically, there was quarrying and mining associated with this landscape. At Chinley Churn there are particularly extensive relict quarries where surface quarrying and underground stone extraction was carried out; the Cracken Edge workings are a fine example, and remains of structures and machinery, winding inclines and other features are still in place. Historically, the landscape would also have supported coal mining as around Whaley Moor, Aspenshaw and Ludworth Intakes. There are extensive mining remains at Ollersett Moor dating from the early 18th to late 19th centuries.

Enclosure

The land here was enclosed from upland waste and commons. The date of the enclosure in this landscape varies with some ancient, irregular enclosure that pre-dates mid 17th century historical mapping, as for example to the north-west of Hayfield. Later enclosure is more common. Some was probably enclosed prior to the late 18th century as part of private agreements, other areas could well have been enclosed as late as the 19th century.

Drystone gritstone walls are the prominent enclosing element, particularly on higher ground, although in some places enclosure is created by hedgerows and fencing; this tends to occur towards the fringes of the landscape and not on the higher ground.

Settlement, buildings and monuments

Settlement tends to consist of isolated gritstone farmsteads with stone slate roofs, often dating from the 18th century onwards, when much of this landscape was enclosed. Settlements often use the natural land form for weather protection. Higher up, towards where the enclosure gives way to the open moorland, the landscape is largely unsettled.

Transport, access and recreation

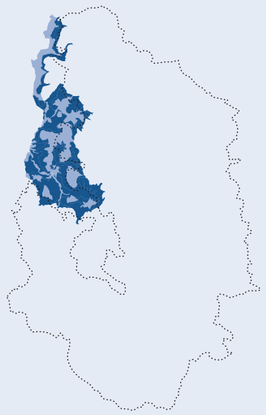
This is a landscape with limited vehicular access with a few roads and tracks associated with farmsteads. Within this landscape type there are older routes and names such as Monks Road suggest historical context associated with landowners such as those at medieval abbeys. The Cown Edge Way may have early origins, and an Anglian cross and waymarker flank this route near Ludworth Mor. There is a network of footpaths through this landscape including the Pennine Bridleway and some small areas of access land.

Valley pastures with industry LCT

Pastoral valleys with industry © Ivan Gajos, Countryscape

A small scale, settled pastoral landscape on undulating lower valley slopes. There are filtered views through scattered hedgerows and dense streamside trees. Stone built terraced housing on lower slopes is associated with historic mills. There are dispersed gritstone farmsteads as well as small clusters of farms with associated dwellings. Pastoral farmland is bounded by hedgerows and drystone walls.

This landscape character type exists as a large area running from the north to the south of the Dark Peak Western Fringe running from Bleak Hey to Stalybridge and from Arnfield to Chapel-en-le-Frith.



Key characteristics

- A low lying undulating valley topography, rising towards adjacent higher ground
- Network of streams and localised damp hollows with millponds and leats
- Small to medium sized pastoral fields enclosed by hedgerows and drystone walls
- Trees are dense along watercourses and scattered along hedgerows and around settlements
- Dispersed settlement with isolated farmsteads and small clusters of dwellings
- Stone built terraced housing associated with historic mills
- Narrow winding lanes, sunken on slopes

Geology, landform and soils

An undulating lower valley floor landscape with rounded hills and shallow to steep valley sides, incised by steeper cloughs in places. The underlying geology is of interbedded Millstone Grit combined with shales and siltstones. To the south of the area, below Glossop and westwards, the coal measures influence the underlying geology.

The coal measures consist of interbedded grey shales, siltstones and sandstones with occasional beds of coal and ironstone (the latter dispersed through particular beds of other rocks). The valley is mostly covered with glacial till deposits. Where the river level has altered, a series of terraces have been cut into alluvial deposits.

Soils are characterised by base poor, gleyed soils which are waterlogged, lacking oxygen and nutrients. Where the soils are permanently wet the horizons tend to be rich in organic matter and often intergrading into peat deposits. Along river channels soils tend to be alluvium, created and carried by relict rivers.

Species and habitats

This is an agricultural landscape with limited biodiversity value as much of the land is improved, although there are occasional, isolated patches of unimproved grassland which enhances biodiversity. Mixed species hedgerows provide an important habitat linking woodland and other habitats. In wetter fields there are rushy pastures which provide diversity as do the heath species such as heather and bilberry that are often located along verges.

Tree cover

Woodland exists as shelterbelts and often densely along streams and tributaries giving the impression of a well wooded landscape set within the pastoral farmland. There are scattered ancient woodlands throughout the character type such as around the western side of Shire Hill; these further contribute to the wooded nature of the landscape. Most woodlands are broadleaved and contain species such as oak, ash and sycamore. There is some coniferous plantation woodland such as around Dovestones Reservoir in the north of the area.

Land use

This is a pastoral landscape of cattle and sheep grazing. In some areas, agriculture is more intensive with dairying and stock rearing. There are reservoirs in this landscape, such as the Coombes Reservoir, the Bottoms Reservoir and the Dovestone Reservoir.

Areas such as Whaley Bridge and New Mills were also historically important for coal mining and the coal extracted was very important in the 19th and early 20th centuries to provide fuel for local manufacturing and industry. While not much remains at surface of these once important mines, there are rare examples of Cornish steam engine houses and other colliery structures still standing. There are sandstone quarry sites of varying size on the higher ground.

Enclosure

This is a landscape of small to medium fields, many of which are known to pre-date the first historical mapping of the mid 17th century. Other enclosures are also irregular but undated, while there are examples of regular enclosure such as early 19th century Parliamentary Enclosure fields to the south-east of Glossop.

Within this landscape character type there are several small areas of narrow fields that reflect piecemeal enclosure of strips on medieval open fields associated with the settlements, to the east of Hadfield, around Padfield, and to the south of Glossop at Charlesworth, Whitfield and Chunal.

Settlement, buildings and monuments
This is a settled landscape with distinctive gritstone mill settlements and dispersed outlying settlement. The valleys contain numerous historic mills that drew on water power. These supported woollen, cotton and paper milling industries and some are of 18th-century origin. Examples are found at Birch Vale, Chinley, Uppermill and Glossop. Beyond the urban centres, such as Glossop, New Mills and Whaley Bridge, there are three distinctive forms of settlement in the landscape: dispersed farmsteads, farmsteads clustered with other dwellings in hamlets, and terraces associated with historic mills. There is a deserted medieval village at Arnfield.

Transport, access and recreation

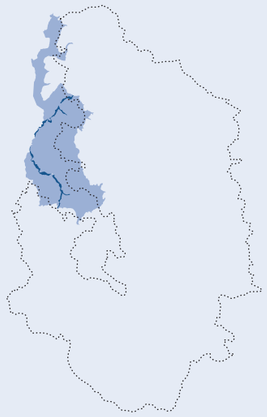
This landscape has a relatively strong network with some busy roads and many smaller winding lanes that connect areas of settlement. There are two train lines running through this landscape. There were once further railway branches in this landscape character type that have now closed, some now forming recreational routes such as the Sett Valley Trail.

Riverside meadows LCT

River Goyt Furness Vale © Peak District National Park Authority

A small scale pastoral landscape characterised by a meandering river channel in a flat alluvial floodplain. Views are often tightly framed by lines of riverside trees. Patches of wetland vegetation are a distinctive feature associated with the river channel.

This landscape character type exists in two locations within this fringe landscape along the River Etherow and further south along the River Goyt.



Key characteristics

- A flat alluvial river corridor with seasonally waterlogged alluvial soils
- Meandering river channel with shingle beds and marginal vegetation
- Grazing meadows, often with patches of wet grassland
- Dense waterside and scattered hedgerow trees
- Historic mills and water management feature

Geology, landform and soils

This is a river valley bottom landscape and has a narrow almost flat floodplain. There are deposits of alluvial silts, sands and gravels. Hollows within the floodplain reflect the past courses of the river.

The floodplain is characterised by gleyed soils that are either continuously or seasonally waterlogged. The river enhances the fertility of the soil when flood water deposits nutrients that replenish the wet soils. Palaeochannels may contain important evidence for past landscapes, environments and vegetation.

Species and habitats

The meadows are either seasonally or permanently wet, creating wet pastures which support soft rush and some sedges.

Tree cover

The river banks are densely lined with alder and some willow. This creates an intimate landscape where views are filtered by watercourse trees and framed by the adjacent wooded slopes. In places there are small copses of willow carr and poplars.

Land use

This is a pastoral landscape with permanent pasture dominating due to heavy soils and seasonal waterlogging. There is some semi- improved grassland. In the past, land uses have been more industrial, the fast flowing rivers were used to power industry. Away from the urban areas on the narrow floodplain some mills still survive and are often converted to other uses, while other mills have been demolished and only remnant mill ponds, weirs and races give evidence of this past industry in this tranquil landscape.

Enclosure

Enclosure in this landscape is often irregular, particularly along the River Goyt where its origin is unknown. Generally, small fields are bound by mixed species thorn dominated hedgerows creating a sense of enclosure adjacent to the river; the presence of riverside trees enhances this sense of enclosure.

Settlement, buildings and monuments

This is a largely unsettled landscape where the wet ground and risk of flooding make development difficult. There are built up areas and the occasional gritstone farmsteads on the higher ground above the valley bottoms and several sites of former mills.

Transport, access and recreation

There are few roads within the character type due to the wet nature of the soils creating limited opportunity for road building. In places roads and the railway line cut through the landscape to cross over the river. Crossing points vary with some gritstone bridges and, later, metal bridges. A short segment of the Cromford and High Peak Railway route falls within this landscape at Whaley Bridge. The Peak Forest Canal follows the floodplain in places.

The Bugswoth Canal Basin was an important transport hub created in the late 18th century that today forms an important leisure resource.