4.1 MIDDLEGICH OPEN PLAIN

Key Characteristics

- Generally flat, open landscape though more varied along River Wheelock Valley and tributaries
- Industrial works and railway infrastructure at the urban fringe and pylons are prominent built forms within most views
- Relatively low vegetation cover in comparison to the wider landscape of the borough
- Areas of subsidence, most probably the result of former salt workings
- Clipped hedgerows are often intermittent and infilled with post and wire fencing. There are generally few hedgerow trees
- Farmland is generally medium scale irregular fields, predominantly used for sheep grazing and dairy farming with some arable use
- Settlement varied, comprising modern contemporary housing areas at the urban fringe. Within more rural areas are some older traditional cheshire brick buildings
- The main transport route is the A533, located between Sandbach and Middlewich, running parallel to the Trent Mersey canal. There are also several minor country lanes
4.1 MIDDLEWICH OPEN PLAIN

LANDCOVER TYPES

Open Farmland
Open, medium scale agricultural land is mainly under pastoral use, though smaller areas of arable land exist. On broader, level lying land fields are larger.

River Wheelock Valley
Narrow, shallow valley landform extends along and across the borough boundary. Land comprises pasture fields and localised clumps of deciduous vegetation.

Industrial Corridor
Extending between Middlewich and Sandbach is a corridor of land, under industrial use, defined by the railway line and the Trent and Mersey Canal.

Wetland at Sparrowgrove
Long, narrow waterbody and environs comprising pasture, clumps of deciduous trees and pasture which is poorly drained in places.

Peatland
Area of peatland situated on a localised raised landform, within which water bodies occur on poorly drained soils.

LANDSCAPE QUALITY

The Middlewich Open Plain has a quality of its own associated with subsidence and industrial development. In many ways it is akin to the disturbed and degraded landscape of the Sandbach Flashes. The overall quality of this landscape character area is poor. This landscape is much affected by industry and has little aesthetic value or evidence of effective mitigation. There is generally a lack of mature vegetation cover. Factors which contribute to this poor quality landscape include:

- Landscape degraded by past activities of the salt industry and ongoing industrial processes and ‘urbanisation’ of the countryside;
- Railway embankment and industrial sites have engineered slopes with inadequate restoration and little or no vegetation.
4.1 MIDDLEWICH OPEN PLAIN

Existing Landscape

The Middlewich Open Plain character area is located at the western most extent of the Borough, between Sandbach and Middlewich. This area has broadly similar qualities to the Cheshire Plain although there is a lesser extent of tree cover and greater urban fringe and industrial influences upon the landscape.

This is a level low-lying landscape formed on primarily upper keeper siluriferous beds with lower keeper siluriferous beds surrounding Middlewich. The entire area is overlaid with boulder clay. However, there are more varied deposits immediately to the west of Sandbach, these comprise undifferentiated fluvio-glacial deposits, glacial sand and gravel and an area of peat near Mooton Green. Local variations in topography occur both as a result of natural processes and also from subsidence caused by the salt extraction industry. In this area artificially raised features are prominent, these include screen bunds to the perimeter of industrial developments and the Crew to Manchester railway embankment. The River Wheelock defines both the western boundary of the Borough and the character area. The river is in a narrow, shallow valley containing pronounced tight meanders, undulating pasture fields and bluff slopes. There is greater vegetation cover along the River Wheelock and its tributaries, although generally most land surrounding the river is farmed for pasture. Some of the old 'ridge and furrow' landscape is evident along the valley.

This is primarily an agricultural landscape, although there is a marked influence of industry on the urban fringes of Elworth and Middlewich. The industrial activity includes industrial estate infrastructure and development along a corridor between the AS33, Trent Mersey Canal and the railway. Industrial works include a salt factory and chemical plant. The buildings are typically large scale modern structures. Other prominent features include electricity pylons extending from Middlewich into the character area.

The land is predominantly used for sheep grazing and dairy farming, with smaller areas of arable land cropped for vegetables. Field sizes are generally larger than within the Cheshire Plain, and are primarily defined by clipped hawthorn hedges, which tend to be degraded and intermittent in places with post and wire infill. Some hedges are overgrown, creating linear clumps, notably along the canal. Hedgerow trees are sparse and limited to mature and over mature oaks. In the valley slopes of River Wheelock, field boundaries are less distinct. There are areas of rougher pasture, poorly drained in places. Scattered field ponds are noticeable as isolated clumps of deciduous scrub and trees within fields.

Settlement patterns are typically urban fringe developments, comprising a range of traditional and contemporary styles. Within more rural areas older traditional buildings are typically constructed in cheshire brick, under slate roofs or clay-tile. The main road is the A533, running straight and directly between Elworth and Middlewich and is parallel to the Trent and Mersey Canal. Additionally there are several narrow country lanes and farm tracks, winding in places and one at risk of subsidence.

Due to the relatively level landform and low vegetation cover, the landscape has an open character. Consequently, urban fringe developments, industry and pylons feature prominently within many views. These urban forms have less of a visual impact upon the landscape to the west of the character area, where local undulations, valley landform, and clumps of vegetation contain views to a greater degree. The canal often a prominent feature within the landscape is visible from the A533 and surrounding areas. The sandstone walls, canal boats and people along the towpath add some interest and relief to the views in this area.

This landscape is more influenced by urban and industrial developments than the wider Cheshire Plain. The juxtaposition of farmland and industry along the urban fringe results in a visually and physically fragmented landscape. Noise generated by industrial activity at Middlewich, is clearly audible from surrounding areas, this further detracts from the landscape character and quality. There are some localised more rural areas such as the valley of the River Wheelock, Mooton Green and Tetten Hall which have a slightly more pleasant, intimate character.

Designations

Landscape designations within the Middlewich Open Plain are as follows:

Statutory Designations

- SSSI – Flashes to the west of Elworth, includes small area of peatland.
- SAM – Two sites north of Middlewich; Kinderton Hall moated site and King Street Roman Fort
- Conservation Area – Trent and Mersey Canal.

Non-statutory Designations

- SBI A - Bridge Farm Wood, Bridge Farm pasture
- SBI B – Hollins Wood; includes ancient woodland
- SBI C – Unions Gorse, woodland along Small Brook.
- SBI C – Stretch of River Wheelock Valley

Forces for Change

The main issues and forces for change affecting this character area stem from urban/industrial development and agricultural change.

- Pressure is from industrial works and estate development and accompanying infrastructure at the urban fringes of Middlewich and Elworth, Sandbach.
- Symptoms of agricultural change include neglected farmland, field enlargement increasing incidence of arable farmland, loss of woodlands and hedgerow trees.

Future Management

The aim of the following guidelines is to outline the most appropriate management and conservation strategies, which ensure that the areas character is conserved, restored or enhanced.

- Respect the conservation value associated with waterbodies and wetlands. The SSSI at Sparrowgrove, areas of woodland along brooks and field ponds are important features of the landscape and are also of value for nature conservation value. Continue to manage and maintain these areas.
- Respect the conservation value of the Trent and Mersey canal. The canal is a distinguishing feature of the landscape. Continue to maintain and manage this resource avoiding new developments impacting upon its course.
- Promote further areas for nature conservation. Areas of disturbed or degraded land affected by industry provide an opportunity to develop new landscape features such as blocks of broadleaf woodlands, wetlands or grasslands particularly where they are positive benefits in screening industrial works and roads. Increase woodland cover along the River Wheelock.
- Avoid major changes to ground level. The generally flat, low lying topography should be respected in any proposals for new development resisting significant changes to ground level.
- Restore and manage hedgerows as positive conservation features within the landscape. Continue to manage hedgerows, restoring gaps and planting new trees to promote this feature within the landscape.
- Preserve remnants of ridge and furrow. Retain land in arable use along the River Wheelock to preserve historic feature.