Landscape Character Type 8:

Lowland Estate
LE1: Eaton

Key Characteristics:

- Flat and almost flat topography
- The large historic Eaton estate, which has had a significant impact on land-use
- Grade II* Registered Park and Garden, including a high density of woodland – broadleaved and mixed
- Irregular medieval fields and areas of post-medieval reorganisation, possibly associated with estate improvements.
- Nucleated estate villages and some dispersed farms including estate farms
- Ponds
- Medieval moated sites and motte and bailey castles
- Chester Business Park
- Two dual carriageways

This character type covers just one character area which shares many characteristics with the West Cheshire Plain. However, it has been excluded from this type because of the influence that the Eaton Estate has had upon the land management of the area from the post medieval period onwards.
LE1: Eaton Character Area
Including Kinnerton, Belgrave, Eccleston & Pulford

This character area is located west of the River Dee and south of Chester on the border with Wales. Topography is very flat (c 10-30m AOD) and the underlying geology comprises Kinnerton Sandstone and Chester Pebble Beds Formation. This is overlain by Devensian till. Soils are typical argillic stagnogleys, which are suited to pasture as they are not particularly free draining.

The most dominant characteristic of this area is the Eaton Estate, the seat of which is Eaton Hall, home to the Grosvenor Family now the Dukes of Westminster. Eaton Hall was first built in the late 17th century for Thomas Grosvenor and rebuilt in the 19th. However, during its use by the army in WWII it was badly damaged and finally it was largely demolished in 1963. A new house was built in a modern style in the 1970s, which was transformed in the 1990s when it was encased in pinkish ashlar. The park and gardens of Eaton are listed Grade II* on the English Heritage register. This includes 17th to 20th century formal gardens and a landscape park associated with a country house, including elements by John Webb, William Andrews Nesfield and Edwin Lutyens.

The northern edge of this character area is strongly influenced by the urban form of Chester, particularly the extensive buildings of the Chester Business Park within a prestigious landscape setting, and the visual intrusion of heavy traffic on two major roads. The A55 passes through the character area from east to west, hidden in deep cutting for some of its length, but raised conspicuously on embankment further west towards the county border with Wales. The A483 is particularly obvious where it rises to pass over the Chester-Wrexham railway.

Elsewhere the character is pleasantly rural with numerous attractive properties, cottages and farmsteads dispersed along meandering country lanes lined with well-managed, closely trimmed hedgerows. There are many conspicuous blocks of woodland, often linear and following the public road system or defining the private approaches to Eaton Hall. Many of the individual properties are surrounded by mature gardens and small stands of trees, often with a strong element of evergreen planting, and all reinforcing the perception of a higher density of tree cover. This increased tree cover ensures a greater degree of enclosure than elsewhere in the Cheshire Plain. However in common with other areas of the Plain the flat topography allows a number of tall cylindrical storage silos to be seen in middle distance views, identifying the location of individual farmsteads.

There are four wooded approaches to the Hall in this character area and they are very conspicuous within the surrounding field system with its low hedgerows. A mix of broadleaves and coniferous with Beech, Holly, Hornbeam, Lime, Scots Pine and Yew, they make up much of the woodland content of this character area. In the northeast the linear woodland along the Chester approach dominates the edge of the Dee Valley. This area, a SBI

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with a range of species indicative of older woodland, is managed as a public access area, a reflection of its location on the southern edge of Chester. A small portion of the park – the Buerton Approach, which crosses the Dee via the Iron Bridge - is located in the West Lowland Plain type. Bretton Wood in the northwest is also an SBI and follows a former approach to the Hall dissected by the construction of the A55 in the 1970’s.

Fields are a mix of small, medium and large enclosures (up to 4ha, 4-8ha and over 8ha respectively) and are mainly of an irregular and semi-regular pattern. These are typical of medieval fields that have undergone improvement during the post-medieval period as part of estate management as well as more recent changes i.e. boundary loss and field size increases. Boundaries are typically hedgerows – some mixed species, others single species hawthorn. The area is also rich in farm ponds, flooded marl-pits that in many places reach a density of one in every field.

The Eaton “estate style” predominates with high quality buildings, both red brick cottages and higher status properties, with characteristic architectural detailing. Several of the neighbouring villages have a strong and consistent identity afforded by the large number of late 19th and early 20th century estate buildings. There are also a number of small nucleated villages in this character area such as at Eccleston, which is one of the most notable villages of the Eaton Estate. Many estate buildings and cottages from the 19th century survive such as Wrexham Road Farm which is a model farm. Lower Kinnerton also has Eaton Estate housing as does Pulford and Poulton and there are many cottages that are typical of those dating from the time of the first Duke of Westminster. The architect who designed many of the estate’s notable buildings was John Douglas and his typical building fabrics are soft red-orange brick to hard Ruabon brick. Roof tiles are both slate and red clay. In the late 19th century the Estate constructed over 300 cottages, which meant that many buildings of an earlier date were demolished. They are of high quality and have intricate and elaborate architectural detailing such as highly decorative chimneys and complex roof forms, moulded brick detail and areas of contrasting rendering.

There is a rich historic heritage in this character area: Watling Street Roman road runs south from the fort at Chester to Eccleston and on through the grounds of the Eaton Estate, and a Roman settlement site off this has been the subject of excavation at Heronbridge. There are two motte and bailey castles in the villages of Pulford and Dodleston and a number of medieval moated sites e.g. Belgrave, which is a rare example of a moat flanked on three sides by a medieval garden; Dodleston Hall is also moated.

To the west of Park Plantation is the greater part of a former deer park. This was requisitioned in 1940 for use as a runway. Most of the wartime structures have been removed but the abandoned runways largely survive.
Issues affecting the Lowland Estate landscape character type

1. **Changes in farming** including pressure to diversify and changing patterns of land ownership. The purchase of agricultural holdings by non-farmers is becoming a significant force for change, resulting in conversion of farm houses and farm buildings and changes in farm use.

2. **Changes in farm crops.** Increase in areas under arable or fodder crops and a trend towards silage production.

3. **Reduction, fragmentation and deterioration of habitats:** Loss of ponds through drainage and in-fill plus nutrient run-off from surrounding farmland. Decline in species-rich hedgerows at some locations. Intensification of grassland management leading to loss of species-rich acid grassland.

4. **Decline in veteran trees:** Loss of a valuable biodiversity resource and an essential component of historic parkland.

5. **Loss of historic field pattern** due to decline in hedgerow management, with resulting increase in use of fencing. Many hedgerow trees over-mature and in decline.

6. **Loss of historic parkland** to agriculture and recreational use e.g. golf courses.

7. **Erosion of built environment character through incremental development:** This may lead to loss of historic buildings and vernacular character; the suburbanisation of rural properties and their curtilage; pressure for expansion of existing settlement, ribbon development and in-fill.

8. **Standardisation of roads:** Upgrading of lanes and minor roads leading to increasingly suburban character of the countryside.