Landscape Character Type 7:

East Lowland Plain
LANDSCAPE TYPE 7: EAST LOWLAND PLAIN
East Cheshire Flat Farmland

ELP1: Ravensmoor
ELP2: Dodcott
ELP3: Cholmondeston
ELP4: Stublach
ELP5: Wimboldsley

Key Characteristics:

- Flat and almost flat topography
- Small to medium sized fields (up to 8ha) used for pasture and arable farming
- Mainly hawthorn hedgerows and hedgerow trees, some mixed specie hedgerows
- Dispersed hamlets and farms with predominantly low density, and some nucleation
- Intensive farming and large farm businesses
- Large number of small water bodies
- Scattered species-rich grasslands
- Riparian ancient woodlands and field sized coverts
- Medieval moated sites

General Description:
This large expanse of flat and very slightly undulating land comprises a large proportion of the Cheshire landscape. It is differentiated from the West Lowland Plain by the physical barrier of the Sandstone Ridge. However, in many respects there are shared characteristics and features in both the East Lowland Plain and West Lowland Plain. The East Lowland Plain has been broken down into five character areas, which explore the subtle variations that occur within this common character type. It extends from High Whitley in the north to Dodcrott in the south, and from Bunbury east to Nantwich.

Woodland cover is low, with small coverts scattered intermittently across the area. Field patterns comprise a mix of ancient enclosure and post medieval improvement and settlement is predominantly low density and dispersed.

**Visual Character:**

This landscape type is represented by a generally flat agricultural plain where the prevailing field pattern and condition of the hedgerows can account for subtle differences in landscape character. Where fields are smaller, hedges higher and hedgerow trees more abundant, the sense of enclosure is much stronger. Long distance views are blocked or filtered and the perception is of a smaller scale and much more verdant landscape. Where the fields are larger, with low trimmed hedgerows and fewer trees, the lack of enclosure means that the landscape character appears to be more open and larger scale. At such locations the views are much more extensive and panoramic and often extend as far as the high ground of the surrounding character areas. Long distance views to the west extend to the Mid-Cheshire Sandstone Ridge and a limited number of areas enjoy views eastwards to the Pennine Hills.

The large number of hedgerow trees across the plain can lead to a false perception of woodland density. Most viewpoints are low due to the absence of high vantage points and the nearest tall hedgerow tends to form the visual horizon. Views from more open ground tend to feature a succession of hedgerows receding into the distance, and these can coalesce visually into a single mass of tree crowns creating a false impression of woodland cover.

**Physical Influences:**

This character type is low-lying, with flat and almost flat topography with very gentle undulation has an elevation of between 40–80m AOD. This is higher than that of the even more low-lying West Lowland Plain (0-40m AOD).

The underlying bedrock is a mix of Eldersfield Mudstone, Northwich Halite and Wilkesley Halite Formation. This supports drift deposits of Devensian Till interspersed to the east with small pockets of glaciofluvial sand and gravel and peat. The overlying soils are pelo-stagnogleys and stagnogleys which are poorly drained and suited to pasture.
Secondary calcium carbonate deposits are common at a depth of 1-2m in the
till, and before cheap lime was made available in the 19th century this was
dug and spread on the surrounding fields to reduce acidity. On sandy soils
this practice of marling also increases fertility and moisture holding capacity.
The digging of these marl pits led to the creation of ponds as the pits filled
with water and were colonised by a rich variety of plants and animals from
other wetland habitats of greater antiquity, for example, meres and mosses.
Clay was also dug for use in daub in the construction of vernacular structures
and later to make bricks.

The natural processes of vegetation succession have reduced many ponds to
small, shallow features, over shaded with trees and with little open water.
Nevertheless, it is estimated that Cheshire’s 16,000 ponds represent some
10% of all farm ponds in England and Wales, and still provide an important
wildlife resource. Characteristic plant species include bur marigold, water
plantain, tubular water-dropwort, reedmace, branched bur-reed, water
horsetail, common spike-rush, purple loosestrife, water milfoil, various water
lilies and pondweeds. A wide range of invertebrates is associated with marl
pits as well as all five species of amphibian found in Cheshire, including the
European protected great crested newt.

Like the West Lowland Plain, this type contains some of the lowest levels of
woodland cover in Cheshire. Where it does occur woodland generally
consists of a mix of broad leaves and conifers in small copses and coverts, a
small proportion of which is ancient woodland. Exceptions occur where there
is parkland of which there are few examples e.g. Bostock Hall. There are
some mixed species hedgerows, but hawthorn dominates; there are
numerous oak hedgerow trees, many of which are in poor condition.

Two major rivers flow through the area – the Weaver and the Dane – both of
which are defined as River Valley Landscape Types.

Cultural Influences:

Within this large character area there are a small number of nucleated
settlements e.g. the historic centres of Bunbury and Nantwich. Nantwich is
the more picturesque of Cheshire’s salt towns, not having undergone the
industrial development that for example Northwich has. Predominantly
settlement character consists of low density dispersed hamlets and farms.
Farms are larger and the land more intensively farmed on the West Lowland
Plain, but the rural character dominates.

Typical building materials include red brick, such as white washed brick and
timber frames.

The East Lowland Plain is dominated by enclosure and field sizes are mainly
a mix of small (under 4 hectares) and medium scale enclosure (4 to 8
hectares) with an irregular and semi-regular pattern. This is typical of
surviving medieval fields and associated improvement in the post-medieval
period. In some areas there is a greater concentration of post medieval field
patterns, which are associated with later phases of enclosure e.g. intakes from heath, as well as more drastic measures of reorganisation. There are also small areas of 20th century improved fields, which tend to be found where boundaries have been lost and field sizes have been extended (greater than 8ha).

More intensive working of the land is evident in the deterioration of field boundaries and the loss of species rich grassland. Sheep are wintered in Cheshire from North Wales and Yorkshire, while beef rearing is increasingly replacing dairying.

Large historic halls are not typical of this type, exceptions are Dorfold Hall to the west of Nantwich, which has a registered park and garden on the English Heritage list. Part of the Tollemache Estate overlaps with the Bunbury and Burland area, indeed Burland is a good example of an estate village. Here red brick, tiled roof Peckforton Estate cottages built c 1870 form a distinctive part of the built landscape. However, estates in this area are scattered and the holdings of the major land owners such as the Tollemache, Grosvenors, and Cholmondeleys are intermingled.

Given the poor drainage of much of the plain, high status sites are provided by a number of medieval moated sites e.g. Hulme Hall. Water bodies have provided important focuses for activity since prehistory e.g. an Iron Age oak carved tree trunk log boat and paddle was found at Baddiley Mere and another, thought to be Saxon in date, was discovered at Astbury. More recent features include the secret bunker at Hack Green, which is a hangover from the Cold War period and the WW II airfield at RAF Calveley.

There are a number of significant communication routes that cross through this character type. Roman roads include a Nantwich to Middlewich route and Kings Street, which connected Middlewich with Chester. Utilising the flat topography are the Shropshire Union Canal (Main Line, Middlewich Branch and Llangollen Branch), the Trent and Mersey Canal and numerous railway lines.

**Issues affecting the East Lowland Plain 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. Possible move towards bio-energy crops such as miscanthus on better drained land.
3. **On-going decline in traditional woodland management practices**
   leading to under management of farm woodlands, coverts and copses
   leading to general deterioration. Many hedgerow trees over-mature
   and in decline.

4. **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 due to
   mismanagement, too frequently or badly timed cutting, increased
   stocking, particularly sheep. Intensification of grassland management
   leading to loss of species-rich acid grassland.

5. **Loss of historic field pattern** due to decline in hedgerow
   management, with resulting increase in use of fencing.

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.
**ELP1: Ravensmoor Character Area.**
*Including Reaseheath, Burland & Broomhall Green*

This is a large character area. It extends from Bunbury, east to Nantwich and as far south as Audlem. It comprises a mix of ancient enclosure and later reorganisation during the post-medieval period i.e. both irregular and regular shaped fields, as well as patches of enclosure by Act of Parliament, which survives as a grid-like field pattern e.g. at Swanley. Hawthorn hedges and standard trees are typical boundary types.

This is a predominantly flat landscape and the different patterns of enclosure strongly influence the character of the landscape. Near the A51 in the north of the area the landscape is open and expansive, with larger fields and thin or low hedges with few trees, allowing extensive views across the plain as far west as the Sandstone Ridge. Views southward from the A51 reveal the large structures and warehouses of the Wardle Industrial Estate, developed on the very flat former airfield site. A small radio telescope structure is very noticeable relatively close to the road.

By contrast many areas in the south and west possess a smaller-scale landscape, with much more limited views restricted by high vegetation associated with smaller fields, abundant hedges and hedgerow trees. Such areas have a very tranquil and rural character.

The church tower at Aston provides a squat landmark from several directions. Nearby at Burland there are buildings of architectural interest. A number of distinctive brick-built cottages with very decorative windows and chimneys face the A534, whilst a number of substantial Victorian farmsteads are also visible from the highway.

This character area has the greatest settlement density of the whole *East Lowland Plain* character type. There are a number of nucleated villages such as Bunbury, Wrenbury and Aston as well as hamlets and a scatter of dispersed farms and halls. Dorfold Hall and garden to the west of Nantwich has a Grade II Registered Park and Garden. Buildings mainly comprise red brick but there are also a number of timber-framed structures, with brick and in some cases wattle and daub in-fill.

The Shropshire Union Canal runs through the area, the Barbridge Junction is just to the northwest of Nantwich, from which the Llangollen and Middlewich branches emerge. The A51, A534 and the A530 are the main arterial routes in this area, which have acted as a focus for the development of settlement. Winding roads and country lanes are also typical. Railways cross the area - running from Nantwich to Whitchurch and Crewe across to Chester.

Reaseheath Cheshire College of Agriculture is just north of Nantwich and the Secret Bunker at Hack Green, which is a vestige of the Cold War period, is a popular tourist attraction.
Old meadow habitats survive in isolated locations at Bunbury Heath Marsh, and around Nantwich at Reaseheath Pasture, Ravensmoor and Bridge Farm. Species-rich grassland also lines the towpath of the Llangollen Branch of the Shropshire Union Canal. Other SBIs in the area include a diverse range of wetland features, such as, Peckforton Mere, Baddiley Meres and Hurlston Reservoir. It is drained by a network of brooks that traverse the area – Darley Brook, Wettenhall Brook and Barkside Brook. Woodland is limited, there are a small number of coverts and blocks of trees e.g. Tally-Ho covert, which betrays its hunting origin.

Sound Heath is an area of common land overlying light, sandy soils of glacial origin. It comprises a range of habitats including several areas of damp heath, scrub and young woodland, and pools resulting from localised sand digging. The damp heathland is now a scarce habitat in Cheshire, and Sound Heath supports several of the county’s rarest plants, for example, round-leaved sundew, lousewort and bog asphodel. The wide range of habitats is known to support a diverse range of invertebrates including several species of dragonflies and damselflies.

The Tollemache estate extended across Burland, Brindley and Haughton amongst others, while the Crewe Estate included Spurston.

The remains of a medieval village and its fields survive at Haycroft to the south of Bunbury. The battle of Nantwich fought between the Royalists and Parliamentarians in January 1644 survives in the landscape as a series of entrenchments in Acton churchyard.

RAF Calveley was an airfield used to train WWII fighter pilots. Features associated with this use that survive today are pillboxes, a hangar and seagull trenches. Today it is used as a satellite tracking station. A bombing decoy site is located at Austerson Hall which acted as a distraction for Crewe.
ELP2: Dodcott Character Area.
Including Burleydam, Wilkesley & Royal's Green

This character area runs along the southern County boundary between Combermere Abbey and Audlem. The character area is dominated by medium sized (4-8ha) regular fields, which have arisen as a result of reorganisation and rationalisation of the medieval field pattern, under a mixture of pasture and arable use. Boundaries comprise hawthorn hedgerows and standard trees, with solitary trees identifying the line of grubbed out hedgerows.

This area is generally flat but there local areas of more undulating ground. In some areas a combination of flat topography, larger fields and the replacement of hedges with post and wire fences, has created an open and expansive landscape character. This is further reinforced by extensive views across the plain in all directions to the surrounding higher ground in the distance. The large scale woodland of Shavington Park lies beyond the county boundary but is a dominant feature in views to the south. Elsewhere the field pattern appears more intact, views are restricted or framed by high vegetation and the landscape appears much more verdant and small scale.

There are few hedgerow trees in this character area. Those present are predominantly mature or over-mature.

Settlement is made up of a small number of dispersed farms connected via an irregular network of roads and footpaths. The only major highway is the A525, upon which are located the two hamlets of Burleydam and Lightwood Green. There are timber framed buildings such as the Grade II* Butterley Hayes and red brick houses e.g. Northwoods and Royals Farmhouse. This area was part of the Combermere estate. There are two medieval moated sites – Butterley Heys Moat and Northwood’s Farm Moat.

Much of the woodland in this area is ancient oak wood, and the larger areas tend to be located in riparian contexts e.g. along Walk Mill Brook, and the River Ducklow. Old coppiced hazel still survives in the understorey, indicating former traditional woodland management. Bramble, bluebell, red campion, yellow archangel and dog’s mercury are characteristic species in the ground flora.
ELP3: Cholmondeston Character Area.
Including Wettenhall, Wardle Bank & Darnhall

This character area extends from the south of Winsford to the north of Barbridge. It is dominated by medium (4-8ha) regular and semi-regular shaped fields that are typical of planned post medieval enclosure of former unenclosed heath. This character area was formerly part of the great medieval Forest of Delamere. Boundaries are made up of hedgerows and standard trees.

This is an area where a flat topography combines with a field pattern of low hedges with fewer hedgerow trees to create a fairly large-scale landscape. In some areas the character is even more open and expansive, with extensive views across the Cheshire Plain, due to the loss of hedgerows evidenced by scattered and isolated mature oaks and the use of post and wire fences. Substantial farmsteads provide obvious points of interest within the open field system. A number of long straight lanes associated with planned enclosure provide an opportunity for uninterrupted long distance views that extend as far as the Sandstone Ridge in the west.

There is a low density of settlement, which mainly comprises dispersed farms and halls linked by an intricate network of roads and paths e.g. Calveley, Cholmondeston and the timber framed Wade’s Green Hall. More recent linear settlement has developed at Cholmondeston and Wettenhall that follows one of the main roads in the character area.

Small copses and coverts are scattered across the area, with a low proportion of ancient woodland. The latter includes Page’s Wood, an oak-ash woodland over hazel coppice, which is one of the largest surviving examples of ancient broadleaved woodland on the Cheshire Plain. A section of the Middlewich Branch of the Shropshire Union Canal runs across the character area, which is crossed by the railway line connecting Crewe and Chester.

On the area’s western margin a linear block of woodland intrudes into the flat plain and defines the clough woodland of Ashbrook within the adjoining Weaver Valley character area. This is a very conspicuous local feature when viewed against the low tree cover of the surrounding area.
ELP4: Stublach Character Area.
Including Lach Dennis, King Street & Byley

This character area extends from Lach Dennis in the north to Byley Hill Farm in the south. Enclosure comprises small – medium (0-8ha) regular, semi-regular and irregular fields, including medieval fields, post-medieval reorganisation and modern adaptation. Boundaries are made up of hedgerows, ditches and standard trees.

Within this area the degree of visual enclosure provided by field boundaries varies greatly. Where the field system has been rationalised the larger scale, more expansive areas provide extensive views towards the Peak District hills. Elsewhere views are limited, being restricted by the lush hedgerows and abundant hedgerow trees associated with the intact field pattern. The woodlands in the vicinity of Rudheath in the adjoining character area appear as a solid block on the eastern boundary of this part of the Cheshire Plain, terminating views in this direction.

This character area has a very low density of settlement, and with the exception of the small village of Byley, has a handful of dispersed hamlets and farms.
Woodland consists of a limited number of small broadleaved copses and coverts. There are a number of drainage features e.g. Puddinglake Brook and Bradshaw Brook.

In the North West, the large scale warehouse facilities on the A530 at Rudheath are highly visible as they lie within an area of large fields with low trimmed hedges. The visual intrusion is substantial and extends over a wide area. By contrast, only a short distance away, views along the area’s western margins extend across the secluded Dane Valley to the wooded parkland surrounding Bostock Hall.

The extensive brine workings in the centre of the area are serviced by numerous low well-head structures. Fortunately these are relatively low and easily screened by the surrounding pattern of hedgerows. Two overhead power lines converge in the centre of the character area before running south. They form a very significant feature over an extensive area.

The moated medieval Hulme Hall has 15th century origins, and the moated Drakelow Hall has four fishponds. More recently Wellington Bombers were produced at the Vickers Factory in Byley.

The M6 and the A530 or King Street as it is known both cross the character area. The latter follows the line of a Roman Road that runs north from Middlewich. Otherwise roads are minor and few. The railway line from Middlewich to Northwich runs through the west of the character area.
ELP5: Wimboldsley Character Area.
Including Warlingham, Minshall Vernon & Coppenhall Moss

The large urban centres of Northwich, Middlewich, Sandbach and Winsford dominate this character area, which extends from Northwich south as far as Crewe. This character area comprises a mix of small-medium (0-8ha) irregular and regular fields, which are typical of a medieval field pattern and partial post medieval agricultural improvement. There are also long, narrow, straight-sided fields that are the result of draining former mossland e.g. Warlingham Moss and Coppenhall Moss.

This is a predominantly flat, large scale landscape with relatively few hedgerow trees or dominant hedgerows. This combines with the low woodland cover typical of the type to create an open landscape with long views in all directions to a distant skyline. Woodland is limited to a handful of copses and coverts, one of which Hollins Wood is designated as an SBI. The River Croco, Sanderson’s Brook and Small Brook drain the area, while to the north in a separate character type is the River Dane. Species-rich grassland is scarce and known from only a few isolated sites in the south-west of the area around Moston Green. In places, the grassland is part of a mosaic of wet habitats including flashes caused by land subsidence, alder/willow carr merging into fen.

The Pennine Hills are visible to the east and the Sandstone Ridge to the West. In the north the areas of estate woodlands around Bostock Hall are conspicuous within the surrounding large, open arable fields. Throughout the area a number of large isolated farmsteads provide points of focus within the field system.

In this area there is a great difference in the perceived tranquillity of the more remote rural areas, with scattered and dispersed settlement linked by narrow country lanes, and those areas influenced by large scale industrial sites such as Winsford and Middlewich. With the latter, the absence of high vegetation and the open nature of the surrounding landscape allow the large structures to intrude over a very extensive area. The area is traversed by two very dominant overhead power lines, one along a north-south axis, the other along the area’s western flank, and these further diminish the area’s rural character.

The M6 crosses through this relatively empty character area, and two arterial routes from Crewe (A533 and A5022) run north. There are two railway lines that link Elworth to Holmes Chapel and Middlewich, and the Trent and Mersey Canal passes through the area. Both the motorway and railways are visually intrusive when they cross the level plain on raised embankment.

Beyond the major urban centres settlement consists mainly of dispersed farms and hamlets such as Bostock Green and Bradfield Green, which are likely to be of some antiquity i.e. linked by footpaths and minor roads. Warlingham is a small village through which the River Wheelock flows. There are a large number of halls e.g. Davenham Hall, Bostock Hall and Eardswick Hall.
In the grounds of the Grade II* Bostock Hall there is mix of broad leaves and coniferous woodland. Stretches of both the canal and the River Wheelock are designated as SBIs. The margins are lined with rich vegetation, and the towpath supports species-rich grassland.

Buildings include red brick e.g. the 17th century barn at Kinderton Lodge, and whitewashed brick, as well as timber framed structures. Moated sites are located at Wood Hall Farm and at Minshull Vernon. The hospital complex at Leighton is located to the west of Crewe.