Landscape Character Type 6:

West Lowland Plain
LANDSCAPE TYPE 6: WEST LOWLAND PLAIN
West Cheshire flat farmland

WLP1: Manley
WLP2: Hoofield
WLP3: Tattenhall
WLP4: Shocklach
WLP5: Guilden Sutton

Key Characteristics

- Flat and almost flat topography
- Irregular and semi-regular small and medium fields (up to 8ha) used mainly for pasture
- Hawthorn hedgerow boundaries and hedgerow trees – mainly oak
- Low density dispersed settlement
- Low woodland cover
- Black poplar trees
- Large number of small water bodies
- Scattered species-rich grasslands

General Description

This character type dominates a large proportion of western Cheshire, and as such it has been broken down into five character areas which reflect the subtle variations that exist in the landscape. It extends from Stanlow and
Helsby in the north, as far south as Threapwood at the south-westerly tip of the county.

This type is defined by its flat and almost flat topography enclosed by hedgerows and standard trees in small-medium enclosures that follow an irregular and semi-regular field pattern. It is differentiated from the East Cheshire Plain by the physical barrier of the Sandstone Ridge. However, in many respects there are shared characteristics and features between the East and West Lowland Plain types.

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

**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, creating a perception 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 areas. To the west this extends to the Clwydian Hills and to the east the Mid-Cheshire Sandstone Ridge.

The high number of hedgerow trees scattered across the plain can lead to a false perception of the landscape. 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 can feature a succession of hedgerows receding into the distance, and these coalesce visually into a single mass of tree crowns creating a false impression of woodland cover. In reality the woodland cover is low across the Cheshire Plain, being restricted to small copses, game coverts and groups of trees associated with ponds and lines of drainage.

**Physical Influences**

The topography of the type is predominantly flat with a range of between 10-40 m AOD. This is lower than the East Cheshire Plain (40-80 m AOD). The solid geology comprises Chester Pebble Beds, banded with Kinnerton Sandstone and Salop Formation (mudstone, sandstone and conglomerate) in the central area of the Plain. To the east is an area of Wilmslow Sandstone. Overlying this is a large expanse of glacial till (Devensian) interspersed with occasional pockets of sand and gravel. This supports argillie stagnogley soils which are the most widespread type in the County. These fine textured soils
are ideally suited to grass and are a major factor in the development of the Cheshire dairy farming industry. Much of the type is given over to permanent pasture but more favourable sites are also used to grow fodder crops.

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 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. Marl was also used 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 5 species of amphibian found in Cheshire, including the European protected great crested newt.

The Plain is naturally very badly drained, despite a large number of water courses. There is a network of rivers and brooks that drain into the Dee to the west and Mersey to the north. Woodland is mainly restricted to small copses, shelter belts and along river sides. The type is notable for its lack of ancient woodland; just one area is mapped at Long Wood to the north of Ashton Hayes, while the greatest concentration of broad leaved woodland occurs around Churton Heath. Scattered examples of species-rich grassland survive throughout the area, with particularly important examples in the south between Shocklach, Tilston and Threapwood.

Hawthorn hedgerows and standard trees (oaks, ash and sycamore) are distinctive features of this type. In some areas hedgerows have been lost or have grown out, leaving mature trees which give a false impression of parkland and an unrealistic proportion of woodland. The sense of a well wooded landscape is enhanced by the tree growth that now surrounds many of the ponds and small water bodies which occur throughout the area.

The black poplar is Britain’s rarest native tree. In Cheshire there are estimated to be less than 200 in the county which are predominantly located in what are the West and East Lowland Plains.

**Cultural Influences**

A handful of Bronze Age round barrows such as the bowl barrow near Coddington provide some of the earliest indicators of human activity, while the
first example of settlement is indicated by the discovery of the remains of a series of Iron Age round houses to the south of Tarvin during the construction of a pipeline. By this time it is likely that much of the Plain was dotted with similar settlement on the higher, better drained areas with associated fields and animal husbandry enclosures. There are also two Roman roads that cross the Plain – leading to Wilderspool and Manchester. Medieval features such as moated sites are common features with fine examples of these ornamental water features at Bruera and Lower Huxley Hall. There are also fishponds and field systems as well as expanses of ridge and furrow.

The predominant settlement character consists of low density dispersed hamlets and farmsteads. There are also a small number of nucleated villages – Ashton, Great Barrow, Tarvin and Tattenhall, being the largest of these.

The West 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. A large proportion of fields in this type (c 50%) have been identified as relicts of medieval enclosure, these small, irregular shaped fields have survived for several hundred years, avoiding reorganisation and rationalisation that has affected other parts of the type. Ridge and furrow earthworks are a common feature. Amongst these are townfields associated with ancient settlement. Some of these have escaped agricultural improvement and still support species-rich grassland. Dispersed settlement is typical as are a sinuous network of footpaths and country lanes that link hamlets and farmsteads together across the landscape. Much of this type therefore has medieval origins and there has been very little change in recent centuries.

There are a small number of large fields that have been created in recent decades as boundaries have been lost or deliberately removed, while the remaining proportion of field types are Post Medieval in date, which indicate either later phases of enclosure (there is a small percentage of Enclosure by Act of Parliament) or the reorganisation and rationalisation of field size and shape in order to improve productivity, mainly associated with the surrounding Eaton, Bolesworth and Tollemache estates.

As a reminder of the industrial age that affected parts of Cheshire the Shropshire Union Canal and what was known as the London and North Western Railways both utilise the flat landscape, running northwest-southeast across the Plain. The canal stretches from Ellesmere Port through Chester and Barbridge and eventually reaches Wolverhampton. It was constructed as a number of waterways that were brought together as the Shropshire Union in the mid 19th century. The M56, a major communication route in Cheshire runs east-west across the north of the Plain.

Buildings include timber-framed and brick-built structures as well as a small number constructed from sandstone (mainly high status – churches etc) plus some stone walls are known.
Issues affecting the West 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.

3. **On-going decline in traditional woodland management practices** leading to under management of farm woodlands, coverts and coppices leading to general deterioration. Many hedgerow trees are 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 frequent 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.
**WLP1: Manley Character Area.**
*Including Elton, Dunham, Tarvin Sands and Hockenhull Flats*

The western boundary of this character area is provided by the *Gowy Shallow River Basin type*, and to the east is the *Sandstone Fringe*. Stanlow lies to the north and the area extends as far south as Duddon.

This is a flat landscape. Fields are a mix of mainly small-medium (up to 8ha) semi-regular, regular and some irregular enclosures, with hedgerow boundaries and numerous marl pits. These indicate a combination of medieval fields alongside those that have undergone post medieval improvement and 20th century adaptation. A number of ancient settlements were mentioned at Doomsday and notably ancient field systems developed in the surrounding area, which includes some surviving areas of ridge and furrow. Fields were reorganised into a more regular pattern in the 18th and 19th centuries especially around Ashton Hayes, which alongside the parkland may form a wider estate landscape. There is also evidence of the enclosure of surviving heath in the character area, sometimes associated with dispersed settlement. In certain areas hedgerow loss has resulted in a more open landscape with larger fields, isolated oak trees and post and wire fences.

This is the most built-up of the Cheshire Plain character areas. Here there is a greater proportion of villages, which have undergone modern expansion (Tarvin, Great Barrow and Dunham-on-the-Hill) than elsewhere which is typified by dispersed settlement. Building types are typically red and brown brick. A number of golf courses are located in the north of the area near Helsby and this has significantly changed the character of the landscape.

However, over much of the character area the landscape has a very rural feel with small, winding roads and lanes connecting isolated farms and hamlets. This contrasts with the significant local impact of a number of busy highways, noticeably the M56 and A56 in the north and the A41 and A54 in the south. Next to the motorway is Dunham-on-the-Hill ammunition store of which a number of brick-built buildings survive. The Roman roads to Wilderspool and Manchester both cross this area and medieval moated sites are located at Foulk Stapleford and Elton.

The settlement of Dunham-on-the-Hill identifies an isolated point of high ground within the prevailing flat agricultural plain. This relative elevation provides views to the north over the flat, sparsely developed landscape surrounding the M56, to the industrial areas of Stanlow and Ellesmere Port. This massive petrochemical industrial complex dominates many outward views in the north of the character area. An intrusive overhead power line also traverses this part of the character area. Views to the west are dominated by the Sandstone Ridge, which appears to be very well-wooded in contrast to this area, where woodland is scarce.
Marl pits are frequent in the northern half of the Character Area. Elsewhere semi-natural vegetation is restricted to isolated coverts and copses, for example, the ancient Long Wood on the north banks of Ashton Brook, and wet grassland and fen along the Gowy Valley which cuts across the south of the area. The latter includes Hockenhull Platts and Stapleford Meadows SBIs, where uncommon plants in Cheshire such as ragged robin, fen violet, valerian, bog stitchwort still survive. Hockenhull Platts is also of historic interest for its medieval packhorse bridges. There is a WWII Ammunition Store at Dunham on the Hill.

A road cutting at Dunham-on-the-Hill has been designated as a Regionally Important Geological Site.
**WLP2: Hoofield Character Area.**  
**Including Hargrave, Huxley, Gatesheath & River Gowy**

This character area lies to the south of Duddon and extends as far south as Tattenhall. It is defined by a number of medieval landscape features: a large block of small to medium (up to 8ha) irregular and semi-regular enclosure (mainly a medieval field system), a dispersed ancient settlement pattern and dense network of footpaths. Ridge and furrow is frequently associated with this. There has been very little Post Medieval and Modern re-organisation of the field system and the character of the landscape is strongly influenced by the hedgerow pattern and abundance of individual hedgerow trees. Many hedgerows are tightly trimmed but where allowed to grow taller restrict ground level views. Where middle distance views are available the hedgerow trees in successive field boundaries appear to coalesce to form a solid mass on the horizon, creating the effect of a well-wooded landscape. Woodland cover is actually quite low and usually associated with water courses and small copses. A fragment of heath survived into the post medieval period, which was enclosed by Parliamentary Act at Duddon.

Throughout much of this area the eye is drawn to the striking landmark of Beeston Castle, perched high upon the precipitous sandstone crag on the area’s southern boundary. This feature, in combination with the much greater mass of the Sandstone Ridge in the vicinity of Peckforton and Buckley Hill, terminate all views to the south and contribute significantly to the landscape character.

The Crewe-Chester railway traverses the area in close proximity to the Shropshire Union Canal, both in a generally east-west direction. In the north the busy A51 passes through Duddon and Clotton.
The restricted amount of change that has taken place over the last few centuries is reflected in the biodiversity of the character area, with concentrations of SBIs. Black Poplar – Britain’s rarest tree - are found at Lower Hall and Hatton. Barn owls also breed in the area. Many SBI sites are associated within the floodplain of the River Gowy, and the Shropshire Union Canal which both flow through the area. The grassland strip trapped between the river and the canal south of Brassey Green has largely remained inaccessible to agricultural machinery. The diverse habitats include neutral and base-rich grassland, fen and spring-line flushes, swamp and patches of alder carr. The flora includes scarce species such as bog pimpernel, spiny restharrow, pepper saxifrage, quaking grass and numerous sedges. Elsewhere sites of semi-natural vegetation are isolated, for example, at Clotton Common, Hoofield Covert, Huxley Gorse and the disused railway at Gatesheath.

There are a number of halls and moated sites such as the late 15th century manor house of Lower Huxley Hall. Timber framed and orange brick buildings are typical. The shape of the medieval Stapleford Park survives in the landscape at Brereton Park Farm. There are a wide range of sites associated with the type including a hoard of Saxon coins and a medieval kiln. Of cultural interest is the civil war skirmish that took place at Tiverton Heath.
WLP3: Tattenhall Character Area.
Including Saighton, Bruera, Handley & Aldersley Green

This character area stretches from Huntington in the northwest across to the southern section of the Sandstone Fringe. The character of the landscape is strongly influenced by the hedgerow pattern and abundance of individual hedgerow trees. Many hedgerows are tightly trimmed but where allowed to grow taller restrict ground level views. Where middle distance views are available the hedgerow trees in successive field boundaries appear to coalesce to form a solid mass on the horizon, creating the effect of a well-wooded landscape. Woodland cover is quite low and usually associated with water courses and small copses.

Fields are typically irregular and semi-regular in shape and are a mix of medieval and post medieval enclosure. There are often extensive townfields around historic settlements and ridge and furrow earthworks are associated with the medieval fields. However, this character area underwent extensive post medieval reorganisation associated with the surrounding Eaton, Bolesworth and Tолlemache Estates. There are also expanses of large scale 20th century reorganisation and enlargement where boundaries have been lost e.g. in the vicinity of Milton Green. To the south of Tattenhall is an uncharacteristically regular field pattern that suggests late enclosure. Indeed, there was an extensive area of heath at Tattenhall that survived into the post medieval period.

The Waverton Approach and Bruerton Approach to Eaton Hall form a distinctive feature of linear woodland in the northern half of the area. Eaton Hall is listed Grade II* on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens. It is because of this parkland that the greatest concentration of broad leaved woodland in the Cheshire Plain is located in this character area. The building style of the Eaton Estate is evident in the west of the area, notably in the village of Saighton and numerous Victorian “model” farms and properties. Typical building materials are red brick. Saighton Grange was the principal country house of the Abbots of Chester and is listed Grade I.

The distinctive wooded mass of the Sandstone Ridge forms a dominant feature in views to the east. There are more distant views of the Clwydian Hills to the west. Near Tattenhall views towards the higher ground of the Sandstone Fringe feature the substantial property of Bolesworth Castle set against a solid woodland backdrop.

The A41 passes through the area on a north-south axis. Settlement is mainly dispersed in pattern with the exception of Tattenhall, an ancient nucleated village that has undergone modern expansion and Saighton and Waverton, which are associated with the Eaton Estate. Here estate buildings were built at the expense of the Grosvenors. Halls are characteristic and include Clayley and Calveley Halls, the names of which indicate a former wooded landscape.
There are relatively few SBIs in the area: Alford Brook Meadows is a large area of diverse, mainly wet habitats by the canalised Aldford Brook. A large area of wet scrub land is provides the habitat for Arctium lappa - Great Burdock, a species very rare in Cheshire. Handley Covert is on the line of a disused railway with unimproved grassland, scrub and ponds and is valuable for birds and butterflies. Mere Brook Marshes is a long narrow strip of badly drained land alongside an alder lined watercourse with a mosaic of habitats such as unimproved grassland, broadleaf woodland, and swamp and fen in the wettest areas.

There are a number of medieval moated sites in the character area and a road cutting at Saighton has been designated as a Regionally Important Geological Site.
WLP4: Shocklach  Character Area.
Including Aldford, Churton, Burton, Stretton & Threapwood

This character area extends from Aldford Brook in the north down to Threapwood in the south, to the west it is bounded by the Dee Valley and to the east by the Rolling Farmland landscape type of the Malpas area. It has flat topography and includes three small nucleated villages (Aldford, Coddington and Shocklach), while the remaining settlement pattern is made up of isolated hamlets and farmsteads. Fields are small – medium (up to 8ha) and comprise medieval enclosures with post medieval reorganisation. Marl pits are abundant in this area.

Aldford was an estate village associated with the Eaton Estate owned by the Grosvenors. Built in the mid 19th century onwards, there are a number of distinctive brick estate cottages. It was intended to be a market town but failed due to its close proximity to Chester. Douglas also constructed farms for the Grosvenors e.g. the model farm of Aldford Hall Farm.

The land along the western boundary of the character area slopes gently down to the Dee Valley and elsewhere the ground rises towards Malpas and Tilston. These local variations in topography allow more extensive and distant views than elsewhere in the type, over the Cheshire Plain to the west, with the Clwydian Hills in the far distance. To the east the highest parts of to the Sandstone Ridge are visible. Although there are few woodland areas, small copses associated with field ponds or small streams combine with the abundant hedgerow trees to filter views within the landscape, creating the impression of well wooded landscape.

The A534 between Farndon and Clutton is the only major highway traversing this area and this has relatively little impact upon the rural atmosphere of the surrounding landscape. Elsewhere the area is characterised by an extensive system of narrow and winding country lanes running between solid, intact hedgerows connecting small settlements and farmsteads. Many areas have a strong feeling of tranquillity and isolation.
The greatest concentration of ridge and furrow in the county is located in the Shocklach area. Species-rich grasslands are found near Shocklach, Tilston, Castletown and Threapwood. Woodland SBI’s includes a scatter of broad leaf copse and coverts e.g. Beachin Wood, plantation woodland with buckthorn and a pond with diverse marginal vegetation. Heirs Wood and Pasture is a Grade A SBI with both unimproved neutral grassland and broadleaved woodland, including coppiced hazel with a species rich ground flora.

There are a number of medieval monuments in this character area including Aldford Motte and Bailey castle, Shocklach castle motte and moated enclosure and a deserted medieval settlement and ornamental moat at Grafton.

Threapwood was a contested extra-parochial area where it is rumoured that as it fell outside the control of three parishes, it was home to brigands, ruffians, illegitimate children and women of loose repute.
WLP5: Guilden Sutton Character Area.
Including Mollington, Backford, Mickle Trafford, Guilden Sutton, Christleton and Waverton

This area extends from the edge of Ellesmere Port in the north to Waverton in the south. It lies c.10-20m AOD. Fields are a mix of medieval and post medieval, regular to irregular in pattern, of mainly small to medium scale (up to 8ha). There are numerous mature and over mature hedgerow oaks creating a well wooded appearance without any great occurrence of woodland, apart from a few small copses typical of the type.

This area’s physical character is heavily influenced by its proximity to Chester and Ellesmere Port and the urban fringe location. The communications network is particularly dense due to the number of major highways radiating out of Chester. This includes the M53 and M56 and their massive interchange junction, the A56 and A51 to east Cheshire, the A55, and the A41 south to Shrewsbury. Consequently moving traffic can form a disruptive element within the landscape at many locations. Railway lines also radiate southeast and northeast from Chester. The Shropshire Union Canal traverses the area in the north. There is a background pattern of dispersed settlement but during the 20th century most settlements in the areas surrounding Chester have expanded considerably, particularly Christleton, Guilden Sutton, Mickle Trafford and Waverton. The Saighton army camp was established in the 20th century.

In the east and north east of this area two dominant elements fill the skyline and are visible over a very extensive area. The first is the northern extent of the Sandstone Ridge, forming an important visual feature to the east and appearing as a wooded mass of high ground beyond the low lying and visually insignificant Gowy Valley. The second lies to the north, in the form of the massive Industrial complex around Stanlow and Elton which dominates the skyline. In this location the visual intrusion of a number of overhead power lines is also noticeable.

The combination of generally flat terrain and low, closely trimmed hedgerows means that heavy traffic on the motorways, and associated signage and lighting, can be visible over an extensive area. Where the highway is raised on an embankment the visual impact is even more substantial. The motorways are traversed by a significant number of bridges, serving the relatively dense road network or providing farm access. Although the highway planting schemes are now reaching maturity the steep bridge earthworks can still intrude and appear as artificial structures within the very flat landscape.
This area has a rich historic environment. The prosperous city of Chester has acted as an economic stimulus for the area since its foundation as a Roman Fort in AD 70. The site of a Roman camp has been identified at Elm Bank near Rowton.

The Shropshire Union Canal winds its way through the ‘D eva Spillway’ south of Backford where, at the end of the Devensian glaciation, meltwater from the Mersey drained into the Dee, leaving an obvious dry valley within the Cheshire Plain. A stretch of the Shropshire Union Canal is also designated as an SBI, as are Acres Wood and Canal Wood, both typical small wooded copses.