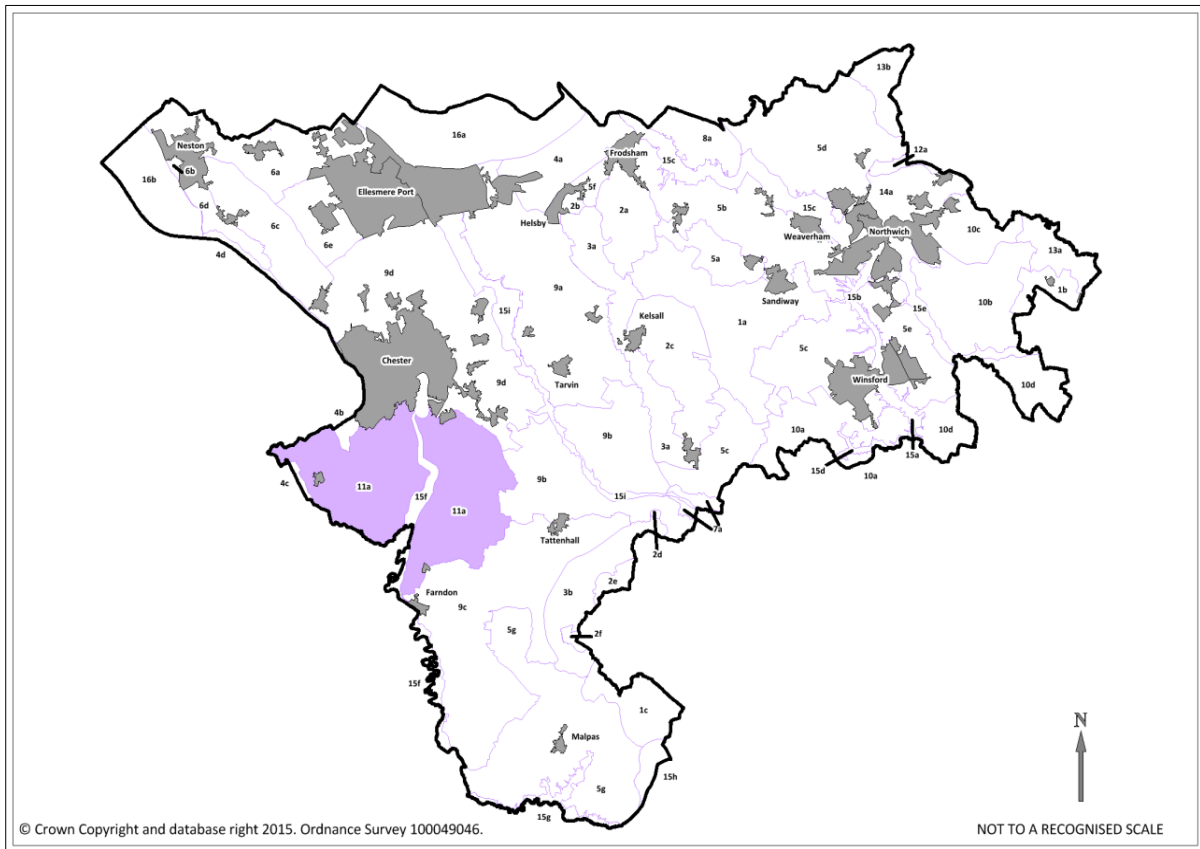


LCT 11: ESTATE FARMLAND



General Description

A medium-scale, low-lying and well maintained landscape character area falling in extensive tracts of the Cheshire Plain either side of the *Dee Valley* LCA south of Chester. It is defined through a consistency in topography, land use, woodland blocks and formal parkland and tree-lined avenues associated with historical estate ownership, with particularly strong and distinguishing settlement and architectural elements. The landscape type shares many characteristics of the *Cheshire Plain West* LCT.

Visual Character

Visual character is defined by flat or gently rolling expanses of hedgerow enclosed fields of medium size and regular pattern, set within a context of extensive designed parkland and mature woodland blocks, particularly the four linear 'approaches' /drives/avenues which radiate out from Eaton Hall and are a key characteristic of the Grade II* Eaton Hall Registered Historic Park and Garden (Chester Approach, Buerton Approach, Pulford Approach and Belgrave Avenue – the main formal approach from the west). These blocks and parkland, together with a significant density of hedgerow trees serve to present a semi-enclosed landscape. The landscape is punctuated by highly attractive estate villages with striking redbrick, slate and tile houses and estate buildings with ornate detailing and strong consistency of style designed by John Douglas. Eaton Hall and its associated buildings are set low within the wooded estate but whose estate chapel clock tower and spire rises to provide a dramatic and imposing landmark across much of the lowland pasture. Church spires also provide visual reference points, with some longer views possible to the Welsh hills and the sandstone ridge to the east.

The extensive network of fields is a mix of small, medium and large enclosures (up to 4ha, 4-8ha and over 8ha respectively) and is 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 northern edge of this character type 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.

Physical Influences

Topography is flat or gently rolling (c 10-30m AOD), gradually increasing with distance to the south. 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.

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 neighbouring *Cheshire Plain West*. The flat topography allows a number of tall cylindrical storage silos to be seen in middle distance views, identifying the location of individual farmsteads.

The four formal wooded approaches to the Hall in this character area 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 local wildlife site 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 to the east – the Buerton Approach, which crosses the River Dee via the Iron Bridge - is located in the adjacent *Cheshire Plain West* landscape type. Bretton Wood in the northwest is also a local wildlife site and follows a former approach to the Hall (Balderton Drive) dissected by the construction of the A55 in the 1970's.

Cultural Influences

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 three motte and bailey castles in the villages of Aldford, 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.

The most dominant characteristic of this landscape type is the influence of 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 Grade II* Eaton Hall Registered Historic Park and Garden includes 17th to 20th century formal gardens and a landscape park associated with the country house, including elements by John Webb, William Andrews Nesfield and Edwin Lutyens.

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, one of the most notable villages of the Eaton Estate. Most 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.

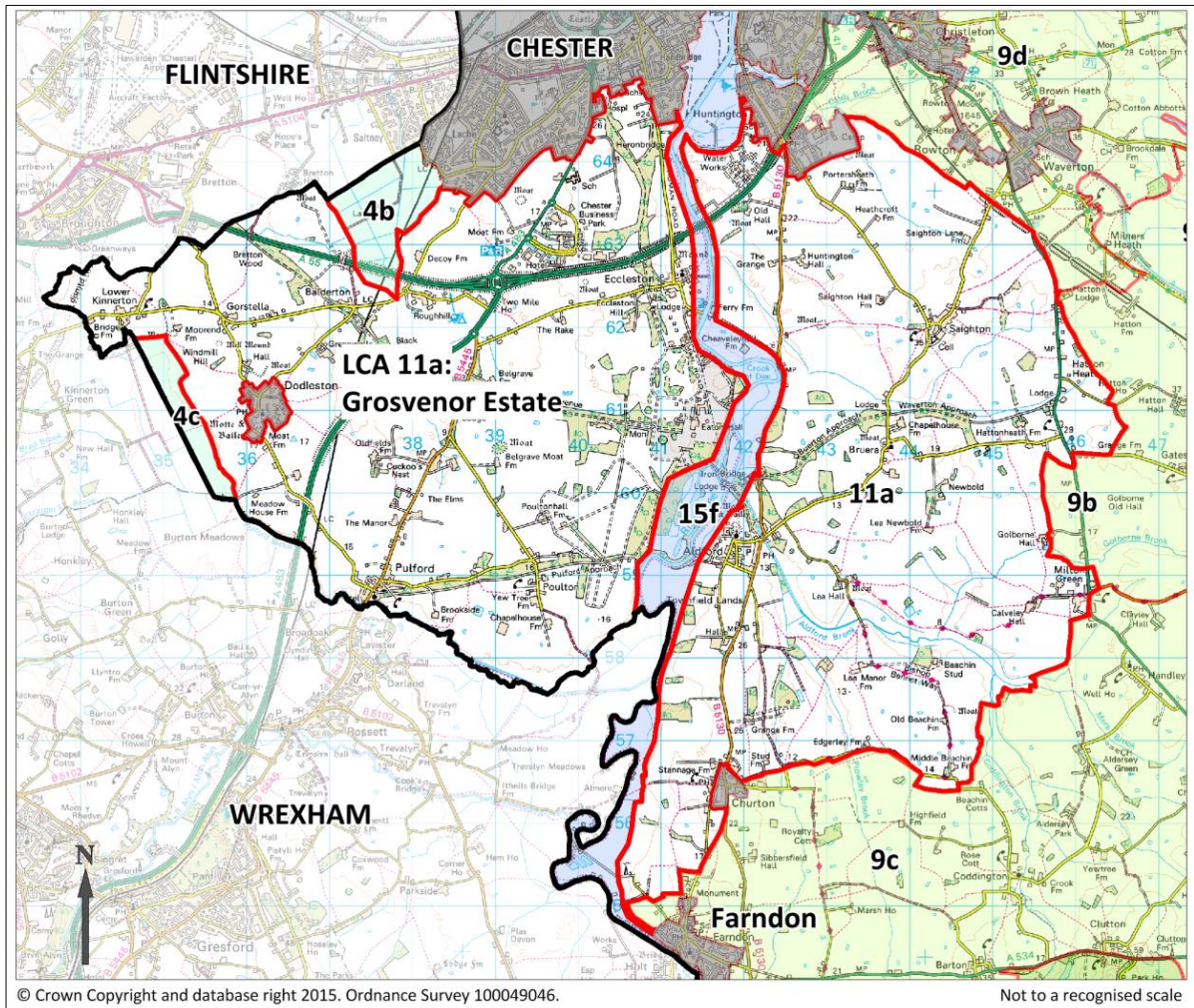
In the late 19th century the Estate constructed over 300 cottages, which meant that many buildings of an earlier date were demolished. They are of high quality and have intricate and elaborate architectural detailing such as highly decorative chimneys and complex roof forms, moulded brick detail and areas of contrasting rendering, built on planned street form.

To the west of Park Plantation is the greater part of a former deer park. This was requisitioned in 1940 for use as RAF Poulton which opened in 1943 and was manned by RAF 12 Group Operational Training Unit. Poulton acted as a satellite airfield for Hawarden airfield and was mainly used for fighter training. Parts of the runways and most of the perimeter track survive. Most of the dispersal bays have gone.

There is **one Landscape Character Area** within LCT 11:

11a: Grosvenor Estate

LCA 11a: Grosvenor Estate



Location and Boundaries

The **Grosvenor Estate** character area is located in two separate blocks displaying strong consistency in appearance, on the east and west flanks of the River Dee, beyond the narrow LCA which defines the river's immediate landscape character. To the north of the LCA is the urban influence of the City of Chester, although limited changes in relief do not afford views beyond its fringe, and to the east lies the *Cheshire Plain West* which shares many landscape characteristics with the *Grosvenor Estate*. For the most part the west of the character area is defined by the Welsh border apart from a linear strip of *Drained Marsh* west of Dodleston (LCA 4c).

Key Landscape Characteristics of LCA 11a: Grosvenor Estate

- A gently rolling or flat landscape with few views apart from longer vistas to higher ground east and west of the area
- Underlying geology comprises Kinnerton Sandstone and Chester Pebble Beds Formation overlain by Devensian till
- Large blocks of woodland, predominantly oak with a more ornamental mix of species around Eaton Hall
- Mix of pastoral and arable land use
- Strong network of well managed hawthorn hedges with a high proportion of oak trees
- Sense of enclosure arising from low elevation, dense hedgerows and significant woodland blocks creating middle distance and close skylines
- Extensive areas of flood plain as tributaries meet with the River Dee, such as Stoneyford Brook, Powsey Brook and Plowley Brook
- Dense concentration of listed historic estate buildings, set within Conservation Areas at Eaton Hall and within most of the designed villages across the LCA
- Three motte and bailey castles in the villages of Aldford, Pulford and Dodleston and a number of medieval moated sites
- Eaton Hall clock tower and spire provides an imposing landmark unchallenged by other constructions
- Views to some estate village church spires and towers, such as Eccleston, Pulford and Aldford
- Influence of important designers on the designed landscape and built environment of the LCA, such as John Douglas, John Webb, William Andrews Nesfield and Edwin Lutyens reflected by designations
- Big skies
- Some field ponds, often of habitat importance
- A sparse network of often straight, quite lanes and roads, including private estate roads
- Significant influence of road and rail infrastructure to the northern parts of the LCA
- Significant variation in public access to the countryside between the eastern part with good public rights of way network, and the western area where the network is less extensive
- Connectivity between the two parts of the LCA is significantly limited by very limited crossing points of the River Dee
- Large garden centre complex and car park at Belgrave reflects diversification of the estate and rural enterprise.

Key Landscape Sensitivities, Qualities and Value

Natural / Physical

- The Topography is flat or gently rolling (c 10-30m AOD), gradually increasing with distance to the south;
- The landscape is partly enclosed by extensive, conspicuous linear woodland blocks known as *approaches* of oak and a more complex mix of holly, beech, hornbeam, lime, Scots pine and yew closer to Eaton Hall;
- The wooded parkland *approaches* which often define the horizon;
- Woodland to the eastern and western fringes of the LCA become less frequent and prominent;
- Mature parkland planting;
- Good quality ridge and furrow survives on the estate;

- Soils are typical argillic stagnogleys, which are suited to pasture as they are not particularly free draining;
- Arable agriculture is more predominant on better-drained soils such as north of Belgrave, south of Cuckoo's Nest and around Churton;
- Field pattern is primarily semi-regular in shape with well-managed, often low clipped hawthorn hedges;
- 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;
- Straight and gently meandering country lanes lined with well-managed, closely trimmed hedgerows;
- Hedgerow trees are less frequent to the north-western fringes of the LCA;
- Where arable land use has increased there is evidence of loss of hedgerows, such as at Churton, Milton Green and immediately north of the A55 Chester ring road;
- The LCA supports an extensive network of habitats due to the estate woodlands and wetlands;
- Local wildlife sites have been designated locally reflecting the habitat value of the woodlands across the LCA, including Bretton Wood, Duck Wood and Beachin Wood with a range of species indicative of older woodland;
- Aldford Brook Meadows is a large local wildlife site of diverse, mainly wetland habitats, including wet scrub/woodland, by the canalised Aldford Brook.

Cultural / Heritage / Historic

- 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;
- The three motte and bailey castles in the villages of Aldford, 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;
- The moated Dodleston Hall;
- The major landscape and historical influence of the Eaton Estate, the seat of which is Eaton Hall, home to the Grosvenor Family now the Dukes of Westminster;
- Eaton Hall, first built in the late 17th century for Thomas Grosvenor and rebuilt in the 19th century, but largely demolished in 1963 after army use. 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 Registered Grade II* on Historic England's National Heritage List for England and 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 'Eaton Estate style' predominates much of the LCA with attractive, high quality buildings, both red brick cottages and higher status properties, with characteristic architectural detailing in estate villages and on model farms;
- Recreation opportunity is presented by the cultural and landscape attractions of Eaton Hall;
- The extensive footpath network allows for recreational use to the west of the River Dee more so than to the east;
- Duke's Drive (Chester Approach) woodland is managed as a public access area, a reflection of its location on the southern edge of Chester;
- The garden centre at Belgrave presents a major retail-focused attraction in the countryside.

Built Development and Settlement Pattern

- Settlement is characterised by a mix of well-defined, nucleated and architecturally integral estate villages, such as Aldford, Saughton and Eccleston and medieval villages which have grown through mid-20th century expansion such as Dodleston and Pulford where some suburbanisation is evident;
- An extensive collection of large 'model' estate farmsteads and estate workers cottages dot the landscape outside the main settlements;
- Within and around the estate villages, the quality and commonality in styles of the built environment is highly evident, reflecting long-term single ownership of much of the LCA by the Grosvenor family, and design concept of John Douglas;
- Red and orange brick houses with clay tile and blue slate roofs that dominate these villages, often with intricate brickwork detailing, ornate chimney stacks and leaded casement windows;
- 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;
- Atypical of the LCA, the expansive Chester Business Park stands as a significant concentration of employment modern buildings immediately north of the A55 set partly within a designed landscape setting which reduces its prominence;
- Major road transport corridors of the A55 and A483 contrast with the otherwise quiet lane road network;
- Watling Street Roman Road crosses the river at Aldford and continues south-eastwards through the LCA;
- The former RAF Poulton stands centrally in the LCA, west of Eaton Hall with runway and taxiways still evident. However this is inconspicuous in the flat and well screened landscape context.

Perceptual / Visual

- 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;
- This is a simple landscape, with a consistent and unified character as a result of the consistent land use and field size/pattern;
- The scale of the landscape is moderate as a result of the gentle undulating topography and scale of field units;
- There is a sense of some enclosure in places as a consequence of the effects the approaches to Eaton Hall and the extensive layers of hedgerows and hedgerow trees have in combination;
- The presence of arable crops and deciduous woodland provides changing colour with the seasons;
- Whilst deeply rural, any perceived naturalness in this landscape is diminished by the presence of managed farmland, and increasingly across the northern parts by the relationship with Chester and transport infrastructure;
- This area is perceived as a peaceful rural landscape close to the City of Chester;
- The upstanding sandstone ridge of the *Higher Burwardsley* LCA forms a strong skyline in views to the east from parts of the character area, whilst the ridge of the Clwydian Hills in Wales present a more dramatic horizon profile to the west;
- The presence of woodland means there may be some potential for mitigating visual impact of low lying features without the mitigation measure in themselves having an adverse effect on the character of the landscape.

Landscape Condition

The *Grosvenor Estate* LCA is in active agricultural use and is intensively managed by the estate for dairy and arable land use. Despite erosion of formal parkland, the condition of the landscape is generally good, although hedgerow loss and the influence of urban extension and transport infrastructure to the north is increasing.

CWaC Local Plan policies with an influence on the character of LCA 11a: *Grosvenor Estate*:

- Green Belt and Countryside;
- Natural heritage sites of regional and/or local importance;
- Significant concentration of nationally designated heritage assets (on Historic England's National Heritage List for England) and locally significant heritage assets;
- Flood risk and water management.

Forces for Landscape Change

Past Change

- Erosion of formal parkland;
- A predominantly well-managed and maintained landscape where change has been partly arrested over the past century through consistent estate management and agricultural practice;
- Increases in arable farming on better-drained soils has resulted in some field enclosure loss and weakening of character;
- Increase in modern agricultural buildings (particularly silos) diminishing the architectural integrity of historic model farmsteads;
- Estate diversification including introduction of visitor attractions around the Eaton Estate;
- Improved drainage and in-filling has led to the loss of field ponds and wetlands over the years;
- Main roads, railways and industry in the area perceptually influenced by Chester have had a significant impact on the character of limited parts of this landscape – eroding the tranquillity of the landscape at its edges;
- Steady intensification of grassland management in the 20th century has resulted in the loss of species rich grassland;
- Erosion of the historic form and character of non-estate villages through suburban-like housing growth;
- Some limited inter-war and mid 20th century sporadic and isolated housing such as at Sandy Lane;
- Diminution of the ecological value of the area through intensive agricultural use and landscape management;
- Loss of ridge and furrow areas.

Potential future change / key issues affecting LCA 11a: *Grosvenor Estate*

- Further intensification of agricultural practice and infrastructure development;
- Purchase of agricultural holdings by non-farmers resulting in conversion of farm houses and farm buildings and changes in farm use;
- Further loss of field boundaries and changes to the enclosure scale and pattern;
- Restoration of parkland would be a positive change;
- Loss of veteran trees;
- Deterioration of wetland habitats through drainage and nutrient run-off, and ecological succession of remaining ponds;
- Further diversification of estate enterprise;
- Pressure for small-scale residential development to maintain rural communities;
- Improvement and increase in use of major transport infrastructure;
- Expansion of Chester into the north of the area.

Overall Landscape Management Strategy for LCA11a: Grosvenor Estate

The overall management objective for this landscape should be to **conserve** and **enhance** the condition of the hedgerow, tree and woodland network, and **restore** and link former habitats such as woodland and maintain ponds and wetland. New development should have strong a reference to estate village scale, layout, architecture and planting.

Landscape Management Guidelines

- 1.** Maintain an intact hedgerow network through management of hedges, planting lost hedge lines, and re-planting a young stock of hedgerow trees. Consider a programme of replacement hedgerow tree planting to re-instate those that have been lost over the years.
- 2.** Avoid over-intensive flail mowing or ploughing too close to hedgerow boundaries – protect saplings and encourage trees to grow up at intervals along the hedgerow.
- 3.** Promote appropriate management of arable and pastoral farmland to create a wildlife-rich habitat supporting farmland birds, including retaining areas of fallow land, over-wintering stubbles, maintaining an unploughed margin around arable land, and management of existing hedgerows.
- 4.** Increase the biodiversity of intensively managed grassland – create and link buffer strips along linear features such as hedgerows to create a continuous network of wildlife corridors.
- 5.** Conserve and manage the remaining field ponds and wetlands across the plain – seek opportunities to extend areas species rich unimproved grassland.
- 6.** Avoid further loss of ridge and furrow through agricultural intensification or development.
- 7.** Promote traditional woodland management techniques of the deciduous woodland to ensure a diverse (indigenous) species and age structure.
- 8.** Seek opportunities to expand and link existing woodlands in areas currently of low ecological value – support plans to create additional large woods in balance with the open agricultural landscape.
- 9.** Minimise the impact of existing major roads and industry on the area by using native planting to screen.

10. Seek to conserve and restore historic designed landscapes and their settings, such as the historic parkland at Eaton Hall and consider opportunities to enhance access to, and appreciation of, this landscape. Respect approaches to Eaton parkland.
11. Avoid road ‘improvements’ (such as addition of kerbs and lighting) that would alter the rural character of the lanes.

Built Development Guidelines

1. Conserve the low settlement density and rural character of the estate villages and hamlets. Avoid ‘suburbanising’ features such as gate posts, kerbs and close board fences around gardens.
2. Ensure new built development fits with the local built vernacular, including use of distinctive materials. Use indigenous planting to integrate any new built development into the landscape but also ornamental species mix where consistent with the local context.
3. Maintain the external fabric, appearance and setting of farm buildings and promote the use of local materials.
4. Ensure modern farm buildings and infrastructure is sensitively located and screened in relation to historic buildings as well as landscape prominence.
5. Ensure conversion of farm buildings is sensitive to the rural landscape and vernacular building style. Pay particular attention to the features which accompany the conversion such as driveways and gardens, ensuring that these features do not ‘suburbanise’ the landscape.
6. Ensure riding schools, stables and equestrian development do not accumulate to detract from the rural character of the area – ensure sensitive integration of fencing, tracks, jumps and ancillary buildings.
7. Respect planned form of settlements.
8. Preserve views of the estate chapel clock tower and spire.

