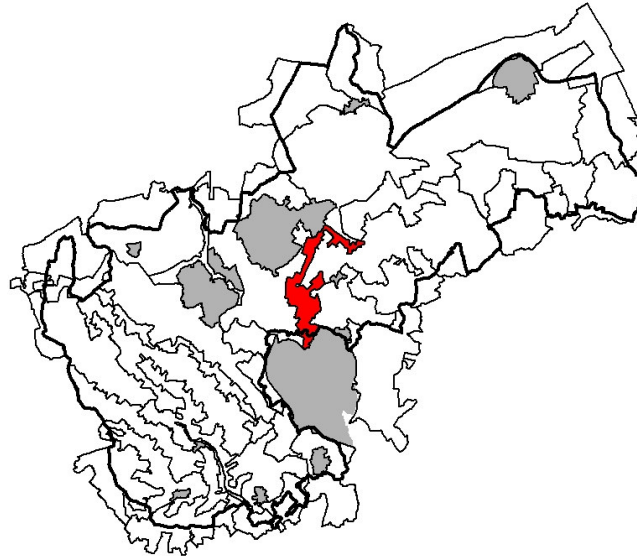


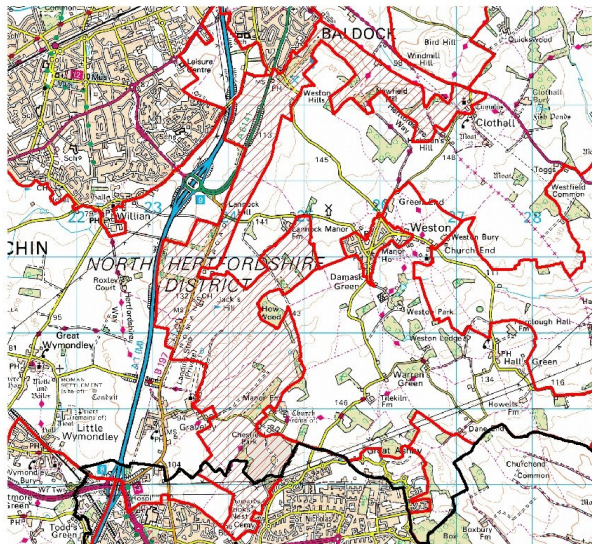
LOCATION



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LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

Located to the east of the A1(M), stretching in a narrow band from the north of Stevenage to a point southeast of Baldock, where the scarp turns through 90° and runs in a southeasterly direction.



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LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

Steeply sloping in places chalk scarp, eroded by local valleys, mostly dry, to form an undulating landform. Two deeply incised valleys southwest of Weston still carry streams, which feed a number of water features. Extensive arable fields of cereals with occasional patches of pasture land. Sparse woodland cover. General lack of development.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Undulating chalk scarp with local steep sided valleys
- Large arable fields
- Small, occasional plantations, or shelter belts
- Small sunken lanes and footpaths climbing up the slope

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- B197 Roman road cuts across the contours
- Abuts suburban edge to Baldock in the north and Stevenage in the south
- Small reservoirs and telecommunications masts
- Caravan park to north of Graveley
- Rooks Nest House (Setting for Howards End), is identified with an area known as Forster Country

ASSESSMENT**PHYSICAL INFLUENCES****Geology & soils**

Chalk overlain by shallow rendzina and calcareous loam soils.

Topography

Steeply sloping scarp face.

Degree of slope

Generally varies between 1:5 to 1:20.

Altitude range

100m to 135m.

Hydrology

Generally dry except for two local valleys which have been eroded in the scarp face. These rise on the western side of Weston Village, running in parallel steep sided valleys towards Graveley. The streams feed a series of water features.

Land cover and land use

Predominantly arable land with occasional pockets of pasture land. Small plantations. Southern part falls within Chesfield Park.

Vegetation and wildlife

Scarp slope with associated calcareous grassland communities, which can be of significant wildlife value. Scrub and broadleaved semi-natural woodland also occur. Small woods are important for fallow deer. Old beech plantations occur at Weston Hills at Ledgerside/Chesfield Park.

Chalk grassland was historically widespread. Important remaining sites include New Field Hill Nature Reserve and Ledgeside Downs, with vestiges on road verges. Chalk grassland remnants include species such as autumn gentian, common valerian, eyebright and orchids, notably the southern marsh orchid at its only extant dry chalk site in Hertfordshire at Weston Hills. Witebeam at Ledgerside is the most easterly native site in the county. Unimproved calcareous grassland is an uncommon habitat present as only 0.25% of land cover in North Hertfordshire. It is a notably species-rich habitat which is home to an array of invertebrate and plant species, many of which are becoming increasingly uncommon in a local and national context.

The expanse of Chesfield Park is improved grassland.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Clothall was a medieval village and lies at the northeastern edge of the Character Area. The parish church of St Mary, Clothall, dates to the 12th century. To the south of the church lies Clothall House, the former rectory with a tithe barn and cottage within the grounds. Iron Age occupation straddles part of the Roman road, which runs through the western part of the area. Cropmarks of a double ditch lie towards the north of the area.

Rooks Nest House is best known as the childhood home of novelist E M Forster, author of *Howards End*, who was brought to the house by his mother in 1883.

Field Pattern

The historic agricultural landscape pattern consists of a mixture of post 1950s enclosure, prairie fields with 1950s boundary loss, 18th century and later enclosure, informal medieval parkland, prairie fields with relict elements within, 19th – 20th century plantation and pre-18th century irregular enclosure. Ancient woodland lies to the north and there are two water reservoirs, one to the north and one in the southwest.

Transport Pattern

Small sunken lanes and footpaths climbing up the slope. The Roman road cuts across the contours.

Settlement and Built Form

The historic settlement pattern is characterised by sparse settlement consisting of farmsteads and part of the historic settlement of Clothall. Traditional buildings are therefore scarce but an example can be found at Clothall House, a five bay, two storey Georgian brick house which was formerly the rectory.

EVALUATION**VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION**

Extensive views from the scarp over the lowland landscape to the north and south.

Rarity & distinctiveness

Distinctive scarp edge, relatively common in North Hertfordshire.

VISUAL IMPACT

Area comparatively undisturbed with localised infrastructure and water pumping station.

ACCESSIBILITY

Area to north crossed by road and footpath network. Area to south more remote but crossed by footpaths and bridleways.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) have undertaken Tier B (Community of Place) consultations. Views of the local community have been sought and contributor's responses to each of the Character Areas will be analysed and a summary of the responses provided by HCC.

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

LC2 Landscape Conservation Area

EVALUATION

CONDITION

Land cover change:	Localised
Age structure of tree cover:	Mixed
Extent of semi-natural habitat survival:	Widespread
Management of semi-natural habitat:	Good
Survival of cultural pattern:	Interrupted
Impact of built development:	Low
Impact of land-use change:	Moderate

Matrix Score:	Good
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ROBUSTNESS

Impact of landform:	Prominent
Impact of land cover:	Prominent
Impact of historic pattern:	Apparent
Visibility from outside:	Widely visible
Sense of enclosure:	Open
Visual unity:	Coherent
Distinctiveness/rarity:	Frequent

Matrix Score:	Weak
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CONDITION	GOOD	Strengthen and reinforce	Conserve and strengthen	Safeguard and manage
	MODERATE	Improve and reinforce	Improve and conserve	Conserve and restore
	POOR	Reconstruct	Improve and restore	Restore condition to maintain character
		WEAK	MODERATE	STRONG
ROBUSTNESS				

EVALUATION

INHERENT LANDSCAPE SENSITIVITY

Landscape Character Sensitivities

- A large scale landscape with steeply sloping and undulating chalk scarp. It is rural in character, which would be vulnerable to the addition of built or urbanizing features
- Large scale arable fields are the predominant land use, with occasional pockets of pasture and linear plantations
- The landscape is also used for a variety of recreational activities including: 'pick your own', golf courses, horseculture and an airfield. However the landscape would be vulnerable to further recreational land uses, particularly if they alter the existing character
- The area includes a number of Ash woodland belts and old Beech plantations in the southeast of the Baldock Gap associated with registered park and garden, Chesfield Park. These woodlands are vulnerable to lowering water tables, lack of management or removal
- Baldock Gap is almost unsettled, with most isolated development occurring on the edges of the Character Area and along the B197 (a Roman Road).
- Access through the Character Area is limited to two significant roads, the B197 Roman Road cuts across the contours. Associated vegetation is significant, providing good containment to the road. The area would be sensitive to vegetation loss in this situation. The more modern A505 cuts through the scarp slope more sympathetically.
- There are a limited number of rights of way in the area
- Hedgerows are not a frequent feature of Baldock Gap and are variable in height and management

- The landform is smooth with limited enclosure and despite its rural character it is not tranquil due to the significant movement generated by the busy infrastructure system in and adjacent to the area

Overall Baldock Gap is considered to be of **moderate to high sensitivity**. The large scale steeply sloping chalk scarp creates a dramatic landscape with limited urban influence.

Visual Sensitivities

- The open undeveloped skyline is an important feature of the Character Area
- Panoramic views are common from the scarp towards the lower lying land in the west and north. Views are less pronounced to the south, which is more of a valley landform
- Small telecommunications masts currently intrude on the skyline within the Character Area
- The edge of Stevenage to the south of the character area is visually intrusive

In visual terms, Baldock Gap is considered to be of **high sensitivity**. Views to the open undeveloped skyline are an important feature both within the character area and from adjacent areas. These would be sensitive to the introduction of built and urbanizing features.

LANDSCAPE VALUE

Overall Baldock Gap is considered to be of **moderate landscape value**. Aspects of particular value within Baldock Gap are the intactness of the landscape, a recognisable sense of place, the striking landform, memorable views, the visual interest, the sense of openness and the visible expressions of the local geology.

EVALUATION**CAPACITY TO ACCOMMODATE DEVELOPMENT****Large urban extensions and new settlements (>5ha)**

This type of development would not be appropriate within Baldock Gap, due to its rural and undeveloped nature. It would introduce a scale of development that would be entirely out of keeping with the Character Area. Large scale development could not be accommodated within the Baldock Gap without a significant visual impact on the open undeveloped skyline. The steeply sloping and undulating landform would also make major development very difficult to accommodate.

The landscape capacity for large urban extensions or new settlements is considered to be low.

Smaller urban extensions (<5ha)

This type of development would not be appropriate within this Character Area, due to its rural and largely unsettled character. Visual impacts could be high, due to the panoramic views and undeveloped skylines currently experienced.

The landscape capacity for small urban extensions is considered to be low.

Major transport developments/improvements

This type of development has recently occurred in the Character Area, with the A505 Baldock Bypass, which follows a reasonably sensitive alignment and design. However upgrading of existing narrow, twisting lanes could erode the character of the landscape.

The landscape capacity for major transport developments/improvements is considered to be moderate.

Commercial/warehouse estates

This type of large scale development would not be appropriate in this character area, as there are not currently any large scale developments of this type within the area. Extensive development would also disrupt the open undeveloped slopes and skyline.

The landscape capacity for commercial/warehouse estates is considered to be low.

Individual large/bulky buildings

There may be some limited capacity for sympathetically located and designed individual large buildings, particularly if they were of a vernacular form or style and in keeping with the rural character. Large buildings, if not carefully located, could erode the rural and undeveloped character of the Baldock Gap.

The landscape capacity for individual large/bulky buildings is considered to be low to moderate.

Large scale open storage

The landform within Baldock Gap would make it difficult to accommodate large scale 'open' uses without considerable ground modelling. This would not be in keeping with the rural character of the area and likely to be very open to view and introduce new elements that would conflict with the existing characteristics. Extensive development would also disrupt the open views and sloping landform.

The landscape capacity for large scale 'open' uses is considered to be low.

Mineral extraction/waste disposal

This Character Area is currently relatively undisturbed and rural in appearance. Whilst some small scale mineral extraction could be accommodated with careful design and mitigation measures, larger scale extraction or waste disposal would not be in keeping. The characteristic landform would also be adversely affected if mineral extraction were to occur.

The landscape capacity for mineral extraction is considered to be low. Waste disposal would be a problem in all character areas due to the presence of aquifers.

EVALUATION

Incremental small scale development

There is very limited capacity for small scale developments within the Character Area. Baldock Gap is almost unsettled, with the only isolated development at present occurring on the edges of the Character Area. This is already intrusive creating a less intact landscape. The landscape capacity for incremental small scale developments is considered to be low.

Utilities developments e.g. masts, pylons, wind turbines

There are few vertical built and urbanising elements within this Character Area at present. New utilities developments or structures such as masts or wind turbines would have a major impact on the rural character of Baldock Gap and be detrimental to the open skyline of the character area. Large scale structures such as these would be highly visible within Baldock Gap, as well as potentially visible in surrounding Character Areas. The landscape capacity for utilities developments is considered to be low.

GUIDELINES

Nb. These guidelines apply only to land within North Hertfordshire

STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING CHANGE**Strategy: Strengthen and Reinforce****Landscape management guidelines**

- Conserve the visually sensitive skylines and rolling slopes from inappropriate land uses, structures and built development
- Recognise and conserve visual relationship with Lowland Village Farmlands
- Promote planting of new beech woodland to encourage a diverse woodland flora especially in relation to sub-urban fringe areas
- Promote the creation of buffer zones between intensive arable production and areas of semi-natural habitat and the creation of links between habitat areas
- Promote hedgerow restoration along the lines of historic field boundaries and for the creation of visual links between existing woodland areas
- Promote the use of traditional field hedges in place of post and wire enclosures to new grazing areas
- Promote the diversity of hedgerow species and the planting of standard hedgerow trees
- Encourage the development for species-rich calcareous grassland habitats
- Enhance features by removal of scrub vegetation to reinstate chalk grassland and rare indicator species e.g. juniper and pasque flower
- Maintain openness for rare farm birds e.g. grey partridge, lapwing, corn bunting and stone curlew and also for arable weeds and brown hares
- Maintain and extend the rights of way network

Built development guidelines

- Retain the rural character of Baldock Gap, ensuring that any new development is appropriately sited and of a scale, form and style appropriate to Baldock Gap
- Maintain the open character and the long distance views from the Character Area
- Ensure that new development does not necessitate the removal of existing hedgerows
- Planting should reflect existing patterns, with hedges and shelterbelts following field and road boundaries and strategic isolated copses to mitigate buildings
- Avoid the location of new development on visually exposed areas of the scarp slopes
- Ensure that lighting necessitated by new development minimises the impact on the Character Area
- Restrict the location of masts and vertical features in the Character Area to prevent them from dominating the skyline
- Use the opportunity of any new developments to create new accessible green infrastructure