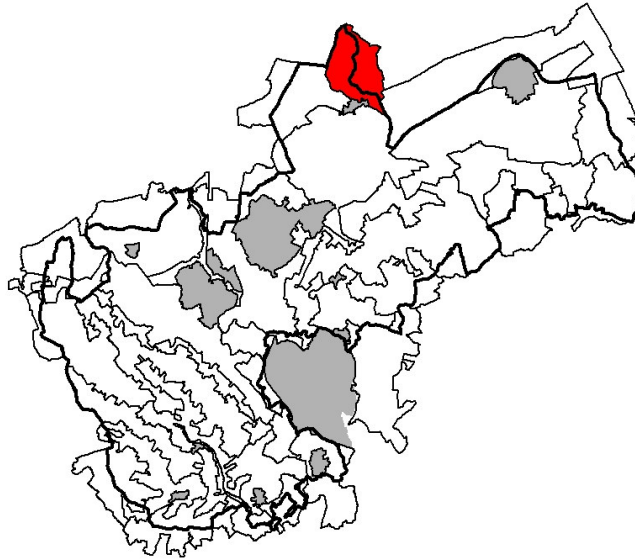


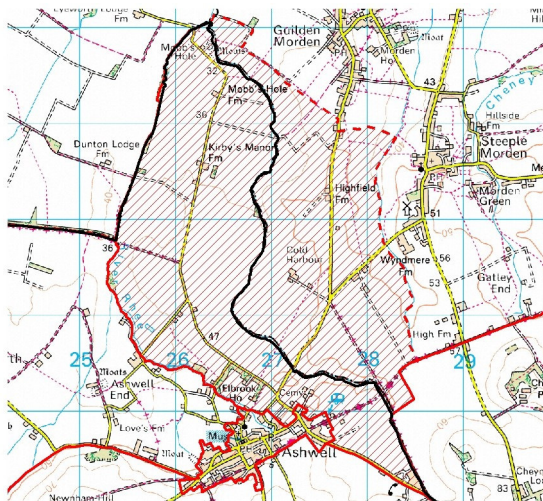
LOCATION



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LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

The Character Area of Steeple Morden Plain lies to the north of Ashwell village. It is bounded by the River Rhee to the west and extends beyond the District boundary to the west of Steeple Morden village.



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LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

Steeple Morden is one of several nucleated settlements, extending eastwards, which run in a line (probably a spring line) parallel to the foot of the chalk scarp. Gently rolling chalk landform with a strong pattern of geometrically ordered fields and

lanes. Northfield Road to the north of Ashwell, runs on a slight rise across the landscape. The land falls away gently on each side of the road. Vast acreage of arable land on both sides of the road only interrupted by the recent tree planting along the road. Area is very exposed. Absence of settlements adds to the lack of variety and homogeneity of the landscape.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Medium to large arable fields
- Spring line feeds streams which flow northwards
- Flat, low lying to west
- Gently rolling landform to east
- Open, exposed character
- Geometric pattern of rectilinear fields and roads

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- Bounded to north by Steeple Morden settlement
- (Lower) Icknield Way long distance footpath
- Lack of settlement in the west with pattern of nucleated settlements to the east, beyond the boundary to the Character Area

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

Soils tend to be partially waterlogged calcareous clays overlying Chalk Marl.

Topography

Very shallow crossfall over area to north of Ashwell rising to gently undulating further east.

Degree of slope

Typically 1:100 in the west rising to 1:30 in the east but with pockets of more level ground. Area falling gently from south to north.

Altitude range

35m to 55m.

Hydrology

Kirby Manor farmland drained by two broadly parallel streams running to east and west (river Rhee) of Northfield Road. The Cheney Water, which runs to the east of Steeple Morden, rises at Upper Gatley and flows through a series of weirs and ponds. Cheney Water is a characteristic chalk spring rising from the bottom of the scarp and draining northwards into the River Cam catchment.

Land cover and land use

Dominated by arable, large sized fields to the west, medium sized fields to the east adjacent to Steeple Morden.

Vegetation and wildlife

The Character Area, which falls partly outside the county boundary, contains no wildlife sites and is of notably low ecological interest. It is dominated by large arable field systems, with semi-natural vegetation restricted to watercourses, occasional shelter belts and neutral/calcareous grassland remnants on road verges and old field banks, eg Shire Baulk and Ashwell Street. Verges dominated in spring by cow parsley. Low hawthorn hedging is also common. The white willow lined eutrophic watercourses have some value for wildlife. Golden plover frequent the open fields in winter, whilst water voles inhabit some streams. Very important area for corn bunting. Dotterel occasionally occur in large arable fields on spring migration. Dung heaps (middens) from Bluegate Dairy are a very important food source (insects) for resident and migrant birds.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

In the centre of the Character Area, a cropmark of a prehistoric ring ditch is known from an aerial photograph. Earthworks of a probable medieval moated site, a Roman Villa and Romano-British occupation material lies to the south. A medieval moated site of two concentric moats lie at Mobbs Hole in the north.

Most of the open farmland has been excavated in the past for coprolites and is therefore a secondary landscape.

Field Pattern

The historic agricultural enclosure pattern dates from the mid 19th century. The landscape of rectilinear fields retain some pre-enclosure features such as old moats, county boundary field baulks, etc. Informal Medieval parkland lies to the south with small pockets of 19th – 20th century plantation in the centre.

Transport Pattern

Northfield Road runs on a slight rise along the west and Ashwell Road runs parallel to it through the east of the Character Area.

Settlements and Built Form

The historic settlement pattern is characterised by sparse settlement consisting mainly of farmsteads.

EVALUATION**VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION**

Vast scale open landscape in the west with dispersed farmsteads. Long distance views, long straight roads. More settlement pattern obvious to the east providing smaller scale landscape.

Rarity & distinctiveness

This landscape type is comparatively uncommon within the District but characteristic of south Cambridgeshire.

VISUAL IMPACT

Local pockets of linear development at Steeple Morden and Guilden Morden.

ACCESSIBILITY

Area to the west has limited rights of way access. Steeple Morden and Guilden Morden have extensive road and rights of way coverage.

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: Widespread
 Age structure of tree cover: Mixed
 Extent of semi-natural habitat survival: Relic
 Management of semi-natural habitat: Poor
 Survival of cultural pattern: Declining
 Impact of built development: Moderate
 Impact of land-use change: High

Matrix Score: **Poor**

ROBUSTNESS

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

Matrix Score: **Moderate**

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 largely rural character throughout the Character Area, with an absence of both development and other detractors. Steeple Morden would be vulnerable to the addition of urbanizing features
- Gently rolling chalk landform, moving into clay with large geometric open fields, create an exposed landscape with a remote character
- The few roads crossing the area are defined by clipped hedgerows, new hedgerow planting and trees, including poplars. The roads are vulnerable to improvements or upgrading.
- The majority of vegetation in the character area is associated with the River Rhee and its tributary. The removal or inconsistent management of these corridors would be detrimental to the character area.
- The character area is not particularly intact and has lost elements of its typical character due to the extensive removal of fields boundaries and hedgerows. Remaining hedgerows are vulnerable to further loss.
- The built form in the area is characterised by small groupings or individual properties set amongst tree planting and boundary vegetation. The majority of these are farmsteads and agricultural buildings. These properties would be vulnerable to development or removal of associated boundary vegetation.
- There is very limited public access to the west of the character area. There is scope for improvement. However the Icknield Way does run through the south of the area

- The area is sparse, with a simple texture and limited diversity. The limited linear vegetation associated with the river and streams, which flow northwards, breaks up its predominantly horizontal form. The area is vulnerable to removal of further vegetation

Overall Steeple Morden is considered to be of **low to moderate sensitivity**. The relatively flat arable farmland creates an open, remote character with limited urban influence.

Visual Sensitivities

- Views towards the watercourses are an important feature of the Character Area
- Panoramic views are common from the higher ground to the east
- Long distance views along long straight roads

In visual terms, Steeple Morden is considered to be of **moderate sensitivity**. Views between the watercourses are relatively open and would be sensitive to the introduction of urbanizing features.

LANDSCAPE VALUE

Overall Steeple Morden is considered to be of **moderate low landscape value**. Aspects of particular value within Steeple Morden are the lack of incongruous elements, the remote rural character, the uninterrupted tracts of land with few built features, the sense of openness and the relative tranquillity.

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

This type of development would not be appropriate within this Character Area, due to its rural and undeveloped character. It would be of an inappropriate scale and would introduce elements that would urbanise the landscape, altering the character and removing the existing key characteristics. Increased housing development would be likely to affect the existing rural roads, which could erode the character of the landscape.

The landscape capacity for major 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 undeveloped character.

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

Major transport developments/improvements

This type of development would not be appropriate within this Character Area, due to the largely rural character of the roads at present. Upgrading of existing rural roads could erode the character of the landscape. Additional traffic would also affect the peace and tranquillity of the Character Area.

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

Commercial/warehouse estates

This type of large scale development would not be appropriate in this character area. There are not currently any large scale developments of this type within the area. Existing minor roads would be inappropriate for any significant larger volumes of traffic and/or HGVs. Any upgrading of the existing network would cause damage to the landscape character.

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 an agricultural character and in keeping with the rural character. However, large buildings could be highly visible within the Character Area if not carefully located. Any building or group of building should be located strategically, preferably associated with existing building groups and with boundary planting and shelterbelts where necessary.

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

Large scale open uses

The rural character of Steeple Morden would make it difficult to accommodate large scale 'open' uses without significant impact. 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. The minor roads are unlikely to have capacity to accommodate development or would need considerable upgrading to be able to accept larger volumes of traffic and/or HGVs, which would further dilute the landscape character.

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

EVALUATION**Mineral extraction/waste disposal**

Whilst some small scale mineral extraction could be accommodated with careful design and mitigation measures, larger scale extraction would not be in keeping with the character of Steeple Morden. The minor roads would need upgrading to be able to accept larger HGVs, which could further dilute the landscape character. Should any schemes be consented, restoration proposals should be mainly at grade and include for additional planting in character with existing patterns.

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

Incremental small scale development

There may be some capacity for carefully located and designed small scale developments within the Character Area, particularly if they were of an agricultural character and in keeping with the rural character. Small scale isolated properties or small groups of buildings carefully designed and in keeping with the existing character of the area, could be accommodated. However, due to the existing open and undeveloped character any proposals would need clear justification to avoid the erosion of the rural character of Steeple Morden. Proposed buildings would normally be expected to relate to existing complexes

The landscape capacity for incremental small scale developments is considered to be moderate.

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

There are very few urbanising elements within this Character Area at present. There are currently few detractors in the areas. New utilities developments or structures would have a significant impact on the rural character of Steeple Morden. Large scale developments and tall elements would be highly visible within the Character Area, 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: Improve and Restore****Landscape management guidelines**

- Promote creation of new woodland and for existing woodlands encourage a diverse woodland flora
- Promote the creation of buffer zones between areas of intensive arable production and areas of semi-natural habitat and the creation of links between habitat areas
- Promote hedgerow restoration to create visual links between existing woodland areas
- Promote the use of traditional field hedges in place of post and wire fencing to new grazing areas
- Promote the diversity of hedgerow species and the planting of standard hedgerow trees
- Maintain and extend the rights of way network
- Encourage the development of unimproved species-rich grassland habitats
- Promote the creation of new ponds and the retention of existing ponds for wildlife
- Encourage the planting of shelter belts and planting associated with built form
- Encourage the planting of trees and other appropriate vegetation along watercourses

Built development guidelines

- Protect and preserve the pattern of rural roads and associated hedgerows and trees
- Encourage the planting of appropriate broadleaved woodland and vegetation to screen new development that could intrude in rural views
- Retain the rural character of Steeple Morden, ensuring that any new development is appropriately sited and of a scale, form and style appropriate to the Character Area
- Avoid the location of new development in visual intrusive locations, such as on higher ground
- Place new buildings in association with existing groups
- Ensure that new development does not necessitate the removal of existing vegetation or the loss of surviving hedgerows
- Ensure that lighting necessitated by new development minimises the impact on the Character Area