6.0 THE PEVENSEY LEVELS LANDSCAPE
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6.1 General

6.1.1 This Section presents the assessment of the Pevensey Levels Landscape and the landscape setting of the selected settlements in this area. The assessment includes:

• A summary overview of the Pevensey Levels National Character Area (NCA) and its constituent County Landscape Character Areas.
• Assessment of the character, sensitivity and value of each Local Landscape Character Type identified within the Pevensey Levels Landscape, including description of each Type’s constituent Local Landscape Character Areas, in accordance with the methodology set out in Section 2.0.
• Assessment of the Landscape Settings for each of the selected settlements within the Pevensey Levels Landscape in accordance with the methodology set out in Section 2.0.

6.2 The Pevensey Levels National Character Area

6.2.1 The extent of the Low Weald National Character Area in respect of Wealden District is shown on Figure 2.1. A full description of the National Character Area as a whole is available from the Natural England website19. A summary overview of the Pevensey Levels National Character Area within the District is provided below.

Summary

6.2.2 The Pevensey Levels are extensive tracts of low-lying reclaimed wetland with pockets of raised land typically associated with farm buildings and settlements. A distinctive windswept feel characterises the large-scale open landscape of predominant pasture. Large fields are set within an irregular network of drainage ditches and banks, with a few hedges (often associated with old silted dykes) and trees, except on areas of higher ground where isolated groups of trees associated with small settlements add variety and interest. Ditches are typically fringed with reeds while patches of standing water and rushy pasture further reinforce the wetland character. Although intensively farmed, much of the area is still wet pasture and is managed for grazing. Much of the area is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and the Pevensey Levels are designated as a Ramsar Site and Site of Community Importance20.

Key Characteristics

6.2.3 The key characteristics of the Pevensey Levels National Character Area as a whole are:

• Low-lying tract of largely reclaimed wetland, actively maintained by purpose-built drainage systems and river flood plain improvements, with long views to the dramatic and distinctive backdrops of the South Downs and out over the sea. A predominantly open landscape with extensive grazed wet meadows and some arable fields with characteristic dykes, wetlands and wide skies. The open, windswept feel is further enhanced by the scarcity of trees and hedges in the landscape.
• Low density of dispersed settlement, mostly farmsteads on medieval sites, away from main centres of population.
• Local landscape diversity is added by ‘eyes’ – islands of higher ground, many with farmsteads – and also by reed-fringed ditches, scattered willows and patches of standing water with adjacent rushy pasture. Ditches of high biodiversity value, particularly for invertebrates and aquatic plants, typically fringed with reeds, and with patches of standing water and rushy pasture reinforcing the wetland character.
• Pevensey Castle overlooks the Levels near the coast, dominating the landscape and adding to the historic interest of the area along with Martello towers and Eastbourne Pier.
• Numerous salt works where seawater was evaporated to form salt crystals, resulting in distinctive low mounds.
• Shingle beaches with views along the coast dominated in the west by the Victorian seafront at Eastbourne and the Sovereign Harbour complex.
• Widely spaced roads and isolated settlements combine with the overall open character to provide a sense of remoteness. Roads tend to be slightly raised above the surrounding land, forming visual divisions in the landscape.
• Electricity transmission lines and pylons form vertical features in the flat and open landscape.

20 Sites of Community Importance are sites that have been adopted by the European Commission under the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) but not yet formally designated by the government of each country as a Special Area of Conservation.
6.3 County Landscape Character Areas

6.3.1 The relevant County Landscape Character Areas within Wealden District that fall (whole or in part) within the Pevensey Levels National Character Area are included below (see Figure 3.1), taken from the East Sussex County Landscape Assessment21:

Eastern Low Weald (15)

Summary

6.3.2 This area is more open and exposed than the western low weald, with many more flat, treeless areas. It contains the large woodland areas of Abbot’s and Vert Woods, which are mainly conifer plantations. Running from Ringmer in the west (outside Wealden District) to Polegate in the east the area contains the upper River Cuckmere and Arlington Reservoir.

Key Characteristics

- Significant areas of flat, nearly treeless country with remote windswept feel
- A greater area (15%) is under woodland than in the Western Low Weald but, by contrast, nearly all of this is in large blocks over 2 Ha.
- About half the woodland is coniferous.
- Hedges and hedgerow trees are slightly less abundant, and trees are often small and wind-bent.
- Ancient pathways cross the area, including ancient Drove roads running North and South across the Low Weald.
- Fine, open views of the Downs.
- Small, remote and largely unspoiled rural villages.
- Historic designed landscapes and parkland.
- Small, winding, partly tree-lined streams, notably the River Cuckmere, but also many artificial, straightened streams and channels.

Wilmington Downs (23)

Summary

6.3.3 From the mouth of the Cuckmere to Eastbourne, this landscape contains the iconic coastline cliffs of the Seven Sisters and Beachy Head. Friston Forest, the fine wood above Folkington, and the woods on the edge of Eastbourne contrast with the open downland. Inland, the Long Man of Wilmington chalk carving looks out from the scarp across the Low Weald and remote downland winds through the interior.

Key Characteristics

- Complex and diverse block of downland with bold, dramatic landforms and several famous features.
- This area contains significant areas of valued chalk grassland habitat which is nationally scarce.
- Fine, coombed scarp at Wilmington, Folkington and Wannock, with bold landforms complemented by ‘sculptural’ tree groups.
- Picturesque, varied villages of with flint churches, cottages and walls, and fine tree compositions.

- Traditional flint farm houses, barns and walls on the Downs.
- Dramatic erosion of coastline, especially at Birling Gap where coastguard cottages are falling into the sea.
- Remote central areas away from main roads.

Eastbourne Levels (24)

Summary

6.3.4 This small tract of levels is separated from the Pevensey Levels by the low Polegate-Stone Cross-Pevensey ridge. Its other boundaries are the urban edges of Eastbourne, Willingdon, Langney and Sovereign Harbour.

Key Characteristics

- Quiet pasture and reedy channels.
- Flat open landscape.
- Hard urban edges intrude on rural tranquility.
- Established urban trees soften this in places.

Pevensy Levels (25)

Summary

6.3.5 Grazing marsh and reeds are completely dominant in this large, flat, open landscape. This is a landscape characterised by reed-fringed drainage channels with scattered thorns and willows. Away from the roads there is a distinct remoteness amongst the big skies and cries of wetland birds.

Key Characteristics

- Reed-fringed winding channels in open wetland pasture.
- Scattered straggly willow and thorn along channels.
- Islands (eyes) of slightly higher ground.
- Main channels engineered.
- Isolated farms and cottages.
- Winding lanes cross the levels.

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6.4 Local Landscape Character Type F: Open Levels

Character Description

Location and Boundaries

6.4.1 The Open Levels Local Landscape Character Type (LLCT) (F) is situated in the south-eastern part of Wealden District, to the east of Hailsham and north of Eastbourne. This LLCT also occurs as a tract of encapsulated landscape between Polegate and Stone Cross (Eastbourne). In the south, the Open Levels are adjacent to the Settled Levels (G) and Coastal Levels (H) LLCTs. To the north, this LLCT abuts the southern wooded slopes of the High Weald (LLCT B: Ridges and Slopes), whilst to the west, the Open Levels are overlooked by the gently rising landscape of the Open Clay Vales LLCT (E).

Key Characteristics

- **Topography:** Low-lying, predominantly flat landscape encompassing a patchwork of alluvial grazing marshes which are drained by purpose-built drainage channels and ditches. The marshes give rise to a network of wetland habitats which often attract flocks of birds.
- **Settlement Pattern:** An absence of large-scale settlement within the LLCT. Existing settlements comprise primarily isolated farmsteads, which are often situated at the junctions of minor road corridors, on higher islands or ‘eyes’ of land. Brick and flint buildings, weatherboarding and tiles are the predominant building materials within the Open Levels.
- **Communications:** Crossed by a network of national and local recreational routes and footpaths including the 1066 Country Walk, facilitating access to this landscape.
- **Views and Visibility:** A large-scale, predominantly open landscape facilitating open views north and eastwards to surrounding higher landscapes and southwards across the Coastal Levels. Wide, open skies contribute to local sense of place. Views northwards are dominated by the rising slopes of the southern High Weald (LLCT B: Ridges and Slopes), which form a skyline backdrop. To the east, the gently rising landscapes of the Open Clay Vales (LLCT E) provide setting and visual containment to the Open Levels.
- **Tranquillity and Remoteness:** A strong sense of tranquillity and remoteness, particularly in the north of this LLCT, at a distance from the large urban areas of Polegate and Eastbourne.

Physical Landscape Character

6.4.2 This low-lying, predominantly flat landscape forms the lowest land within the Study Area and encompasses a network of man-made drainage ditches which dissect the landscape into a series of ‘levels’. Two main drainage channels (Waller’s Haven and Pevensey Haven) cross this LLCT, running north-south from higher land (within the southern slopes of the Low Weald – LLCT B: Wooded Ridges and Slopes) to the coast (via the Coastal Levels – LLCT H). Small islands of higher ground or ‘eyes’, which tend to form the location for farmsteads, punctuate the low-lying Open Levels. The Levels are largely rural, with a predominant habitat of grazed pasture and wetland floodplain habitats. The drainage ditches are often reed filled which contributes to landscape and ecological interest. The present day appearance of the levels results from a combination of natural sediment depositional processes and extensive reclamation of the wetland for agricultural use. An absence of tree cover or hedgerows is a key defining feature of the physical character of this area, resulting in a strong sense of openness throughout the LLCT.

Historic Landscape Character

6.4.3 The pattern of scattered settlements and open roads reflects the history of land reclamation from wetland. Isolated farmsteads are often situated on higher ground or ‘eyes’ which is reflected in placenames with the suffix ‘ey’ such as Mansey. Military fortifications are scattered across the landscape, alongside historic military buildings. The draining of this landscape began in the Middle Ages, when a network of drainage ditches were dug in order to take advantage of the fertile soils. The Open Levels were formed by the changing relationship between land and sea, which first began during this period.
Evaluation

Landscape Sensitivity

6.4.4 Overall, the Open Levels LLCT is assessed as having Very High Landscape Sensitivity. Strength of place is considered to be very strong as a result of the distinctly recognisable pattern of drainage ditches, on low lying, open landscapes. There is strong historic continuity as a result of the ancient pattern of drainage ditches, which were first dug in the Middle Ages. The low lying open landform dominates character, which, when combined with an absence of tree cover, results in very high visibility and open views across the LLCT.

F1: Down and Whelpley

6.4.6 Forming a large part of the Open Levels LCT (F), this Landscape Character Area (LCA) comprises a patchwork of large pastoral fields, which form a series of ‘Levels’ including Down Level, Horse Eye Level and Whelpley Level. Vast open skies and long distance, panoramic open views are a key characteristic feature of the area. There is a strong sense of remoteness and tranquillity as a result of the absence of large scale settlement and the network of minor, unmarked roads. Wooden electricity poles, and trees associated with farmsteads provide some of the only vertical elements. Other human influences include low post and wire fences at field boundaries and the network of drainage ditches (which are softened by reeds and wetland vegetation). Where present, hedgerows are low and tend to follow the course of the minor road corridors. The ever present backdrop of the rising southern slopes of the High Weald (LLCT B: Ridges and Slopes) frame views northwards from the area. The cries of wetland birds and the sound of wind in the reeds contribute to local recognisable sense of place.

F2: Waller’s Haven

6.4.7 This LLCA encompasses a relatively long river which is fed by the numerous small stream corridors within the slopes of the Low Weald to the north and stretches to the sea in the south. The banks of the river have been modified in places, resulting in a straight channel; however, to the north there are gentle meanders in the river corridor. The river channel is lined by reeds and there is a strong sense of openness throughout the area, resulting in strong inter-visibility with surrounding LLCAs within the Open Levels LLCT. Occasional small trees line the river banks, but there is an overall absence of tree cover or hedgerows. Long distance, panoramic open views across the Levels contribute to recognisable sense of place and there is a strong sense of remoteness and tranquillity throughout.

F3: Manxey and Hooe

6.4.8 This LLCA encompasses a patchwork of small scale pastoral fields that are lined with numerous drainage ditches at field boundaries. The drainage ditches are reed fringed, resulting in a strongly recognisable sense of place. Remnant salt-workings are key historic features; however these are not visually dominant within the current landscape. Vast open skies and long distance, panoramic open views are key characteristics of the area. A minor, narrow road corridor runs west-east across the area, leading to Norman’s Bay coastal hamlet. Whilst this has a predominantly rural appearance, with low grass verges and absence of hedgerows or trees, it is relatively busy and introduces a source of noise and movement. In addition, the corridor of the busy main A259 road corridor also runs south-north across the area, reducing the overall sense of tranquillity and remoteness. Urban fringe land uses (including services associated with the A259) are apparent in the west of the area, in close proximity to the settlement of Pevensey.

F4: East Polegate Levels

6.4.9 This LLCA is surrounded on all sides by the settlements of Polegate, Willingdon and Langney. Views from the area are therefore dominated by the predominantly residential urban edges of these urban areas. Within this LLCA, there is a strong sense of openness. The eastern part of the area, to the east of the main railway line (which connects Eastbourne to Pevensey Bay and Hastings to the east) comprises predominantly small pastoral fields and rough grassland which are crossed by a network of reed-fringed drainage ditches. These connect with Shineswater Lake and the Willingdon Levels (to the south of the Study Area). The western part of the area comprises further pastoral fields and, in closer proximity to the urban

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22 Sites of Community Importance are sites that have been adopted by the European Commission under the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) but not yet formally designated by the government of each country as a Special Area of Conservation.
edge, a series of planting fields and recreation grounds. Within these areas, mature trees are a key feature. Overall sense of remoteness and tranquility is diminished as a result of the presence of the railway corridor, the A27 road corridor in the east and the proximity to urban edges.
6.5 Local Landscape Character Type G: Settled Levels

Character Description

Location and Boundaries

6.5.1 The Settled Levels LLCT (G) is located in the southern tip of Wealden District, stretching only between the northern edge of Polegate to the west and Pevensey to the east. This LLCT is adjacent to the Open Levels LLCT to the north, east and west; and abuts the northern edge of Polegate and Stone Cross to the south.

Key Characteristics

- **Topography:** Low-lying, predominantly flat landscape encompassing a patchwork of alluvial drainage marshes, pastoral fields and small settlements. This LLCT is slightly higher than the surrounding Open Levels LLCT, likely resulting in historic choice for settlement.

- **Settlement Pattern:** There is an absence of large-scale settlement within the LLCT. Existing settlement comprises isolated farmsteads and properties along the network of minor rural road corridors and the small villages of Pevensey and Westham.

- **Communications:** The east-west corridor for the A27 main road is a dominant feature within this LLCT, and the east-west railway corridor also crosses its southern edge. In addition, a network of minor rural road corridors and footpaths (including the 1066 Country Walk), provides access to this landscape.

- **Views and Visibility:** A large-scale, predominantly open landscape facilitating open views north and eastwards to surrounding higher landscapes and southwards to the settlement edges of Polegate and Eastbourne (Langney). Wide, open skies contribute to local sense of place. Views northwards are dominated by the rising slopes of the southern High Weald (LLCT B: Ridges and Slopes), which form a skyline backdrop. To the east, the gently rising landscapes of the Open Clay Vales (LLCT E) provide setting and visual containment to the Settled Levels.

- **Tranquillity and Remoteness:** A strong sense of tranquillity and remoteness, particularly in the north of this LLCT, at distance from the large urban areas of Polegate and Eastbourne.

Historic Landscape Character

6.5.3 The pattern of scattered settlements and open roads reflects the history of land reclamation from wetland. Isolated farmsteads are often situated on higher ground or ‘eyes’ which is reflected in placenames with the suffix ‘ey’ such as Manxey. The draining of this landscape began in the Middle Ages, when a network of drainage ditches were dug in order to take advantage of the fertile soils. The Settled Levels were formed by the changing relationship between land and sea, which first began during this period. Evidence that this landscape was used and settled during the Roman and Norman periods is present in the form of Anderita Roman Fort and Pevensey Castle. Settlement associated with these two key historic features began in the 4th century as one of the last and strongest of the Roman ‘Saxon-Shore’ forts, two thirds of which whose towered walls still stand. This was the landing place of William the Conqueror’s army in 1066 and thus has very strong historic and cultural associations. During the century after the Conquest, a full-scale Norman Castle with a great square keep and a powerful gatehouse was built within one corner of the fort. In the 1250’s, the towered bailey wall was constructed, and soon put to test during the great siege of 1264.
Evaluation

Landscape Sensitivity

6.5.4 Overall, the Settled Levels LLCT is assessed as having Very High Landscape Sensitivity. Strength of place is considered to be very strong as a result of the distinctly recognisable pattern of drainage ditches, on low lying, open landscapes. There is strong historic continuity as a result of the ancient pattern of drainage ditches, which were first dug in the Middle Ages; and the strong historical and cultural associations with Pevensey Castle and Anderita Roman Fort. The low lying open landform dominates character, which, when combined with an absence of tree cover, results in very high visibility and open views across the LLCT.

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Landscape Value

6.5.5 The Settled Levels LLCT is considered to have Very High Landscape Value. The harmonious arrangement of drainage ditches, which dissect nationally important ecological habitats (much of the area is designated as a SSSI and Ramsar Site) provide strong structure within the landscape. Overall, sense of tranquillity and remoteness is strong as a result of the absence of detracting features and presence of a network of narrow, rural, unmarked lanes. This is, however, diminished in the south as a result of proximity to the A27 road corridor and settlement edges. Open views northwards across the Open Levels LLCT to the southern slopes of the High Weald (LLCT B) contribute to a strong local strength of place.

Local Landscape Character Areas

G1: Pevensey and Hankham

6.5.6 This LLCA encompasses the small villages of Pevensey and Westham in the east; and the small hamlet of Hankham, which are connected to Eastbourne and Polegate in the west and Pevensey Bay in the east via the A27 road corridor and a series of interconnected rural lanes. In the north of the area, there is a strong sense of remoteness and tranquility within the levels. Houses, nurseries and a school within Hankham introduce a human influence to the centre of the area and there are also scattered farmsteads along the network of rural road corridors to the west of Hankham. Pastoral fields predominate, and whilst there is an overall sense of openness, low hedgerows and trees provide a stronger sense of enclosure than within adjacent LLCAs within the Open Levels LLCT. Views to treed settlement edges are a key feature of much of this area. In the south of the area, to the south of Westham, there is a stronger sense of openness; and alluvial drainage marshes, lined with reed-fringed ditches are a key feature. In the south of the area, overall sense of tranquillity and remoteness is diminished as a result of the presence of the A27 road corridor, the railway corridor and proximity to densely settled urban edges.
6.6 **Local Landscape Character Type H: Coastal Levels**

**Character Description**

**Location and Boundaries**

6.6.1 The Coastal Levels LLCT (H) is situated along the southern edge of Wealden District. It is bounded by the English Channel to the south and east and by the Open Levels LLCT (F) to north and west. Eastbourne’s Marina lies just beyond its south-western edge.

**Key Characteristics**

- **Topography:** Low-lying, predominantly flat, coastal edge landscape which encompasses the beach/shoreline and the coastal settlement of Pevensey Bay.
- **Settlement Pattern:** The coastal-facing settlement of Pevensey Bay overlooks the beach/seascape.
- **Communications:** The western part of this LLCT is connected to Eastbourne via the A259 main road corridor, which connects to a minor road corridor, leading eastwards through Pevensey Bay to Norman’s Bay. The Eastbourne-Hastings railway line forms part of the northern boundary to this LLCT, accessible via a station to the north of the Pevensey Bay.
- **Views and Visibility:** Open, ever-changing panoramic views southwards across the seascape of the English Channel, with wide, open skies. There is also a strongly recognisable sense of place within open views northwards across the Open Levels LLCT.
- **Tranquillity and Remoteness:** This LLCT encompasses a busy seaside settlement, therefore overall sense of tranquillity and remoteness is diminished. On eastern parts of the beach (and seasonally along the whole stretch of the beach) there is a sense of remoteness and tranquillity.

**Physical Landscape Character**

6.6.2 This flat and low lying landscape encompasses a narrow strip, primarily comprised of settlement and a shingle beach between LLCT F, the Open Levels, and the sea. The settlement comprises a mixture of caravan parks and urban development, with an associated golf course.

**Historic Landscape Character**

6.6.3 Settlement within this area is likely to have grown as a result of the defence of the landscape during the Roman and Norman periods (associated with Anderita Roman Fort and Pevensey Castle to the north). Whilst there is little evidence of early settlement within the current urban fabric, three Martello Towers, adjacent to the beach are key historic features. These were built as fortifications (originally with rotating canons on top) to protect against Napoleonic invasion. More recently, the settlement of Pevensey Bay has grown as a seaside town associated with Pevensey Bay beach.
Evaluation

Landscape Sensitivity

6.6.4 Overall, the Coastal Levels LLCT is assessed as having Moderate Landscape Sensitivity. Strength of place is considered to be strong as a result of open views southwards across the sea and northwards across the Open Levels LLCT. There is strong historic continuity as a result of the presence of the Martello Towers. Whilst this LLCT is low-lying and there are panoramic, open views across the sea to the south, within the built up area, buildings, rather than trees, provide an intermittent sense of enclosure, often truncating views to the sea.

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Landscape Value

6.6.5 The southern part of the Coastal Levels LLCT (encompassing the beach/coastal edge) is considered to have Very High Landscape Value as a result of the very strong strength of place resulting from open, panoramic views and presence of key valued historic features (the three Martello towers). To north, this LLCT is considered to have Moderate to Low Landscape Value as a result of the presence of predominantly post-war residential development within Pevensey Bay.

Local Landscape Character Areas

H1: Pevensey Bay

6.6.6 This LLCA encompasses the seaside town of Pevensey Bay which overlooks the beach, forming the coastal edge to Pevensey Bay. There is a very strong strength of place within the southern part of the area, resulting from open, panoramic views across the ever changing seascape within Pevensey Bay. The three Martello towers, placed at regular intervals along the coastal edge in the southwest of the area further contribute to recognisable sense of place. The beach is a popular tourist area and there are associated tourist-influences, in the form of car parking and colourful seaside tourist shops within close proximity to the beach. Pevensey Bay settlement comprises a mixture of predominantly post-war housing estates, with some older Victorian properties towards the centre of the town along the high street. Several of the roads that run south from the high street have been designed to facilitate framed views across the sea, and coastal edge properties often have informal, private, beachfront gardens. Wooden and concrete groynes along the beach are key landscape features. The beach is predominantly pebbly, with some patches of sand. From the northern edges of the area, panoramic, open views northwards across the Open Levels LLCT and its constituent LLCAs contribute to a strongly recognisable strength of place.