



### Location and Context

The *Farmed Lowland Plain* Landscape Character Type is located in the far north-east of Caithness. It forms a broad and relatively low-lying plain bounded by the sea and expansive *Sweeping Moorland and Flows*.

### Key Characteristics

- A generally open, low-lying plain, gently undulating to form shallow broad valleys, which are often filled with lochs and mosses, and subtle low ridges.
- Occasional smooth hills rise above the more low-lying plain forming local landmarks.
- The broad and shallow valley of the River Wick forming the largest of a series of valleys generally aligned south-east/north-west across the plain.
- Agriculture the predominant land cover.
- More intensively managed farmland near the coast around Thurso and Wick, and close to Loch Watten.
- Distinctive Caithness flagstone fences in some parts, creating low, sharp edges to fields.
- Sparse woodland, mainly comprising small angular coniferous plantations planted for shelter on farms.
- Larger conifer woodlands located at the transition with the *Sweeping Moorland and Flows* standing out where they are planted on poorer wetter ground on low ridges.
- Farm buildings and houses forming focal points within the landscape.
- Occasional loose clusters of croft houses located on more marginal upper slopes and near the coast.
- A number of historic environment features, including conspicuous castles, Baronial mansions and tall 'Lairds' houses, usually with broadleaf shelter woods planted around them.
- Roads reinforce the settlement pattern, often following the field and property boundaries, running straight and then swinging around sharp corners.
- A number of large settlements, including the towns of Thurso and Wick, situated on the coast, as well as several smaller settlements.
- Many historic features, including brochs and cairns, dotted across farmland and situated on hills within, or adjacent to, this area.
- Small groups of large wind turbines sited on some of the low ridges and hills and

prominent visibility of larger wind farms in adjacent Landscape Character Types.

- Extensive views due to the openness of the landscape, and the clarity of northern air and light.
- Dramatic views from the northern part of this landscape to Dunnet Head and the distant Orkney islands, and views from the A9 on the western edge of this landscape of the *Lone Mountains* of Movern and Scaraben seen across the low-lying *Sweeping Moorland and Flows*.

## **Landscape Character Description**

### *Landform*

The gently undulating landform of this landscape has a wide horizontal emphasis and this, together with huge skies and the clarity of the northern air, give a characteristically open, light and exposed character. Occasional smooth hills, such as Spittal Hill and Hill of Orlig, rise above the plain to form local landmarks.

The undulating landform forms a series of broad, shallow valleys running south-east/north-west across the plain, of which the valley of the River Wick is the largest, accommodating Lochs Watten and Scarmclate in its upper section.

### *Landcover*

Although this landscape is predominantly farmed, areas of wetter rough pasture and moss, and occasional lochs, also occur within valley floors and shallow basins. These lochs form key foci set amidst well-managed farmland, especially in bright conditions where their deep blue waters contrast with the greens and yellows of arable fields. Large arable fields are present close to the coast and within the broad Wick valley. Farmland is more mixed elsewhere with improved pastures and occasional arable fields interspersed with areas of rougher grazing and wetland. The pattern of fields within this Landscape Character Type is delineated by the route of fences, low stone walls, dykes and locally distinctive Caithness stone flagstone fences with their regularly shaped, thin stone slabs which create low sharp edges to fields. This pattern of fields is highlighted by a variety of different crops, the character of which changes throughout the year.

Woodland is sparse, limited to small coniferous shelterbelts and clumps of broadleaf trees sheltering farms. More diverse wooded policies and arable fields, some of these enclosed by low hedgerows and neat walls, are associated with occasional estate houses. Broadleaf trees are largely restricted to clumps of wind-stunted sycamore around larger and generally older houses, with some ash planted along roads. Mixed hedgerows and wooded policies are a rare feature but are notable around Orlig House. Larger coniferous woodlands are present at the transition of this Landscape Character Type and the *Sweeping Moorland and Flows*, planted on former moorlands and less fertile ridges. These are visible across this open landscape.

### *Settlement*

This is a well-settled landscape with farms regularly spaced across the plain and occasional loose clusters of croft houses located on more marginal upper slopes and near the coast. Areas of crofts and loosely clustered newer houses tend to be associated with more marginal land on higher slopes or close to the fringes of the *Sweeping Moorland and Flows*. Larger settlements, including Wick and Thurso, are generally situated along the coast. There are also a number of smaller settlements such as Halkirk, Watten and Spittal inland, and Castletown on the north coast. Some of these settlements feature an intact core of 19<sup>th</sup> Century planned streets and buildings. Past and current stone quarries are located near

Spittal and Castletown.

There are a large number of historic environment features, including brochs and cairns, castles, Baronial mansions and 'Lairds' houses, usually with broadleaf shelter woods planted around them. They include the Castle of Mey and its associated historic garden and designed landscape, Castle Girnigoe and Castle Sinclair, Ackergill Tower and Noss Head lighthouse.

A network of often angular roads, the railway line and transmission lines cross this plain. The long tradition of occupation of this landscape is evident in the many archaeological features dotted across farmland and on the less cultivated hill fringes. Ruined crofts, drainage channels and field boundaries with neglected grassland and rushes/bracken, are present in more marginal areas, often lying at the transition with the *Sweeping Moorland and Flows*. These are an indication of past land use.

There are small groups of large wind turbines located on some of the low ridges and hills. More extensive wind farms are located within areas of forest, moorland and moss within the *Sweeping Moorland and Flows* lying close to the boundary of this landscape. These often closely-spaced developments are prominent from roads and settlement within the very open Caithness *Farmed Lowland Plain*.

#### *Perception*

This landscape is vast, exposed and open, generally dominated by a horizontal emphasis. This, as well as the clarity of the air and light, allows for extensive views both within the lowland plain and to the landscapes and seascapes beyond.



This is one of 390 Landscape Character Types identified at a scale of 1:50 000 as part of a national programme of Landscape Character Assessment republished in 2019.

The area covered by this Landscape Character Type was originally included in the Caithness and Sutherland LCA (Stanton, C) published 1998; and Caithness and Sutherland Landscape Character Review (Carol Anderson Landscape Associates), published 2015.