Landscape Character Type 3:

Sandstone Fringe
LANDSCAPE TYPE 3: SANDSTONE FRINGE
Area surrounding the Mid-Cheshire sandstone ridge

SF1: Kelsall
SF2: Beeston-Duckington

Key Characteristics

- Transitional zone between the high ground of the Sandstone Ridge and the surrounding low-lying landscape
- Strong visual elements including the sandstone outcrops of Helsby Hill and Beeston Crag
- Extensive views across Cheshire and beyond to Merseyside, North Wales and Shropshire
- Deciduous and mixed woodland on the steepest slopes
- Remnants of acid grassland
- Pasture and some arable on the flatter land
- Fields enclosed by hedgerows and some sandstone walls
- Combination of nucleated villages and dispersed farms and halls

General Description

This is an intermediate landscape type that delineates the eastern margin of the West Lowland Plain, while above it rises the Sandstone Ridge. To the east and south is the Rolling Farmland landscape type. It contains strong visual elements such as the sandstone outcrops of Helsby Hill and Beeston.
Castle, which are physically separate from the Sandstone Ridge type and therefore fall into the Sandstone Fringe type.

Visual Character

This is a landscape of strong contrasts. At many locations landform, high hedges and blocks of woodland provide effective enclosure and ensure only immediate, short distance views. Where the high vegetation combines with narrow incised, meandering lanes the landscape has a small scale, verdant character. This is in contrast to those elevated and open viewpoints enjoying extensive and panoramic views across the adjacent low lying Cheshire Plain and the Mersey valley. Views to the west extend to the Clwydian Hills whilst the Pennines are visible to the east. At the southern extent of this landscape type the Shropshire hills are discernable on clear days.

At many open viewpoints on the lower slopes the eye is drawn to a number of distinctive landmarks along the high ground of the Sandstone Ridge.

Physical Influences

The Sandstone Fringe rises from the West Lowland Plain at 50m AOD, with a maximum elevation of 120m AOD. To the east and south of the Sandstone Ridge the landscape is more undulating and the break between character types is not so distinct.

The topography varies from gentle slopes and undulations to steep scarps. The underlying geology comprises Wilmslow Sandstone and Tarporley Siltstone, which is overlain by glacial till and glacio-fluvial deposits. Soils are brown sands and earths, which support arable and grassland. The principal arable crop is potatoes. Fragments of acid grassland, which support fauna such as fescue and sheep sorrel, are also found in this character type.

While the overall woodland cover is lower than on the Sandstone Ridge, on the steep contours of the northern section of the character area near Frodsham and Helsby, is one of the largest areas of broad leaved woodland in Cheshire. Elsewhere small copses are dotted across this type - a number of which are Sites of Biological Importance. Areas of ancient woodland occur at sites such as Cats Rough in the valley of Ashton Brook and in part of the large Pennsylvania Wood to the west of Peckforton Castle. Fields are mainly enclosed with hawthorn hedgerows but there are also some dry sandstone walls.

Cultural Influences

Prehistoric finds of flint tools, metal work and burials suggest Bronze Age and earlier activity in this area. Paleo-environmental work has also shown that significant soil erosion was occurring in the southern part of the sandstone ridge in the Bronze Age, which is also indicative of the clearance of woodland. The earliest remains of habitation in this area date from the Bronze Age and are located on the site now occupied by the medieval Beeston Castle.
The northern areas of this Landscape Type lay within the boundary of the extensive former Royal Forest of Mara (Delamere), which covered a vast portion of Cheshire, considerably larger than the coniferous plantations that today are referred to as ‘Delamere Forest’. The popular perception of a forest is that of an area densely covered with trees. In the medieval period, a forest was an area for hunting, especially deer. This part of the forest would have been interspersed with farmland and settlements.

There is a greater density of settlement than on the Sandstone Ridge and the West Lowland Plain. The topography provides good aspect and a pleasing outlook above the poor draining land of the West Cheshire Plain. There are a number of small nucleated villages such as Burwardsley and Alvanley as well as large villages such as Tarporley and the estate village of Peckforton. Buildings are constructed predominantly from red and brown brick, but there are also examples of 17th century timber framed buildings with white washed brick and brick infill. Fruit farms are found in this type, taking advantage of the free draining, light soils and the shelter afforded by the ridge.

Some settlements such as Alvanley are still surrounded by their enclosed medieval townfields. Areas of medieval and early post medieval enclosure are distributed throughout the character type and these areas often contain the remains of marl pits. The township commons, some of which survived into the nineteenth century were enclosed in the post medieval period creating more regular patterns of enclosure. In these areas of later enclosure settlement is largely dispersed and often associated with a complex pattern of roads.

This character type is defined by small to medium fields (up to 8ha) in an irregular and semi-regular pattern. Enclosure is likely to date back to the medieval period if not earlier following the assarting of heath and woodland.

This type shares much in common with the Sandstone Ridge; it has been favoured for the location of high status monuments and buildings. Iron Age hill-forts and isolated halls with associated parkland are prominent features e.g. Bolesworth Castle. Sections of the Sandstone Trail pass through the character type.

**Issues affecting the Sandstone Fringe landscape character type**

1. **Wind turbines are likely to target this type** given the elevated topography and average wind speeds

2. **Further communication masts** may target this type given its prominent topography

3. **Visitor pressure at certain locations**, leading to loss of tranquillity, loss or fragmentation of habitats, erosion of road verges, visual
intrusion of car-parks or stationary vehicles and demand for additional facilities.

4. **Increased demand for visitor facilities** such as holiday cottages, caravan parks and holiday cabin developments.

5. **Changes in farming** including pressure to diversify and changing patterns of land ownership. The purchase of agricultural holdings by non-farmers is becoming a significant force for change, resulting in conversion of farm houses and farm buildings and changes in farm use.

6. **On-going decline in traditional woodland management practices** leading to under management of farm woodland, over maturity of trees and neglect of hedgerows and hedgerow trees.

7. **The relaxation of traditional grazing practices** and resultant spread of scrub and trees has resulted in a reduction and deterioration of heathland

8. **Reduction, fragmentation and deterioration of habitats** at some locations, including ancient woodland and heathland.

9. **Loss of historic field pattern** due to decline in hedgerow management and disrepair of dry-stone walls, with resulting increase in use of fencing.

10. **Erosion of built environment character through incremental development:** This may lead to loss of historic buildings and vernacular character; the suburbanisation of rural properties and their curtilage; pressure for expansion of existing settlement, ribbon development and in-fill.

11. **Standardisation of roads:** Upgrading of lanes and minor roads leading to increasingly suburban character of the countryside.
SF1: Kelsall Character Area
Including Helsby, Alvanley, Manley, Kelsall & Birch Heath

This character area runs the length of the two upper sections of the Sandstone Ridge – from Helsby to Tarporley. The visual characteristics of this area are determined by its location at the transition between the elevated Sandstone Ridge and the lower lying West Lowland Plain. The abrupt transition from ridge to plain is readily apparent to the occupants of vehicles travelling westward on the A56 Kelsall Bypass where the extensive flatlands of the Cheshire Plain and the Mersey Valley suddenly appear. Throughout the area those elevated locations with an open outlook enjoy extensive views over the surrounding countryside. To the west the Clwydian Hills form the distant skyline when viewed across the full extent of the Cheshire Plain. Views to the north can extend beyond the industrial zone around Ellesmere Port as far as the River Mersey. To the east the area is bound by the Sandstone Ridge and this wooded skyline is a strong element throughout much of the character area, being especially dominant in the north. This character area also includes Helsby Hill – a sandstone outcrop that is topographically separate from the main body of the mid-Cheshire ridge, and a distinctive feature that has visual prominence from the west, particularly when approached from the M56.

Settlement is a common feature of this area and includes a number of nucleated villages as well as the small historic town of Tarporley. Associated with these predominantly nucleated villages such as Manley and Alvanley, a complex network of roads has developed. This settlement pattern is interspersed with isolated halls e.g. Manley Hall and there is also an ornamental parkland at Ashton Hayes.

Deciduous woodland is an important component of this landscape, and is most abundant on the steeper slopes, particularly on the escarpments at Helsby Hill, Dunsdale Hollow and Frodsham and Overton Woods. Here the scale of the landscape is effectively reduced, with a strong element of enclosure as many views are restricted by high vegetation. Elsewhere solid blocks of woodland appear as separate regular enclosures within the wider field system. Fruit farms growing apples and summer fruits are located in Kelsall and Willington.

The hedgerow pattern appears intact with large numbers of hedgerow trees. The occasional exception is particularly noticeable, such as the much more open landscape around Manley Old Hall. Here closely trimmed, straight hedgerows almost devoid of trees define medium-to-large fields under pasture. Towards the south of the area around Utkinton and Tarporley the topography is less dramatic, with shallower slopes and a less dominant skyline. Alvanley and Kelsall are still surrounded by their enclosed medieval townfields. Elsewhere, there are areas of medieval and post-medieval enclosure throughout this character area, as well as areas that have been enlarged and improved in the 18th and 19th centuries.
Frodsham and Overton Woods are one of the largest areas of broad leaved woodland in the county, in part ancient woodland, with typical acid heath ground flora and bracken. Dunsdale Hollow is an SSSI for its birch and sessile oak woodland. The ground flora is typically poor, composed of species such as wavy hair-grass, bluebell and bramble, with heather, bilberry, climbing corydalis and areas dominated by bracken. This disused quarry is also designated as a site of geological/geomorphological interest (RIGG).

The township commons, some of which survived into the nineteenth century, were often encroached by landless labourers creating a pattern of irregular fields interspersed with small holdings. In many cases enclosure was undertaken by the local landlord or his tenants, while areas such as Willington and Kelsall common were enclosed by an Act of Parliament, thus creating a landscape of regular fields with straight hawthorn hedgerows. In these areas of later enclosure, settlement is largely dispersed and in areas of encroachment there is a complex pattern of roads. Areas of post medieval plantation are also common in these areas, but on a much smaller scale than in the LCA types to the east. Field boundaries are typically regular with hedges and over mature hedgerow trees.

Helsby Hill comprises an old birch wood covering the slopes of the prominent sandstone cliff, with much bracken and gorse and a small heathland fragment. The Hill is also of geological interest comprising Wilmslow Sandstone capped by Helsby Sandstone, with fault gullies and extensive exposures. Other woodland fragments occur on the steeper slopes, for example, along Moor’s Brook and Ashton Brook at Cat Rough, and at Ashton Hayes and Willington Corner. On top of the hill is an Iron Age hill-fort (a scheduled monument) which has utilised its natural defences. It affords extensive views of the surrounding area, while the rest of the area has a west facing aspect. It is likely that this area once lay within the extensive Royal Forest of Mara (Delamere). Numerous prehistoric artefacts have been found in this area including Mesolithic (c.8000bc to c.4000bc) flint tools. The area also contains around thirty listed buildings, including Iddinshall Hall which is also a scheduled monument.
SF2: Beeston-Duckington Character Area
Including Beeston Castle, Burwardsley, Broxton & Hart Hill

This character area is undulating with a maximum elevation of 130m AOD. It extends from Beeston Castle in the north to Larkton Hall in the south. The visual characteristics of this area are determined by its location at the transition between different landscapes types, the more elevated Sandstone Ridge and the lower lying areas of Cheshire Plain and Rolling Farmland. The medium-scale farmland is divided by weak hedgerows with mature hedgerow oaks. The River Weaver issues just below Hillside Farm, to the south of Peckforton.

This character area completely encircles the Peckforton and Maiden Castle Character Areas of the Sandstone Ridge type and this central zone of high ground forms a dominant wooded skyline throughout the area. Those elevated locations with an open outlook enjoy extensive views over the surrounding countryside. Such views can extend across the Cheshire Plain to the higher ground beyond. To the west the Clwydian Hills form the distant skyline. To the east the Pennines are visible while the Shropshire Hills can be seen from the south.

Woodland, much of it ancient in origin, is located on the west-facing slopes on the western side of the Character Area. These woodland blocks provide a very strong visual image when approached from the flatter land to the west. At some locations the more undulating ground form can provide a strong element of enclosure and the scale of the landscape is much reduced where narrow lanes rise and fall, flanked by high hedges. In the west the A534 passes through a particularly complex landform with prominent ridges and hidden valleys. Where the undulation is less marked the increasing reliance upon arable crops tends to be associated with larger fields with trimmed hedges. There is a consequential increase in the apparent scale of the landscape. This is particularly noticeable in the south of the area between Duckington and Bulkeley.

The main settlements are the small nucleated villages of Burwardsley, Bulkeley and Brown Knowl. There are a number of high status halls and mansions in the area, such as Bolesworth and Bulkeley Hall, both of which are listed Grade II*. There is also a small estate village at Peckforton (part of the Peckforton or Tollemache Estate as it was known) where brown brick estate cottages were built c 1860. The concentration of timber framed cottages in Peckforton along Stonehouse Lane, on the eastern boundary with the Rolling Farmland landscape type, creates a very distinctive visual character.

Many of the medieval and later fields around Beeston Castle and Peckforton have undergone enlargement and improvement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and these are probably associated with the works of the Tollemache estate. Similar changes are evident around Bolesworth Castle, which was the focus of another estate. Medieval and later field systems survived 18th and 19th century improvements in areas around Burwardsley.
and Harthill although modern field enlargement has significantly changed their character.

Beeston Castle is a distinctive site and topographically stands slightly aside from the rest of the Sandstone Ridge -hence its inclusion in this type. The medieval castle utilised the rampart of a hill fort and today it is open as a visitor attraction. The Sandstone Trail runs through this character area and the candle factory at Burwardsley is a popular tourist facility.

There are numerous archaeological and historic sites in this area, from prehistoric barrows to the remains of WWII searchlight batteries.

Beeston Crag is of geological and ornithological interest with features of Wilmslow, Bulkeley Hill and Helsby Sandstone Formations, and rare breeding birds. Excavations at Beeston Castle have revealed seven circular buildings of late Bronze Age to early Iron Age date and evidence which suggests that this site may have been a specialist metal working centre in the Bronze Age. The castle last saw hostilities in the English Civil war when it changed hands a number of times.

The township commons and areas of open heath, some of which survived into the 19th century, were often encroached by landless labourers creating a pattern of small fields interspersed with small holdings and a complex pattern of roads such as at Brown Knowl and Fullers Moor.

Examples of ancient woodland include Pennsylvania Wood, Broxton Wood, Walkers Wood, Barnhill Wood and Burwardsley Hill Wood. Some of the woodland has been replanted and now comprises even-aged oak, beech, sycamore and larch over bramble, bluebell and bracken.