Landscape Character Type 2:

Sandstone Ridge
LANDSCAPE TYPE 2: SANDSTONE RIDGE
Mid Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

SR1: Frodsham
SR2: Eddisbury
SR3: Peckforton
SR4: Maiden Castle

Key Characteristics

- Sandstone ridge - a distinctive landmark, with outcrops and upstanding bluffs above 100m AOD.
- Spectacular long distance views across Cheshire and beyond into North Wales, the Peak District and Shropshire.
- High density of woodland compared with the rest of Cheshire comprising post medieval conifer plantations as well as areas of ancient woodland.
- The largest surviving area of lowland heath in Cheshire.
- Low-density dispersed farms.
- Sandstone buildings, boundary walls and sunken lanes.
- Cluster of Iron Age hill forts.
- Historic halls e.g. Utkinton Hall and Peckforton Castle
- Industrial archaeology (sandstone quarries, copper mines).
General Description

The Sandstone Ridge stands prominently above the surrounding Plain and is visually one of the most distinctive landmarks in the Cheshire landscape.

It runs roughly north-south from Helsby through Tarporley and on to Duckington for some 30 km, emerging and dropping back down into the plain as a series of scarps and sandstone outcrops. There are overlapping characteristics with the Sandstone Fringe character type, but the visual and topographic differences set it apart from this more intermediate landscape.

The ridge has a very strong cultural and natural character for example there is a concentration of prehistoric features, woodland and heathland, sandstone quarries and exposures and sandstone buildings, walls and sunken lanes.

Visual Character

This landscape exhibits varying degrees of enclosure and contrasting scales, due to the localised ridge and valley features of the undulating topography and a wide variation in woodland cover. At many locations solid blocks of woodland (including conifers) and high hedgerows combine to provide strong enclosure, creating an impression of a small-scale verdant landscape. The sense of enclosure by lush, dense vegetation is further reinforced when travelling along sunken roads between high hedges or valley bottoms below wooded ridge lines. Elsewhere, reduced tree cover leads to a more open landscape with a dominant hedgerow pattern, particularly evident from many elevated positions available along the network of narrow lanes.

Expansive, long distance views provide an important element of this landscape type as they are widely available from the higher ground and contribute significantly to the distinctive character of the landscape. These vary between narrow views framed or filtered by high vegetation to spectacular panoramic views from open vantage points. Views extend over the surrounding plain as far as the Clwydian hills in the west and the Peak District in the east. Locations at the northern and southern ends of the ridge enjoy views of the Mersey Valley and the Shropshire Hills respectively.

Physical Influences

This elevated character type has a topography of between 100 and 212m AOD. The underlying bedrock comprises Helsby Sandstone and Tarporley Siltstone with a small amount of glacial till in occasional places. Outcrops of Triassic sandstone show cross bedding of the layers indicating that the rocks were formed originally as windblown sand dunes.

The Sandstone Ridge is generally overlain by free-draining brown earths and brown sands. The steep slopes and thin acid soils support concentrations of woodland, some ancient Oakwood, but much of more recent secondary origin or planted with conifers. Bird species are well represented, with several uncommon breeding species attracted to the elevated position, extensive
woodlands and deadwood habitat, for example, buzzard, sparrow-hawk, raven and pied flycatcher.

Heathland is also characteristic of the type and remains most intact from agricultural improvement on Bickerton Hill. Heathland was once a common sight in Cheshire, but has become increasingly fragmented and denuded. A survey in 1995 found that heath covered less than 160 ha of the County. A number of woodlands are listed as Sites of Biological Importance such as Peckforton Woods, and there are three SSSIs at Peckforton, Bickerton and Raw Head. The last site is of nationally importance for its sandstone exposures. A number of other geological and geomorphological features in the type are listed as of regional importance (RIGGS).

Pasture dominates the land use and is enclosed by hawthorn hedgerows and sandstone walls in the south. Arable cultivation of fodder crops and potatoes plus orchards and fruit farming are located on the better draining, gentler slopes of the ridge.

**Cultural Influences**

Settlement is mainly small scale and dispersed and comprises individual farms and houses. There are areas of modern development, which has changed this settlement pattern such as at Utkinton and Quarry Bank but just one large urban settlement falls into this type: the modern village of Kelsall to the west, which grew from a dispersed pattern into a nucleated centre in the 20th century. Settlement is of a greater density in the adjoining Sandstone Fringe type.

Prehistoric flint scatters and barrows indicate prehistoric activity (Bronze Age and earlier). This character type has been inhabited since at least the Iron Age period (c 700 BC) with the occurrence of a number of hill-forts. These defended settlements utilised the imposing natural topography as part of their defences - banks, ditches and palisades. They were monuments that were intended to be seen, making a statement about status as much as defence.

Subsequently the Sandstone Ridge has been used for other defensive structures, for example, a ditched enclosure of Roman date and a burh at Eddisbury which dates to the Saxon period. The northern areas of this LCA type lay within the extensive former Royal Forest of Mara (Delamere). The medieval forest of Delamere 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; broad-leaved woodland was interspersed with farmland and even settlement in some areas. Forests were mainly owned by the Crown and they were subject to Forest Law which imposed restrictions upon land use and severely punished poaching. The southern areas of this LCA type were largely woodland and heath, fringed by medieval fields, yet still important resources to the adjoining communities.
During the medieval period it became increasingly common for hunting to take place in deer parks and there are two former sites on the ridge which are identified by the place names Old Pale and New Pale. The enclosure of the forest was finally completed in 1819. Agricultural land was enclosed, creating the pattern of small to medium (up to 8ha) regular fields with straight hawthorn hedgerows. In the southern areas enclosure and forestry were also occurring, but on a significantly smaller scale. These areas were also subject to significant change by the activities of the local estates to improve their agricultural land.

Evidence of former industries is visible in the landscape, with numerous small sandstone quarries and copper mining in the south. Quarryed sandstone from the ridge has been used extensively in the construction of local buildings and boundary walls, adding a distinctive architecture and colour to the area.

There are a number of high status residences on the ridge from the brick c 1700 Utkinton Hall, the 19th century castle at Peckforton (grade I), to the pebble-dashed 20th century Tirley Garth.

Today the Sandstone Trail runs along the ridge, providing access to the length of this character type. There are also open access areas such as the National Trust owned Maiden Castle and it is a popular destination for walkers. Other leisure facilities include golf courses.

Issues affecting the Sandstone Ridge 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 woodlands, 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.
SR1: Frodsham Character Area
Including Frodsham Hill, Newton & New Pale

This character area towers above the urban areas of Frodsham and Helsby. The sandstone ridge escarpment runs west and south west, extending south as far as Manley Common.

This is an area of varying scales, with many large-scale open landscapes based upon an elevated and undulating topography providing numerous vantage points. Extensive panoramic views to the west, over the adjacent Sandstone Fringe and West Lowland Plain, extend as far as the Clwydian Hills. To the north Liverpool is visible on the distant horizon across the River Mersey, with Frodsham Drained Marsh in the foreground. To the east the Lower Weaver Valley appears as a wooded depression at lower altitude, surrounded by Undulating Enclosure farmland, The Peak District hills are visible on the distant horizon.

Woodland occupies much of the visually important high ground and this combines with the intact hedgerow system to create a strong sense of enclosure. The valley bottoms can appear as more intimate small-scale enclosures. In many places the impression is of a densely wooded landscape, particularly towards the south where the area is bound by the prominent edge of Delamere Forest. There are steep sided wooded slopes to the west comprising broad-leaved or mixed woodland types. Some is ancient woodland, for example, at Alvanley Cliff Wood, whilst other woodland has regenerated (mainly with birch) or been replanted, for example, at Snidley Moor and Royalty Wood. There are substantial open areas dominated by bracken with a heath flora.

This area lies at the northern end of what was once the extensive Royal Forest of Mara (Delamere). By the eighteenth century this was an area of heath and the common grazing land of the adjoining townships such as Kingsley and Manley. It is dominated by the regular rectangular fields (up to 8ha) with straight hawthorn hedgerows, created by Acts of Parliament at disafforestation, which survive largely unchanged in the modern landscape.

Settlement is characterised by isolated farms and areas of dispersed houses created in the 19th and 20th centuries. Towards the south of this character area is the New Pale, a seventeenth century deer park whose distinctive boundaries are a prominent landscape feature. New Pale Lodge was built in the 17th century and was one of two permanent dwellings in Delamere Forest until the forest laws were repealed in 1812.

There are numerous prehistoric monuments in this area including a Bronze Age barrow at Castle Cob and an Iron Age hill fort at Woodhouses, which uses the steep slopes of the ridge to form part of its defences. Many prehistoric stone tools have been found in this area. Frodsham Golf Course has existed since at least the 1890’s, though the modern course occupies a new site to the west. A number of communication masts are prominently located on the highest ground and are visible over a wide area. A war
memorial stands at the northern tip of the character area, which provides a distinctive landmark.
SR2: Eddisbury Character Area
Including Eddisbury Fort, Old Pale, Primrose Hill & Utkinton

This character area runs from Eddisbury, south as far as the small town of Tarporley, which lies in the neighbouring character type. Settlement includes Utkinton and Quarry Bank. The topography in this area is significantly undulating, as evidenced by the sequence of changing views experienced by road users on a number of major routes traversing the area. The view westward from the A 556 in the vicinity of Kelsall is particularly striking, extending past the Sandstone Fringe in the foreground, over the low lying West Lowland Plain to the Clwydian Hills on the distant skyline. Elsewhere panoramic views extend out in all directions over the adjacent areas of Sandstone Fringe and Rolling Farmland.

At Primrose Hill there are meandering dry gorges up to nine metres deep created from glacial melt water channels – designated as Urchin’s Kitchen Regionally Important Geological Site. The hedgerows are generally in good condition over the whole of this area and the presence of hedgerows and hedgerow trees, combined with the rolling landform, can influence the scale of the landscape by interrupting views in some areas. Elsewhere, trees and woodlands can appear as isolated elements and in the more elevated areas this leads to an open landscape with extensive views.

Several blocks of woodland, both broadleaves and conifer plantations including Primrosehill and Nettleford Wood, are managed as part of the Forestry Commission’s Delamere Forest holding. The Forestry Commission has also recently established an extensive area of community woodland of mixed planting with open spaces on the northern slopes of the Old Pale in the north of the area. The nearby communication mast at Pale Heights near Eddisbury Hill is very dominant, being visible to the travellers on the busy A556 as well as the wider surrounding area. Public access to this high vantage point provides extensive views in many directions. The elevation position allows westward views over Delamere Forest to the urban area of Northwich, with prominent large-scale industrial structures.

Orchards and fruit farming are to be found in the north of the character area. In the south a golfing complex has been established in the former landscape park of Arderne Hall, on the northern edge of Tarporley. This has created a very distinct local character with two extensive golf courses on the east facing slope. There is a striking disparity between the intensively managed grounds, with many specimen ornamental trees of various ages, and the surrounding farmland.
This area was once part of the extensive Royal Forest of Mara (Delamere). By the eighteenth century much of the northern part of this area was heath and the common grazing land of the adjoining townships such as Kelsall and Willington. This area is dominated by the regular rectangular fields with straight hawthorn hedgerows and large regular woodland blocks established during disafforestation and enclosure in the nineteenth century. Within this area is the Old Pale, a medieval deer park whose distinctive boundaries are a prominent landscape feature. The Chamber in the Forest was one of only two permanent dwellings in Delamere Forest until disafforestation. To the south field systems are more irregular reflecting piecemeal enclosure and encroachment in the medieval and post medieval periods.

This is an area with a high density of archaeological monuments ranging from a prehistoric tumulus at High Billinge and Iron Age hill-forts at Kelsbarrow and Eddisbury (scheduled monuments) to a medieval rabbit warren at Forest Farm and a Roman road that crosses through the area en route to Manchester from Chester. Large halls include Utkinton (listed grade I), constructed in the 17th century for the Done family who were the hereditary wardens of Delamere Forest; Tirley Garth to the southwest of Kelsall was constructed in the 20th century and reflects the Arts and Crafts style of the time. It is a grade II* listed building and is surrounded by a grade II* registered park and garden.

One SBI is located at the Yeld, the site of an old quarry. Small areas of ancient woodland occur at Tirley Garth and Willington Corner and include species such as oak, ash and sycamore, with elder, hawthorn and hazel in the under canopy.
SR3: Peckforton Character Area
Including Peckforton Hill, Bulkely Hill & Rawhead

This upland character area forms a very prominent ridge of steep-sided wooded hills which appear to rise abruptly out of the surrounding flat or undulating farmland. The ridge forms a distinctive skyline in views from adjacent areas and the more distant parts of the Lowland Plain to both east and west. The abundant woodland is especially noticeable as it is in marked contrast to the scarcity of woodland cover over much of the surrounding farmland. The dense tree cover can create a very small-scale insular landscape, with views channelled along narrow tracks or woodland drives. Elsewhere, elevated viewpoints provide spectacular views, often framed or glimpsed between mature trees, over the surrounding low lying farmland. These extend in all directions to the very distant horizons of higher ground, such as the Peak District to the east and the Clwydian Hills to the west.

This character area is separated from the Eddisbury Sandstone Ridge character area to the north by the Beeston Gap. Over looking the gap at the northern end of the ridge is the grade I listed Peckforton Castle. Beeston Castle, on the neighbouring Sandstone Fringe, features prominently in views to the north.

The poor soils of the ridge are well endowed with woodland habitats and some of the steeper slopes have been continuously wooded for many hundreds of years and are designated as Ancient Woodland. Other wooded areas are often much younger, having developed naturally from neglected heath or grassland.

Medieval and later field systems survived eighteenth and nineteenth century improvements in the southern part of the character area; however modern field enlargement has significantly changed their character. Settlement is very sparse and consists of individual farms - often the product of encroachment onto areas of open heath in the post-medieval period. This includes a number of timber framed buildings such as the farm buildings at Grigg Hill Farm which are listed grade II.

At the southern end of this character area is the Rawhead escarpment, rising to 227m at the highest point, designated as a geological SSSI. This area was enclosed during the nineteenth century and the area retains the distinctive regular field pattern created. The steeper slopes were planted with regular blocks of coniferous or mixed woodland. The remains of numerous small sandstone quarries are evident in the area, often partially hidden by vegetation.
Peckforton Castle imitates the style of a 13th century castle yet was built in the mid-19th century for Lord Tollemache to replace the seat of the Tollemache estate at Tilstone Lodge by Salvin. It was designed to emphasise the dominance of the landlord over his tenants and was far from being in keeping with the fashion for country estates in its time.

Significant areas of ancient woodland were replanted with mixed woodland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the Tollemache estate, often as part of the parkland surrounding the castle. The estate also enlarged and improved the many surviving small irregular medieval field systems on the lower slopes of the ridge. Peckforton Wood and Buckley Hill are both ancient woodland SBI’s. Oak, both sessile and English, is dominant, with birch, rowan and holly in support and a poor ground flora of wavy hair-grass, soft grass or bracken and bramble.

Near Gallantry Bank, at Bickerton there is a sandstone engine house chimney, which is all that is left to mark the site of a former copper mine, worked intermittently from c.1690 to the 1920s. The quarry exposures, the Gallantry Bank Copper Mine, together with the scarp slopes around Bulkeley Hill, Bickerton Hill and Raw Head are all designated for their regional geological and geomorphological importance.
SR4: Maiden Castle Character Area  
Including Maiden Castle, Bickerton Hill & heathland

This is the most southerly of the Sandstone Ridge character areas, separated from the Peckforton Character Area by a strip of low land through which the A534 passes. Settlement is limited and mainly sits on the lower slopes of the neighbouring character areas.

Within this area the extensive tracts of heathland and peripheral birch woodland form a distinctive landscape, with the characteristic distant and panoramic views out over the surrounding lower ground so typical of this type. A number of small fields lie within or alongside the woodland. The scale of these enclosures lies mid-way between the total enclosure of the woodland and the more expansive landscapes of the open heath on the higher ground and ridges.

The area’s location at the southern end of the Sandstone Ridge allows views in a southern direction, over the adjacent Sandstone Fringe and the areas of Rolling Farmland in the middle distance towards the Shropshire Hills. The elevated sandstone outcrop in the vicinity of Maiden Castle provides a distinctive ridge line when viewed from several directions.

There are a number of disused quarries that have been colonised by woodland. Locally, the extracted sandstone can be seen in the construction of buildings and lining field boundaries and sunken lanes.

Although the character area was enclosed by an Act of Parliament in 1854, the top of the hill and some areas of the scarp slope still support open heathland vegetation of ling, wavy hair-grass and gorse, encouraged by recent active management. Dense secondary birch woodland with oak, aspen, rowan, gean and holly covers extensive areas, with ling, bilberry and ferns in the ground flora. Much of the area is designated as a SSSI for its heathland communities and assemblage of reptiles. It is also notable as one of the few breeding sites in Cheshire for the pied flycatcher.

Caves naturally occur within the sandstone of the ridge and Mad Allen’s Hole is an example of a possible prehistoric cave shelter as well as the former home of an 18th century recluse. There is also the Iron Age hill-fort of Maiden Castle which is situated on the edge of a cliff with its outer edge protected by a double rampart (bivallate). This Scheduled Monument is under bracken and part of the heathland environment.