

Into the Trees

Continue straight ahead, on a path that winds through the heather. (Ignore the Sandstone Trail, which plunges down the steep slope to the right here). Less than 200 metres across the plateau, go through a wooden gate into open birch woods, and bear immediately right on a well-used path beneath the trees. When the path reaches the edge of the slope, follow it around to the left to rise and fall past sandstone outcrops jutting from the hill. The path drops obliquely across the wooded slopes, flanked by ivy-festooned crags.



Heathland Reptiles

Common lizards can sometimes be spotted basking in the sun on Bickerton Hill

Before the rocks end, turn sharp right, downhill on a tree-trunk edged path that angles back across the slope. To either side is **Hether Wood 4**, a mixed woodland dominated by mature oaks with occasional holly, rowan and birch. Recognised as a Local Wildlife Site, it's home to badgers, bats and bluebells, as well as tawny owls, greater spotted woodpeckers, redstarts, and pied flycatchers.

“Peace, panoramic views, heathland and wildlife – Maiden Castle has it all. This is my special patch of heaven.”

Dave Morris, former National Trust warden, Bickerton Hill

When the path rejoins the Sandstone Trail at the foot of the slope, bear right and follow the path until it opens into a scoop-shaped field above the National Trust's Duckington car park. Turn right, gently uphill through the grassy valley. Go through the waymarked gate at the top of the slope and continue uphill to a natural saddle marked by a wooden Sandstone Trail fingerpost.

Turn left here, and climb the short slope to the top of **Cuckoo Rock 5**. Celtic folklore is rich in cuckoo references, and 'Cuckoo Rocks' occur across Britain. 'Cuckoo' means both the herald of spring and a fool or dolt – as in April Fool's Day, the traditional day the first cuckoo calls.

Bear right at the summit, and follow the broad curving path gently downhill through a mosaic of heather and bilberry. When the path forks beneath a power line, continue straight ahead, down into the trees.

Quiet Lanes

Turn right at the next T-junction, and follow the waymarked path down to a gate leading onto a rough access track. Beyond a field and house, the track emerges on tarmaced Sandy Lane. Within 100 metres, turn right again, into a signposted bridleway opposite a small house, and then almost immediately left into **Lower Sandy Lane 6**. In spring, the hedge banks here are bright with celandine, self heal, and wild forget-me-nots, followed by stately foxgloves in late summer.

At the junction with Brown Knowl Lane, bear right, downhill towards **Brown Knowl Methodist Church 7**. Rural Cheshire has a strong non-conformist tradition, and the church replaces a chapel begun soon after the charismatic Methodist leader John Wedgewood preached beneath a nearby oak, in October 1822.

Onto the Hills

Turn right, opposite the church, down a drive signposted as a footpath. The waymarked track kinks sharply right, then left, between tall hedges. Over a stile, the path opens into sloping fields. Walk uphill, keeping close to the left-hand fence, and go through the kissing gate at the base of Bickerton Hill. Immediately ahead here is a slab of curiously marked sandstone known as **The Slars 8**. Five smooth, parallel vertical grooves are clear in the sloping bedrock. Some suggest they were formed during the Ice Age; but sandstone is easily eroded and they're more probably the result of an unknown Victorian local industry.

Follow the path around the top of the Slars, and climb the heather-clad scarp. Back on the top, bear right at a waymarker post and head for a wooden Sandstone Trail fingerpost at the head of Pool Lane. Now turn left, gently uphill on a sunken sandy track signposted to 'Rawhead' and 'Beeston'. At the top of the slope, turn left again to reach a natural sandstone platform and viewpoint dominated by a memorial called **Kitty's Stone 9**. A generous donation by Kitty's bereaved husband helped the National Trust acquire the northern end of Bickerton Hill, in 1991.

The path traces the edge to enter open birch woods again. Bear right here, away from the edge, back towards the top of Pool Dale. To the left is the **'Ten Acre Field'** being restored to heathland from silage 10. Follow the field edge around and then bear right, back down the sunken sandy track to the four-way fingerpost at the head of Pool Lane. Turn left, downhill, back to the 'Car Park'.



Rock Art?

These curious parallel grooves in the rock are known locally as the Slars

A series of other guides is available. Look out for four walks leaflets, four habitat leaflets, and six hillfort leaflets.

 SandstoneRidge

A circular walk around Maiden Castle, Bickerton



Discover the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge on foot

This leaflet was originally produced as part of the Habitats & Hillforts Project (2008-12) with the generous support of the Heritage Lottery Fund.

To learn more about the work of the Sandstone Ridge Trust and its partners, visit www.sandstoneridge.org.uk

For other walks, visit

www.sandstonetrail.co.uk

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 The Sandstone Ridge Trust

 National Trust

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Around Bickerton Hill and Brown Knowl

A pleasant and varied circuit exploring the heathery hills around Maiden Castle hillfort

THIS SHORT BUT SPECTACULAR CIRCUIT explores the very best of arguably the finest section of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. Ascend through purple heather and bilberries to the ramparts of Maiden Castle hillfort. Admire stunning views across the Dee Valley to the Welsh hills, drop down through open birch woods, then circle back through sandy lanes via the picturesque settlement of Brown Knowl.



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Start: Pool Lane National Trust car park (free), off Goldford Lane (opposite Pool Farm), Bickerton SY14 8LN. Map ref: SJ 503530

Distance: 5 kilometres/3 miles

Difficulty: Easy-Medium

Duration: Allow 2 – 2½ hours

Map: OS 1:25,000 Explorer 257 Crewe & Nantwich

Dogs: Bickerton Hill is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and livestock is grazing for much of the year. Dogs should be kept under control at all times, and on a lead between March 1st and July 31st to protect ground nesting birds, reptiles and invertebrates. Please consider other walkers and clean up after your dog.

STARTING FROM THE NATIONAL TRUST'S POOL LANE CAR PARK, go through the wooden gate at the top of the parking area and head gently uphill on a broad sandy track. The open areas of **lowland heath 1** beside the path are typical of others being carefully restored across Bickerton Hill. Characterised by heather and bilberries interspersed with yellow gorse and broom, this increasingly rare habitat supports a wealth of wildlife including common lizards, adders, slowworms, glow-worms, and green hairstreak butterflies.

When the track forks, 250 metres later, just before the crest of the slope, bear left on a broad sandy path. At the next crossing of paths, continue straight ahead up a flight of sandstone steps.

Now part of the popular 34-mile/55 kilometre-long Sandstone Trail, the waymarked path traces the lip of the scarp before climbing a second, shallower set of steps to a viewpoint with a rustic log bench.

Iron Age Hillfort

The path rises again to cross the eroded double ramparts of **Maiden Castle hillfort 2**, dominating the crown of the hill. Built in phases between 900 and 400 BC, this prehistoric hilltop enclosure was defended by the steep natural escarpment to the west, with twin, drystone wall-faced earth and timber-laced ramparts protecting the gently sloping ground to the south and east.

From the lofty interior of the hillfort, **panoramic views 3** look westwards across the Dee valley to the Welsh hills. To the north is Rawhead, the highest point on the sandstone ridge, with Shropshire's Caer Caradoc, Lawley, and Long Mynd faint on the southern horizon.

At the southern end of the hilltop enclosure, re-cross the ancient defences and drop down steps to an illustrated National Trust interpretation panel explaining the significance of the hillfort and surrounding heath.

Commanding Views

The distant Clwydian hills span the horizon across the Dee valley



Timeline

c. 280-250 MYA Bickerton Hill sandstones formed during Triassic Period	c. 900-400 BC Maiden Castle hilltop enclosure used for seasonal gatherings?	1600s Sandstone quarried from scarp slope and interior at Maiden Castle	1742 Land around Maiden Castle reclaimed for agriculture under the Enclosure Act	1770s onwards Lovesick John Harris of Handley lives as a hermit in Mad Allen's Hole	1835 First Brown Knowl Methodist chapel built; replaced by current church in 1913	1934-35 Excavations at Maiden Castle uncover an intumed entrance with possible guard chambers	1939-95 Maiden Castle area used as an army training ground and firing range	1950s Birch and bracken invade long-established heathland on the hills after grazing by sheep and cattle ends	1970s Bickerton Hill used for motorised hill climbs and motocross events	1979 Bickerton Hill designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)	1983 National Trust bequeathed 68.5 hectares/170 acres on Larkton Hill	1991 Further 48 hectares/120 acres on Bickerton Hill acquired by National Trust; Kitty's Stone erected	2010 Work begins to restore '10 Acre Field' to heathland
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