

# Come In You Reds!

Just like the Wolds, the scarlet-hued Cheshire Sandstone Ridge is under the AONB spotlight. And damn right it should be.

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**P**EOPLE SORT OF expect Cheshire to be flat,” says Stewart Pain. “The Sandstone Ridge proves pretty conclusively that it isn’t.”

He’s quite right. Rising sensationally from the surrounding pancake of the Cheshire Plain, the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge is a complex and intriguing geological upthrust which, just like the Yorkshire Wolds, is under Natural England’s scrutiny for possible admission to the AONB/ National Landscape club.

Stewart’s enthusiasm for the idea makes perfect sense. He is the vice chair of the Cheshire Sandstone Trust, which was established to protect the ridge as well as campaigning for its inclusion among England’s elite landscapes. As far as he and his colleagues are concerned, adoption as a National Landscape is no less than it deserves.

The ridge runs for some 25 miles from Frodsham and Helsby in the north, where it rears up above the vast sweep of the Mersey Estuary, down to the tiny village of Duckington on the Cheshire-Shropshire border. A pre-existing and very wonderful long-distance path, the 34-mile Sandstone Trail, follows the line of the ridge, extending a little further south to finish across the border in Whitchurch.

Although defined by its rich red sandstone spine, the ridge actually consists of eight different landscape forms, including sandstone plateaux (such as the twin prongs of Overton Hill and Helsby Hill, and the wooded scarps of Bickerton, Bulkeley and Raw Head), as well as heaths, mosses and meres formed by glacial action. It even has its own forest – Delamere – planted by humans in the soil of the mosses between Chester and Northwich. Stand atop Old Pale Hill looking out over Delamere and if

## ▲ RED WALL

The distinctive red sandstone skin of the ridge, as found at Raw Head.

## ▼ MERES & MARVELS

Below left: The rocky steps of Jacob’s Ladder on Overton Hill (there’s a modern-day staircase called Baker’s Dozen if you don’t fancy it).

Below: Summer light on one of the meres in Delamere Forest.



PHOTO: TOM BAILEY



PHOTO: A.P.S (UN)/ALAMY

*‘Something like four million people live within 20-30 minutes of the ridge, but many may not know this special place is here.’*



PHOTO: TOM BAILEY



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/MARMALADE PHOTOS

you squint a bit, the sense of scale makes it look like you’re above a Canadian boreal forest. Sort of.

There are superstar highlights like Beeston Castle, a 13th century fortress perched on its very own pulpit of rock, and the Iron Age hill-fort of Maiden Castle atop Bickerton Hill.

If you like caves you’ll love it here, too; check out the impressive and fabulously named Queen’s Parlour and Mad Allen’s Hole, both etched into the scarlet folds of the southern end of the range.

Plus, how many National Landscapes can say the Beatles played on them? Overton Hill was once the home of a thriving entertainment paradise called the Mersey View Pleasure Grounds – funfairs by day and a nightclub by night (with floor-to-ceiling windows providing an immense view over the lights of Cheshire and Liverpool). The Fab Four played the View in April 1963, while the likes of Bob Monkhouse and Tom O’Connor provided cabaret entertainment.

But to Stewart and his fellow trustees, what makes the ridge most worthy of inclusion is its accessibility.

“We think something like four million people live within 20-30 minutes of the sandstone ridge, because around the edge you have conurbations like Liverpool, Chester, Warrington, Crewe, Runcorn and Northwich,” he explains.

“Those who already know about the ridge love what it offers – tranquility, freedom, escape and wonderful walks. But many more may not be aware that this special place is here, particularly in some of those urban settings. So it’s our hope that adoption as a National Landscape can raise the



PHOTO: TOM BAILEY

profile of the ridge and encourage people to discover it for the very first time.”

The road to that (potential) adoption is long, of course; three years and counting. The process has currently reached stage eight (informal public consultation via on-the-ground surveys and questionnaires) of a total thirteen. So if you happened to get stopped by someone with a clipboard on Peckforton Hill, make sure you say ‘I love it here!’ It could make all the difference.

**WALK HERE:** Download Frodsham and Helsby at [walk1000miles.co.uk/bonusroutes](http://walk1000miles.co.uk/bonusroutes) CW

## ▲ ALL IN A ROW

Top: Beeston Castle in the foreground, with the ridge continuing south to Peckforton, Raw Head and Bickerton.

## ▲ STEP INTO MY PARLOUR

Above: Chilling in the Queen’s Parlour, a vast cave in the folds of Raw Head.