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.

Before the rocks end, turn sharp right, downhill on a tree-trunk edged path that angles back across the slope. To either side is Hetherwood 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.

Heathland Reptiles

Common lizards can sometimes be spotted basking in the sun on 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 3. 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 downhill, ahead 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 4. 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 Stars 3. 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 Stars, 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 sandstone 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 2. 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 recently purchased ‘Ten Acre Field’ 10. These curious parallel grooves in the rock are known locally as the Stars.

"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

A circular walk around

Maiden Castle, Bickerton

We hope you enjoy your visit to Maiden Castle. To learn more about the work of the Sandstone Ridge Trust and its partners, visit www.thesandstoneridgetrust.co.uk

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**Timeline**

c. 280-250 MYA
Bickerton Hill sandstones formed during Triassic Period

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
First Brown Knowl Methodist chapel built; replaced by current church in 1801

1835
Excavations at Maiden Castle uncover an interned entrance with possible guard chambers

1939-95
Maiden Castle area used as an army training ground and firing range

1960s
 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 Stane erected

2010
Work begins to restore ‘10 Acre Field’ to heathland

**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 dogs should be kept 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.

**Iron Age Hillfort**

The path rises again to cross the eroded double ramparts of Maiden Castle hillfort, dominating the crown of the hill. Built in phases between 800 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.

**Commanding Views**

The distant Clwydian hills span the horizon across the Dee valley.