

Lowland Heath: important habitats along the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

A CHAIN OF SIX IRON AGE HILLFORTS dominates the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. Beyond their earthen ramparts spreads a mosaic of broadleaved woodland, species-rich grassland, and open heath, flanked by meres and mosses. These varied yet fragile habitats support a huge variety of unusual plants and animals, many of them adapted to specific historic land uses.

By restoring and enhancing these increasingly threatened landscapes, the vision is to create an interconnected and expanding network of woodlands, grasslands, wetlands and heath around the hills that will benefit both people and wildlife long into the future.

Open Landscapes

Lowland heath delights all the senses in high summer. Purple heather, yellow gorse and bright green bilberry dazzle the eye. On sunny days, the honeyed, woody scent of heather drifts on the breeze, and the hum of insects fills the air.

Lowland heaths are atmospheric open landscapes on poor, free draining soils. They're typically found on glacial or windblown sands in damp, mild areas. Roughly one fifth of the world's total heathland survives in Britain and on the western coast of Europe.

And yet this vital habitat is under threat. More than three-quarters of Britain's lowland heath has been lost since 1800, much of it within the last fifty years. In 1995, a survey found less than 60 hectares of lowland heath in Cheshire. These scattered patches of surviving lowland heath support a range of increasingly scarce plants and animals: from round-leaved sundews and tree pipits, to common lizards and green hairstreak butterflies.

Historic Landscapes

As a rare and increasingly threatened habitat, around 90% of Cheshire's lowland heaths are now protected as either Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) or Local Wildlife Sites. Cheshire's largest area of continuous lowland heath at Bickerton Hill, in central Cheshire, is cared for by the National Trust. Other important Cheshire heaths include Little Budworth Common, just to the east of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge.

Curiously, for all their current rarity, lowland heaths are actually man-made. When Neolithic farmers first cleared the wildwood to grow crops, around 6,000 years ago, they moved on whenever the soil's fertility was exhausted.

Lowland Heath

A mosaic of open heathland along the sandstone ridge supports a wealth of unusual insects, reptiles and birds

Heaths and Commons

Grazing animals then prevented the trees from re-establishing themselves; and by the Bronze Age, heathland was widespread over much of England. Centuries later, many lowland heaths were adopted as commonland — as at Lindow, Little Budworth, and Thurstaston commons. Traditional activities such as cutting wood, gorse and peat for fuel, collecting bracken for animal bedding, and grazing domestic animals all helped maintain the open nature of the heath and prevented them reverting to woodland. It's worth remembering, too, that (as old photographs show) much of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge remained as treeless open heath until grazing ceased in the 1940s and '50s.



Purple Heather
Richly coloured bell heather covers the ramparts of Maiden Castle, on Bickerton Hill

So, what makes lowland heath so special today? Until the agricultural advances and extensive enclosure of common land in the eighteenth century, heathland habitats had survived almost unchanged for thousands of years. During that time a unique and fascinating plant-animal association evolved that was adapted to the harsh and seasonally dry conditions.

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www.sandstoneridge.org.uk

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“Open heathland is rarer than rainforest.”

Lowland Heathland, Natural England, 2002

Left untouched, the natural succession of heathland moves from bare earth to fine grasses and bracken, followed by heather and gorse, culminating in birch scrub and woodland. Properly managed, healthy lowland heath contains a patchwork of young and old growth heather, bilberry, gorse and scattered trees, bare ground, boggy areas and small pools. Together, this rich mosaic supports a range of uncommon plants and animals. Cheshire's notable heathland species include: ling, bell heather, cross-leaved heath, bilberry, and western gorse; tree pipits, wood larks, and nightjars; common lizards, grass snakes, slowworms, and adders; and a range of invertebrates from grasshoppers to large heath butterflies. Without a doubt, lowland heath is one of nature's gems.

Heathland for the Future?

Yet statutory protection is not enough. Cheshire's heaths are threatened by forestry, agricultural 'improvement', peat and mineral extraction, scrub invasion, misunderstanding, neglect and recreational pressure. They are also being fragmented into areas too small to support viable wildlife populations.

If enough lowland heath is to survive to sustain its unique assemblage of unusual plants and animals, then it needs proper care and attention. Without active management heathland soon reverts to scrub and woodland. Management of lowland heath varies across the region; larger areas are sometimes grazed with sheep or burnt in rotation to encourage new growth. Smaller areas may be seasonally grazed by cattle or ponies, or manually cleared of scrub to maintain open habitats. On other lowland heaths, trees are selectively removed to allow the heather and bilberry to regenerate from the underground seed bank or from seeds brought in from nearby heathland.

The priority in Cheshire is to restore the health of existing heathland, and link small fragmented patches back into larger, more sustainable areas. Looking further ahead, the goal is to recreate an extra 10% of new heathland. As these bold plans come to fruition, the bright blooms of purple heather and yellow gorse will once again delight visitors to the summer hills.

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

CASE STUDY

Heathland Restoration on Bickerton Hill

BICKERTON HILL is the finest example of surviving lowland heath in Cheshire. Owned and managed by the National Trust since 1982, the elevated 110-hectare site supports more than half the county's dry heathland habitat. This part of the sandstone ridge lies at the heart of Cheshire's Ecological Network.

Work to recreate a mosaic of open heath and scattered woodland began in 1992, under the first of three agri-environment schemes. Guided by Natural England, the Trust is restoring roughly half the hill to heathland; the rest is managed as woodland. The reintroduction of seasonal grazing by cattle is just part of a long-term sustainable management plan that is already seeing the welcome return of heather and bilberry, and the threatened species they support.

Plans to consolidate and extend the area of lowland heath on Bickerton Hill began with the purchase of a 4-hectare field at the heart of the site, which was converted from heath to pasture in the 1970s. This is being restored to lowland heath by increasing the soil's acidity to allow reseeding with heathland flora harvested from elsewhere on the hill.

“We've made a real difference at Bickerton Hill; and that feels very good ...”

Chris Widger, Countryside Manager,
National Trust

