Across the Valley

Almost opposite the house, turn right, off the road (before Bates Lane) on a signposted footpath to ‘Burrows Lane’ and ‘All Lane’. The path crosses the valley farmland ahead, alongside a deep field ditch, to emerge on narrow Burrows Lane. Turn left, and then right at the T-junction, uphill on the Ridgeway. Walk past the Foxhill pumping station, and turn left, off the road, onto a broad sandy bridleway signposted to ‘Woodhouse Hill’ and Frodsham’.

For the next 1.5 kilometres, the path follows the waymarked Sandstone Trail penuit until through Snidley Moor Wood. Together with Woodhouse Hill Wood and Frodsham Hill Wood, they represent the second largest continuous block of broadleaved woodland in Cheshire. As elsewhere along the ridge, buzzards nest in the treetops; watch for them circling overhead on outstretched ‘V’-shaped wings, or listen for their drawn out ‘pee-oo’ cry.

At the top of Snidley Moor Wood, turn left on a path just inside the trees, signposted for the ‘Sandstone Trail’. Across the open fields to the north is low, wooded Beacon Hill topped by its twin microwave communication masts. The masts are the modern equivalent of the huge beacon fires lit on the hilltop throughout history, to warn of imminent danger or invasion. Follow the path as it curves to the right, then left, around the base of Woodhouse Hill. Up to the left are the tumbled ramparts of a late Bronze Age hilltop enclosure. Excavations in 2010 uncovered drystone walled facings to the ramparts, a possible stone slab lined grave, and two fine tools.

Wooed Scarp

From the northern end of the hill, drop down the slope to the rock overhang, seat, interpretation panel, and viewpoint at Scouts Rock. Now turn left along the upper edge of the slope. At the southern end of Woodhouse Hill, bear right through a gap in the old boundary bank, immediately before a meta-kissing gate into a new plantation. The path plunges down the wooded scarps, heading back towards Helsby Hill.

Leave the woods at the bottom of the slope, and follow the tarmaced drive gently downhill to Tarvin Road. On the left here are the grounds of Foxhill house. Built originally for Liverpool’s Pilkington glass family, the Italianate-style Victorian country house is now a spiritual retreat and conference centre run by the Church of England. Its 30 hectare wooded grounds include an arboretum, or collection of exotic trees, and a lookout tower.

Turn left along Tarvin Road and immediately right, down sunken Chestnut Lane. When the lane narrows, continue ahead to cross a footbridge beside a tiny ford. Now a rare watery delight, fords are a reminder of a far older landscape, before the widespread bridge building of the Middle Ages.

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From Helsby Hill to Woodhouse Hillfort

An exhilarating circuit exploring two of Cheshire’s most northerly hillforts

THIS POPULAR HALF-DAY CIRCUIT takes you to two of Cheshire’s loveliest prehistoric hilltop enclosures. Enjoy breathtaking panoramic views from the rocky summit of Helsby Hill with its ancient defences, before crossing the valley to the tumbled ramparts of Woodhouse hilltop enclosure, high on the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. Together, they provide the focus for a perfect walk.

Timeline

c. 280-250 million years ago
Helsby and Frodsham sandstones formed during Triassic Period

c. 22,000 BC
Helsby crag shaped by vast ice sheet pushing in from Irish Sea basin

c. 12,000 BC
Early Stone Age hunters watch for prey from Helsby and Frodsham hills

c. 900-400 BC
Hilltop enclosures built on Helsby and Woodhouse hills

c. 79-410
Chester to Wilderspool Roman road passes foot of Helsby Crag

c. 900
Viking settlement at Helsby named Hjallr-by — ‘the village on the ledge’

Panoramic Views

Out on the open, rocky summit of Helsby Hill, head for the concrete Ordnance Survey ‘trig’ point. Breathtaking 360° panoramic views span the Frodsham Marshes, M56, Manchester Ship Canal and Mersey Estuary far below. To the north are the Liverpool skyline and planes rising from Liverpool John Lennon airport, with the Welsh hills pale to the west. On a clear day, the Shropshire Hills and Long Mynd stand out to the south.

From the summit, turn sharp right, away from the edge, downhill on a sandy path that re-crosses the ramparts. Turn left at the next junction of paths, and walk past Harmers Lakes and Farm. Continue downhill on Hill Road North, around the bend to the left, to the lower end of Harmer’s Wood.

Turn right here, off the road, on a path signposted for the ‘Sandstone Trail ¾’. The waymarked path drops around field edges, then follows a sunken way to Tarvin Road.

Turn left, downhill on Tarvin Road for 200 metres, past curiously-named Teubhill House — its ancient place name comes from the Old English ‘teutian’, meaning a ‘lookout place’, and may refer to either nearby Helsby or Woodhouse hills.

STARTING FROM HELSBY QUARRY CAR PARK, cross the road and walk up Hill Road South, opposite. At the top of the road, follow the path ahead, uphill through National Trust woodland, passing an old quarry cutting once known as the ‘Black Cut’, on your right. Thousands of tons of hard Helsby sandstone were ferried across the Mersey from the 1830s onwards to build the Liverpool Docks. Now largely filled in for public safety, the lower workings were reopened as Helsby Quarry Woodland Park in 1990, and designated a Local Nature Reserve in 2002.

Look for the waymarker at the junction of paths. The path ahead traces the lip of the wooded slope uphill to pass through the original entrance to Helsby hillfort. Fortified sometime between 800 and 400BC, this late Bronze Age/early Iron Age hilltop enclosure was protected on two sides by cliffs that plunged 120 metres to the surrounding marshland. A double arc of earthen ramparts faced with drystone walling enclosed the hilltop to the south and east.

To the north, the peak of the surviving fortification buttresses the escarpment of the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, where the rock is the most likely to have been quarried by the early Iron Age people to build their ramparts.

As you approach the summit, look for the waymarker at the old quarry cutting, a narrow stone cleft in the rock. This once cut 17 metres deep — all that remains today is a shoal of shale blocks, but it gives you a sense of the geological challenge these ancient builders faced.

Here, on the skyline to the north, the Liverpool skyline stands out, with its ongoing development of new apartments and apartment blocks, and the new Wirral Loop Line railway that now connects Liverpool to Chester. The latter can be seen as a narrow strip of rail down the middle of the Mersey Valley to the right, the old wooden bridge across the river just visible above the water.

At the peak of the fortification, you are enjoying the first of many panoramic views across the region. Look north to the Liverpool skyline, and west to the Welsh hills as they stretch towards the Wye Valley.

From the summit, turn sharp right, away from the edge, downhill on a sandy path that crosses the ramparts. Turn left at the next junction of paths, and walk past Harmers Lake and Farm. Continue downhill on Hill Road North, round the bend to the left, to the lower end of Harmer’s Wood.

As the forested summit of Helsby Hill falls away, take a hard right on a sandy path that drops across a field edge, and passes through the ruins of the ancient estate house on the left. The house is now a private residence, but you can see the remains of the walled garden on the right.

Here, within the wasps’ nest, was built the Victorian ‘gibbet’ that was used to hang criminals for public warning. In its day, it was a common form of punishment, with many gibbets built across the country. The gibbet here remains a chilling reminder of the methods used to control law and order in the pre-Royal Proclamation period.

At the top of the climb, on the right, is the small Hamers Farm, where you take the hard left to walk through the ancient woodland. After another sharp climb, the path drops steeply down, past the farm, and crosses the road to the woodland entrance.

Here, you pass beneath the ancient trees, where the gorse and bracken begin to thin, and the views open up as you approach the summit of Woodhouse Hill.

To the south and west, the Shropshire Hills stand out, with the Long Mynd visible in the distance to the south.

Beyond the Sky

Beneath the Sky

High above the Mersey Estuary, peregrines prey on pigeons passing Helsby Hill

To Alvanley

To Frodsham