



Viewpoint

Real backbone



Time: 15 mins

Region: North West England

Landscape: rural



Location: Beeston Castle, Chapel Lane, Beeston, Cheshire, CW6 9TX

Grid reference: SJ 54046 59088

Getting there: From Beeston Castle car park, turn left and walk along Chapel Lane. Before the road bends, go straight ahead on a narrow waymarked footpath signposted 'Whitchurch'. Follow it downhill through some woods to emerge on Tattenhall Road, opposite Tabernacle Cottage. Turn left, cross the road and go up the bank on the Sandstone Trail, signposted 'Burwardsley'. Walk a little way until you can look back up at Beeston Crag and Castle.

Keep an eye out for: Peregrine falcons – they nest in the rocks of Beeston Crag and the neighbouring Peckforton Hills.

Gaze up at the wooded bluff ahead with the ruins perched on top. Compared to the low-lying Cheshire Plain that we are standing on, Beeston Crag is an imposing sight, rising to a height of around 500 feet. The ruins are the remains of a thirteenth century castle - but our medieval forefathers were not the first to build here. And the Crag contains many secrets...

Why has Beeston Crag been a refuge for our ancestors over the centuries?



From our viewpoint we can see Beeston Crag is a highly defensible site. The high ground stands distinct from neighbouring hills. The rest of the Cheshire Plain is relatively flat, so from its summit it is possible to see as far as the Welsh Mountains in the west and the Pennine Hills in the east.

These qualities made the Crag an ideal place for a castle. Any attackers would have been visible from a distance and then had to climb a steep slope. Ranulf de Blondville, Sixth Earl of Chester, began building work here in the 1220s. Returning from the Crusades, he found the king's viceroy confiscating lands from other wealthy men. So Ranulf's castle was a show of strength and effort to cement his political position.

Ranulf had the local geology to thank for this advantageous spot. Beeston Crag forms part of the Mid Cheshire Ridge, a sandstone crest that flows for 34 miles across Cheshire's flatlands, from Frodsham and Helsby in the north to Malpas in the south. Rather than a continuous ridge, 'the backbone of Cheshire' is a series of rolling hills.

The pink-red sandstone rock we can see exposed in the Crag is between 225 and 195 million old. It formed when layers of sand and pebbles were laid down in desert-like conditions. Over time, these layers were compressed together to create soft rocks. Later, upheavals in the Earth's crust made vertical 'faults' (fractures) in the layers, which were pushed upwards and tilted - creating the ridge.

Over millennia, these uplifted rocks have been weathered by wind, water and ice to produce the cliffs, crags and scarps (steep slopes) we can see today. Now only the hardest bits protrude above the Cheshire Plain.

Following in the footsteps of our ancestors...

Ranulf de Blondville wasn't the first to spot the local landscape's opportunities. The discovery of Neolithic (3,500-2,000 BC) flint arrowheads around the Crag suggests that prehistoric people recognised this vantage point with good views for hunting, and spotting enemies.

On the lower slopes of the Crag burial mounds from the early Bronze Age (2,000-1,500 BC) have been uncovered. By the late Bronze Age it appears that a series of earthworks had been constructed and that the site had become a centre for metalworking.

These earthworks were added to during the Iron Age (650BC – 40AD) to create a hillfort. Crops were processed and it appears that salt was traded from here. Central Cheshire has extensive underground salt deposits, dating from a warm shallow sea which evaporated around the same time that the sandstone rocks were formed.

The hillfort was abandoned at the end of the Iron Age and remained largely unoccupied for centuries until Ranulf built his castle. Ranulf kept hold of his land, but died soon after. The king seized his assets, including the castle, which then changed hands several times. During the English Civil War (1642-1651) it was fought over for its strategic location. When Parliamentarians gained control of it in 1645 the castle was partly dismantled so it couldn't be used in battle again.

From the end of the seventeenth century, the Crag and Castle ruins became a playground for the wealthy. Romantic artists, including JMW Turner found inspiration here for their paintings. Today Beeston Castle is a tourist attraction managed by English Heritage. Do take a look around. It isn't hard to see why it served as a place of refuge for so long. Indeed, this landscape's advantages mean that there are the remains of six hillforts and four castles along the Mid Cheshire Ridge.