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A perfect winter walk between two great pubs in Cheshire

This 14-mile section of the Sandstone Trail crosses an ancient landscape of hills, woods and ridges, bookended by two fine old inns



 Phoebe Smith hiking the Sandstone Trail in Cheshire. Photograph: Phoebe Smith

Phoebe Smith

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Deep in the heartland of rural Cheshire, there's a wind-scoured ridge of sandstone that hides a two-storey cave known as Mad Allen's Hole. Here, on the flanks of Bickerton Hill, it is said that in the 18th century a heartbroken man called [John Harris of Handley](#) lived as a hermit for several decades.

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distance.

As locations to weather the storm of romantic trauma go, this - I mused as I stood above it on a crisp winter's day - certainly takes some beating. Offering a panorama of nine counties of England and Wales from its entrance, I could spy the white disc of Jodrell Bank Observatory glistening in the sunlight, while the peaks and troughs of the Clwydian range appeared like a watermark in the



I'd come here, not seeking solitude, but to meet up with Jose, an old friend I'd not seen for nine years, and to try a new walking package dreamed up by two Cheshire pubs along a prime section of the 34-mile (55km) [Sandstone Trail](#) between the villages of Tarporley and Malpas. The route follows the

Sandstone Ridge, an ancient landscape of escarpments and rolling hills, rising from the Cheshire Plain.



 A walker on the Sandstone Trail near Beeston Castle. Photograph: UK City Images/Alamy

The idea for the walk is simple: just because it's winter doesn't mean it has to be hard. Daylight hours are limited, the weather is less predictable, so why not stick to one 14-mile stretch, bookended with a comfy, warm room in each inn, and good food and drink - dinner on both nights and a cooked breakfast are included, as is an optional packed lunch. The pubs arrange the luggage transfer and a taxi when you finish to take you back to the start.

We met in the Swan in Tarporley - a 16th-century coaching inn, where, in front of a roaring open fire, we caught up on old times, studied the walk map

and enjoyed food made from ingredients farmed practically on the doorstep. As we tucked into the cheeseboard (Tarporley blue comes highly recommended), owner Woody Barlow told us how the idea was born in the summer when they held a charity fun run between the two pubs in memory of the late owner Si Lees-Jones.

■ At this time of year, the trail has a lovely stillness about it - the woods and ridgelines look magical in the winter light

“It was so successful, we began to think - these two pubs have always been popular with walkers, cyclists and outdoor enthusiasts, especially those doing the Sandstone Trail in sections,” he said. “Many were trying to organise accommodation night by night, but we realised we could offer something much more streamlined. Plus at this time of year, the trail has a lovely stillness about it - the woods and ridgelines look magical in the winter light.”

I woke the next morning to the sound of rain on my window, but as I met Jose for breakfast - a hearty helping of eggs - the sky unexpectedly began to clear. Leaving the town, we followed country lanes, where the hedges bloomed with sloes. Acorns cracked under our boots. These nuts would once have been used for nourishing pigs before the start of medieval feasts - like those once held in [Beeston Castle](#), the former royal fort built by the Earl of Cheshire on his return from the crusades in the 1220s, which filled the horizon.



 Fog cloaks the trail high on the Sandstone Ridge. Photograph: George Pollock/Alamy

We cut through a muddy field, making a beeline for this landmark, then followed the Sandstone Trail waymarks over the Shropshire Union Canal at Wharton's Lock. We reached the tall red walls of rubble-filled sandstone blocks and huge wooden doors of the castle, said to house treasure from Richard II.

It was a tempting prospect, but with miles still to cover we made our way instead through the network of weaving pathways on Peckforton Hills, topped with towering red pines that give shelter from the icy wind but allow light to drop to the forest floor in dazzling spindles. Here we came across a Victorian castle folly built in the 1840s and now a hotel popular with

wedding parties, but we were more taken with nature's treasures in the form of sweet chestnuts on neighbouring [Bulkeley Hill](#). The bark of these old trees would have once been used by passing Romans to tan leather and the nuts were essential rations for legionnaires.

¶ The light emanating from the windows of the 300-year-old Lion pub welcomed us to our big finish nearly as warmly as the staff

We stopped here a while, enjoying our sandwiches from the pub on our first exposure to some of the tor-like sandstone that the ridge is named for, before soldiering on to our next summit - Raw Head on Bickerton Hill. At 227 metres (745ft), it's not huge, but it is the highest point on the trail. We wandered through the forest talking about its history (its rocks were formed about 250m years ago in the Triassic period, and iron oxide has caused them to become banded in hues of red, terracotta and ochre, which cement the sand together) and our own past lives, discussing friends we once shared.

As the sun hung ever lower in the sky, we still had some climbing to do on Bickerton Hill, home to the hermit's cave. The area is replete with lowland heath, once used for grazing, thatching, and foraging. Bilberries still grow there.



 The Lion in Malpas. Photograph: Phoebe Smith

We traced the edges of Maiden Castle - the remains of an iron age hill fort built between 500 and 600BC and still occupied when the Romans arrived in Britain - before descending to country lanes, where someone had kindly left a wheelbarrow of apples for hikers.

The light emanating from the windows of the 300-year-old Lion pub welcomed us to our big finish nearly as warmly as the staff, who were suitably impressed with the distance we'd walked, making us feel like we'd had a proper adventure.

Before we retired to bed we raised a glass - to the views, the hearty food and, of course, to heartbroken John Harris - in short, to our perfect winter walk. We promised not to leave it another nine years before we walked together again.

The trip was provided by [The Swan](#) in Tarporley and [The Lion](#) in Malpas, with travel from [visitengland.com](#). The [Walk, Dine & Unwind on Cheshire's Sandstone Trail](#) package is from £199pp, including dinner, B&B at both inns, luggage transfer, one packed lunch and a taxi back to start, plus one dog stays free

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