

Type 4

Coastal Sandstone



The large scale landscape includes the dramatic and exposed sandstone cliff scenery of St Bees Head. Beyond this to the south are rolling coastal hills and inland a farmed plateau.

Location

This sub type is found along the coastal edge extending from Whitehaven to St Bees Head and south to Sellafield. This type continues into the Lake District national park and is classified as Type E – Coastal Sandstone in the Lake District National Park Landscape Character Assessment.

Key Characteristics

- Coastal sandstone cliffs
- Sandstone rolling hills and plateaus
- Large open fields
- Prominent hedge banks bound pastoral fields
- Small woodland blocks along valley sides
- Exposed coastal edge moving to intimate and enclosed farmland inland

Physical character

Permo Triassic red sandstones overlain by fluvial-glacial drift and brown sandy soils extend between Whitehaven and Sellafield. The tall sandstone cliffs at St Bees Head are a prominent feature and form the best exposure of the sandstone in the area and along the coast of Cumbria. The land becomes progressively lower and the cliff edge softens as you move towards Sellafield. A plateau like area is found around St Bees, intersected by Pow Beck towards the edge of Whitehaven.

Land cover and land use

The area comprises the distinctive sandstone cliff scenery around St Bees, undulating plateau and the rolling coastal hills that move inland and south towards Sellafield. The open plateau north of St Bees is covered in a patchwork of large open regular pastoral fields. These are largely divided by hawthorn hedges. Between St Bees and Sellafield the patchwork of fields continues and gently rolling pastoral fields with prominent hedge (kest) banks of gorse, hawthorn and sometimes bracken. Small blocks of mixed woodland and scrub occur on the valley sides and inland throughout this type. The valley of Pow Beck which cuts through the higher ground is often open and bare, but higher up is more wooded with well maintained hedges.

The area is lightly settled with small scale farmsteads and hamlets scattered away from the cliffs to the north of St Bees. The lighthouse is the most prominent built feature. Further south nucleated caravan sites and villages are dotted closer to the coast, but often sited in dips and undulations in the rolling hills. The traditional buildings are built in the distinctive rich red sandstone. Modern buildings are often rendered with sandstone dressings. The railway follows the shoreline and low contours and is generally hidden and discrete feature in the landscape. The most significant man made development is the sandstone quarry in the coastal cliffs near Whitehaven.

Ecology

The cliffs of St Bees Head support colonies of breeding seabirds, including razorbill, guillemot puffin and kittiwake. The cliffs also support large areas of coastal heath and species-rich grassland including sea campion, bloody crane's bill, kidney vetch, thrift, common scurvy grass and red fescue. Inland the landscape is largely agricultural, but along the valley of Pow Beck there is areas of rush pasture, reed bed and swamp vegetation. Small, deeply incised tributaries to Pow Beck hold small semi natural woodlands.

Historic and cultural character

The St Bees area is characterised by remnants of the former monastic landscape created by the 12th century Priory. The settlements are nucleated and discrete surrounded by the fossilised strips of former medieval field systems. Many of the discrete settlements emerged with parliamentary enclosures in the late 18th century. Many of the buildings are in the local vernacular tradition and built of sandstone. The field pattern is a mix of former common arable field, ancient enclosures and planned enclosure.

Perceptual character

The open character of the landscape along the coast offers wide and uninterrupted views across to sea horizons and along the coast. There is a feeling of remoteness and wildness along the coastal edge with the exposure to the cliff edge, changing weather and sea. In

particular the high cliffs and cliff top landscape at St Bees Head is vast in scale and has an exposed, invigorating, remote and beautiful feel. Inland there is a more intimate feel due to the simple farmed character and the more enclosed rolling land and small valleys.

Sensitive characteristics or features

The dramatic cliffs of St Bees Heritage Coast, their colonies of breeding sea birds that provide a strong link with the open sea and sense of 'naturalness', and the discrete siting of the railway line along the lower coastal edge are all sensitive to the dynamic forces of the sea. The networks of native hedges are sensitive to changes in land management and farm diversification. Discrete settlements, the distinctive sandstone of traditional buildings and fossilised medieval strip fields are sensitive to village expansion.

Vision

The objective is to manage, enhance and restore the landscape. This includes the conservation and enhancement of the distinctive sandstone cliff scenery of the Heritage Coast and enhancement of the coastal strip below St Bees. This should include the restoration of locally distinctive features such as hedge banks and the restoration of maritime heath along the cliff top. A Management Plan should be prepared for the Heritage Coast. Coastal access improvements will encourage visitors and recreation development will be sensitively sited and designed. There is an opportunity to create more woodland on the good soils behind the immediate coast.

Changes in the Landscape

Over the next 10 – 20 years this landscape could be subject to the following changes or issues:

Climate Change

- The coastal edge may be affected by higher levels of erosion due to increased storminess and significant tidal events.

Management practices

- This high quality landscape - rare within Cumbria - is affected by agricultural change including neglect or loss of field boundary hedges and the loss of landscape features.

Development

- There is likely to be continued interest in urban and industrial development in areas around Whitehaven which could erode the undeveloped and rural character of the northern part of this landscape type if not carried out sensitively.
- New buildings are often rendered and opportunities to reinforce the rich red sandstone vernacular are not always taken, despite access to locally quarried stone.
- Large scale wind energy development could take place here due to the exposed coastal location where wind speeds could be high.

Access and Recreation

- Over the next decade, the planned implementation of enhanced access to the whole of the English coast could result in some disturbance to wildlife in sensitive locations at certain times of the year.
- Coastal access will be improved through the roll out of open access along the coast. Space will be needed to allow the route to shift in this dynamic area and in response to any future coastal erosion.

Guidelines

Natural Features

- In areas less affected by sea winds encourage a programme of mixed planting over a phased period; to include establishment of wind breaks, followed by further planting of tree groups, woodlands and feature trees.
- Establish native tree planting along the main water courses at Pow Beck and River Ehen to further emphasise their legibility in the landscape and increase their potential for nature conservation.
- Maintain, enhance and restore important features including maritime cliff grassland, maritime heath, the seabird colony and geological features through appropriate management.

Cultural Features

- Restore and maintain existing hedgerows and hedge banks in a traditional manner.
- Undertake supplementary planting of scanty hedgerows and hedge banks.
- Where climatic conditions allow, increase planting of deciduous trees within hedgerows to strengthen the pattern in the landscape and increase their value as a wildlife habitat.
- Discourage the sole use of fences as field boundaries and encourage planting and traditional management of hedgerows.
- Improve the design and maintenance of public facilities.

Development

- Strengthen definition between town and country by using extensive buffer planting to screen the built up areas and reduce the impact of industry.
- Improve visual containment of caravan parks close to the coast with landscape works and discourage further large scale developments, such as wind energy, in prominent coastal locations.
- Conserve and enhance the traditional farm buildings and features within their own setting.
- Reduce the impact of any new buildings by careful siting and design.
- Support small scale quarrying at the existing site to provide local stone for new developments and repairs to buildings.

Access and Recreation

- Support the roll out of coastal access and encourage sensitively sited coastal access and recreational infrastructure. Coastal access footpaths, areas and facilities should be improved and developed to be compatible with the undeveloped and natural character of this sub type.
- In line with the Marine and Coastal Access Act consideration should be given to routing coastal access footpaths along appropriate sea defence structures.
- In areas where coastal access will introduce new routes appropriate access management may be needed in sensitive locations at certain times of the year to minimise disturbance to wildlife.
- Introduce planting associated with wind-break barriers to improve the appearance and shelter along promenades.
- Undertake sea frontage improvements linked to the existing and potential recreational capacity.