



Location and Context

The *Raised Beach Coast and Cliffs* Landscape Character Type occurs in seven areas in Ayrshire, focused on thin strips of land on the western coastal edge of the mainland, facing towards the Firth of Clyde, and around the north-western and north-eastern coastal edge of the isle of Arran.

Key Characteristics

- Raised beach, visible as a level shelf backed by a steep, sometimes craggy escarpment representing the former cliff line, above which lies more gently rising land.
- Rocky coastline, sometimes with cliffs, with narrow sand and shingle beaches, and mud flats in estuarine locations.
- Varied land uses but mainly farmed; the raised beaches also provide a level terrace for settlement and communication.
- Large parts of the former cliff line are also characterised by dense, often wind sheared broadleaf woodland.
- A number of hillforts, promontory forts, mottes and castles reflecting the strategic importance of this coastal landscape.
- Small, historic settlements sit comfortably against the steep former cliff line and use building materials which reflect the local geology.
- Some modern growth has taken the form of ribbon development and includes caravan parks and holiday development; tall structures such as masts are relatively few.
- Landscape of visual drama and contrast with a strong sense of seclusion, and where less accessible a strong sense of remoteness.
- Views tend to be longer distance and focussed seaward.

Landscape Character Description

Landform

Post-glacial sea-level changes have left a raised beach which comprises an important feature of the Ayrshire coast, both along the mainland and on islands within the Firth of Clyde, particularly Arran. This Landscape Character Type occurs where areas of higher ground reach the coast and where the raised beach is visible as a level shelf backed by a steep, sometimes craggy escarpment, representing the former cliff-line. Thus, although termed 'raised beach', this landscape type comprises the former beach, cliff and areas above. Although raised beaches do occur within the lowland areas, they are less significant as landscape features in their own right.

For the most part, the raised Beach has been carved into comparatively soft red sandstone, creating a level terrace 100 to 300 metres wide a little above high water level, backed by a steep, fairly smooth escarpment. Where harder volcanic rock reaches the coast, however, as at the Heads of Ayr, and south of Girvan, the cliffs remain as rocky crags and the former beach is often much narrower. Above this lies more gently rising land, grading into the moorland higher up.

South of Hunterston, the raised beach widens, forming an area of coastal lowland between the main area of upland to the east and an outlier, Goldenberry Hill (140 metres), to the west. This hill would once have stood as an island and served as a focal point for human activity in the past, evidenced by a number of significant archaeological sites. Complex prehistoric enclosures nearby suggest the land around Goldenberry Hill was of importance from the Neolithic period onwards. At Portencross the raised beach and cliff line are particularly evident. Amongst the most dramatic of former cliffs are the steep hills which rise along the north Ayrshire coast near Largs. This wall of hills forms an escarpment, providing a dramatic setting for Largs and designed landscapes such as Kelburn.

Raised beaches are evident along much of the Arran coastline. They are particularly prominent on the more exposed western coast north of Machrie Moor, and on the eastern coast between Brodick and the Cock of Arran. The raised beaches and old cliff lines are cut into a wide range of different rock types, including new and old red sandstones, schists, and carboniferous rocks. In places, the schists create a complex and folded coastal landscape of crags and cliffs. The steep slopes of the old cliffs either remain as craggy escarpments, or are clothed in rich, but dramatically wind-sheared broadleaf woodland.

Landcover

Raised beach areas vary in land use, but are mainly farmed. While some of the narrowest or more exposed sections are not viable, elsewhere the raised beach provides some of the most productive agricultural land in Ayrshire, supporting, for example, potato cultivation. In the north, the steep escarpment slope is invariably clothed in rich, broadleaf woodland (dominated by beech) with dramatically wind sheared canopies. In the south, the coast is more exposed and the cliff line is either unvegetated or colonised by rough grassland or gorse.

The broader sections of raised beach, for example between Largs and Ardrossan, provide some of the most productive agricultural land in Ayrshire. In some of the narrower sections,

particularly where land has become fragmented or developed, the raised beach is less intensively used, and other activities such as nurseries have developed.

Large parts of the former cliff line are characterised by dense, often wind-sheared broadleaf woodland. While much of this is semi-natural in origin, some is associated with designed landscapes and large estates. In some of the more exposed sections of raised beach (e.g. north of Girvan) these woodlands give way to areas of scrub, often dominated by gorse.

Settlement

The raised beaches probably provided fertile areas for the earliest forms of settlement in the area, as evidenced by occasional archaeological finds. The defensive nature of this coastal landscape and the importance of the raised beaches in providing a corridor for communications are reflected in the presence of a number of hillforts and castles. Examples of the former include Castle Hill immediately east of Largs, the fort and dun on Auld Hill above Portencross, and An Cnap, Arran. Castles include the Old Castle at Knock (17th Century), Dunure Castle (15th Century) and Carlton Castle, Lendalfoot (15th Century). Hunterston House (20th Century), situated within a designed landscape, replaced Hunterston Castle, a 16th Century tower house. Portencross Castle (14th Century) likely supplanted an earlier motte and bailey located on the adjacent Auld Hill, which was itself constructed on the site of an Iron Age hill fort. A number of Castles in the south of the region (Greenan, Dunure and Culzean) are indicative of medieval control of Carrick by the Kennedy family. Turnberry Castle may have been the birthplace of Robert 1 (the Bruce). Several of these historic sites formed the centre of later designed landscapes (e.g. Knock Castle), adding richness to the wooded landscape. Other examples include Skelmorie Castle and Kelburn Castle.

In subsequent centuries, historic settlements such as Largs have expanded beyond their original sites and have spread along the narrow sections of raised beach. While small, historic settlements (such as Portencross) sit comfortably against the steep former cliff line, some the 20th Century growth has taken the form of ribbon development along the coastal road. South of Ayr lie a number of caravan and holiday parks, some comprising a form of farm diversification, while at Lendalfoot a string of holiday cabins has developed at the foot of the former cliff line. The southern sections of raised beach are relatively remote and development pressures appear to be less. Most settlements here are small and functional. One exception is Carleton near Lendalfoot where a string of wooden houses creates an informal settlement on the site of a former fishery. On Arran, the raised beach areas are characterised by narrow, linear villages such as Corrie and Pirnmill, and larger bay settlements such as Lochranza.

Historically, building materials reflected the local geology. At Largs, for example, red sandstone is a common stone, reflected both in tenement buildings and in grander structures such as churches. On the volcanic coast south of Ayr, buildings are built of grey stone or are rendered and limewashed. On Arran, building materials closely reflect variations in local geology, and again many are limewashed. Modern development uses a wide range of materials and styles, few of which have local origins.

Despite the elevated nature of the raised cliff-line, tall structures such as masts are relatively

few. The principal exception is at Hunterston where structures associated with the coal terminal, and the pylons serving the power station, can be prominent features. Extensive screen bunding means that the local influence of the coal terminal is very limited.

The A77 between Girvan and Ballantrae runs along the narrow raised beach at the foot of the hard volcanic cliffs. Over a period of years the once winding coastal road has been straightened and upgraded. This has involved the creation of new rock cuttings and the loss of small headlands and other important local features. Old sections of road remain as laybys and picnic areas. The Ayrshire Coastal Path extends along much of this coast.

Perception

This is a narrow landscape where the cliffs and headlands can appear higher than they are. This emphasised vertical scale creates a sense of visual drama. Well settled sections of the coast contrast with secluded and dramatic sections of headlands and cliffs. The rocky, rugged coastline and semi-natural vegetation reinforce the sense of naturalness. This is a highly visible landscape around the coastal edge, with the coastal headlands (eg. the Heads of Ayr) forming highly visible prominent landmark features in views along the coast and from the sea. The abrupt upper edge of the raised beach creates a very prominent skyline when viewed from much of the coastal road. Views tend to be long distance and focused out to sea and the landmark islands of Arran and Ailsa Craig often form the focus of the view. From Arran, views back towards the mainland, islands and peninsulas around the Firth of Clyde form the focus of views.



This is one of 389 Landscape Character Types identified at a scale of 1:50 000 as part of a national programme of Landscape Character Assessment republished in 2019.

The area covered by this Landscape Character Type was originally included in the Ayrshire (Land Use Consultants), published 1998.