

NCA 6 Solway Basin

Overview

The NCA is a broad, lowland landscape of low rounded hills in the east, grading to a coastal plain bordering the relatively remote coastline of the Solway Firth and Moricambe Bay. It is included under the Western Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type. The coastal plain is known for its outward views to the encircling uplands of the Lake District, North Pennines and southern Scotland. The area is dominated by pastoral agriculture in regular fields bounded by hedges, with more arable farming in the north east. The coastal zone is characterised by salt marshes, beaches, sand dunes and intertidal flats and much of it is within the Solway Coast AONB. Almost the entire NCA coastline and many of the lowland wetlands are nationally and internationally important for their habitats and the species they support, as well as for their geomorphology and record of past environmental conditions. The NCA also includes part of the transnational Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site (Hadrian's Wall), which also includes the German Limes and the Antonine Wall. Settlement is dominated by villages and hamlets across the Solway Plain, with a mix of small villages, hamlets and farmsteads in the low hills. The major centre of population, however, is the city of Carlisle. The NCA is an important communications corridor, with Carlisle as a hub, with key road and rail connections to the west coast of Cumbria. Current woodland cover in the NCA is very low, at less than 5% of the total area, of which 3% is broadleaved woodland. Less than 1% of the NCA is ancient woodland, comprising around 23% of the total woodland cover. Existing woodland is found mainly around the southern fringes of the Solway Plain, and in the low hills north east of Carlisle.

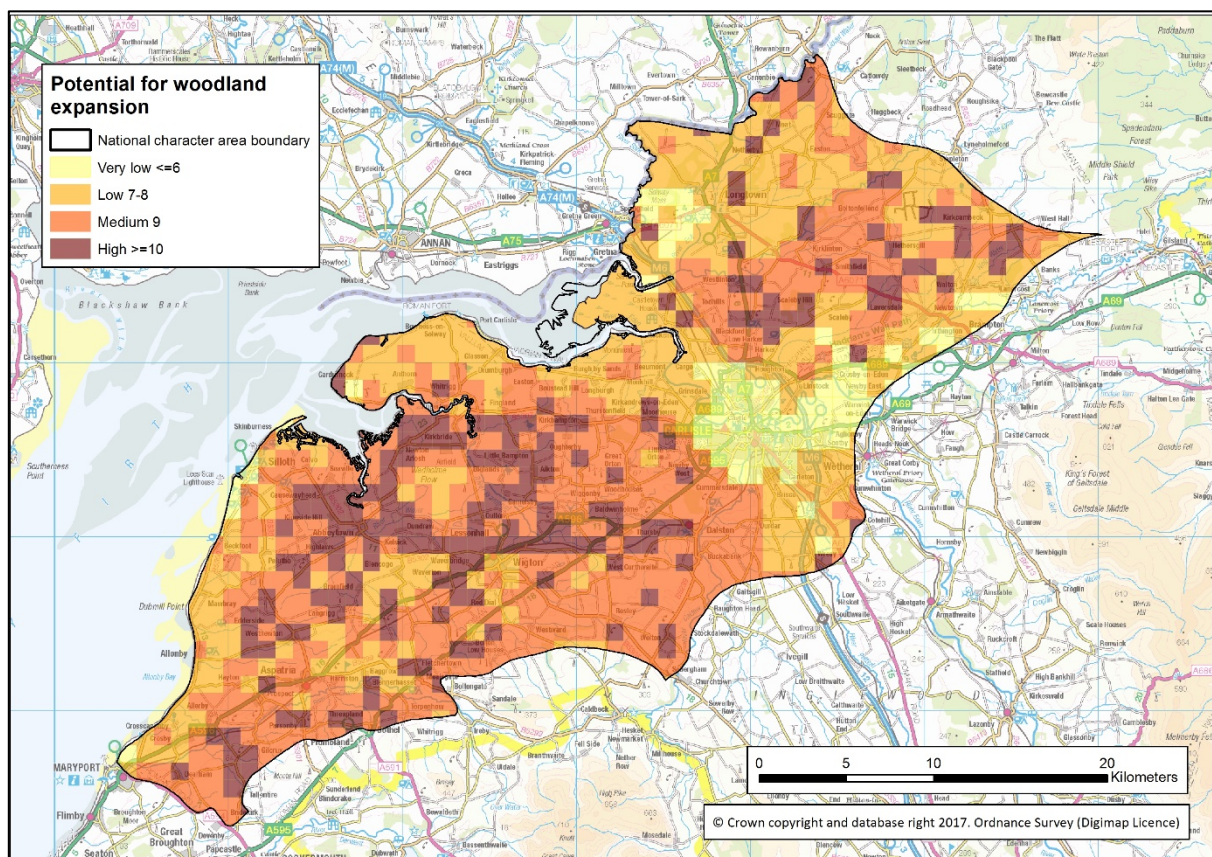
Historical background

Evidence for prehistoric settlement is mainly in the form of cropmarks recorded from aerial photographs, and found across the Solway Plain. The archaeology and history of the NCA, however, is influenced by its position as border country from the Roman period onwards. The dominant archaeological feature is the Hadrian's Wall frontier, with its associated infrastructure including forts, milefortlets and towers. The wall itself mostly survives as a below-ground feature within the NCA, its western end terminating at Bowness-on-Solway. Beyond Bowness there was a series of milefortlets, separated by watch towers every third of a mile along the coast, which extend beyond the southern boundary of the NCA. In the later medieval period, the area became part of the Anglo-Scottish border and its historic character was shaped by the need for strong lordship. Much of the area was ruled through strong baronial control, including the Barony of Gilsland, Nichol Forest and Inglewood Forest. The powerful Cistercian monastery of Holme Cultram also had a considerable influence on shaping the later medieval landscape. The border conflicts have left a legacy of fortified houses and small castles across the NCA. Following the settlement of the borders in the early 17th century, the area north and east of Carlisle underwent a series of improvements and reorganisation of the landscape that included the rationalisation of some field systems and resettlement. Agricultural improvements continued through the 19th century and led to the growth of the dairying industry. In the 20th century, the landscape has been altered by the presence of military sites, with the development of the huge munitions factory and armaments depot at Longtown in the First World War, and a series of airfields

mainly across the Solway Plain. These sites, along with recent wind farm developments, survive as industrial sites in an otherwise rural landscape.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes suggests that there is a high opportunity for woodland expansion in the NCA. The NCA profile identifies that there has been some increase in woodland cover in recent years, conversely, some woodland has also been removed from wetlands as part of the process of moss land restoration programmes. The recommendations in the NCA profile relate mainly to the restoration and better management of existing woodland with continuing removal of woodland from lowland raised bogs. Apart from connecting riparian woodlands, it does not suggest areas for planting new woodlands. The mapping, however, shows a large area of potential across the Solway Plain, though away from the environmentally sensitive coastal marshes and dune, with a second band extending north-eastward from Carlisle. Woodland plantation in these areas would not only expand existing woodland and allow riparian planting, but could also create new woodland areas. It is evident from historical documents that the area had much wider tree cover in the medieval period, particularly wet woodland in areas of former moss lands. New woodland planting, therefore, could restore former wet woodlands, particularly along the shallow valleys of water courses, where the landscape impact of trees on the open landscape character would be minimised. Any new planting, however, should take account of the potential effect on Hadrian's Wall and its setting, as well as on buried archaeological remains particularly along the Solway Plain, where there are many cropmark sites.



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