

## NCA 16 Durham Coalfield Pennine Fringe

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### *Overview*

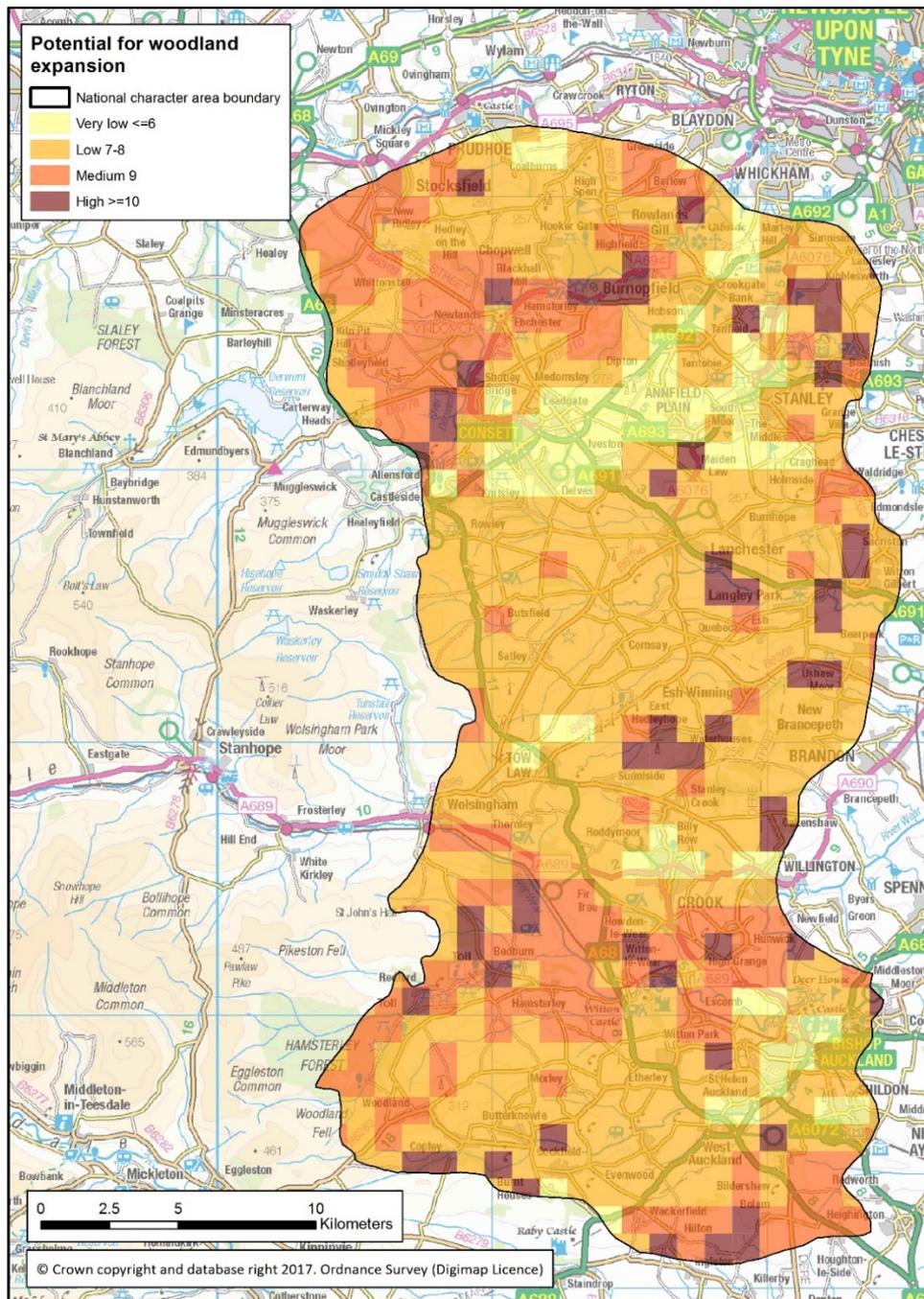
The NCA covers a landscape of gently rounded hills and lies between the Pennine uplands to the west, and the coastal lowlands to the east. The NCA is included within the Upland and Upland Fringe Agricultural Landscape Type. Agricultural land varies from west to east, with the more upland areas dominated by stock farming with large, regular enclosure-period fields, and more mixed farming in the lower-lying east of the NCA. Its character has been largely shaped by industry, particularly coal mining and steel production, with settlement focused around the valleys of the Rivers Wear and Derwent, and their tributaries. Even though many industries have now gone, surviving historic industrial features are still key influences on the character of the landscape, particularly transport infrastructure such as railway lines, bridges and viaducts. The north of the area has urban and industrial towns such as Stanley and Consett, and there is a concentration of settlement along the confined valley of the Derwent. Further south, the main settlement is Bishop Auckland and the settlement character is one dominated by villages and mining settlements. The A68, which runs north-south through the centre of the NCA, is a major arterial route, connecting with other main roads linking to the main urban centres of the north east. Woodland cover is quite high, at 14.3% of the NCA, of which more than a quarter is ancient woodland. Broadleaved woodland is found mostly on steep valley sides, with shelterbelts and conifer plantations on valley sides and higher ground. Veteran trees are also a feature, particularly in historic parklands such as Auckland Castle Park.

### *The Historic Environment Character*

There is evidence for human settlement from the Neolithic period, including burial mounds and flint scatters. From the Bronze Age and Iron Age, archaeological evidence indicates that there was a pattern of dispersed farmsteads and field systems. Dere Street Roman road runs through the NCA, along which Roman forts were constructed at strategic river crossing points, at Binchester, Lanchester and Ebchester. In the medieval period, the area was part of the Palatinate of Durham, under the rule of the Prince Bishops of Durham, who had a palace and deer park at Bishop Auckland. The medieval landscape was one of small villages with common arable fields and significant areas of common grazing and rough ground. There was large-scale agricultural improvement and reorganisation in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, comprising large-scale enclosure of the common fields and enclosure of the commons into large regular fields. Some older, more irregular fields survive in the valleys to the east of the NCA. There has been coal mining in the area from at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century, which developed into a large industry in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when coal was exported to the south of England and Europe. Networks of horse-drawn wooden wagonways transported coal from the mines to the ports, and which were replaced by railways in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ironstone was mined for the local steel-making industry. Settlements grew and new villages and towns, such as Stanley and Consett, were created because of growing industry. Wealthy industrialists invested money in the building of country houses and parkland, such as Gibside. Following industrial decline in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, much of the infrastructure was cleared and land reclaimed and converted to woodland, farmland or nature reserves.

## Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes shows only a low potential for woodland expansion, but where there are clusters of higher potential it indicates opportunities for the expansion and buffering of woods, rather than planting significant new areas. The NCA has quite good tree cover, and opportunities mainly relate to the expansion of existing areas of woodland, linking and buffering native woodlands, particularly on the valley slopes. Care should be taken to avoid planting on and around archaeological sites, particularly some of the extensive industrial remains which characterise the area. The mapping identifies two areas where new planting could take place, in the Derwent and Wear valleys.



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