

NCA 46 The Fens

Overview

The large area covered by the Fens NCA is an expansive, flat, open, clay and peat landscape that drains towards the Wash, England's largest tidal estuary. It is included within the Eastern Arable Agricultural Landscape Type, and it has a low-lying, level terrain, with much of the land below sea level. The north-eastern tip lies within the Norfolk Coast AONB. There is a strong rectilinear drainage pattern that has long been used to make the land viable for agricultural production, and the fields are very large and rectilinear, and bounded by ditches and straight roads. Boundaries near the coast take the form of grassed earthen banks, built as sea defences. The silty, peaty soils are a major and essential resource of national importance for agriculture, producing wheat, vegetables and sugar beet. It produces a quarter of England's potatoes, and a third of its vegetables. The Fens are fed by four major rivers: the Witham, Welland, Nene and Great Ouse, which have been canalised as part of the water management and drainage system. Original fen is now very rare, but does include Wicken Fen. The more anciently drained fens, the 'settled fens', which run in a broad arc inland from the Wash between King's Lynn and Boston, have an ancient, small-scale landscape of sinuous lanes with a higher density of settlements, and remnant grasslands. Here, there are clusters of nucleated settlements around the main towns such as Ely, Boston, Spalding, Wisbech and Holbeach. Settlement has also spread along the main routes as ribbon development. The peaty fens, however, are very sparsely settled, with isolated farmsteads. Main roads cross the Fens, linking the main urban settlements within and around the NCA, though between is a complex network of minor roads and lanes which fits into the fens drainage system. Ely is a railway hub, with lines to Peterborough, Norwich, Cambridge and beyond. Woodland cover is negligible, at only 1% of the NCA. Of this area, just under 4% is ancient woodland. Apart from a few trees along roadside or around settlements, and small ex-decoy woodlands, this is a largely treeless landscape.

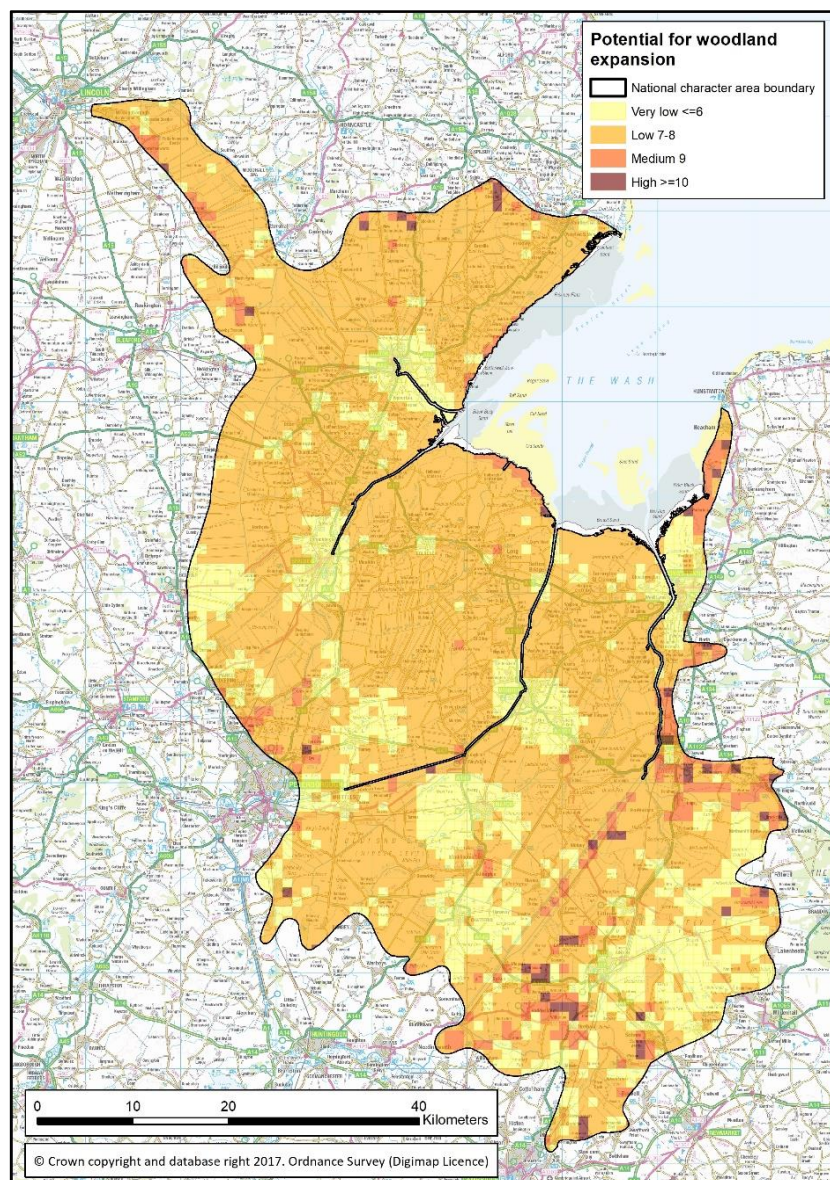
The Historic Environment Character

The slightly raised islands within the Fens and land around the Fens margins attracted settlement from prehistory, though other sites have been buried beneath deposits of marine clays, peat and silts. Some of the many prehistoric sites include numerous burial mounds. Within the NCA are Flag Fen and Must Farm, sites of national and international importance. The area also has Stonea Camp, the lowest-lying hill fort in Britain. The Fen edges and islands, and surviving stretches of canals and dykes, demonstrate the efforts made to control and traverse the fens from prehistory. The Fen Causeway, or Fen Road, for example, ran between Denver, Norfolk, and Peterborough through Flag Fen, and joined Ermine Street. From the mid-7th century, the fen islands became centres of monastic communities, which continued the work of building defences and drainage of the Fens. Monasteries continued to dominate land ownership and management of the wetlands in the later medieval period, canalising and realigning some of the major waterways. Settlements were concentrated around the low, clay hills, most notably on the Isle of Ely, where some remnant ridge-and-furrow pasture can be seen. On the settled inland fens, there were clusters of nucleated settlement around Boston, Ely, Spalding, Holbeach, Wisbech and King's Lynn, the major historic centres. The Fens were an important recourse for fisheries, wild fowling, peat extraction, grazing and salt production. Salt-making had

been an important industry in the Fens from late prehistory, and continued through the Roman, early medieval and late medieval periods. The process of drainage continued into the post medieval period, becoming larger and more industrial in scale, particularly from the mid-17th century, when Cornelius Vermuyden introduced Dutch engineering methods. The drained land had to be kept dry and in the 18th century, a system of wind-powered pumps was introduced, later replaced by steam-powered technology.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes shows only a low, or very low, level of opportunity for new woodland, reflected in the absence of any opportunities identified by the NCA profile. The very high value of the agricultural land in this area acts against any significant new woodland planting. It is also very sensitive archaeologically. The mapping does indicate very small clusters of higher opportunity around the edges of the NCA, where new planting could probably take the form of shelterbelts around development. Very small-scale planting, as shelterbelts or avenues along roads, would also be appropriate.



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