

NCA 56 Lancashire Coal Measures

Overview

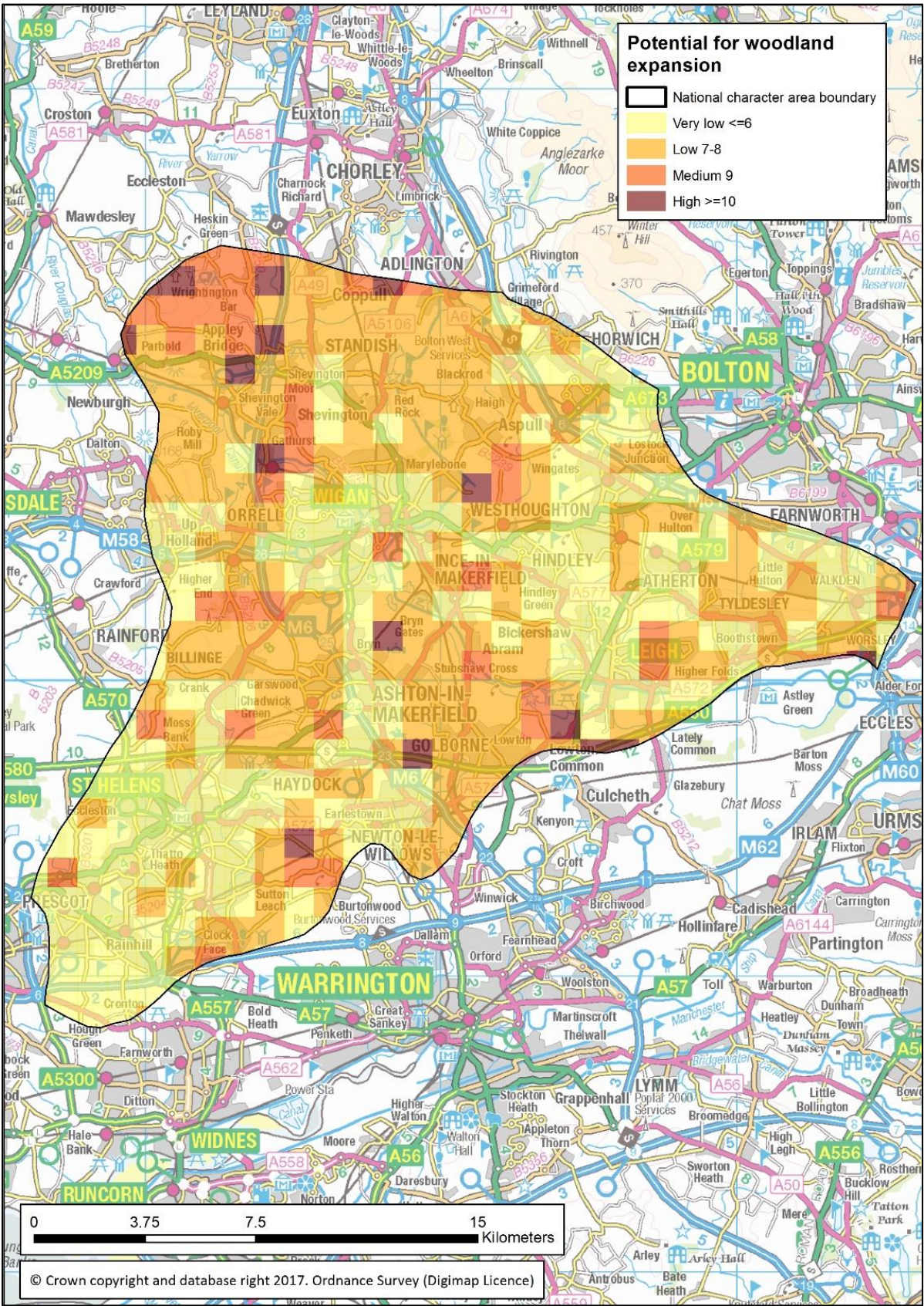
The NCA lies to the west of the Manchester conurbation and encompasses the coal measures around the towns of St Helens and Wigan. The gently undulating landscape is included within the Western Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, and it falls away from the highpoint of Billinge Hill in the east to the Amounderness Plain to the west. The landscape has been vastly altered by past industrial activities, particularly mining subsidence and there is a pattern of low-lying waterbodies, subsidence flashes and peatlands. Agriculture is split between cereal production and permanent grassland for either dairy farming or cattle and sheep rearing, with small areas of oilseed, stock feed and vegetable crops. Fields are medium to large and regular in form. The area is heavily settled with a mixture of housing and industry. The development of villages and towns has been greatly influenced by industry, especially coal mining, though St Helens had an important glass industry. The NCA is a major transport hub, with numerous main roads linking towns within the area and strategically important routes between Liverpool and Manchester. The arterial routes include the M6, M62 and M58 motorways. Mainline railways also pass through the area, including the West Coast main line with links into Manchester and Liverpool. Woodland accounts for 9% of the NCA, though only 5% of this is ancient woodland. Even though the area falls within the limits of the Red Rose and Mersey Community Forests, woodland distribution is limited. There are larger areas of woodland around Wigan, where the landscape is more undulating.

The Historic Environment Character

The wetlands were an important resource in the medieval period, exploited for both peat cutting and grazing, though small-scale drainage and enclosure was taking place from this period, to bring more areas into cultivation. Drainage and enclosure was carried out on a much larger scale from the late 17th century. Some ancient enclosure survives, mainly to the north of Wigan, but most field patterns date from the 18th century or later, with numerous subsequent alterations. The medieval settlement pattern has been largely obscured by later industrial development, although there is some legibility in surviving village cores and the distribution of churches and moated sites. The density of settlement increased, and towns and villages grew as a result of the expanding coal industry between the 17th and 19th centuries. Coal was first exploited on a large scale to power the Lancashire cotton industry, and then the development of glass and copper production, and diverse manufacturing. Outside the industrial towns, agricultural improvement and enclosures led to a dispersed pattern of model farmsteads.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

Mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates a very low level of opportunity for woodland expansion, mainly as a result of the intense urban development across the area. The NCA profile identifies possible areas for new woodland in wetlands, and expanding the network of ancient woodlands, though this would necessarily be on a small scale. The mapping also indicates potential for new planting on the urban fringes.



NCA 056 Lancashire Coal Measures