

# NCA 61 Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain

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## *Overview*

This large NCA extends across the counties of Cheshire, Shropshire and Staffordshire comprising a gently undulating landscape that includes the watersheds for several major rivers. Rising above the plain are small sandstone ridges which provide prominent landmarks. It is included within the Western Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, and agriculture is dominated by improved pasture for dairy or silage and hay making, in fields of varying size and form, but mainly bounded by hedges. On the slopes of the sandstone ridges, however, fodder crops and potatoes are grown, in a mixed farming landscape with dairying. The area also has significant areas of lowland raised bog, such as Whixall Moss. The settlement pattern is mixed, with market towns spread across the NCA, interspersed with villages and hamlets, as well as scattered farmsteads. Some of the hamlets are widely spread, reflecting their origins as squatter settlements established through encroachments onto common land. As well as the market towns, the NCA includes the major regional centres of Chester, Stafford and Shrewsbury. The communications network reflects the presence of several regional urban centres, with many main roads, including the M6 and M56, and railway lines with a rail hub at Crewe. Woodland cover is low and accounts for 6% of the NCA, of which just under 20% is ancient woodland. Generally, woodland is virtually absent from the plain, though the hedgerows are dense, with large, mature, hedgerow trees, particularly in Cheshire, giving the appearance of a well-wooded landscape. Where there is woodland, it is confined to the north around Northwich and to clusters of ancient woodland associated with estates, cloughs and windswept ridges. There is more ancient woodland on the ridges and the clough woodlands comprise oak on the valley tops with ash, sycamore, wild cherry and elm on the lower slopes. In a few woods, the uncommon small-leaved lime and wild service tree occur. Derelict coppice hazel woodland is also found and wet woodland is found associated with the meres and mosses.

## *The Historic Environment Character*

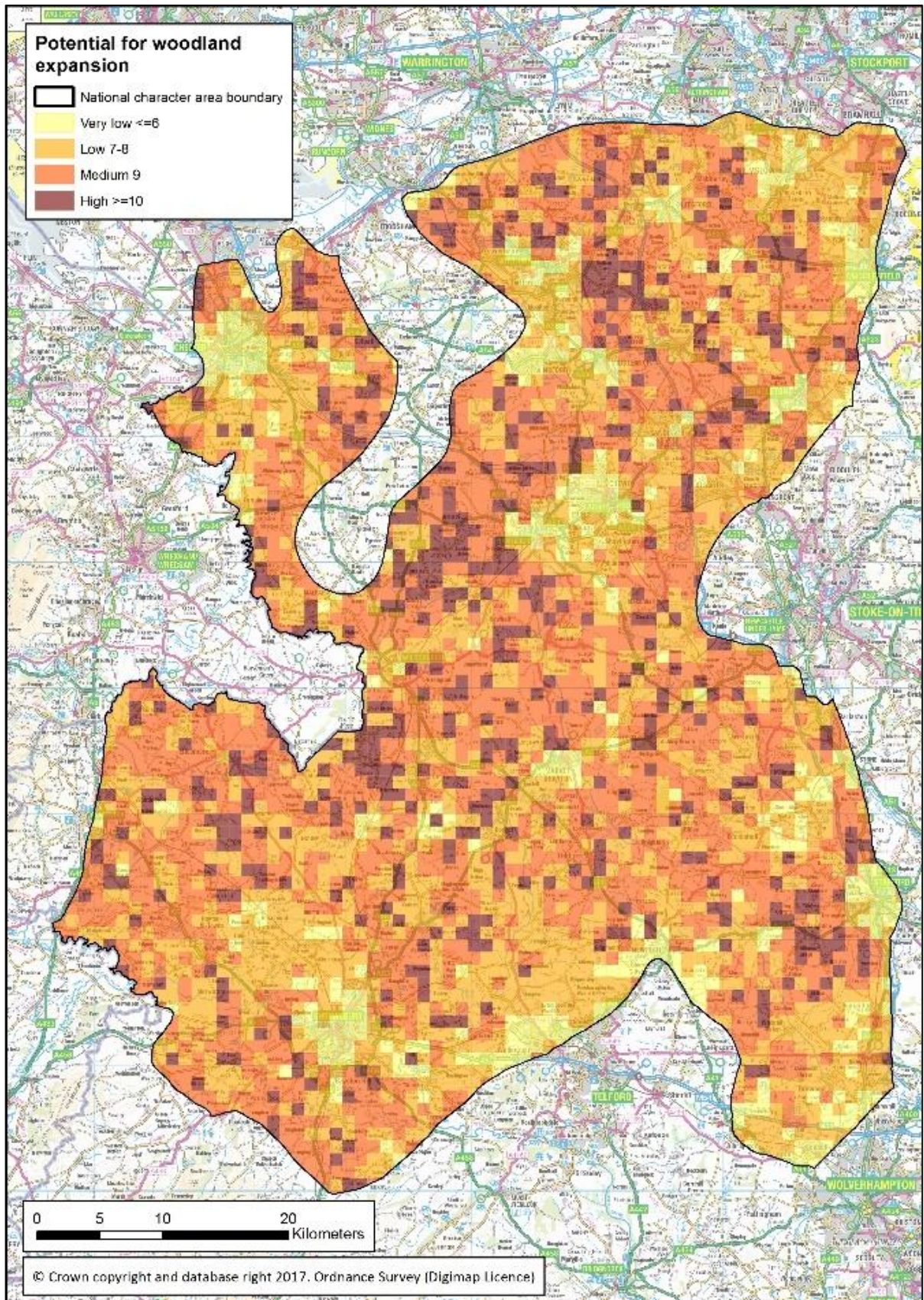
Evidence of the prehistoric activity has been recovered from the area's wetlands, including several dug-out canoes and items of jewellery, as well as preserved human bodies. Iron Age hill forts were constructed on the ridges, and connected by a trackway following the higher land, sections of which form part of the modern Sandstone Trail. There is plentiful evidence for Roman activity, including the legionary fortress and colonia at Chester, and the fortress and town of *Viroconium Cornoviorum* (Wroxeter). Several major Roman roads crossed the plain, for example Watling Street which linked London to mid-Wales via Wroxeter. A line of forts was constructed along Watling Street, which encouraged the development of adjacent roadside settlements such as *Pennocrucium* (Water Eaton, Staffordshire). Salt production was an important industry in Cheshire from the Iron Age, and was particularly important in the Roman period. In the medieval period, centres of salt production were established in the three 'wich' towns of Middlewich, Nantwich and Northwich, where brine was drawn from natural springs. The area of the NCA was reasonably wealthy in the later medieval period; it was well settled with many market towns and villages. There were also many moated farmsteads, a sign of their owner's status and wealth. From the end of the medieval period, the wool and cloth trades brought increasing prosperity to the area, reflected in the fine half-timbered or stone-built halls that distinguish the area. Prosperity continued into

the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of large country houses and estates with designed parkland. In addition to agriculture, industry contributed to the wealth of the area, with silk manufacturing around Macclesfield and salt production in Cheshire. Salt extraction became a major industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with mine shafts and open brine pits over a large area. One of the main sites was the Lion Salt Works near Northwich. With the coming of the railways, Crewe developed as a railway hub, with a related major engineering industry.

#### *Opportunities for Woodland Expansion*

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates that there is a medium level of opportunity to enhance and expand woodland coverage. The mapping shows a general spread of small clusters of high potential for new woodland, which supports the opportunities highlighted by the NCA profile. The NCA profile emphasises the need to manage existing woodland, but also the need to create new, small-scale woodland, including coverts and reversing fragmentation of woodland habitat. This could include wet woodland, clough woodland and woodland on the ridges. The mapping shows potential around existing patches of woodland that might be extended, but also areas within the more intensively farmed parts of the plain. Here, new woodland could expand the number of existing small coverts, helping to create links between fragmented habitats, without affect the historic landscape pattern. Trees could also be planted around modern infrastructure and developments, though care should be taken around historic towns to maintain their historic setting.





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