

# NCA 64 Potteries and Churnet Valley

---

## *Overview*

The NCA is a diverse and contrasting landscape of ridges, hills and intervening well-wooded valleys, rising to a Limestone plateau at the edge of the Peak District. The landscape character, therefore varies from a lowland landscape of heathland and grassland to remote upland moorland and grasslands. It is included within the Upland and Upland Fringe Agricultural Landscape Type. The western half of the area is highly urbanised with the conurbation of Newcastle-under-Lyme and the Stoke-on-Trent Potteries. The extensive areas of urban development create a communications hub of major road and rail routes, with the M6 motorway running along the western edge of the NCA, and other trunk roads, such as the A50, linking to the wider Midlands. East of Stoke is the Churnet Valley, where there is a dispersed settlement pattern of hamlets, individual cottages, farms and clusters of houses along a dense network of sunken lanes. Fields here are small and irregular with some wood pasture. The relatively high plateaux and ridges of the Staffordshire Moorlands at Biddulph Moor and Mow Cop are underlain by Millstone Grit, creating a deeply dissected moorland plateau with poor soils that support permanent pasture. Here, the fields are large and rectilinear. On the highest ground, acidic pasture gives way to open moorland. The major agricultural land uses are sheep and beef farming with some dairying and limited arable farming in the south, mostly of cereals. The NCA is quite well wooded, with a total coverage of 10%, of which around a third is ancient woodland. Woodland is a significant feature of the Churnet Valley on the steep valley slopes of the river and its tributaries, including the largest remaining concentration of ancient semi-natural woodland in Staffordshire. Elsewhere, woodland is less prominent, but there are some ancient woodlands on sites with impoverished soils. There are also important blocks of woodland to the west of Stoke, on the boundary with Cheshire. In wet areas, alder woodland can be found.

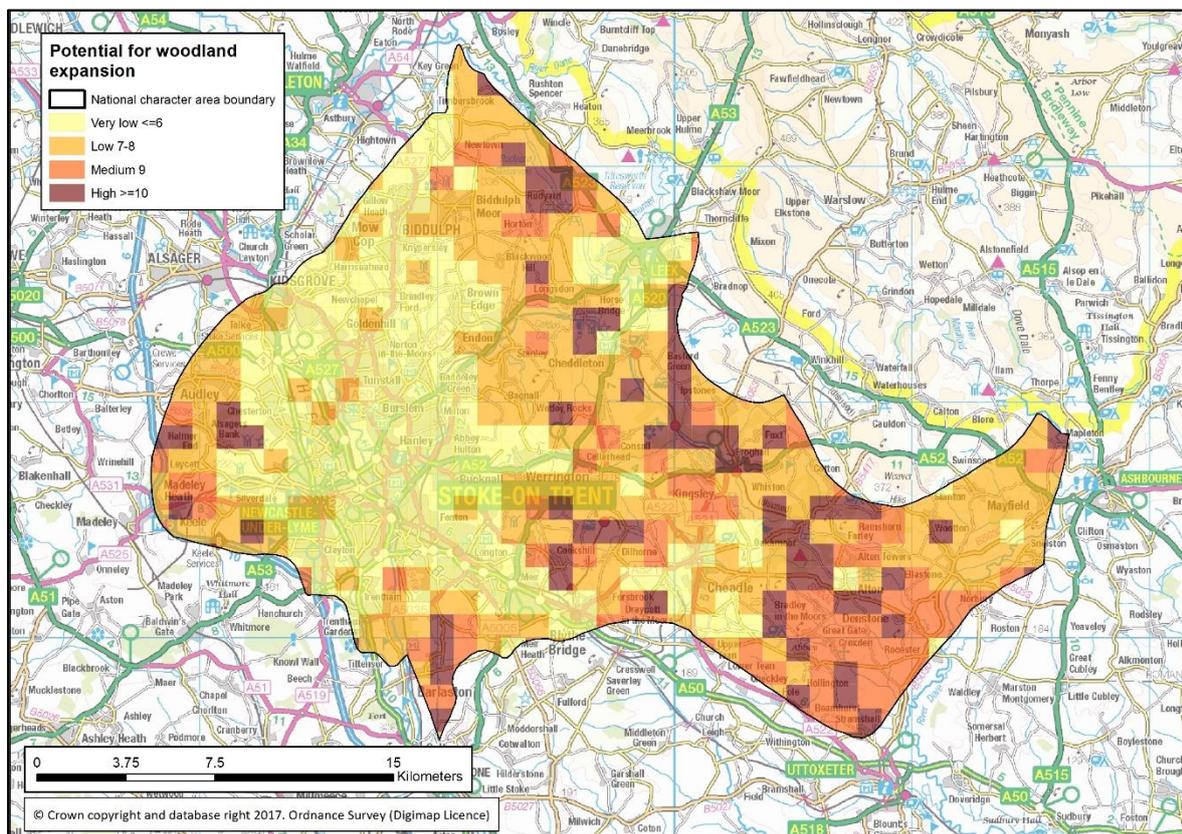
## *The Historic Environment Character*

Prehistoric activity is most visible on the higher land in the south west of the NCA, where there is a prominent hill-top site at Wootton Hill and a concentration of barrows around Mayfield and to the north-east of Ellastone, and there is an Iron Age hill fort on Bunbury Hill within the parkland of Alton Towers. A Roman road, from Little Chester to Chesterton, passes through the NCA and there is evidence of a Roman settlement and fort at Rocester guarding the crossing point of the River Churnet. In the later medieval period, there were a few large settlements, such as Leek and Newcastle-under-Lyme, and the area was dominated by a pastoral economy, with arable land around settlements. Iron was produced in the Churnet Valley, the furnaces fuelled by charcoal made from the extensive woodlands. The Cistercian monasteries at Croxden, Hulton and Dieulacres had a significant impact on the medieval landscape, with a sheep-based pastoral economy together with coppicing, probably for charcoal production for ironworking. By the end of the Middle Ages, the medieval towns of Leek, Cheadle and Alton were well established along with the six towns comprising Stoke-on-Trent: Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke, Fenton and Longton, which began as small pastoral settlements. Stoke-on-Trent developed pottery and coal mining industries in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, resulting in the rapid expansion of urban areas. The area had gained an international reputation by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the towns

became known as ‘the Potteries’. The construction of the Caldon Canal and Trent and Mersey Canal facilitated trade, and the Potteries expanded rapidly, with the addition of brickworks and tileries. Ironworking and coal mining expanded greatly and the land between Biddulph and Blythe became a mosaic of redbrick towns. Rich industrialists established country estates, many of which have become tourist attractions, such as Alton Towers and Biddulph Grange. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, silk and textile industries were concentrated in the towns of Leek and Cheadle.

### *Opportunities for Woodland Expansion*

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes suggests only a low level of opportunity for woodland expansion in the NCA, mainly as a result of the extensive urban areas. The area is one of great contrasts in opportunities, with low levels in the urban areas, but clusters of high potential in the Churnet Valley, where more planting would enhance the extensive woodland along the sides of the valleys. These opportunities are also highlighted in the NCA profile. The importance of the area’s industrial heritage and historic character, however, does need to be considered when designing new planting.



NCA 064 Potteries and Churnet Valley