

NCA 65 Shropshire Hills

Overview

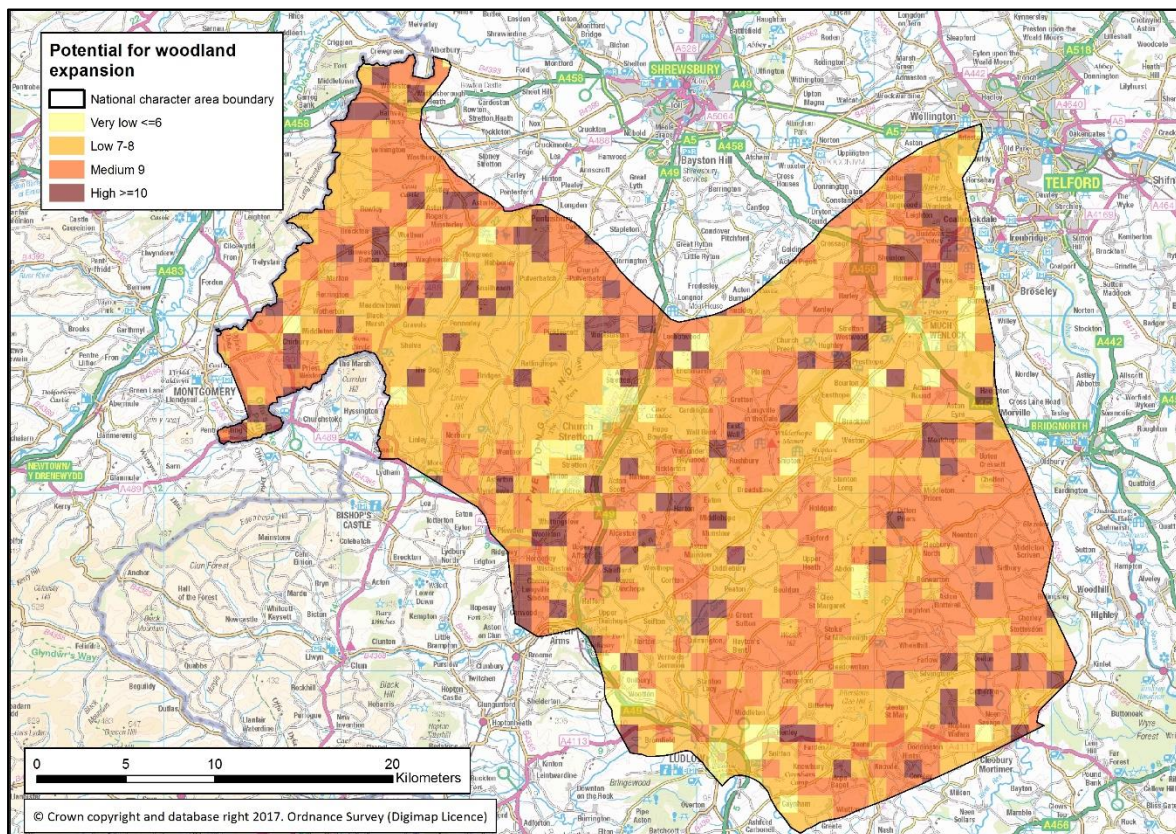
The NCA is dominated by a series of ridges, scarps and intervening valleys running south-west to north-east, with many smaller steep and rounded hills scattered throughout. The uplands include the distinctive ridges of Long Mynd and Wenlock Edge and the Clee Hills to the south-east. The uplands lie within the Shropshire Hills AONB, which covers almost half of the NCA. The area is included within the Upland and Upland Fringe Agricultural Landscape Type, and arable agriculture is generally limited to the valleys and lower slopes where there is mixed farming, whilst the hill sides are patchworks of small pasture fields, often with woodland on steeper slopes. The Clee Hills plateau has fertile and well-drained agricultural land that supports an important sheep and beef cattle industry. The upland moorland has extensive areas of unimproved semi-natural grassland and small areas of calcareous grassland. The settlement pattern is largely dispersed, dominated by hamlets and farmsteads, including several squatter settlements around the edges of commons. The main settlements are clustered in the valley of the River Onny, including Church Stretton and Craven Arms, and Ludlow on the southern boundary of the area, apart from Wenlock Edge, in the north east of the NCA. The topography limits routes through the NCA, and the A49 is the main north south route through the Onny Valley. The area is quite well-wooded, with a woodland coverage of 10%. Around 30% of the woodland is ancient woodland, and it is a significant feature, with upland oak woods on the steep hillsides of the Shropshire Hills. Coniferous and mixed woods comprise almost half the woodland area, and there is mixed deciduous woodland along Wenlock Edge and on the Wrekin. There are small areas of wet woodland, in flushed areas and at stream side locations along valley bottoms.

The Historic Environment Character

Late Bronze Age and Iron Age agriculture was probably characterised by hill-top grazing and cultivation in the valleys, and there are numerous settlement sites, hill forts, barrows and field systems dating from the prehistoric period. In the Roman period, there seems to have been mining for metals like lead in areas such as the Stiperstones. In the later medieval period, a dispersed settlement pattern developed with farmsteads and hamlets interspersed with villages, and surrounded by common fields, enclosed fields and more distant fields in intermittent cultivation (the infield–outfield system). The proximity of the area to the border with Wales meant that administrative and market towns were planted in the west of the area and often protected by an earthwork castle, which was sometimes replaced in later years by a more substantial stone castle – such as at Ludlow. A period of contraction, land purchase and enclosure followed the Black Death and epidemics of the 14th century, and many of the uplands reverted to rough pasture and moorland grazing. During the 16th and 17th centuries cultivation spread to the open uplands once again. Squatter settlements sprang up, especially on the commons of the southern Clee Hills and on the western flanks of the Stiperstones, created by migrants to the area attracted by the prospect of employment in the coal mines and quarries. The period from the 18th century to the present day has been one of fluctuating arable expansion, with conversion of the rough moorland to improved pasture. In response to the arrival of the railways, Craven Arms and Church Stretton developed significantly as inland ‘resorts’ during the 19th century.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates that the potential for woodland expansion is low, and where there are areas of higher opportunity, these tend to cluster around existing woodland on the hillsides. The NCA profile also highlights the opportunity to create significant new woodland along the steep ridge sides. Although the areas where new woodland can be created are limited, the potential sites may be able to absorb significant expansion.



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