

NCA 66 Mid Severn Sandstone Plateau

Overview

The Sandstone plateau of the NCA is a watershed between the east-flowing catchment of the River Trent and the south-west flowing catchment of the River Severn. It is within the Western Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type and it is predominantly rural, bordering the Birmingham and Wolverhampton conurbation to the east, and the smaller conurbation of Telford to the north. The plateau has an undulating landscape with large, open arable fields punctuated by areas of lowland heathland, acid grassland and small wooded streamside valleys. Further west, the landscape is characterised by irregular topography and steep-sided gorges in the Severn Valley. Here, there is mixed agriculture with irregular, smaller fields and a strong hedgerow structure with frequent hedgerow oaks. The eastern side of the NCA is heavily urbanised, including Stourbridge and Wolverhampton. Kidderminster is a major town in the south, and in the north is the former industrial region and modern settlement of Telford. On the southern edge of Telford is Ironbridge, considered to be the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, and now a World Heritage Site. Away from the conurbations, the settlement pattern is defined by towns and villages, and the area's industrial past has played a strong role in the character of settlement. Several major roads cross the NCA, with hubs at Telford, Bridgnorth and Kidderminster, including the M54 which links the M6 to Shrewsbury, via Telford. The area is well-wooded, with a coverage of 14%, of which nearly a third is ancient woodland. Ancient woodland is found on steep valley sides, and mixed with coniferous plantations in the Wyre Forest. There is woodland along the Severn Vale, and elsewhere there are large conifer plantations.

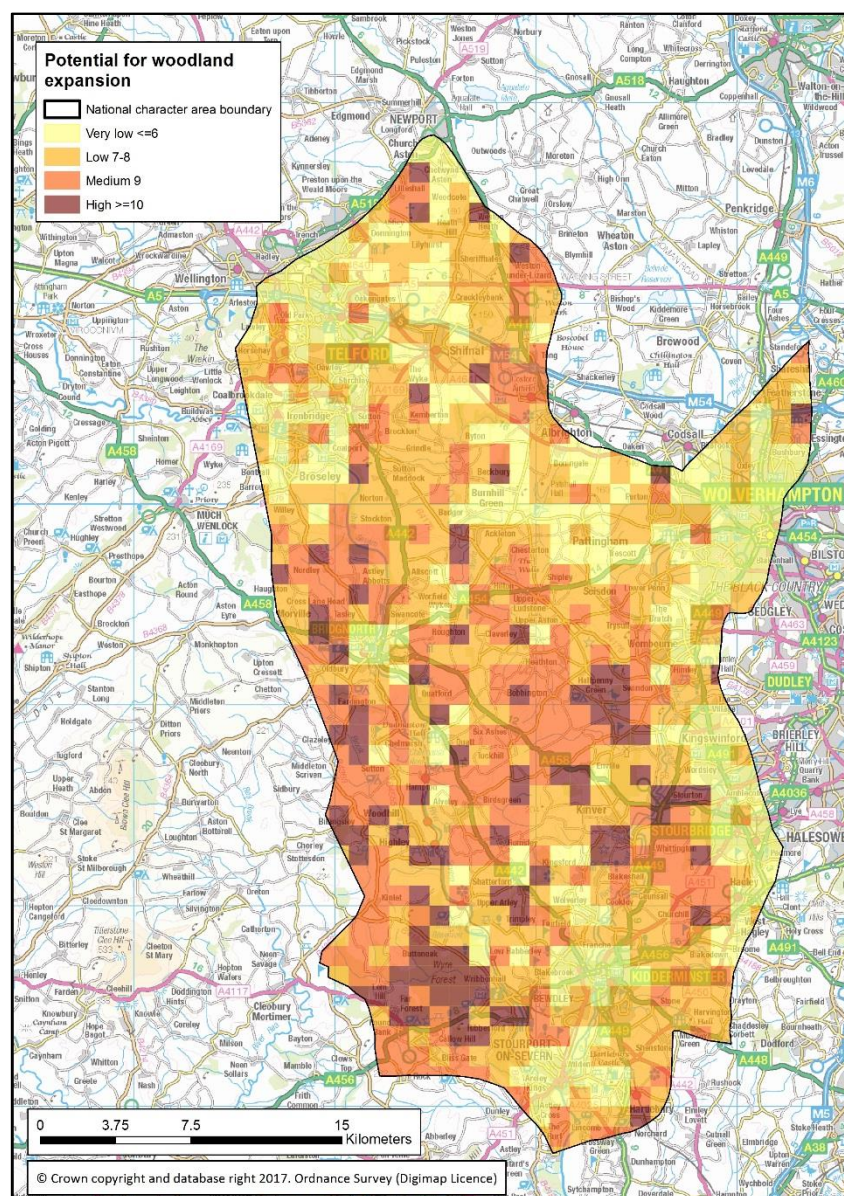
The Historic Environment Character

There is archaeological evidence for settlement in the Severn Valley from Neolithic times. Iron Age settlement was extensive on the fertile soils and there were hill forts on higher ground, for example at Kinver. There are troglodytic dwellings in the sandstone cliffs along the River Stour at Kidderminster, Wolverley and Kinver, some of which were still lived in until the mid-20th century. The Roman road, Watling Street, passes through the NCA, linking London with Wroxeter and there were other more local routes linking marching camps and forts. Bridgnorth was a fortified settlement as early as the 9th century and Kidderminster had large estates on the surrounding lands in the early medieval period. In the later medieval period, much of the area was covered by the Royal Forests of Kinver and Wyre and outside these areas there were numerous settlements on pockets of fertile land. Prosperity lay in the settlements along the river valleys, with the River Severn being navigable by quite large craft. From the 15th century onwards, wool was a significant commodity and Wolverhampton's early importance and prosperity were founded on the wool trade. Heathland remained a prominent landscape feature until large-scale enclosures in the 18th century led to an expansion in agriculture. There was a water-powered iron industry in the Stour Valley early as the 17th century. By the early 18th century industrialisation had a profound effect on the landscape, with the development of Abraham Darby I's coke-fired furnace at Coalbrookdale, which enabled for the first time the mass production of high-quality iron. In 1779 the world's first iron bridge was opened. Before the development of the coke-fired furnace, charcoal was the source of fuel for the smelters and the valley woodlands were managed for this purpose. There was a wide range of industry in the NCA

area, including porcelain production at Coalport, carpet looms at Kidderminster, glass making at Stourbridge and a wide range of trades at Bewdley and Stourport-on-Severn. The inland ports on the River Severn, including Bridgnorth, Bewdley and Stourport-on-Severn, were key to transporting the area's products until the opening of the railways in the 19th century.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The potential for woodland expansion scored as low by the mapping of historic and natural environment attributes, but where there were areas of higher opportunity, these tend to cluster around areas of existing woodland, particularly the plantations in the Wyre Forest and areas to the west of the Birmingham conurbation. The NCA profile recommends managing existing woodland, and replanting areas of conifer with broadleaved woodland, but also highlights the possibility of clearing areas of former coppice used to make charcoal, in order to reinstate views. It recommends increasing woodland along valleys, and the mapping indicates small areas of potential expansion around existing valley woodlands.



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