

# NCA 73 Charnwood

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## *Overview*

The landscape character of the Charnwood NCA is distinguished by the underlying Precambrian geology, creating an area with exposures of rugged, rocky outcrops. It gives the appearance of an upland landscape within the lowland landscape of the Leicestershire and South Derbyshire coalfield to the west, and the valley of the River Soar to the east. It is a largely rural area, included within the Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, and is dominated by pastoral agriculture in medium to large regular fields, bounded by hedges or stone walls. Although surrounded by large urban areas, such as Leicester, Loughborough and Coalville, settlement within it is generally rural in character, with mainly dispersed farmsteads and houses in the centre, and occasional small, planned villages. Around the periphery of the NCA, there are larger settlements with extensive modern developments. There is a network of local roads and lanes, but the NCA is also bisected by the M1, with a dual carriageway link to Leicester via the A50. The area is very well-wooded, with a coverage of 16% of the NCA; of this, nearly a third is ancient woodland. Some of the extensive woodlands are thought to be remnants within former medieval parks, and are predominantly mixed oak with some small-leaved lime. Over half of the National Forest lies within Charnwood.

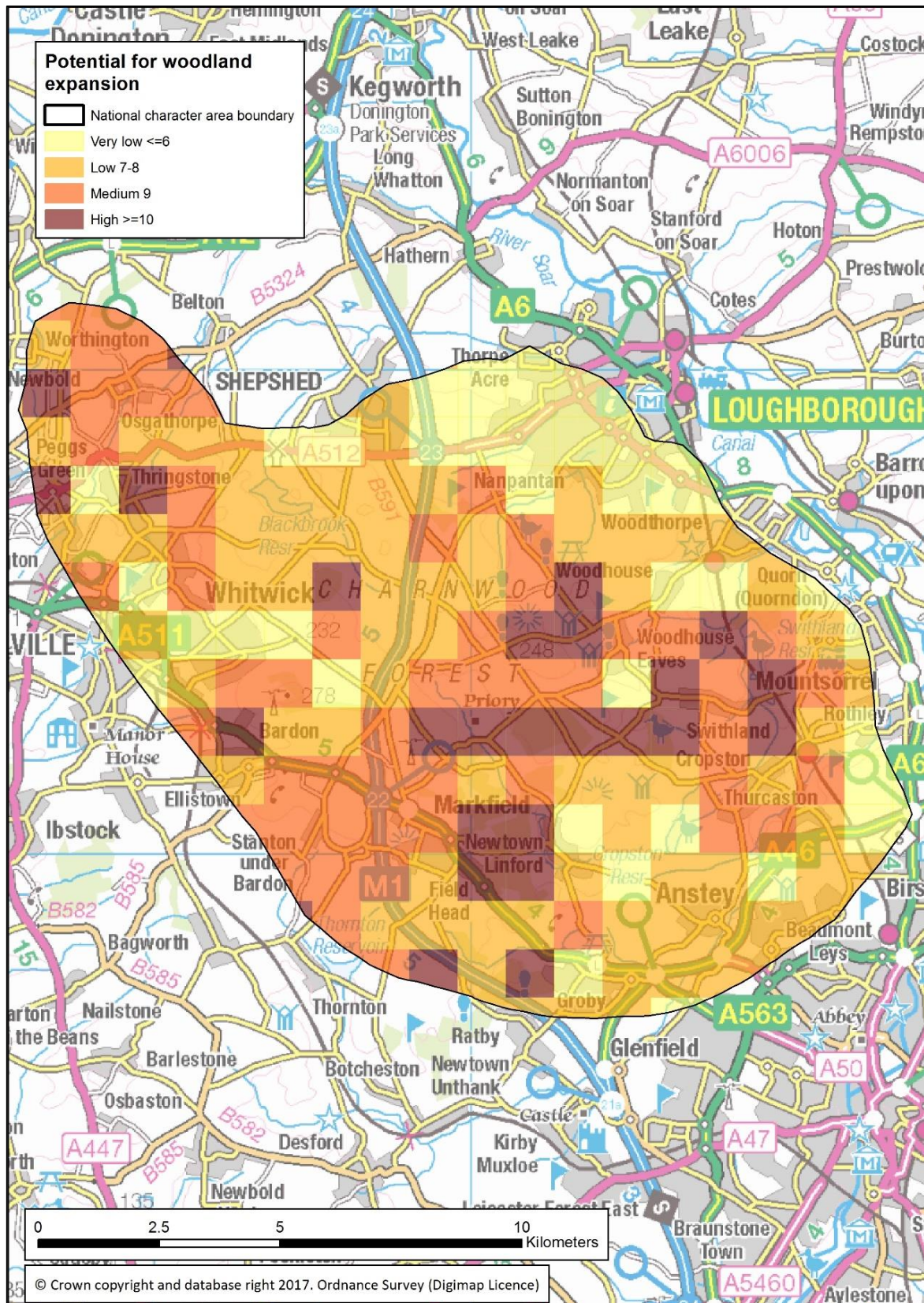
## *The Historic Environment Character*

Evidence for prehistoric activity within the area of the NCA is in the form of Neolithic hand-axes and other tools made from the local stone, a late Bronze Age hoard, and an Iron Age hill fort at Beacon Hill, one of the highest points in Charnwood Forest. In the Roman period, the local stone was quarried for building material and was used in the Roman town of *Ratae Corieltavorum*, now Leicester. The area was part of Leicester Forest in the medieval period, and appears to have been very well wooded. In the Domesday Book, the extensive woodland was known as Hereswode. Hunting parks were established around the core of the forested upland area, making use of land that was too poor for agriculture, including Groby, Bradgate, Quorndon, Beaumanor and Bardon. Where arable farming was more viable, planned villages were created, with associated common field systems, which are still legible in the landscape as enclosed strip fields where they have not been developed for housing. Much of the area remained open and unenclosed, though some areas were taken for the establishment of monastic houses, such as Garendon Abbey and Ulverscroft Priory. With loss of woodland, much of the area became characterised by heathland. There were significant changes to the landscape in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with large-scale enclosure and improvement, and industrial-scale quarrying.

## *Opportunities for Woodland Expansion*

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates that there is only a low level of potential for the creation of new woodland in the NCA, though this probably reflects the relatively substantial proportion that is already wooded. The extensive areas of development, particularly around the periphery on the NCA also precludes or limits opportunities for new planting. The mapping does show areas of greater opportunity for expanding existing woodlands, especially in the centre of the NCA. This is a highlighted opportunity in the NCA profile, as well as planting around the settlement and industrial developments to filter light pollution. The profile does, however, emphasise the need for not planting on arable land. New sites for woodland, or woodland extension, should also

respect historic field patterns, avoiding ancient enclosures or fields which still retain traces of former common field systems.



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