NCA 80 The Broads

Overview

The Broads is a low-lying area on the eastern edge of East Anglia, between Norwich and the North Sea coast and is included within the Eastern Arable Agricultural Landscape Type. Almost all the NCA is open country, with around 6% settlement. Over half of the NCA is within the Broads National Park, and part of the coast is within the North Norfolk AONB. The boundary of the NCA follows the edge of the level, open marshland and valleys drained by three principal rivers, the Yare, Bure and Waveney, and their tributaries. The Broads are shallow stretches of open water, mostly freshwater, though some are linked to the tidal stretches of rivers. The open water and the rivers, many of which have been straightened and deepened, create an extensive network of waterways that join together at the estuary of Breydon Water. Some of the Broads lie below sea level and sea defences are essential to prevent inundation from the sea. Where areas have been drained, the rich alluvial soils support cereal cultivation. The higher land is enclosed mostly by modern field systems, and the drained marshes are divided into a rectilinear framework of embankments and ditches. There are some surviving remnants of earlier, less regular enclosure and curvilinear ditches that are surviving artefacts of earlier phases of drainage from the medieval period, particularly along the middle Bure and Hundred Stream to the north and on the Chedgrave and Wickhampton Marshes in the middle Yare and upper Waveney. Settlement is sparse across the NCA, with nucleated hamlets and villages established on the marshland fringes and in the upper valleys. Isolated farmsteads and cottages are scattered across the farmland, associated with the large-scale drainage works of the post medieval period. Windmills are also a feature of the landscape, many built to power the drainage pumps, though replaced by steam pumps in the 19th century. Woodland represents 10% of the total area of the NCA, a reasonably good percentage given that over half of the area is open water, although less than 1% is ancient woodland. The drained land and salt marshes have limited tree cover, but blocks of deciduous woodland is located on higher land in the upper reaches of the valleys, and are traditionally found around settlements where they supply shelter and in the past the woods were a valuable resource. There is also wet woodland on the flood plain, mostly semi-natural carr woodland, though this is largely unmanaged. Willow pollards are also a feature, particularly of roadsides.

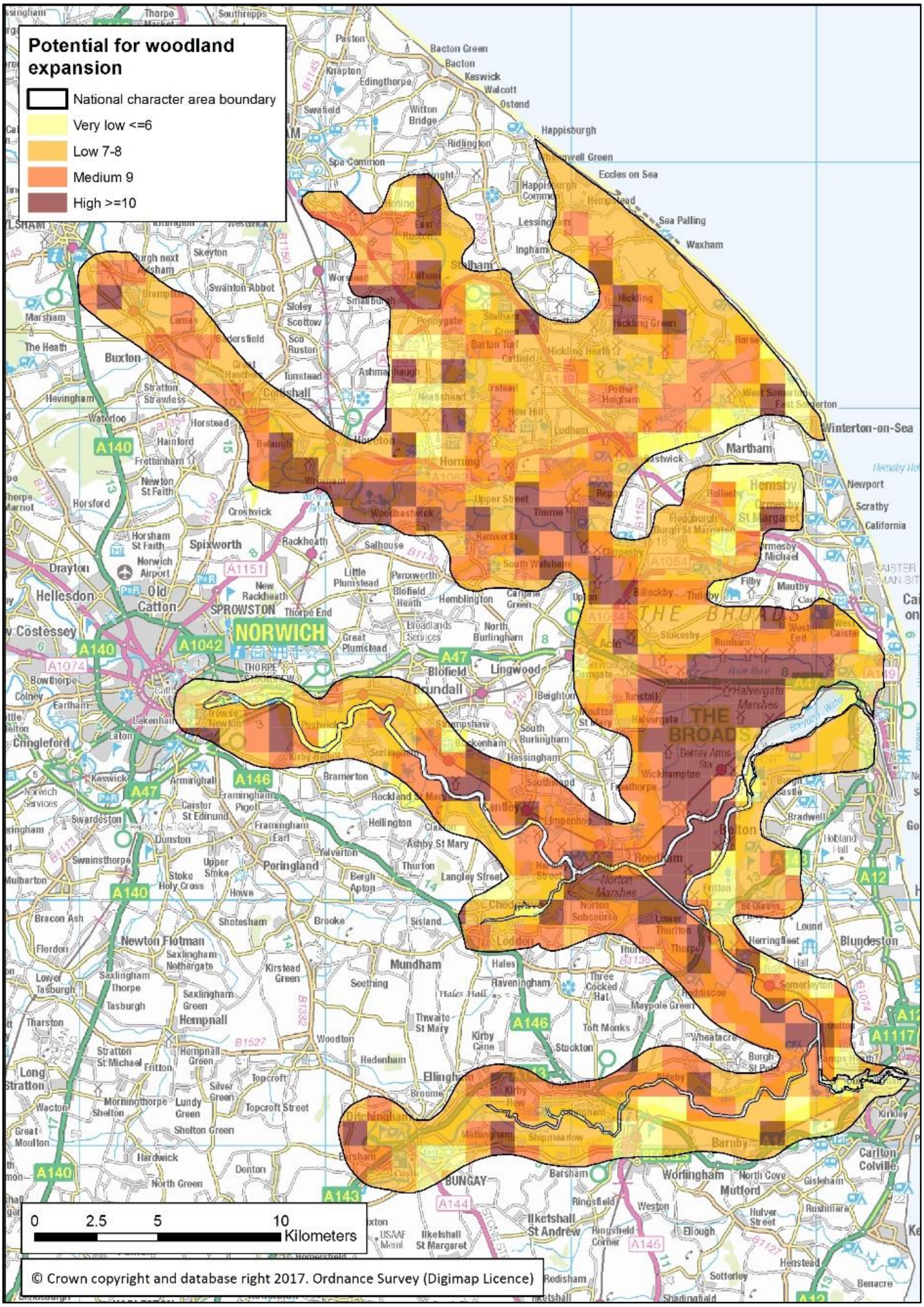
The Historic Environment Character

Early settlement in the area was on islands of higher land in the marshes and around its margins. In the Roman period, a Saxon Shore fort was built at Burgh in the 3rd century AD, which later became the site of a Norman castle. The settlement pattern has its origins in the late Saxon period, and many of the churches have Saxo-Norman fabric. The wetlands were a valuable resource in the later medieval period, and many of the Broads are the result of extensive peat cutting from that period. Peat was used as fuel for Norwich and its hinterland and for the smoking of herring in the coastal fishing villages. The marshes were used for sheep grazing by farms both situated along the wetland edges and at distance. Arable was limited because of the value of land for grazing, and because of the threat of inundation. Significant drainage of the marshlands began in the medieval period, often instigated by monastic institutions, and these early drainage schemes are characterised by patterns of sinuous ditches. It was with the introduction of Dutch engineers in the 17th century,

however, that drainage schemes were undertaken on a much larger scale, a process that continued into the 18th and 19th centuries, when new canals were also constructed.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic environment and natural attributes suggests that there is a medium level of potential for new woodland in the NCA. Areas which score as having the highest potential are in the drained marshlands, which suggests that most opportunities lie with the recreation of carr woodland. An issue, however, is that the high potential areas are along the lower reaches of the River Yare and tributaries, where the irregular field pattern suggests that drainage is historic. Proposals for new woodland planting in the drained marshes would have to be assessed against the historic significance of drainage schemes. Any new planting would also have to be assessed on the potential impact on the open landscape character of the area. There are also opportunities for extending areas of existing woodland around the edges of the wetlands, to expand and link fragmented habitats, though consideration should be given to the potential for archaeological remains on slightly higher land.



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