

NCA 82 Suffolk Coast and Heaths

Overview

The NCA forms a narrow band along the North Sea coast, varying from 5km wide at Great Yarmouth to 20km wide at Harwich. It is a low-lying, fairly flat landscape, which meets the coast as low crumbling cliffs, long sloping shingle beaches, and estuaries with deep inlets. A large part of the NCA, incorporating the Sandlings and the coast, is designated as the Suffolk Coasts and Heaths AONB. It is included within the Eastern Arable Agricultural Landscape Type and agriculture is dominated by arable cultivation, both cereal and vegetable cropping. Fields are large and regular. The areas of light, sandy soils, known as Sandlings, are characterised by large, though fragmented, areas of open heath with mosaics of heather, acid grassland, gorse, bracken and birch. Along the coast are areas of grazed marshland, sub-divided by drainage ditches. The settlement pattern is a largely nucleated one of villages and small towns, with Ipswich and Lowestoft the largest urban centres. Between are scatters of individual farmsteads. Lowestoft and Southwold are popular seaside resorts, whilst Harwich and Felixstowe are busy ports. There is a major road system around Ipswich, particularly the A14 that connects to Felixstowe, but also the A12, which runs along the western edge of the NCA to Lowestoft. The rest of the road system is mainly minor roads and lanes. There is good woodland coverage in the NCA, at 13%, though this is concentrated in substantial areas of woodland closely associated with heathland and birch scrub. These include 19th and 20th century coniferous plantations at Rendlesham, Tunstall and Dunwich Forests. There are areas of older deciduous plantation woodland and wood pasture within the estate and landscaped parks of country houses along the Stour and Orwell estuary slopes, as well as the river valleys and the higher inland areas along the A12 in the west, together with small farm woodlands and field boundary trees. Ancient woodland makes up just under 10% of all woodland cover, the main concentration being Staverton Park, which has around 4,700 medieval pollarded oaks and large hollies, birches and rowans.

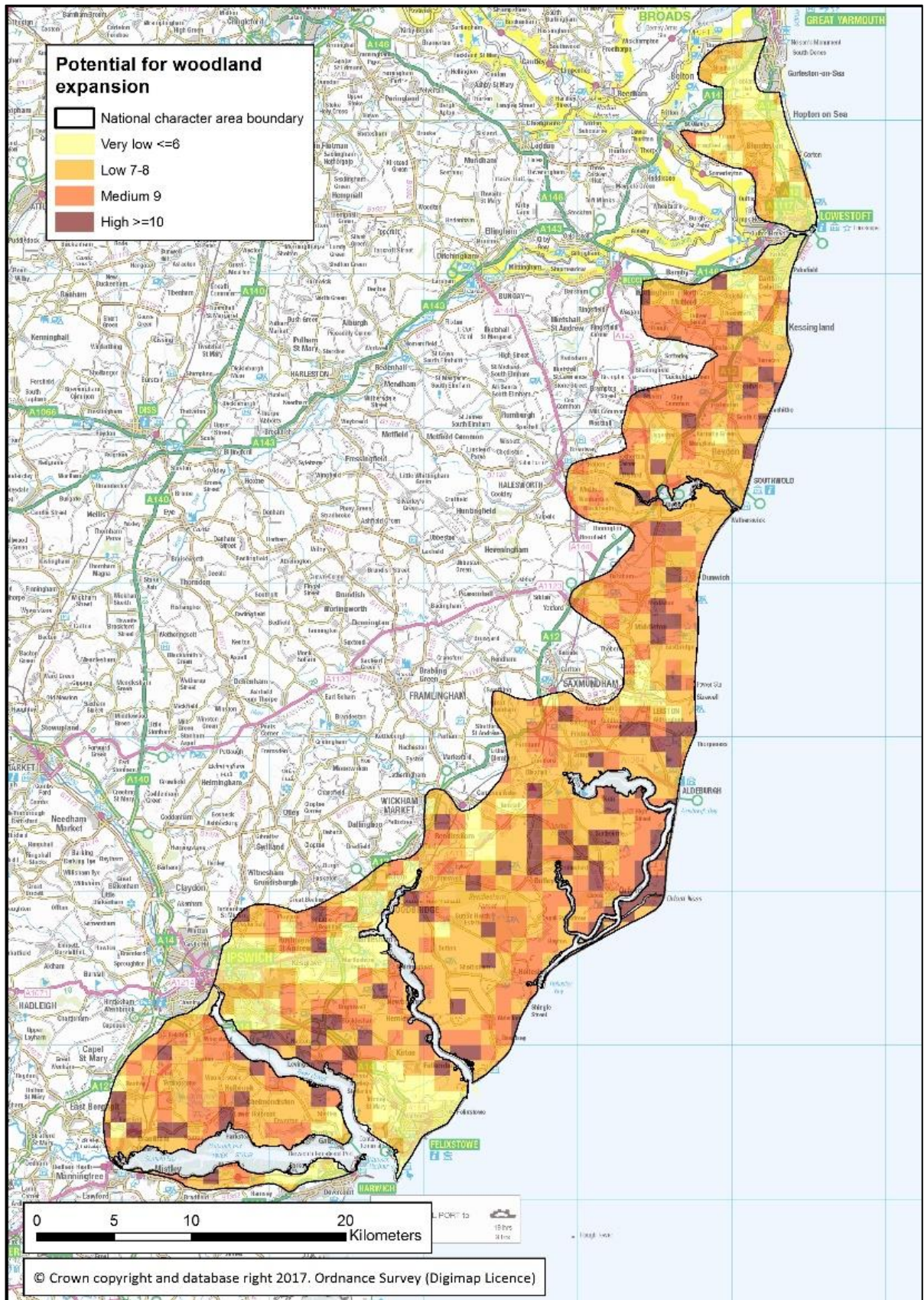
The Historic Environment Character

There is a long history of settlement from the prehistoric period, with the sandy soils facilitating the early clearance of woodland. The heaths are still marked by prehistoric sites, including both settlement, and numerous burial mounds and barrow cemeteries. The area is significant for archaeological remains of the Anglo-Saxon period. Ipswich, with evidence for burial and settlement from the 7th century, was an emporium with a planned street system. It was an important trading and craft centre, known especially for the production of Ipswich ware pottery. It acquired town defences in the 10th century. To the north-west is the 7th to 8th century cemetery at Sutton Hoo on the banks of the River Deben, which is of international importance. A second cemetery, with barrows and cremations of late 6th to 7th century date and including a boat burial, is known from Snape, on the sides of the River Alde estuary. In the same area is the Anglo-Saxon royal centre of Rendlesham. In the later medieval period, Ipswich continued as a market town and trading centre, and other towns and villages were established for fishing and ship building, such as Harwich, Yarmouth and Lowestoft. Rural settlement developed in the form of nucleated villages with associated open fields, and were mainly concentrated on the heavier soils on the inland side of the NCA. Orford, however, was established near the coast adjacent to the castle. Enclosure of the heaths and coastal salt marshes was ongoing from the late medieval period onwards,

when sheep grazing dominated. Early drainage and enclosure of the marshes is marked by sinuous ditches, whilst later reclamation is characterised by long straight ditches. Coastal defences continued were important in the post medieval period, with the construction of Landguard Fort at the tip of Orwell Estuary, beginning in the 16th century and undergoing several rebuildings into the 19th century. Along the coast are several Martello Towers, built during the Napoleonic Wars in the early 19th century.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes suggests there is a low potential for woodland expansion, reflecting the importance of the heathland habitat. Areas where the mapping does highlight opportunities for woodland planting are generally around existing woodland. Within existing forestry, this could be undertaken with the reinstatement of active management of existing woodland for wood fuel and shooting, as highlighted by the NCA profile. The mapping also indicates opportunities in the south of the area, between the estuaries of the Rivers Stour and Deben. This mostly relates to the expansion of existing woodland, but could be used to reduce soil erosion on the lighter soils. The NCA is an area of high archaeological sensitivity, however, particularly on the Sandlings, so new woodland planting should involve a detailed assessment of archaeological potential and significance.



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