

NCA 85 Breckland

Overview

The Brecks, or Breckland, is a low, gently undulating landscape which crosses Norfolk, Suffolk and a small part of Cambridgeshire. It lies within the Chalk and Limestone Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, and has dry soils with low fertility. Traditionally, it was dominated by heaths and grassland, though modern agricultural techniques mean that much of it is now farmed for cereals and vegetables. The field pattern is of large and regular enclosures, apart from smaller, more irregular fields of meadow pasture in the river valleys. The settlement pattern is one of nucleated villages, most small but with larger settlements at Mildenhall, Brandon and Swaffham. Thetford is the historic urban centre and is the largest town in the NCA. Several major roads cross the NCA, many radiating out from Thetford and linking to other regional towns. As well as towns and villages, the NCA is characterised by military sites, including airfields at Lakenheath and Mildenhall, and an extensive military training area. One of the key characteristics of the area is the large percentage of woodland, which accounts for 28% of the NCA. Of this, however, less than 1% is ancient woodland. The majority of woodland is Forestry Commission forestry, comprising coniferous and broadleaf trees planted on heathland in the 20th century, and forming the largest area of lowland woodland in England. Elsewhere, there is some wet woodland on former fen, and there is a scatter of ancient woodland in the south east.

The Historic Environment Character

There is rich archaeological evidence for human activity and settlement within the areas of the NCA from prehistory onwards, both in the form of surviving earthworks, cropmarks, excavations and stray finds. These include numerous prehistoric sites such as burial mounds of various forms. One of the most significant sites is the very rare Neolithic flint mining complex of Grimes Graves. It is one of only ten Neolithic mines known in England and it has 433 mineshafts and other surviving features. The area of Thetford was of importance in the Iron Age/Romano-British period, when it was the location of a settlement with enclosures, thought to have been a site of religious significance. There was also an Iron Age multivallate hillfort at Thetford, later reused to form the earthworks for a motte and bailey castle. Thetford became a town in the late Saxon period, first recorded in AD 870. It became an important Anglo-Danish settlement with a mint, intensive settlement and industrial activity. There was settlement at Mildenhall, too in the Roman period, including a basilican building, a villa and the find of table silver known as the Mildenhall Treasure. The NCA also includes the famous Anglo-Saxon settlement and cemetery of West Stow, which was inhabited from the 5th to 7th centuries AD. Later medieval settlement in the area developed mainly along the river valleys and along the edge of the fen to the west, and their associated common fields tended to remain open until the 18th century. Sheep farming dominated, grazing the open heath and folded onto the arable fields in the winter. Thetford continued to be the principal centre, with an early castle and, for a while, the seat of a bishopric. The castle at Castle Acre was built in the late 11th century, and appears to have had a planned town laid out besides the bailey. The regular enclosure pattern of many of the fields across the NCA reflects the 18th and 19th century enclosures of large parts of the Breckland, both in areas of former heath and on former common fields.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The extensive areas of forestry already provide a much higher than average woodland cover in the NCA, even though much of it is commercial coniferous plantation. The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates a low potential for woodland expansion, which is in accord with the opportunities highlighted by the NCA profile. The profile recommends some felling, to retain a variety of woodland structures and the transition to heath and woodland-edge habitats. The area is also archaeologically sensitive, and any new planting schemes would need to assess the potential to disturb or damage archaeological remains.

