

NCA 86 South Suffolk and North Essex Clayland

Overview

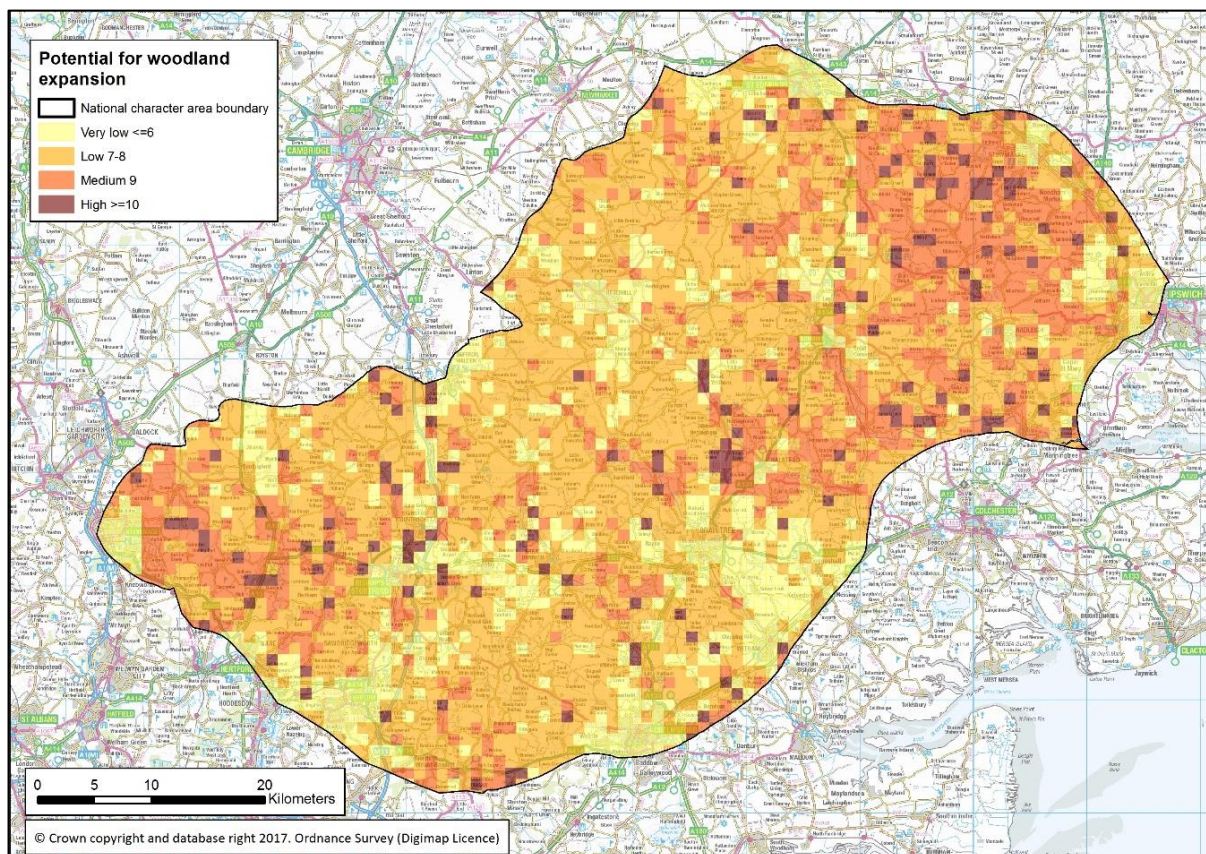
The NCA forms part of the same boulder clay plateau as the South Norfolk and High Suffolk Claylands to the north-east, but is dissected by more small river valleys, giving rise to a much more undulating topography. The area is also crossed by more major rivers, such as the Stour and Blackwater. The lower reaches of the River Stour are designated as the Dedham Vale AONB, most of which is within the boundaries of the NCA. The area is included within the Eastern Arable Agricultural Landscape Type, and is now dominated by arable agriculture, including sugar beet and oilseed rape, which has led to some boundary loss and field enlargement in the 20th century. Even so, this is considered to be a landscape characterised by ancient enclosures, with irregular fields bounded by species-rich hedgerows. There are some major towns around the fringes of the NCA, such as Chelmsford, Ipswich, Bury St Edmunds, Bishop Stortford, Harlow and Stevenage. There are also a few sizeable towns within the NCA, such as Bishop's Stortford, Braintree and Sudbury. Overall, however, this is a relatively tranquil area with a dominant settlement pattern of straggling hamlets, small villages and individual farmsteads. Although some major roads link the urban centres, the road network is largely made up of minor roads and lanes between traditional small towns such as Lavenham, small villages and hamlets, many of which straggle along the roadsides. Woodland cover is quite low, at 6% of the NCA, though 35% of this is ancient woodland. Despite the relative openness of the landscape, it has a wooded character, lent by the enclosed nature of the landscape with hedgerows, copses and small woods. On the valley floor and sides of the River Stour, are modern blocks of cricket-bat willows and poplars, as well as notable crack willow pollards along the river. The wood pasture and the ancient woodland of Hatfield Forest is an important historical and ecological resource.

The Historic Environment Character

The landscape character of the NCA is closely related to its historic development in the medieval and post medieval periods. The pattern of scattered hamlets, individual farms and unplanned small villages, indicate an organic and piecemeal expansion of settlements. Many hamlets and villages are associated with narrow, linear greens, and names contain elements suggestive of encroachments onto commons. The landscape has a pattern of medieval and post-medieval close-grained, irregular, ancient enclosures, with high hedges and winding lanes. To the east of Bishop's Stortford was the small royal hunting forest of Hatfield Forest, which has survived as one of the larger areas of ancient woodland within the NCA. Today's heavily farmed landscape had little open arable in the medieval period. As a consequence few areas, apart from in the Stour Valley, are dominated by more regular late 18th or 19th century enclosure. It was a prosperous area, with a major involvement in the wool and woollen cloth trade until the 17th century, which has left a legacy of timber-framed, colour-washed 17th century and earlier houses, often with elaborate plasterwork or pargetting. In the post medieval period, the area specialised in the production of grain and cattle-fattening to supply the London markets. It was only in the second half of the 20th century, that modern intensive agriculture has led to boundary loss, particularly in the south and east.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates a low potential for woodland expansion, though with some general areas of opportunity in the east between Hadleigh and Bury St Edmunds, as well as to the east of Stevenage. The NCA profile indicates the importance of protecting existing areas of ancient woodland, parkland trees and river valley plantations. Any woodland expansion would have to be on a small scale to fit into the pattern of ancient enclosures and small woodlands, but could include replanting on former woodland sites, where these can be identified.



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