

## NCA 87 East Anglian Chalk

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### *Overview*

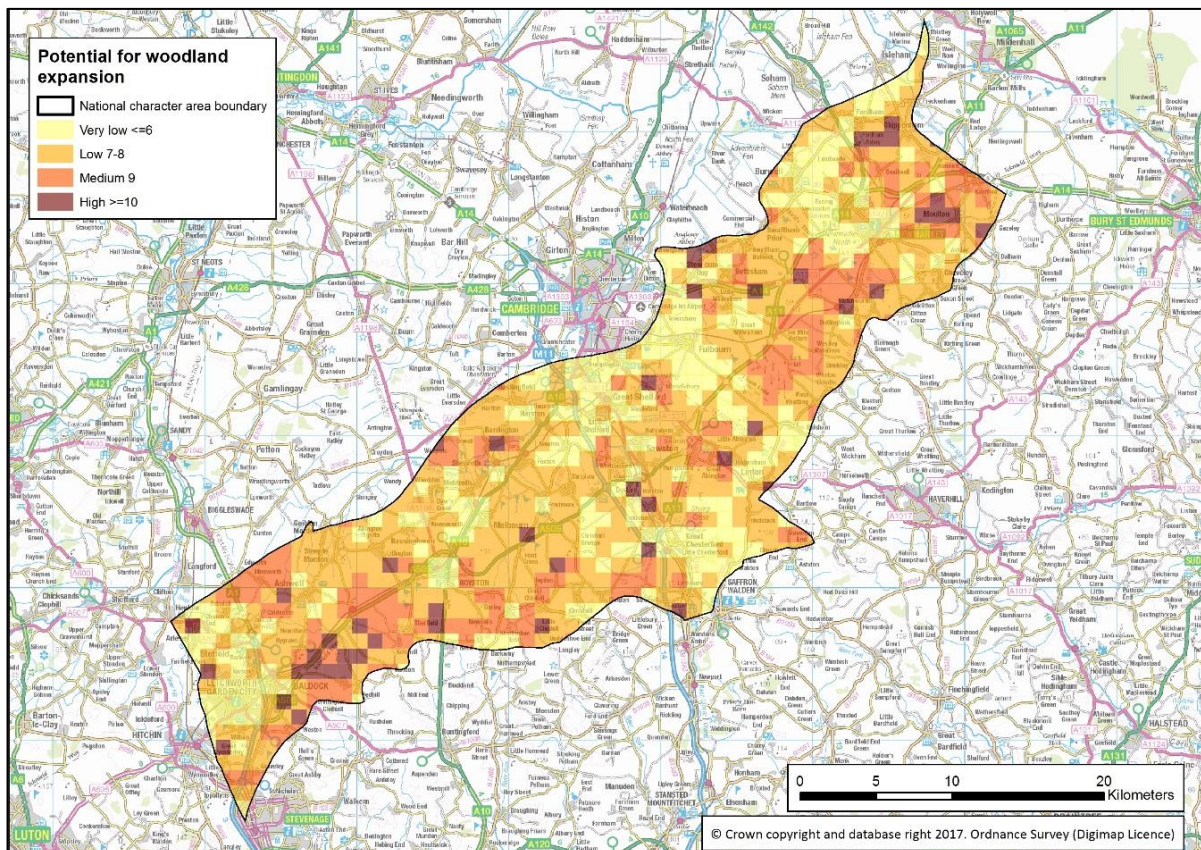
The NCA is a narrow band comprising a chalk ridge crossing from Cambridgeshire into north-west Essex. It is included within the Chalk and Limestone Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type. Agriculture is dominated by arable and the area is a major food producer. Fields are large and regular in shape, with thorn boundaries. There are now only remnants of open chalk grassland. More ancient enclosure and pasture can be found around smaller villages and along the river margins. Horse-racing and stud farms, particularly influenced by the proximity to Newmarket, have created a belt of geometric grid-like enclosures with a manicured appearance, bordered by fences and shelterbelts, in a wide band to the south and east of the town. Settlement within the NCA is highly nucleated, generally found along spring lines and in the valleys of the Cam and Granta to the south-east of Cambridge. Many of the settlements are small villages and towns, but some have grown as commuter settlements. Newmarket is a significant urban centre at the north end of the NCA, whilst at the south-western end is the large urban area of Letchworth and Baldock. Letchworth is the world's first garden city and is thus of international significance. The NCA is a transport corridor, with the A505 and A11 running along its length and other main roads connect to Cambridge and other regional centres. The Cam valley, which bisects the area, is also a communications corridor, carrying the M11, and the railway line connecting Cambridge to London. Just under 5% of the NCA is woodland, of which almost 10% is ancient woodland. Areas of ancient woodland are concentrated to the north east, close to the border with the Breckland NCA. Many older woodlands have been replaced with coniferous planting, but some beech copses and belts survive alongside roads, on ridge tops and ridge sides. Many areas of woodland are in the form of geometric shelter belts around the horse racing and breeding areas.

### *The Historic Environment Character*

The upland chalk plateau has extensive archaeological evidence for settlement and land use from prehistory onwards. There is a rich archaeological resource of both cropmark and earthwork monuments, including the Cambridgeshire Dykes, a series of linear ditches and banks indicating territorial organisation. The origins of the dykes are uncertain, but they were in use from the Roman period into the early medieval period. Many of the surviving earthwork monuments are tree-covered, such as Wandlebury Hillfort. The NCA is traversed by Icknield Way Roman road, running from the Roman settlement at Baldock in the south to Newmarket in the north, crossed by Worstead Street, which is part of the road between the Roman towns of Godmanchester and Colchester. Nucleated villages and small towns were the dominant settlement form in the medieval period, associated with surrounding open fields, but also with large areas of open downland for sheep grazing. This pattern was largely replaced in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when there was large-scale enclosure and improvement. The newly enclosed and improved land was used to feed the growing London market with cereals and mutton. The improvements also saw the introduction of new model farmsteads, some replacing older settlements but also with new ones placed away from existing settlements amongst the new fields. Newmarket has been an important centre of horse-racing from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the growth of horse-breeding and training around the town has had a significant impact on the landscape character of the area.

## Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates that the NCA has only low potential for new woodland, largely as a consequence of the highly valuable agricultural land but also because of the concentration of scheduled monuments. New woodland planting is not seen as a significance opportunity in the NCA profile, apart from maintaining and restoring habitats. Indeed, consideration should be given to woodland removal on archaeologically significant sites, where clearance could be replaced by more benign management regimes such as permanent, grazed pasture.



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