

NCA 88 Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands

Overview

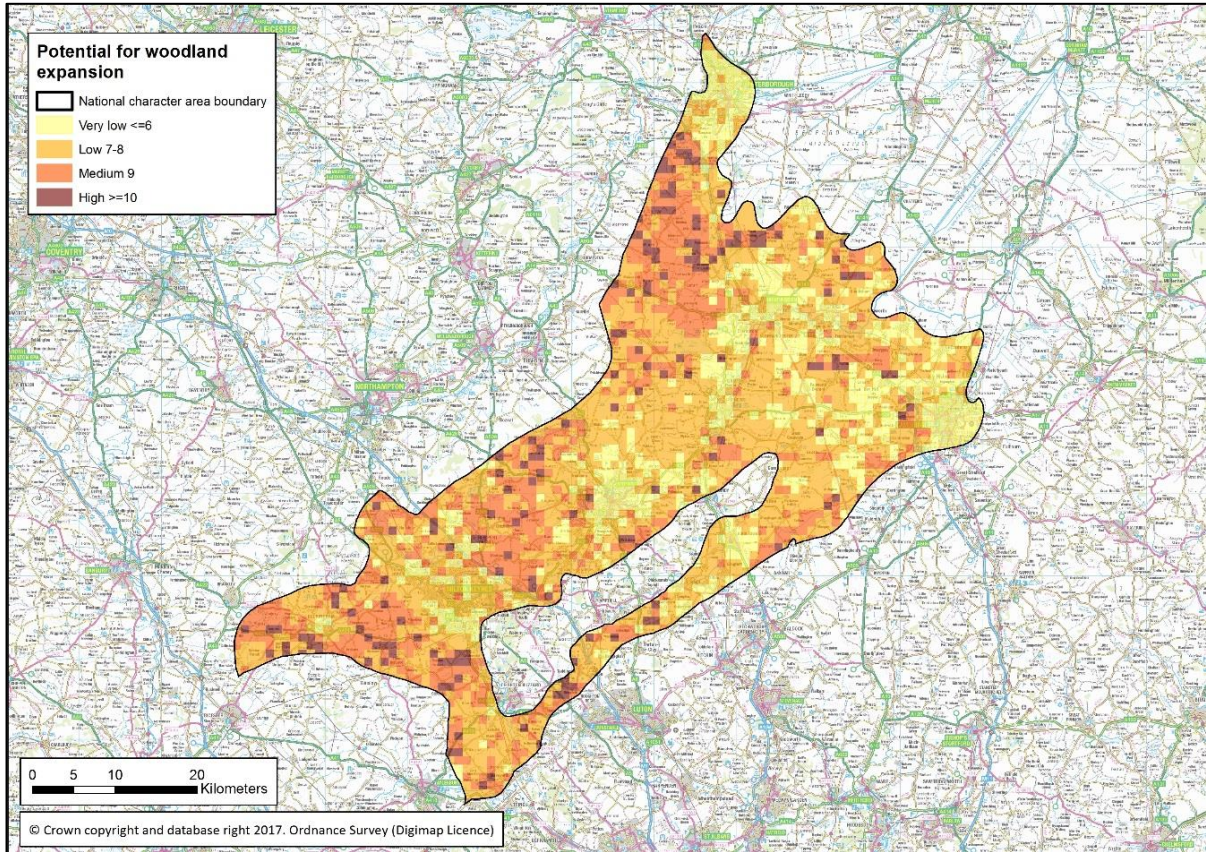
The claylands comprise most of central and northern Bedfordshire and western Cambridgeshire. It is a gently undulating lowland landscape within the Eastern Arable Agricultural Landscape Type, with expansive views of predominantly large-scale arable farmland. Fields are large and regular, bounded by ditches or species-poor, well-trimmed hedgerows. There are areas of ancient enclosure, characterised by irregular and smaller fields. Mineral extraction, particularly clay, sands and gravels, has left a legacy of waterbodies, ranging in size from field ponds to large lakes, particularly in the shallow vales. The settlement pattern is largely nucleated with farms and villages, though north of the Ouse there are greater degrees of dispersion. The NCA is a major communications corridor, crossed by the A14, A1 and M1, with nodes linking to other main routes. Large towns, including Milton Keynes, Bedford, Cambridge, Huntingdon and Peterborough, cluster along these main arteries and on river crossings. Five per cent of the NCA is wooded, of which around a quarter is ancient woodland. Ancient woodland is scattered mainly across the north of the area, and tends to be found on river margins and parish boundaries, in relation to former hunting parks and chases, or on managed estate woodland. South of Bedford is the Marston Vale Community Forest.

The Historic Environment Character

The NCA has rich archaeological evidence for settlement from the prehistoric period onwards, including barrows, and Neolithic and Bronze Age mortuary enclosures. Godmanchester, near Huntingdon, was a Roman town at an important crossing point of the Ouse and a communication node with roads converging on the crossing point. The NCA has numerous sites of the Roman period, particularly along the valley of the River Ouse. Huntingdon, Bedford and Peterborough, all crossing points on major rivers, developed as centres of administration, commerce and religious authority from the medieval period onwards, and the medieval economy grew on agricultural produce and, particularly, sheep farming. The spread of sheep rearing led to widespread enclosure of common fields for pasture. There was rural depopulation at the end of the medieval period, as evidenced in the numbers of deserted sites, including moated sites. From the post medieval period, the area grew in importance for mineral extraction, supplying brick, clay, sands and gravels for the building industry in particular.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The opportunities for woodland expansion are not high, according to the mapped historic and natural environment attributes. The low score is partly attributable to the large urban areas within the NCA, as well as the importance of large areas for arable production. There are potential opportunities in the north-west of the NCA, however, where there is more surviving ancient woodland, and in the countryside around Milton Keynes. In these areas, woodland expansion would fit with the NCA profile, which highlights opportunities to expand and link up woodland, for example along field margins and hedgerows, as well as planting on the urban fringe.



NCA 088 Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands