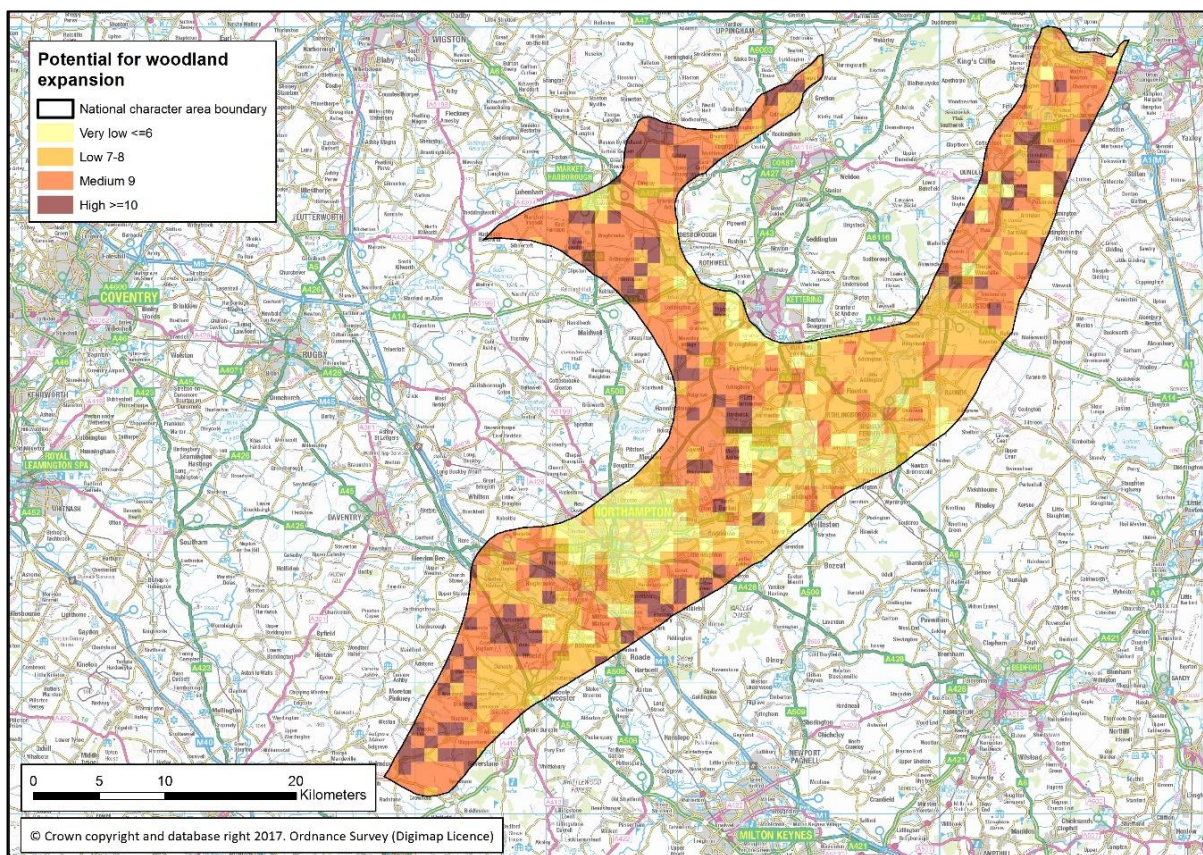# NCA 89 Northamptonshire Vales

Overview

The gently undulating landscape covers a series of low-lying clay vales and river valleys, within the Western Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, principally the valley of the River Nene and its tributaries, and part of the valley of the River Welland. There is a considerable variety of field patterns, from regular geometric fields with straight hedgerows and roads, to older, more irregular enclosure, particularly along the Brampton Brook and River Ise. This is an area of mixed farming, where flatter areas are given over to arable. Here, hedgerows can be particularly low, broken or intermittent. Major settlement is concentrated in the Nene Valley with considerable urban development in the central section, including the county town of Northampton. The overall settlement pattern is a highly nucleated one of villages and towns, although there are also some individual farmsteads scattered between. The northern arm of the area, south of Market Harborough and along the Welland Valley, is more rural in character, with a settlement pattern of villages and scattered farmsteads. The Nene Valley is characterised by extensive areas of gravel extraction, many of which have left a legacy of wetlands and lakes. The long axis of the NCA, which follows the Nene Valleys is a communications corridor, with the main road linking Northampton and Peterborough. Northampton is a communications hub, with numerous key routes linking to other towns in the region, and adjacent to the M1. The A1M motorway passes through the northernmost end of the NCA. Woodland cover is very low, at only 4% of the NCA. Of this, nearly 14% is ancient woodland. Woodland is mainly confined to the valley sides in copses, and spinneys on ridges, and there are riverside trees along the River Welland. Ancient woodland is scattered and fragmentary.

The Historic Environment Character

The river valleys, the Nene terraces in particular, contain a dense and varied array of archaeological evidence representing clearance and settlement from the Neolithic onwards. By the Iron Age, a pattern of major settlements had developed along the main valleys, for example at Irchester, which was then succeeded by a Romano-British town. There was also dense Romano-British settlement along the Nene Valley, with towns, villages and villas. There is extensive archaeological evidence for Anglo-Saxon and later medieval settlement, most notably in the area around the village of Raunds. Northampton, too, was a significant early medieval settlement, beginning as a high-status settlement based around a series of halls, becoming a fortified urban centre, which became the basis for a later medieval administrative and ecclesiastical urban settlement. Later medieval settlement was predominantly nucleated and associated with extensive common fields. There was significant settlement desertion, leaving a legacy of well-preserved earthworks, though many areas of ridge and furrow were lost to arable intensification in the second half of the 20th century. In the post medieval period, there was a move towards livestock rearing for meat and dairy produce, particularly to supply the growing industrial towns such as Northampton and Kettering. Shoe manufacture, ironworking, engineering and brickworks transformed settlements and the wider landscape within and around the NCA, for example the extensive aggregate extraction along the Nene Valley.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes suggests a low level of opportunity for woodland expansion, though there are areas with higher potential. In particular, the mapping indicates that there may be opportunities around settlements, Northampton and Wellingborough in particular, and along the Nene and Welland Valleys. The NCA profile highlights opportunities for valley-side and stream-side planting, as well as on the fringes of settlements, which is reflected in the few clusters of higher potential identified by the mapping. New planting should be small-scale, however, to maintain the landscape character, and care should also be taken to avoid impacting on the legacy of medieval landscape character and features.

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