

## NCA 90 Bedfordshire Greensand Ridge

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### *Overview*

The NCA is a long, narrow ridge of Greensand to the south of Bedford, which dominates the surrounding claylands. The Ridge is dissected by the Rivers Ivel, and is bounded to the west by the River Ouzel, and partially by the River Flit to the south. It is included within the Eastern Arable Agricultural Landscape Type, and arable agriculture is important, with cereals and vegetables grown on the lower parts of the dip slope, with some pasture and market gardening in the valleys. Arable expansion has led to a loss of field boundaries, particularly on the dip slope, and there are modern sub-divisions of pasture for paddocks and stabling, particularly around larger villages and towns. The larger settlements lie along the dip slope of the ridge, in the Flit and Ivel valleys, whilst on the ridge itself are more sparsely distributed small villages, hamlets and farmsteads. The NCA is also notable for the number of country houses and parklands, including Woburn Abbey at its southern end. The area is crossed by several major routes, including the A1, A5 and M1, as well as regional main roads, and main rail lines. The Grand Union Canal runs along the western boundary. The NCA is very well-wooded, with a coverage of 17.5%, of which nearly 30% is ancient woodland. The less-fertile ridge historically had areas of heath and mixed woodland, and there is still extensive woodland cover with areas of heath and pasture on the scarp slope. On the dip slope, woodland is mixed with pasture and arable land. Ancient semi-natural woodlands occur largely on the boulder clay, characterised by pedunculate oak, ash, field maple, hazel and dogwood. Woodlands on the sand, however, have been planted with conifers or sweet chestnut. Where there is native woodland on the sands, this is characterised by sessile oak, birch, holly, rowan and small-leaved lime. Elsewhere, wood pasture is found on the large estates, and there is nationally important wet woodland on Flitwick Moor SSSI. The Forest of Marston Vale, a Community Forest, lies partly within the NCA, and its aim is to increase woodland cover to 30% by 2031.

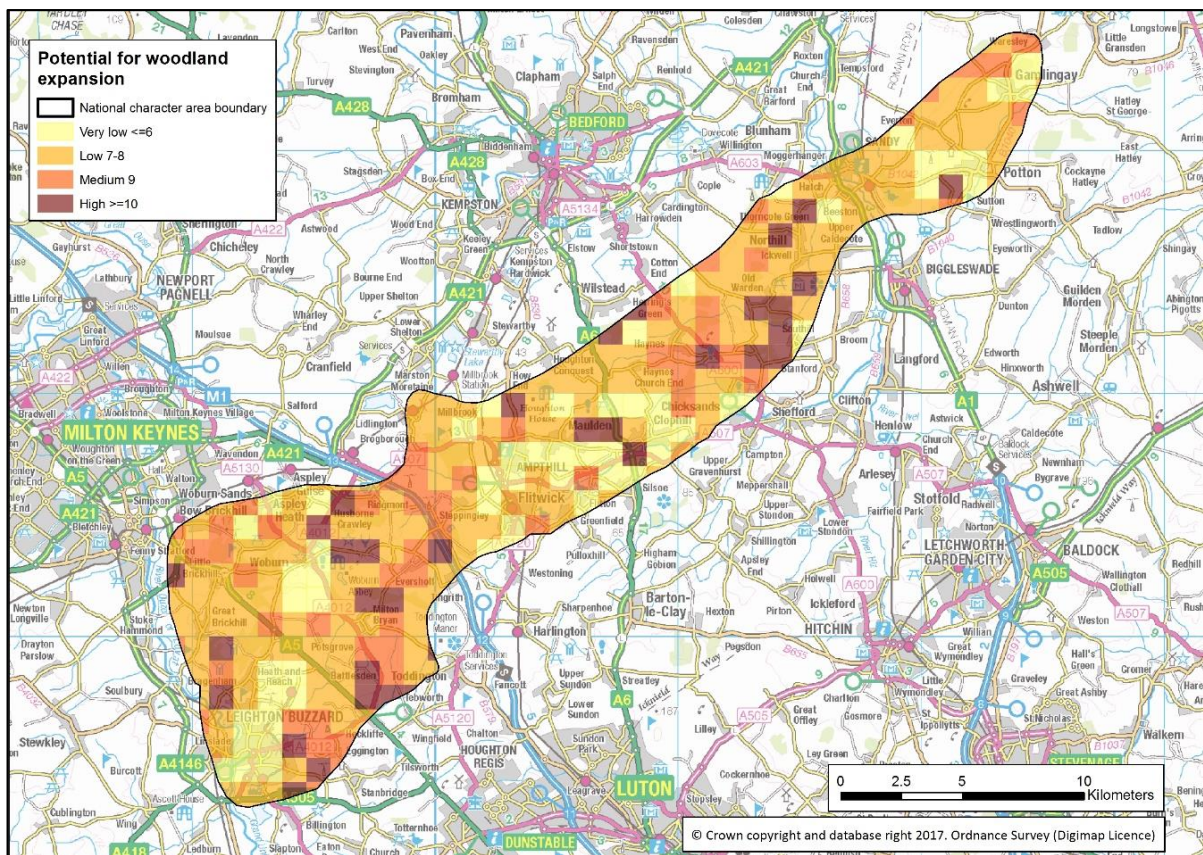
### *The Historic Environment Character*

A series of defended sites were established on the Greensand ridge during the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, for example the promontory fort at Sandy Lodge, and the nearby univallate hillfort at Galley Hill. These forts overlook the valley of the River Ivel where it cuts through the ridge, and demonstrates the strategic importance of the gap. The valley of the River Ouse was also a major transport corridor and a provided north-south communications corridor from at least the Roman period. Medieval settlement was concentrated in the valleys, and along the dip slope of the ridge. The settlement pattern was largely nucleated, but several moated sites indicates that the picture was slightly more complex in the medieval period. There was a clear process of settlement expansion in the late medieval period on the ridge, through encroachment onto the commons, as evidenced by small polyfocal settlements and 'End' elements in place-names. There were several significant monastic institutions, including large Cistercian abbeys at Warden and Woburn and smaller priories at Chicksands, Beadlow and Millbrook. They controlled a substantial proportion of the farmland and heaths, managing woodland and developing extensive warrens. There are surviving ancient enclosure patterns, with irregular fields and mature and woody hedgerows, particularly on the dip slope, where there are also remnants of ridge and furrow earthworks. Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the estates formed the centres of

post medieval country houses and estates. Designed parkland is a particular feature of this NCA.

### *Opportunities for Woodland Expansion*

Although the mapping of historic and natural environment attributes suggests only a low potential for woodland expansion, this is partly a result of the already extensive existing woodland cover. Where there are clusters of high potential for new planting, these are concentrated in the south around the area of the Community Forest of Marston Vale. The NCA also highlights the opportunity of increasing woodland within the community forest, and managing existing stocks through coppicing. The importance of extending existing woodland, and creating links between woodland habitats, is also highlighted. There may also be opportunities for enhancing wet woodland along rivers. The designated parklands have been excluded from areas of potential woodland expansion in the mapping because planting schemes would require specialist advice on landscape impact.



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