

NCA 94 Leicestershire Vales

Overview

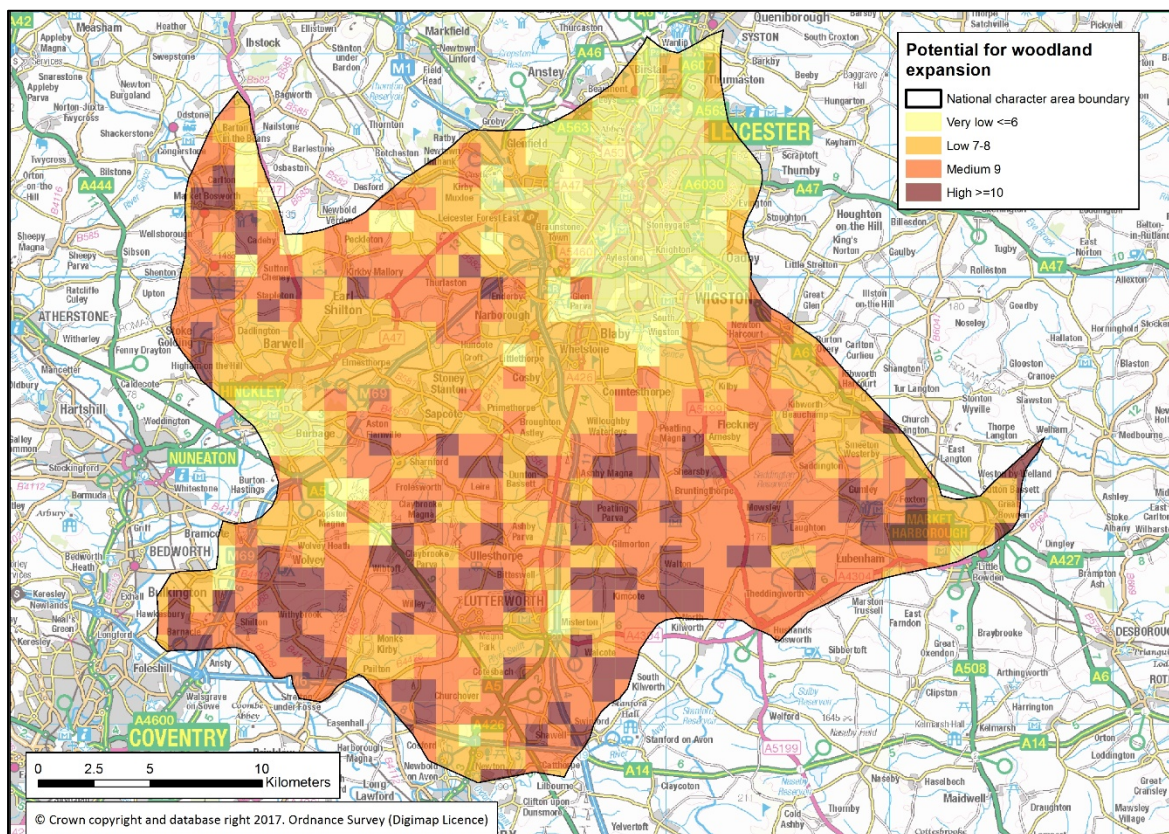
The area of the Leicestershire Vales extends between the towns of Hinckley, Leicester and Market Harborough, and comprises a series of low-lying clay vales and river valleys. It is included within the Western Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, and extends from the town of Hinckley in the west to Leicester in the north-east and south to Market Harborough and Lutterworth. Leicester dominates the north of the NCA. Aside from the larger towns on the periphery, the settlement pattern across the area is predominantly one of nucleated villages and hamlets. Agriculture is a mix of arable and pasture, with small- to medium-sized fields which vary greatly in regularity. The area is crossed by several major routes, including the A5, A6, the M1 and M69, with Leicester forming a key hub. There is very little woodland in the NCA, at only 3% cover, of which only 6% is ancient woodland. Woodlands are small and intermittent and are commonly found as spinneys, copses and game coverts. Ancient woodland is generally restricted to the river valleys.

The Historic Environment Character

The river valleys, and the Nene terraces in particular, contain a dense and varied array of archaeological evidence representing clearance and settlement from the Neolithic onwards. Romano-British settlement was equally, if not more, dense with villas and hamlets associated with the larger centres such as Leicester. The Roman town at Leicester (*Ratae Corieltavorum*) was on the Fosse Way, which crosses Watling Street to the south of the city. Where these two major Roman routes intersect was another Roman town, at High Cross. The settlement pattern of villages has its origins in the medieval period, and many exhibit evidence for planning in their layout. Their associated common field systems can be traced in surviving field boundaries and in many areas as ridge and furrow earthworks and moated sites. Settlement desertion came with a move to livestock farming for meat and dairy produce, combined with corn production, supplying the expanding markets of the industrial towns. Agricultural, industrial and commercial wealth stimulated the development of grand houses in the 18th and 19th centuries, and parkland remains a significant component of the valley landscapes. The principal towns developed as market centres from the medieval period, and as stopovers on the Great North Road: they expanded rapidly as industrial centres in the late 18th and 19th centuries, and many farm buildings around Hinckley to the west were adapted into workshops as the local stocking-knitting industry moved from domestic to industrial production.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes suggests that there is a medium level of opportunity for woodland expansion within the NCA. Woodland creation is not seen as a major opportunity in the NCA profile, however, apart from the creation of wood pasture and wet woodland, particularly in areas of former gravel workings. The mapping, however, suggests that opportunities may be available across the southern half of the NCA. There are archaeologically sensitive sites in this area, however, particularly focused around Roman roads, and care should be taken to avoid impact, both directly and on the setting of such sites. New planting should also respect historic field patterns, where these are still legible in the modern landscape.



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