

NCA 105 Forest of Dean and Lower Wye

Overview

The area is bounded to the west by the River Wye and to the east by the River Severn, tapering to Beachley Point, where the Wye enters the Severn Estuary. To the north is south Herefordshire. The western side of the NCA lies within the Wye Valley AONB, which comprises around 26% of the total area. Centred on an undulating, largely unenclosed wooded plateau, it lies within the Upland and Upland Fringe Agricultural Landscape Type. The field pattern is diverse in size and regularity and agriculture is mixed, with arable and a pastoral landscape of livestock rearing, with some dairying along the edge of the Severn and Avon Vale. There are also smallholdings of small- to medium-sized fields, supporting market gardening, orchards, livestock rearing and horse grazing. Settlement mostly rings the Forest, with nucleated settlement that grew largely through post medieval industrial expansion. The underlying settlement pattern is predominantly dispersed, with many common edge and squatter settlements, one of the largest of which is St Briavels. The road system is mostly a network of minor roads and lanes, with movement out of the area to the east and west restricted by the Rivers Wye and Severn. The main access routes are the A4136 through the Dean, the A40 to the north; the A48 to the south-east; and the A466 along the Wye Valley, linking with the M48, M4, M5 and M50. The dominant landscape character of the NCA is woodland, which covers 41% of the area. Of this, over 80% is ancient woodland, of which a large part has been replanted. Dean was a royal hunting preserve before the Conquest, and has survived as one of the principal Crown forests in England, managed by the Forestry Commission. The Wye Valley has an important range of woodland stand types and rare species including three species of whitebeam, whilst the statutory forest at the centre of the NCA contains a mixture of semi-natural woodland, native broadleaf and conifer plantation. These are some of the most diverse woodlands in Britain.

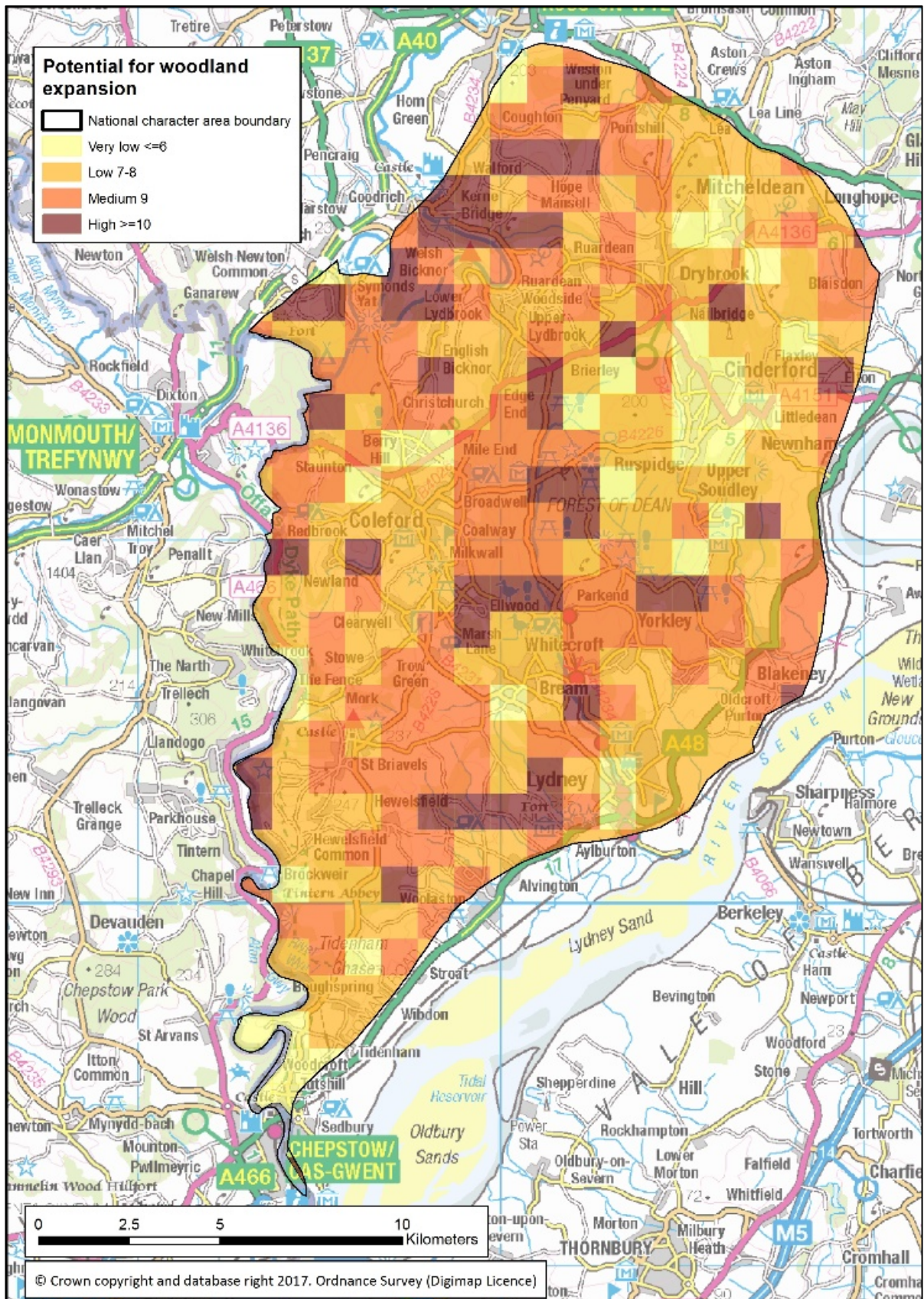
The Historic Environment Character

The NCA's location as a border county between England and Wales has left a legacy in the archaeological record. Offa's Dyke runs along the top of the steep slope overlooking the River Wye, and the Wye remained a defensible border in the Norman period, with castles such as Monmouth and Chepstow situated just outside the NCA. Dean was already a royal hunting preserve by the time of the Norman Conquest. The historic landscape character of the NCA has been shaped by its industrial past and its status as a royal forest from the medieval period. The dispersed settlement pattern of much of the area, a history of common-edge encroachments and assarts, and the extensive woodland cover are legacies of the area's status as a royal forest. Coal has been mined in the area from the Roman period, and iron from the Iron Age. From the medieval period onwards, rights to mine iron ore, coal, stone and associated minerals were granted to the Free Miners within the Hundred of St Briavels, resulting in numerous small-scale workings within the Forest of Dean. The area also became known for iron processing, and there is a long history of active traditional woodland management, including extensive historical coppicing and charcoal burning, which supplied the iron industry. Charcoal was produced first for the smelting hearths and then, from the early 17th century, for blast furnaces. Smelting ceasing in 1864 with minor ore extraction continuing until the end of 19th century. There were also copper works from late 17th century, and from the late 18th century industry expanded to include

tin plate works, machine engineering, brick making, wire works and tanning. Quarrying remains an important local industry, and coal-mining expanded to include deep pits in the late 19th century. Today, evidence for the area's industrial past survives as extensive archaeological remains. With the decline of industry, coppicing declined, though the woods were valued as timber, particularly for naval ship building. The legacy of this can be seen in surviving oak plantations. From the 1920s, when the Forest was taken over by the Forestry Commission, large areas of coniferous woodland were planted.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates a medium level of potential for woodland expansion, particularly around the central wooded plateau and along the Wye Valley around Welsh Bicknor, Lydbrook and Ruardean. Planting along the River Wye would help to meet opportunities highlighted in the NCA profile, to reduce soil erosion, reduce land slippage on steep slopes through proper management, and to help ensure soil and water quality. Any new planting along the banks of the River Wye, however, has to consider the extensive archaeological resource, from Offa's Dyke through to post medieval industrial remains. The higher potential identified by the mapping in the central plateau does not take into account the importance of the mosaic of woodland, transitional and open habitats. The NCA profile emphasises the need for good management of existing woodland, through coppicing, replacing softwoods with hardwoods, controlling deer and boar populations, and maintaining the tradition of commoning to retain open areas within the forest.



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