

NCA 106 Severn and Avon Vales

Overview

This large NCA encompasses the low-lying broad valleys of the Rivers Severn and Avon, and various tributaries, and is flanked by the hills of the Forest of Dean and the Malverns to the west, and the Cotswolds to the east. Small areas of the Cotswolds AONB extends into the eastern edge of the NCA, and the Malverns AONB in the west, accounting for around 6% of the total area. It is a diverse, gently undulating open landscape, which is included within the Western Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type. Along the Severn and Avon rivers, are extensive flood plains, narrowing to the south where the River Severn widens into the Severn Estuary. Along the rivers, pasture dominates, with estuarine levels further south. Many of the levels and grasslands have been managed historically as flood meadows. In the northern section of the NCA, to the west of the Severn there is a landscape of dispersed settlement, with small pasture fields and still-extant commons. To the east, the agricultural land is richer, particularly around the Vale of Evesham where market gardening predominates. Orcharding is found across the NCA. To the south and east, settlements are more nucleated, often around a church that stand prominently in this low-lying landscape. Fields are medium to large in size and regular in form, many resulting from the parliamentary enclosure of medieval common fields. The NCA cover several significant urban areas, including the county towns of Worcester and Gloucester, as well as the industrial port and outer suburb of Avonmouth at the southern end. The low-lying nature of much of this area means that it is susceptible to widespread flooding. The NCA is a major communications corridor, historically along the rivers, but in modern times as the nexus of major routes running north-south, and routes crossing between England and Wales. The M5 runs along most of its length, with the M50 junction providing access to south Wales from the Midlands. The M4 runs north west of Bristol, leading to the two Severn crossings via the M4 and M48. Woodland cover is low within the NCA, at only 5%, of which less than a third is ancient woodland. The appearance of woodland is helped by hedgerow trees and orchards, and there is some ancient woodland on higher ground, but the river valleys generally have few trees, mainly willows and alders alongside field ditches.

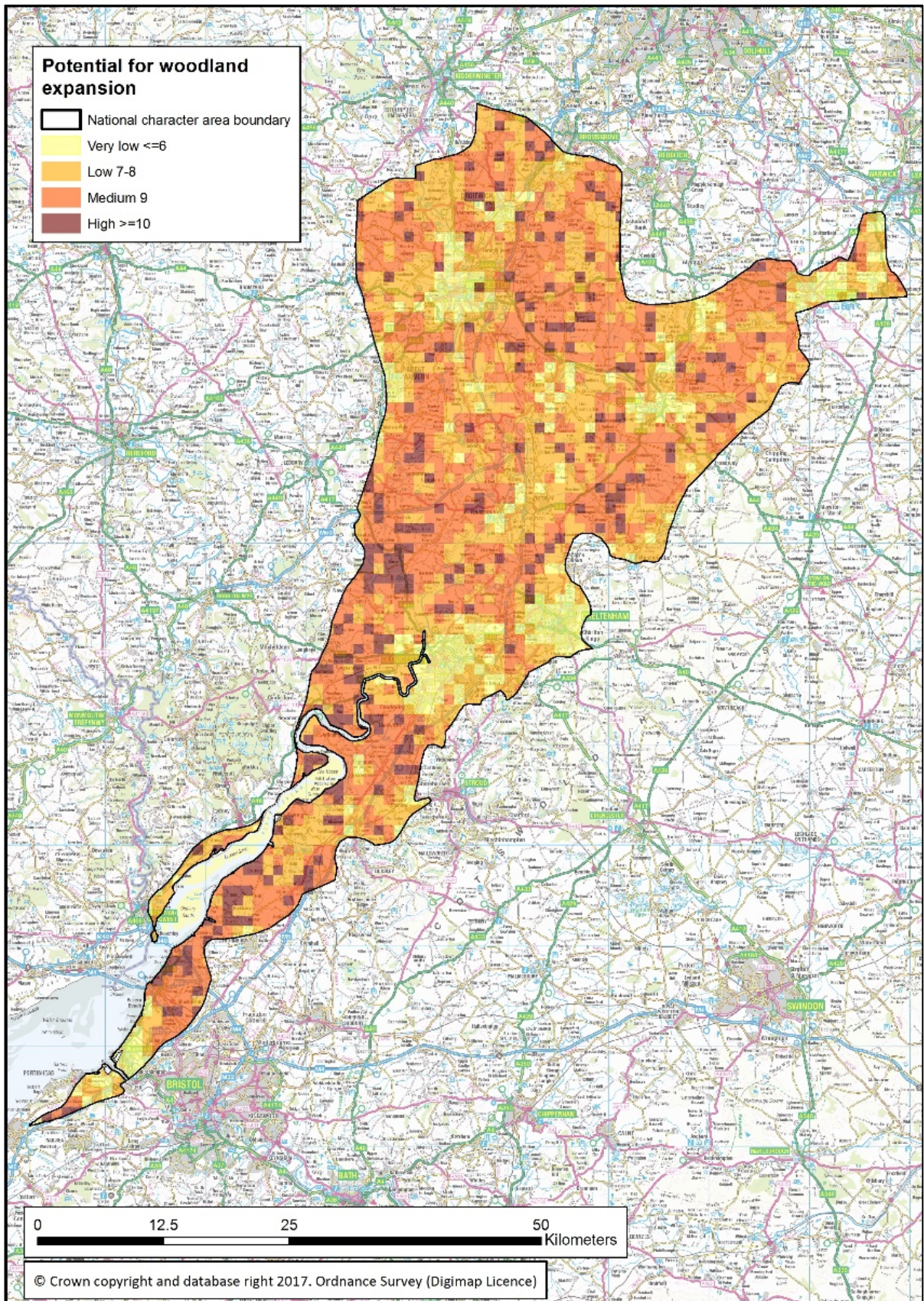
The Historic Environment Character

There is extensive archaeological evidence for all periods in the NCA, with many sites surviving as cropmarks. There are places such as Bredon Hill, an outlier of the Cotswolds, where multiple phases of human activity have been found, from Palaeolithic hand axes to the Iron Age hillforts of Kemerton Camp, Conderton Camp and, possibly Elmley Castle. The Iron Age saw the development of Droitwich as a centre for salt production, an industry which continued up until the 19th century. In the Roman period, urban centres developed across the area, for example at Worcester, Gloucester, Pershore and Evesham, with numerous villas and other settlements in the rural areas. Early Christian centres developed as important urban centres in the medieval period, such as Worcester, Gloucester and Tewkesbury. Planned towns developed from the 12th century at Evesham and Stratford-upon-Avon while Cheltenham developed as a spa town from the 1830s. Rivers were vital routes for communication and commerce, and weirs, fish traps and tidal mills testify to the Severn's importance to the area's economy. Local industries and the urban growth of Gloucester and Worcester were stimulated by the opening of canals from late 18th century.

Agriculture was based on mixed farming, with arable mostly concentrated on the heavy but fertile soils to the east, combined with the fattening of cattle and sheep. Orcharding, particularly for cider and perry, grew in importance from the 17th century. Market gardening, horticulture and smallholdings grew and intensified with the opening of the railways in the 19th century, allowing access to expanding urban markets.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

Opportunities for new woodland planting are low according to the mapping of historic and natural environment attributes. Where there are clusters of higher opportunities, these are on the west side of the lower reaches of the Severn, to the west and north of Gloucester, and on the east side of the Severn between the M4 and Gloucester. Planting should fit into the opportunities identified in the NCA profile, which highlights the need to link fragmented habitats, particularly areas of ancient woodland. The NCA profile names Bredon Hill, and the Cotswold outlier that includes Bredon does show as a small cluster on the mapping. The archaeological sensitivity of this area, however, means that careful consideration should be taken of the location of any new planting, both to avoid direct impact as well as impact on the setting of archaeological monuments. The NCA profile references the Forestry Commission opportunities mapping, but planting schemes should also consider the generally open nature of the landscape.



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