

NCA 107 Cotswolds

Overview

The Cotswolds is an extensive character area lying between Bath in the south and Banbury in the north. It forms part of an Oolitic Limestone outcrop stretching from Dorset to Lincolnshire, and is included within the Chalk and Limestone Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type. The NCA is distinguished by an open wold landscape, with gently rolling hills and wooded valleys forming a dip slope to a west-facing steep scarp. The distinctive landscape character is reflected in 65% of the area lying within the Cotswold AONB. It is a predominantly rural area, with arable dominating the high wold and dip slope, with pastoral farming in the river valleys and steep hillsides. There are also large areas of common land on the high wold and scarp slope, with unimproved calcareous grassland. The field pattern is one of generally regular, small to medium-sized fields, reflecting piecemeal and large-scale enclosure of former common fields and common pasture. In the valley bottom are former water meadows. The settlement pattern is mainly nucleated, with towns and villages at the foot of the scarp slope, in the valley bottoms and along spring lines, but with scattered hamlets and farmsteads in between, particularly on the high Wolds. On the eastern edge of the Cotswolds is Blenheim Palace, a grade I registered park and garden and also a World Heritage Site. Around the Stroud Valley fields are more irregular, reflecting piecemeal enclosure of the commons, along with common-edge settlement. The local building stone forms a key element in the distinctive character of the settlements of the NCA. Although predominantly rural in character, the NCA includes the towns of Stroud, Cirencester and Bradford-on-Avon, and the city of Bath, with other regionally significant towns nearby, including Oxford, Swindon and Bristol. The centre of Bath is a World Heritage Site. As a result, the NCA is crossed by several major roads, including the M4 and M40 motorways, as well as several main rail routes and the Kennet and Avon Canal. The NCA is fairly well-wooded, with a coverage of 11%, around a third of which is ancient woodland. Woodland is scattered across the NCA, particularly in the form of coniferous and mixed plantation blocks on the high Wolds and dip slope. Elsewhere woodland, particularly ancient woodland, is found on the steep valleys sides, with a concentration on the scarp slope and the valleys which dissect it. Beech hangars are a feature of the top of the scarp, and the Cotswold Beechwoods have been designated a Special Area of Conservation.

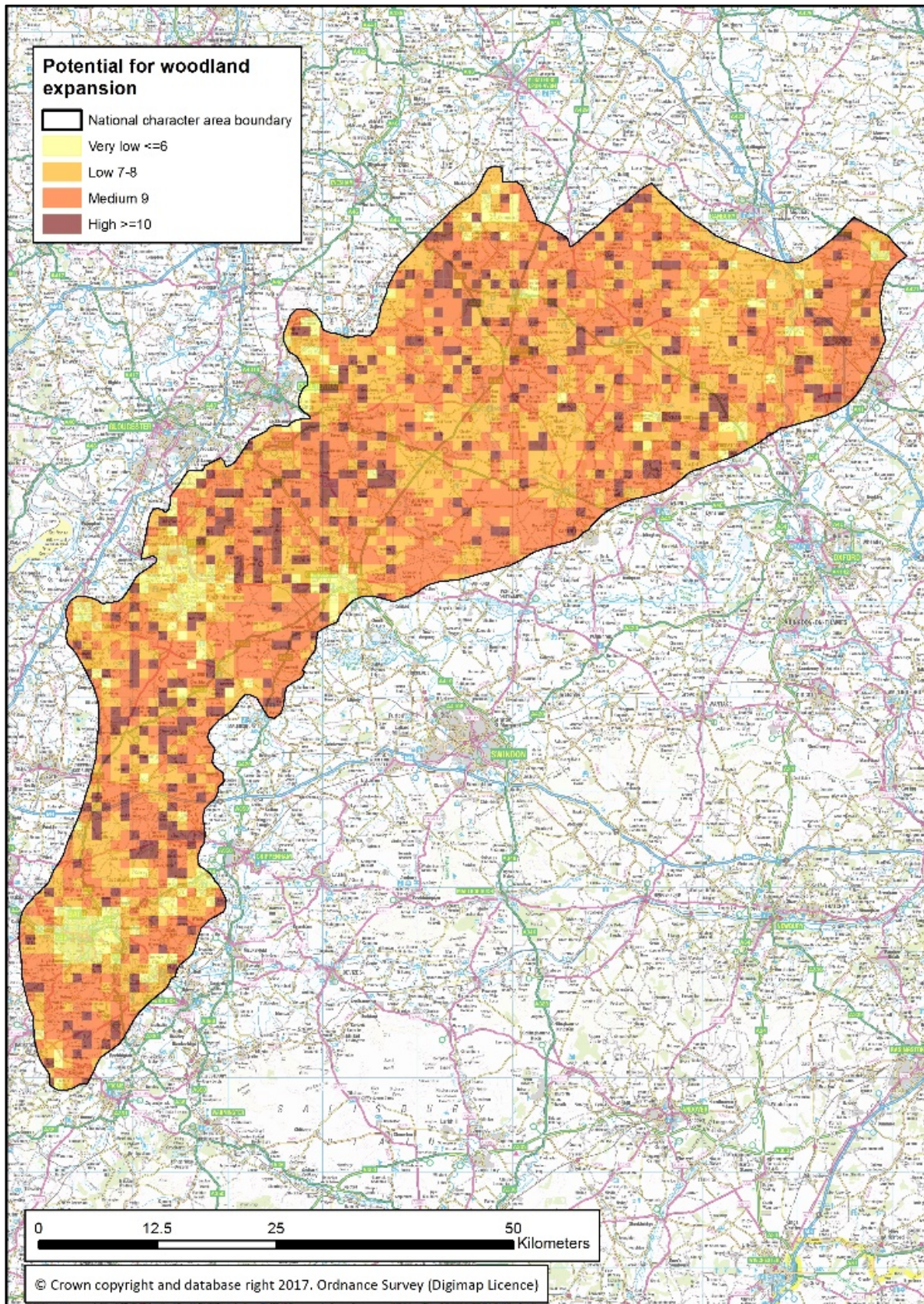
The Historic Environment Character

The NCA has a particularly rich archaeological record for all periods, including Neolithic chambered tombs, stone circles and hill forts. The NCA includes Cirencester, which was one of the largest towns in Roman Britain, and a regional capital, and Bath on the southern boundary of the area, where baths and a temple complex developed around the hot springs. Within the NCA, several modern routes follow major Roman roads, including Ermin Street, the Fosse Way and Akeman Street, which all converge on Cirencester, and the Roman countryside was well-settled with farms and villas. The present-day settlement pattern was established in the medieval period, with planned villages and associated field systems. As in many areas of the country, there was settlement contraction and abandonment from the 14th century, leaving a legacy of settlement and field system earthworks. It became a centre of the broadcloth industry with areas of arable converted to sheep pastures. The wealth brought by the cloth industry has left its mark on existing towns and villages, for example in

the churches, merchants' houses and loomshops. Places such as Bradford-on-Avon became important cloth manufacturing centres. In the post medieval period, a cloth-finishing industry, with fulling and dying, developed in the deeply-incised valleys cut into the scarp slope of the Cotswolds, taking advantage of the plentiful water supplies. As a result, early industrial settlements, such as Stroud and Dursley, developed. The thermal springs at Bath became a major spa town from the 18th century, based around the Roman baths, with the redevelopment of much of the city in the neo-classical style. The importance of Bath as a grand neo-classical city, and the preservation of its Roman baths, has resulted in its inscription as a World Heritage Site.

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 for woodland planting, these are found in a scattered band across the northern part of the Cotswolds, around Stow-in-the-Wold, in a belt between Dursley and Bath, and along the scarp slope to the north of Stroud and Cirencester. In most cases, they represent opportunities for planting around areas of existing woodland, particularly on valley slopes. The opportunities for planting around scarp slopes is identified in the NCA profile. The NCA profile, suggests planting opportunities to reduce flooding and improve water quality, and as a contribution to creating new landscapes around settlements on the edge of the NCA. Any new planting, however, needs to take account of the historic landscape character of field and settlement patterns, and of potential impact on archaeological monuments and their settings.



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