

NCA 108 Upper Thames Clay Vales

Overview

The NCA is an east-west band of gently undulating, low-lying land that extends from Aylesbury and Bicester in the east to Malmesbury in the west. It includes the Vale of the White Horse, Aylesbury Vale, Wiltshire and Oxfordshire Vales and Buckinghamshire Southern Vale. The area has landscape designations on its northern and southern boundaries, including Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site, and the Chilterns, Cotswolds and North Wessex Downs AONBs. A small part of the North Wessex Downs AONB extends into the Upper Thames Clay Vales NCA. It is a largely rural area, included within the Western Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type. It is dominated by arable farming in the Vale of the White Horse, but mostly pasture elsewhere, particularly on the poorly drained waterlogged soils. Fields tend to be large and regular, usually bounded by hedgerows. There are substantial gravel deposits overlying the clay in areas, and the extensive gravel quarries are a characteristic of the area, usually in the form of flooded pits. Most notable is the area around Ashton Keynes, where the former gravel pits are the centre of the Cotswold Water Park, now used for leisure activities but also including several nature reserves. The settlement pattern is a nucleated one, of villages and mainly small market towns, though in the east there are some larger settlements such as Aylesbury. Settlement developed along the springlines of the valley sides, or on raised gravel areas above the valley floodplains. Where there are isolated farmsteads, these mostly date to the era of Parliamentary enclosure in the late 18th or early 19th century, although there are a few earlier examples. The road network is largely a local one, connecting towns and villages, though there are some main roads, including trunk routes, which cross the area connecting regional urban centres such as Swindon and Oxford. The area is also cross by the M40 and the M4 skirts the southern edge. Woodland cover is low within the NCA, at only 5%, of which nearly a quarter is ancient woodland. Woodlands tend to be small and scattered across the higher land, with little wet woodland on the floodplains. There are, however, willow pollards and black poplar along water courses, and on the higher Greensands are concentrations of orchards. Fields are generally bounded by hedgerows, with hedgerow trees, and there are mature oak trees within fields.

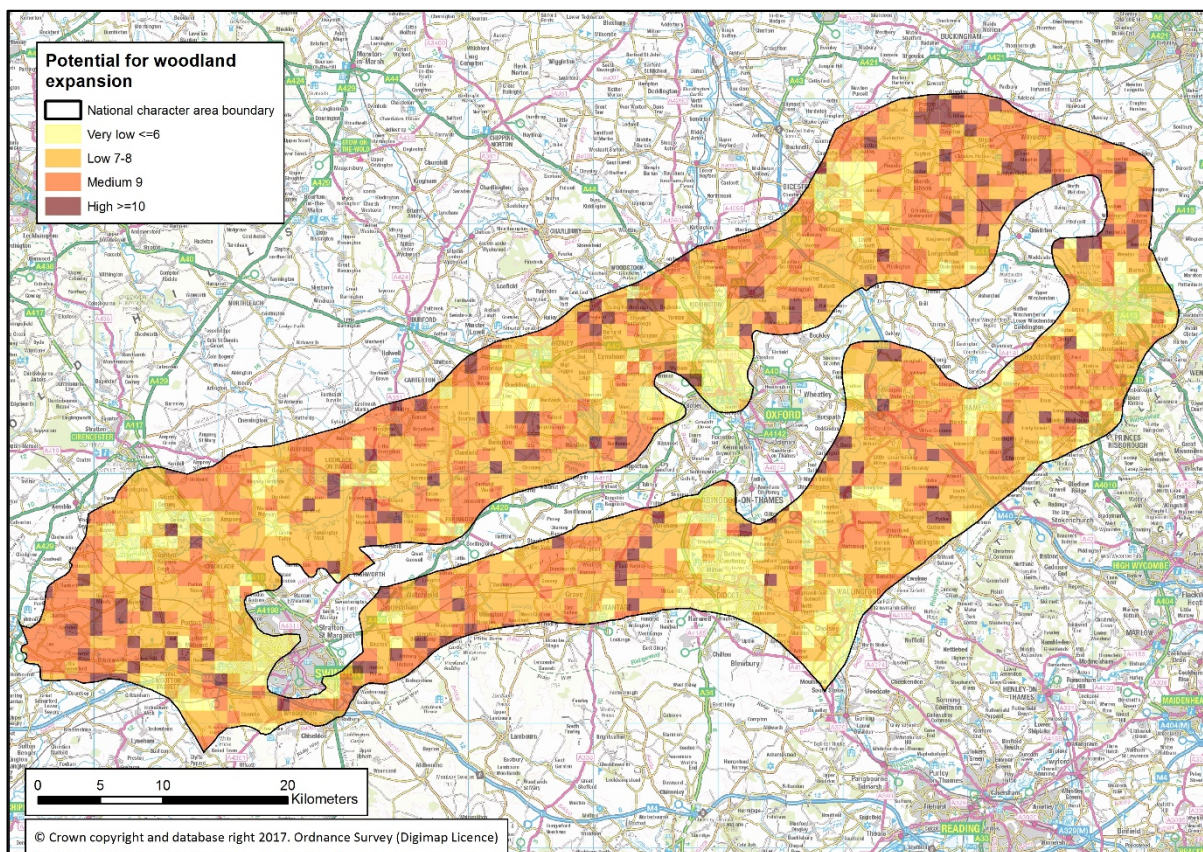
The Historic Environment Character

The gravels of the Upper Thames gravels have produced significant prehistoric, Roman and early medieval remains, including settlements, field systems, villas, roads and trackways. The NCA contains the Roman town of Dorchester-on-Thames, and Cirencester on the western edge. Many Roman farms were concentrated on the well-drained gravel terraces of the river valleys, particularly the Thames, and many survive as cropmark sites, though away from the main arable areas, earthworks features survive. The area is particularly significant for Anglo-Saxon remains, such as the Saxon burhs at Wallingford and Cricklade, but also widespread rural settlement, for example in the area around Ashton Keynes, as well as a concentration of Anglo-Saxon burial sites in the south of the area. Later medieval settlement, mainly in the form of villages, developed along the springlines. There is evidence of desertion and shrinkage of settlement in the later medieval period, some of which has been preserved as settlement and field system earthworks. Around Aylesbury, for example, are deserted villages such as Quarrendon, Fleet Marston and Creslow. Nationally important

survival of ridge and furrow can be found at West Hanney, Denchworth, Lodgershall, Hogshaw and Creslow.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

Opportunities for new woodland planting are low according to the mapping of historic and natural environment attributes, and this reflects the largely open character of the modern landscape. Where the mapping does indicate opportunities for woodland planting, these are generally where there is existing woodland, for example in the west of the NCA between Royal Wootton Bassett and Minety, and around villages. The NCA profile does not see woodland expansion as a key priority, though it does suggest wet woodland in the valleys to filter pollution, as well as the maintenance of veteran trees such as pollarded willows and black poplar. Any new planting should take account of the significant potential for archaeological remains, particularly on the gravels, and should also take account of the historic open character of the area, and features such as water meadows.



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