NCA 110 Chilterns

Overview

The Chilterns NCA is a long, south-west to north-east orientated area, stretching between Reading to Letchworth Garden City. It is included within the Chalk and Limestone Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, and the underlying geology is chalk, with a north-west-facing escarpment, and a plateau-like dip slope falling to the south-east and cut by branching, steep-sided valleys. Half of the NCA is within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and a small part falls within the North Wessex Downs AONB on the south-western edge. Agriculture is a mix of pasture and arable, with numerous areas of common. Commons comprise species-rich chalk grasslands, but there are also remnant heaths and acid grasslands. Fields are bounded by hedgerows and many are anciently enclosed. The steep valleys sides are mostly pasture, and there are meadows in the valley bottoms. Arable production, mainly cereals, dominate the northern end and along the Thames Valley in the south. The largest settlement within the NCA is the town of Luton, though there are other towns including Dunstable, Hemel Hempstead, Berkhamsted, Chesham, Amersham and High Wycombe, which have grown as commuter settlements for London. Within the AONB, the area is rural with a settlement pattern of nucleated villages, particularly in the valleys. The proximity to London means that significant areas of land are used for leisure, including golf courses and horse paddocks. Several major routes cross the NCA, leading towards London, and include the M40, M1 and A1M and well as major rail lines such as the West Coast Main Line. The area is well-wooded, with a coverage of 17%, particularly within the AONB. Woodland is part of the distinctive landscape character and nearly 45% is ancient woodland. Woodland is found across the plateau, densely scattered across the area in blocks and interspersed with other semi-natural habitats, though this is more fragmentary in the north, where there is more arable cultivation. It is also found in the valleys and on the scarp slope, particularly in the form of beech hangars, and ancient beech woods are a distinctive feature. The beech woods were managed for the furniture industry, but there are also ancient coppice woodlands. Natural box woods are found on the scarps, and cherry orchards have long been a feature of the central part of the NCA, though these are now more fragmentary.
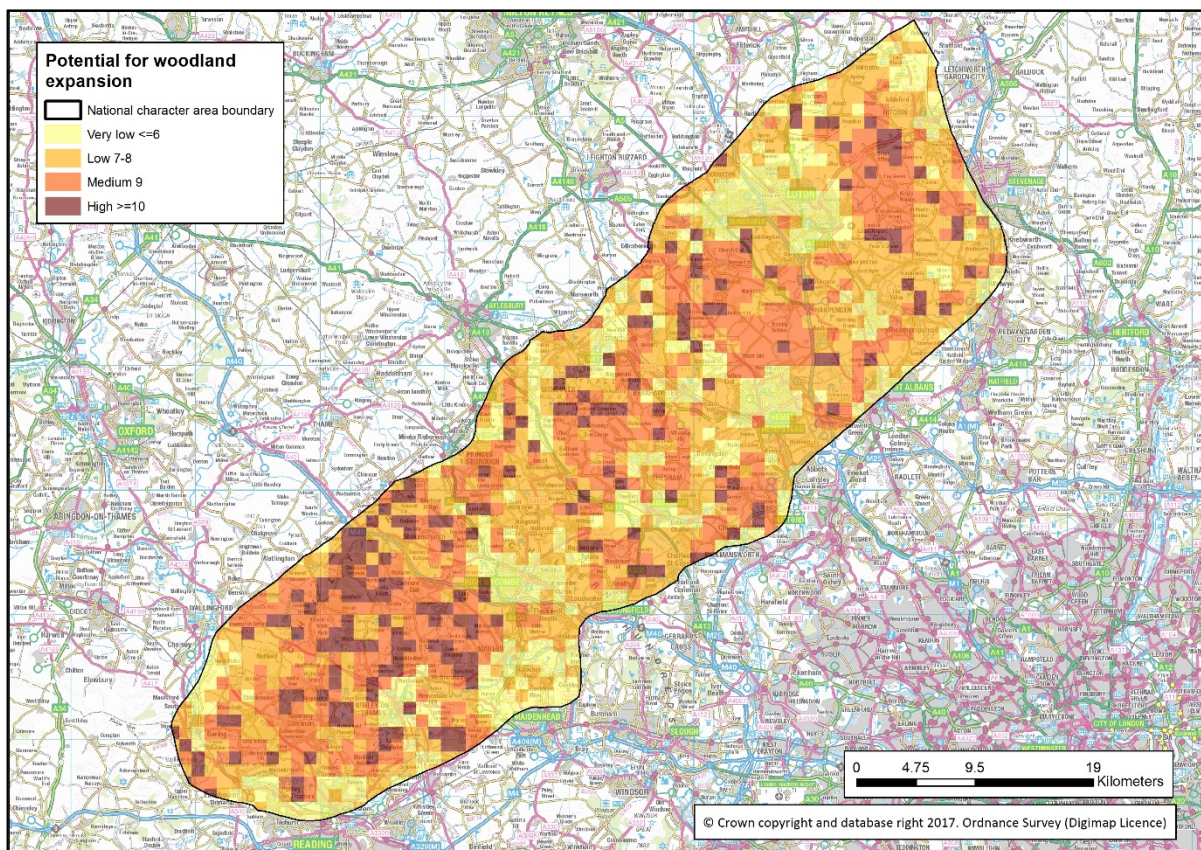
The Historic Environment Character

There is plentiful evidence for settlement from prehistory onwards, and the area has remains of prehistoric burial mounds, Iron Age and Romano- British farmsteads, Roman villa estates, and an iron industry in the Roman period. The NCA also includes the Roman town of Verulamium, at St Albans, where a fort was built soon after the Roman invasion and was quickly founded as a town. It became the third largest town in Britain. The field systems across large parts of the NCA are thought to be ancient, including co-axial fields which may have late prehistoric origins. Other fields are known to have been assarts, taken in from woodland clearances, and the evidence of the former common arable fields has been preserved in the sinuous field boundaries. The extensive woodlands meant that a furniture industry developed, and pigs were a significant aspect of stock-rearing in the beech woods. Sheep grazing was a feature of the chalk grasslands. The area's proximity to London led to the development of country houses and estates in the post medieval period. With the

advent of the railways and improvement roads, there was a vast expansion of historic towns and villages in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The overall opportunities for woodland expansion, as mapped by the historic and natural environment attributes, is low. A low score probably reflects the already extensive woodlands within the AONB, and the dominance of arable agriculture in the northern part of the NCA. Where areas of possible expansion are highlighted in the northern half, these are generally around areas of existing woodland. There are more extensive opportunities highlighted within the AONB and, again, these are mostly around areas of existing woodland. This would fit in with the opportunity highlighted in the NCA profile, for the better management of the woodlands, landscape restorations and securing woodland and tree health, though this may mean replanting within woodland extents, rather than expansion. Even within woodland, the importance of archaeological woodland features must be considered. In some cases, the NCA profile indicates that clearance of secondary woodland should be undertaken. Historic land use, such as the species-rich chalk grasslands, managed as common, should be conserved, so any new woodland planting would have to take this into account.

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