

NCA 111 Northern Thames Basin

Overview

The NCA covers a large area in an arc from Hertfordshire in the west to the Essex coast in the east. It is included within the South East Mixed (woodland) Agricultural Landscape Type, and agriculture is a mix of pastoral and arable farming, reflecting the varying quality of soils within the NCA. Stock-rearing is dominated by dairying and pig-rearing. There is also an increase in smallholdings, accounting for nearly a third of agricultural holdings. The field pattern across large parts of the area are of small, irregular fields, anciently enclosed and bounded by hedgerows, but also include some co-axial fields. Within the London Clay lowlands, larger, more regular fields dominate, where there is more arable cultivation. The settlement pattern is heavily urbanised and includes the suburbs of north London, and the spread of towns in Essex, such as Billericay and Basildon. There are historic towns and cities including St. Albans and Colchester, as well as new and planned towns such as Welwyn Garden City, Hatfield and Basildon. The rural settlement is one of villages, but with a large element of places created from commons of woodland clearance, with place-name elements such as -green and -end, particularly in the north. There are many major routes running across the NCA, both road and rail, mainly running into London but also includes the M25 London orbital motorway. Despite the extensively developed suburbs and commuter towns around London, the NCA is quite well-wooded, with a coverage of 10%. Of this, 37% is ancient woodland. Woodland coverage reflects the areas of medieval legal forest and hunting park, such as Hainault Forest and Epping Forest, with a good survival of wood pasture, and pollarded and veteran trees, as well as blocks of mixed and broadleaved woodland more than 500 hectares in extent. The eastern boundary of Hertfordshire is heavily wooded, including coppiced hornbeam woods with oak standards. The hilltops and ridges of Essex have smaller woods, including ancient woodland and secondary woodland on commons. Apple orchards are a feature of the London Clay lowlands and Essex heathlands.

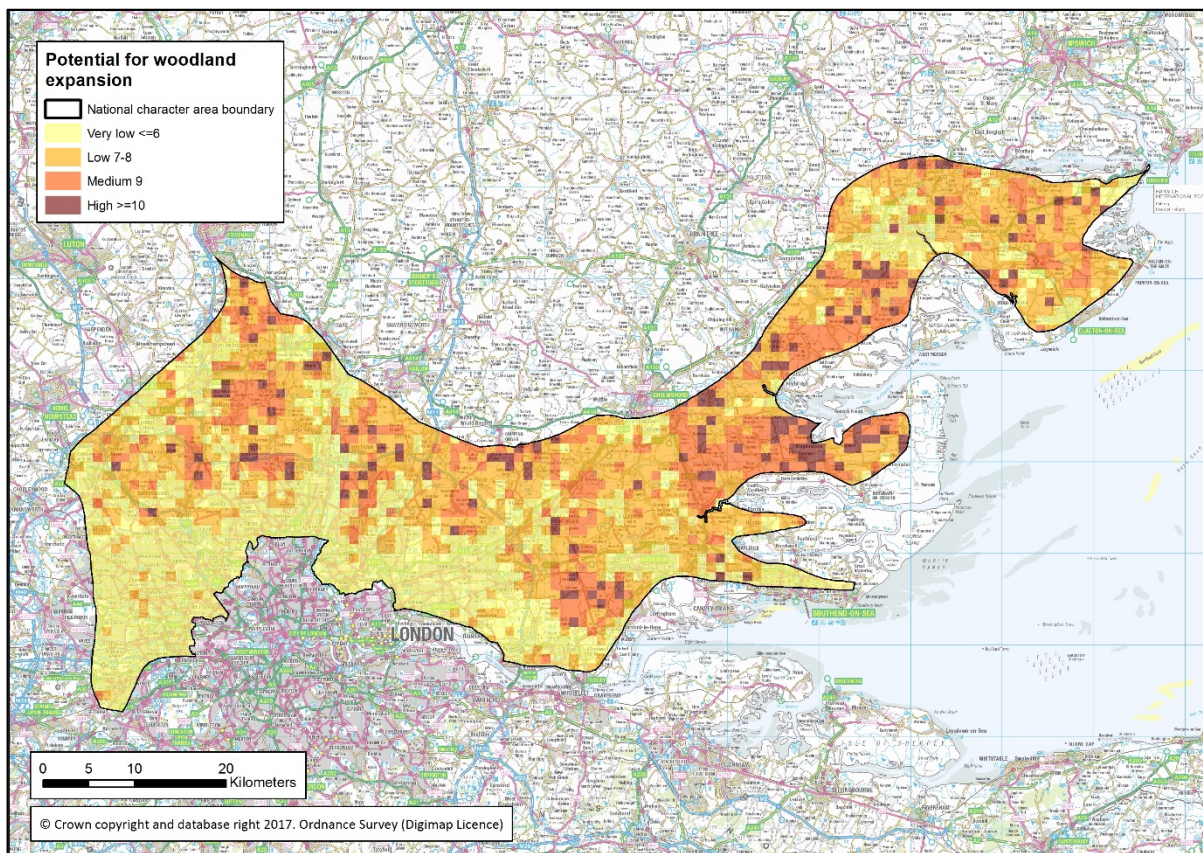
The Historic Environment Character

There are significant remains of prehistoric, Roman and Anglo-Saxon remains across Hertfordshire and Essex, particularly in the heathlands where there are surviving earthworks, but also elsewhere in the form of cropmarks. These include late prehistoric territorial boundaries, funerary monuments and settlement, as well as co-axial field systems. The NCA also includes the site of the Roman town of Colchester, the earliest Roman urban settlement in Britain, and the first capital of the province. In the later medieval period, large areas were administered under forest law, including Hainault and Epping Forests. The settlement pattern was mixed across the NCA, with areas of well-spaced nucleated villages, whilst elsewhere the pattern was more dispersed with farmsteads and hamlets. Place-name evidence indicates that there was a process of colonisation on the areas of common waste, with names with elements such as -end and -green. From the post medieval period, the influence of London led to the development of market towns and country estates. Industries also developed, such as malting and brewing, paper-making, hat-

making and tanneries. With the advent of the railways in the 19th century, there was a massive expansion of commuter settlements.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The opportunities for woodland expansion, as mapped by the historic and natural environment attributes, is low, largely because of the extensive urban area of Greater London and other towns around London. There are a few areas of higher potential between the built-up areas, but the main clusters of higher opportunity are to the east, between Chelmsford and the Blackwater Estuary. The NCA profile identifies opportunities to expand and link up existing woodland, as well as planting new woodlands in urban areas. Any new areas must take account of the areas of heathland and acid grassland, which are recommended for restoration, and which also have a high archaeological potential.



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