

NCA 115 Thames Valley

Overview

The NCA is a low-lying wedge-shaped area covering the Thames basin and is included within the South East Mixed (woodland) Agricultural Landscape Type. Reading marks the western end, where the NCA is narrowest. The area widens as it extends eastward, as far as Wimbledon in the south and Rickmansworth in the north. Large parts are urbanised, including outer suburbs of western London, but also Slough, Windsor, Maidenhead and Reading. There are some villages, which are now mainly commuter settlements for London and the major towns. The urban areas also have extensive industrial and storage facilities. As a result of extensive urban development, farming is limited and comprises mainly grazed pasture in a generally open, flat and featureless landscape. The field pattern is medium-scale and irregular, with smaller fields to the west. Undeveloped areas have been protected by green belt designation, including some small areas of heath, and by the extensive areas of parkland. The NCA contains many landscaped parks, including royal parks such as Windsor Great Park, Hampton Court and Richmond Park, but also the Botanic Gardens at Kew, which is also designated a World Heritage Site. Water is a key characteristic of the NCA, not only the River Thames and its tributaries, but also many water bodies created as large reservoirs to supply London with drinking water, and flooded mineral extraction quarries. The area is important for recreation both on and around the River Thames, with access to many of the parks and to areas of common. The NCA is a major transport hub, including the M25, the M3, M4 and M40, numerous main arterial roads connecting London to the surrounding areas, but also linking major towns within and beyond the NCA, as well as several of the main rail lines into London. Heathrow Airport also lies within the NCA, and is under continued pressure to expand. Despite the heavily urbanised character of the NCA, there is a total woodland coverage of 13%, of which nearly 23% is ancient woodland. In the Thames Valley, most woodland comprises a patchwork of small woods, though there are more extensive areas to the north, on the southern edge of the Chilterns. Ancient woodland is a feature of some of the parklands, particularly Windsor Great Park and Richmond.

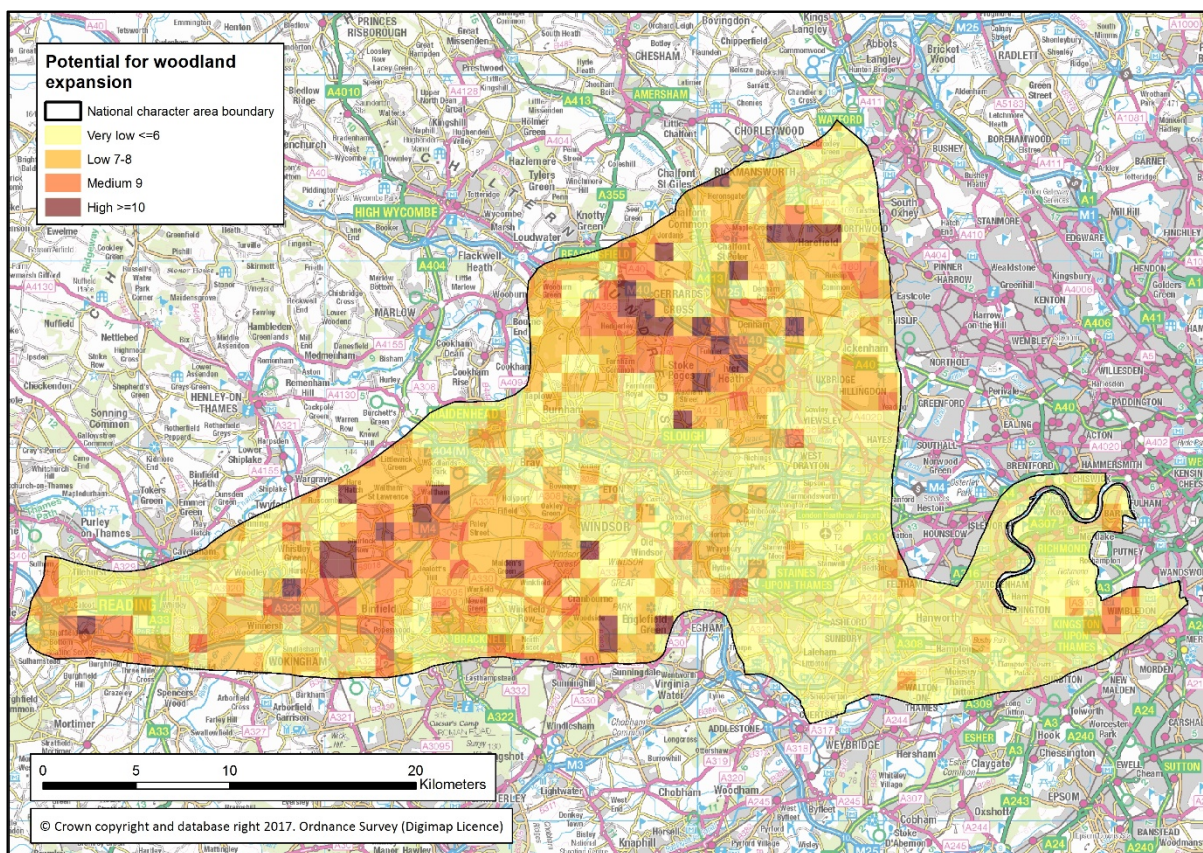
The Historic Environment Character

The sands and gravels of the River Thames floodplain are long settled, with a rich record of archaeological remains from early prehistory, including a Mesolithic site at Braywick near Maidenhead, and many important Neolithic and Bronze Age sites. The area continued to attract settlement throughout the Roman period. In the later medieval period, there was a focus on important estates because of the proximity to London. Windsor Castle, for example, was built by the Normans soon after the Conquest and became a royal residence in the reign of Henry I. The Manor of Sheen, near Kew, was a royal manor and became the site of Richmond Palace in the reign of Henry VII, with Richmond Park becoming a royal park in the early 17th century. Hampton Court was added to the royal estates in the mid-16th century. The NCA also contains the site of Runnymede, where the Magna Carta was sealed in 1215. The presence of royal estates was attractive to members of the aristocracy and gentry in the post medieval period, who developed their estates along the riverside, with the Thames providing a convenient transport route into London. The area also attracted artists, poets, landscape designers and scientists, including Sir Joseph Banks who developed the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. The area rapidly urbanised with the expansion of London,

a process which accelerated, first with the coach roads, but particularly with the advent of the railway. The designation of nearly half the area as greenbelt has helped to preserve some open character, but the undeveloped parts of the NCA, owe a significant amount to the extensive areas of parkland.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

Opportunities for woodland expansion, as mapped by the historic and natural environment attributes, is very low. The low level of opportunities is largely a consequence of the extensive urban areas, but also the significant areas of designated parks and gardens. Although woodland forms a significant factor in many parks and gardens, new planting schemes would require specialist advice and therefore outside the remit of general advice on woodland expansion. The mapping does identify two limited areas of potential for new woodland, however. The first is along the M4 corridor, between Reading and Maidenhead, and the second lies in the most northern reaches of the NCA, north-west of the Windsor/Maidenhead conurbation, particularly around the M40 corridor. These two areas would fit into the opportunities highlighted by the NCA profile to create sustainably-managed broadleaved woodlands along transport corridors, in order to improve noise reduction and air quality. The profile also identifies opportunities for wet woodland along the River Thames, but these would be small-scale. There are also likely to be opportunities to restore and expand existing areas of woodland.



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