

NCA 116 Berkshire and Marlborough Downs

Overview

The Berkshire and Marlborough Downs extends in a broad, east-west band, from Devizes in the west to the Thames Valley at Goring in the east. Almost the whole of the NCA lies within the North Wessex Downs AONB, apart from a small area that includes the town of Devizes, and fragments of landscape on the northern edge. The NCA includes the Avebury section of Stonehenge and Avebury and Associated Sites World Heritage. This is a predominantly rural landscape, included within the Chalk and Limestone Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, with rolling, open chalk downlands cut by more intimate river valley landscapes. The agricultural landscape is largely one of very large, open arable fields bounded by fences and grass baulks on the tops of the downs, with a pattern of mixed agriculture including meadows in more irregular, smaller fields in the valleys. Areas of chalk grassland survive on the scarps and steep slopes. Horse-racing is a major feature of the Lambourn Valley, to the north of Newbury, where there are racecourses, stables and gallops. The settlement pattern is a nucleated one in a rural landscape of villages, and Hungerford, Marlborough and Devizes form the main towns. Large courtyard farms, undertaking crop processing on a large scale, are a feature of the downs. Much of the road system is local, but the NCA is crossed by the M4 and a few major A-roads. Woodland covers 9% of the NCA, of which nearly 42% is ancient woodland. Woods tend to be small and scattered across most of the NCA, though there are very few around Devizes in the west. The major concentration lies between Marlborough and Hungerford, with the greatest concentration around Savernake Forest. Woods are commonly found on heavier clay-with-flints soils, the steep valley sides and scarp slopes, with Beech hangars and fox coverts planted in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

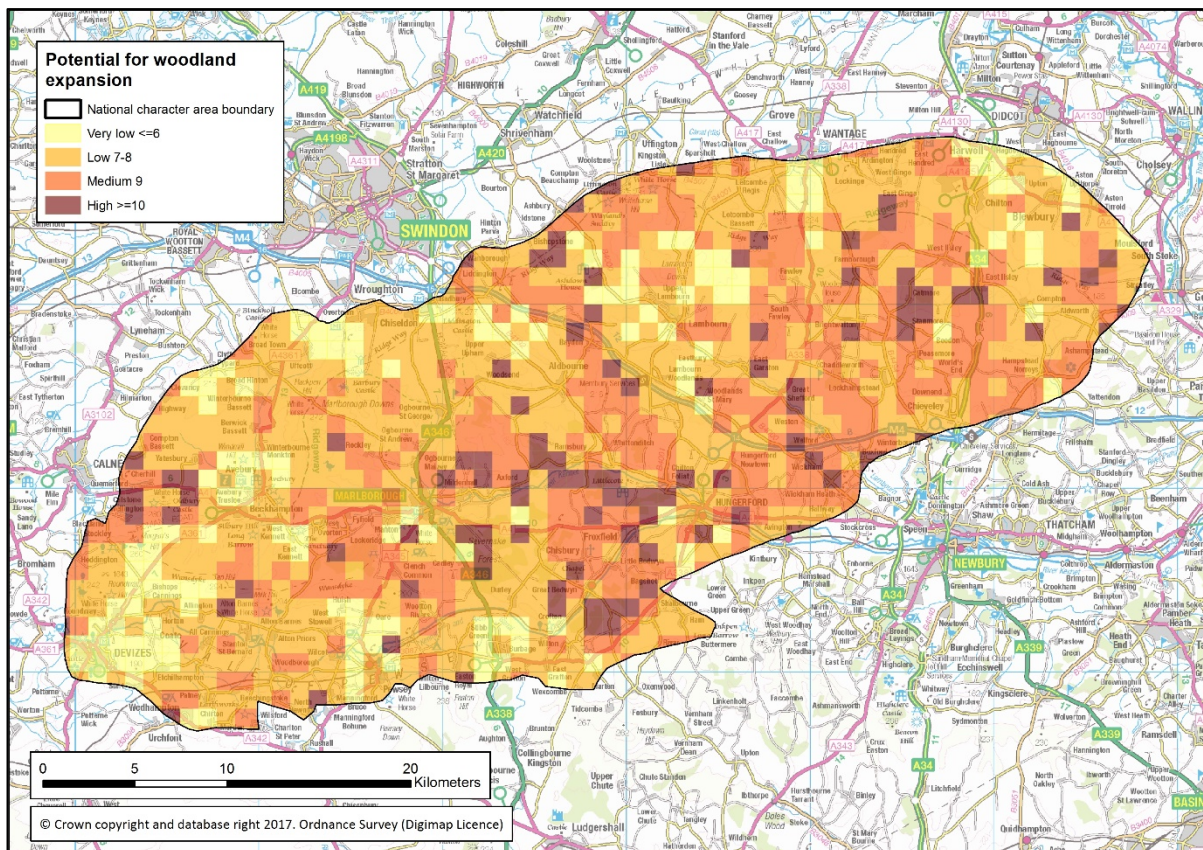
The Historic Environment Character

The NCA contains an extraordinarily rich legacy of prehistoric archaeological remains, from Palaeolithic artefacts found in the clay-with-flints around Hungerford and Kennet terrace deposits, through Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments and burial mounds to Iron Age hill-forts, field systems and nucleated settlements. The NCA contains the Avebury portion of the internationally significant Stonehenge and Avebury and Associated Sites World Heritage Site. The World Heritage Site covers numerous, well-preserved prehistoric ceremonial monuments of the Neolithic and Bronze Age, including Avebury, where the massive banks and ditches of a henge enclose the world's largest stone circle. Running from Avebury, right across the northern edge of the NCA, is the Ridgeway, linking many other nationally significant prehistoric monuments, including the hill-fort of Uffington Castle and the Uffington White Horse. The area was part of a well-settled landscape in the Roman period, with villas, farmsteads and villages. In the early medieval period, the boundary between Wessex and Mercia was marked by Wansdyke, part of which may have had origins in late prehistory. In the later medieval period, an early motte and bailey castle was established at Marlborough, which was later used as a royal residence and hunting lodge for Savernake Forest to the south. A motte and bailey castle was also established at Devizes, on the far western edge of the NCA. Here a planned town was laid out within the D-shaped bailey, which is still legible in the modern town plan. In the late medieval countryside, sheep farming came to dominate, supplying wool to the cloth industry. The area became known

for its cloth production, and there were many fulling mills along the rivers. The NCA is also notable as the location of the Battle of Roundway Down, which is included on the Battlefield Register and was one of the significant battles of the First Civil War in 1643.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates only a low potential for woodland expansion across the NCA as a whole, though there are areas of greater opportunity, particularly between Savernake Forest and Hungerford. This area has the greatest concentration of woodland, and new planting would represent an expansion and linking up of existing woodland habitats. It is clear from the NCA profile, however, that the NCA is not a priority area for expansion. Rather, an emphasis is placed on the management of existing woodland and the replacement of coniferous woodland with native species. The conservation of archaeological features and landscape, including woodland archaeology, should be given a high priority.



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