

NCA 121 Low Weald

Overview

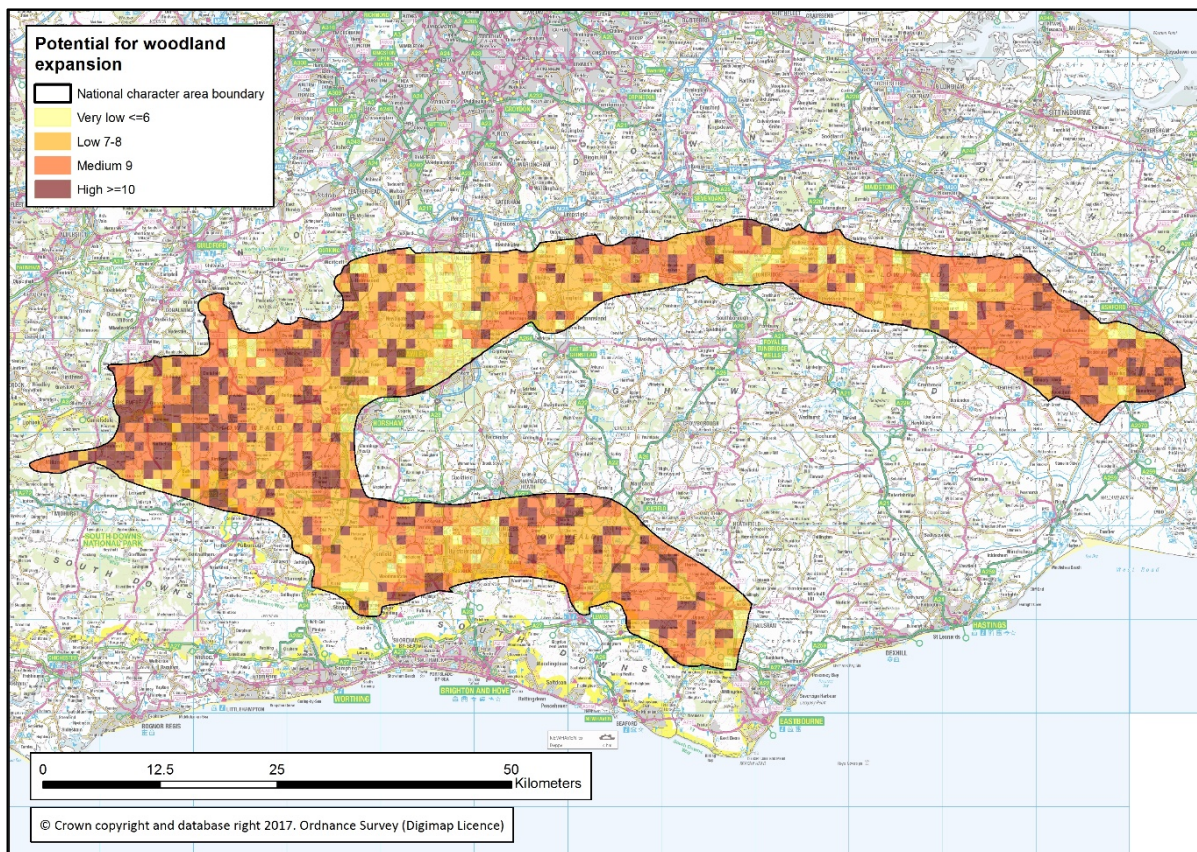
The Low Weald is a broad clay vale, mostly rural in character, which lies within the South East Mixed (Woodland) Agricultural Landscape Type. It extends around most of the High Weald NCA in a broad 'C', from Romney Marches in the north-east, to the Pevensey Levels in the south. The southern fringes of the NCA lies within the South Downs National Park, whilst a small portion of the Surrey Hills AONB extends into the north-western boundary of the area. Fields tend to be small and irregular, and bounded by hedgerows and narrow bands of woodland, known as shaws, though there has been some recent boundary loss. Pastoral farming predominates, including dairy, poultry and pigs. There is more arable on the higher ground, where soils are lighter and more easily cultivated. The settlement pattern is a largely dispersed one of farmsteads, farmstead clusters and hamlets, set within an anciently enclosed field pattern. Villages have developed along roadsides or around greens and commons. The few towns include Burgess Hill, Horsham, Crawley and Tonbridge. Although the M23 crosses the NCA, the road system is mainly local, between settlements. The NCA has a good woodland coverage, of 16%, of which nearly half is ancient woodland. Most of the woodland is broadleaved, and there is evidence of coppicing or former coppicing in many areas. In-field and hedgerow trees are also a feature.

The Historic Environment Character

Industry is one of the key features that influences the historic environment character of the Weald, including the Low Weald. Stone quarrying and brick-making were important local industries, along with marl digging for improving fields. The most important industry was iron production, which was a feature of the area from the Iron Age through to the 19th century. It was particularly important in the Roman period and at the end of the medieval period into the early post medieval period. The Weald provided all the resources needed, from iron ore mined in small pits, to coppiced woodland which produced charcoal for processing, and water-power from the streams which were dammed for mill ponds. The blast furnace was introduced at the end of the 15th century, aided by water-power that operated the bellows, and the hammers in the forging process. Glass production was another significant local industry. In the farming landscape, the importance of hop production has left a legacy of oast houses within the landscape of dispersed farmsteads and hamlets. The wealth of the local economy in the later medieval and early post medieval periods is visible in the large number of moated sites, the high concentration of pre-1750 farmstead buildings including Wealden houses and, in the north part of the character area, a major concentration of pre-1550 barns.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates that there is a medium level of potential for woodland expansion. The largest cluster of high potential is in the west, to the east of Haslemere, and is a continuation of the areas of high potential in the neighbouring NCA of Wealden Greensand. There are smaller, more scattered areas of high potential in the far eastern and southern ends of the area. The NCA profile identifies opportunities to expand woodland through linking existing habitats, particularly on the steep valley sides, but it also acknowledges the importance of managing existing woodland, through the use of coppicing and wood pasture.



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