

# NCA 122 High Weald

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## *Overview*

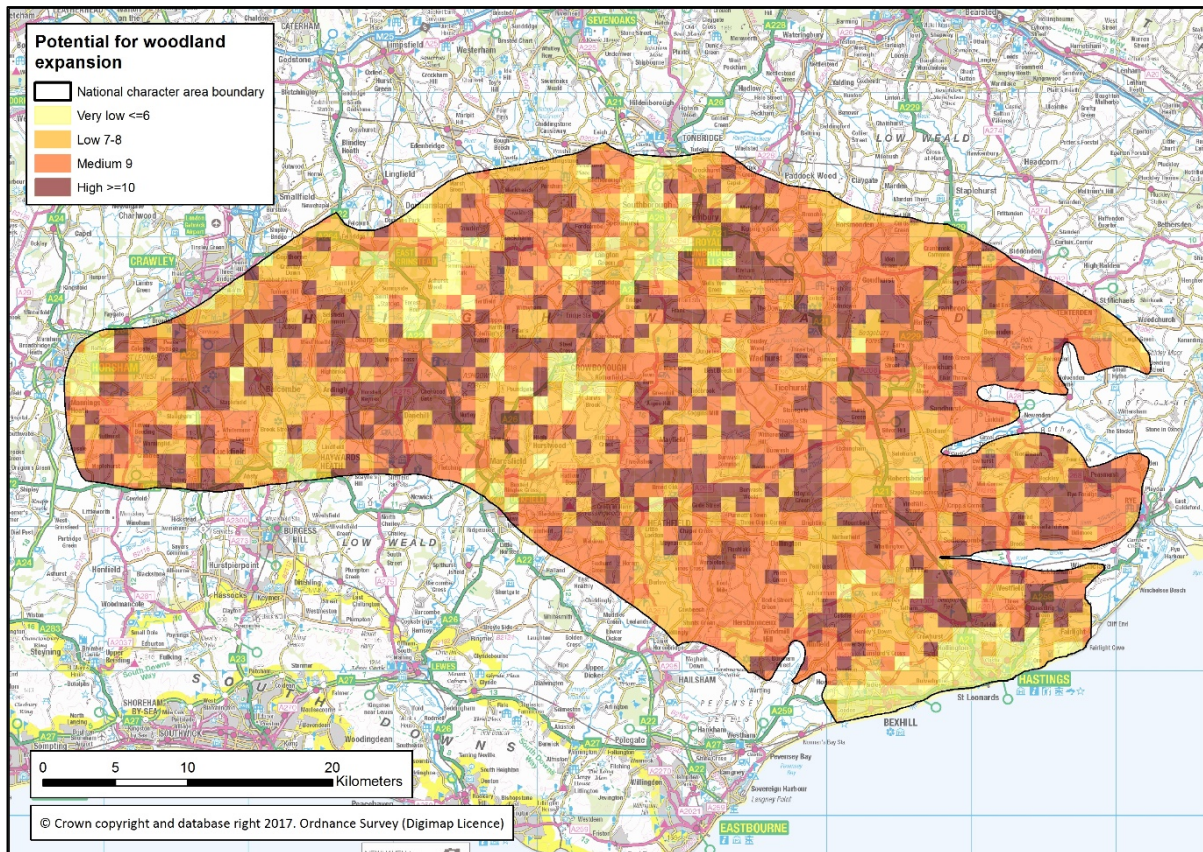
The High Weald NCA comprises the sandstone core of the Wealden anticline. It extends from Hastings on the south coast, north beyond East Grinstead and Tunbridge Wells, and west to Horsham. Most of the NCA lies within the High Weald AONB, and it is included within the South East Mixed (Woodland) Agricultural Landscape Type. It is cut by numerous rivers, creating steep-sided valleys. It has a distinctive landscape of sunken lanes running between small, irregular, fields bounded by hedgerows and narrow bands of woodland, known as shaws. This intimate landscape gives a sense of remoteness to the area. Pastoral farming dominates, grazed by sheep and cattle. The settlement pattern is a dispersed one of farmsteads and hamlets. Towns and villages are clustered along main routes, and the main settlements are Hastings, Tunbridge Wells, Crawley, Bexhill, and Haywards Heath. The road pattern, whilst including main roads between towns, is largely a local one. Woodland cover within the NCA is very high, at 26% of the area. Much of the woodland is broadleaved, and over 65% is ancient woodland, the largest amount of ancient woodland within any AONB, and representing 7% of all ancient woodland in England. Woodland is largely characterised by small woods, valley-side woodland and shaws.

## *The Historic Environment Character*

Industry is a key feature of the historic environment character of the High Weald, particularly iron production, which was a feature of the area from the Iron Age through to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was particularly important in the Roman period and at the end of the medieval period into the early post medieval period. 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 15<sup>th</sup> century, aided by water-power that operated the bellows, and the hammers in the forging process. Traditionally, cattle-rearing and fattening was the main form of agriculture from the late medieval period to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though pig fattening and poultry production were also important. Where cereals were grown, it was often for cattle feed. The hop industry developed on an industrial scale by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the manure from cattle was important for fertilising hop plantations. The wealth generated through industry has left a legacy of gentry estates, with moated sites and Wealden houses a characteristic form of settlement. There is a high density of surviving medieval farmhouses.

## *Opportunities for Woodland Expansion*

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes records a high level of opportunity for woodland expansion, distributed fairly evenly across the NCA. New woodland should, however, be designed to complement the historic character of the landscape, with its ancient enclosures and scattered settlement pattern. Small areas of new woodland, and linking and buffering existing woodland, would be suitable, as well as ensuring the maintenance of the field patterns. The NCA profile also highlights the possibility of planting woodland around settlements and infrastructure developments to filter light pollution and reduce sound pollution and the visual impacts of further urbanisation. The management of existing woodlands is also a priority, including the reintroduction of coppicing.



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