

NCA 123 Romney Marshes

Overview

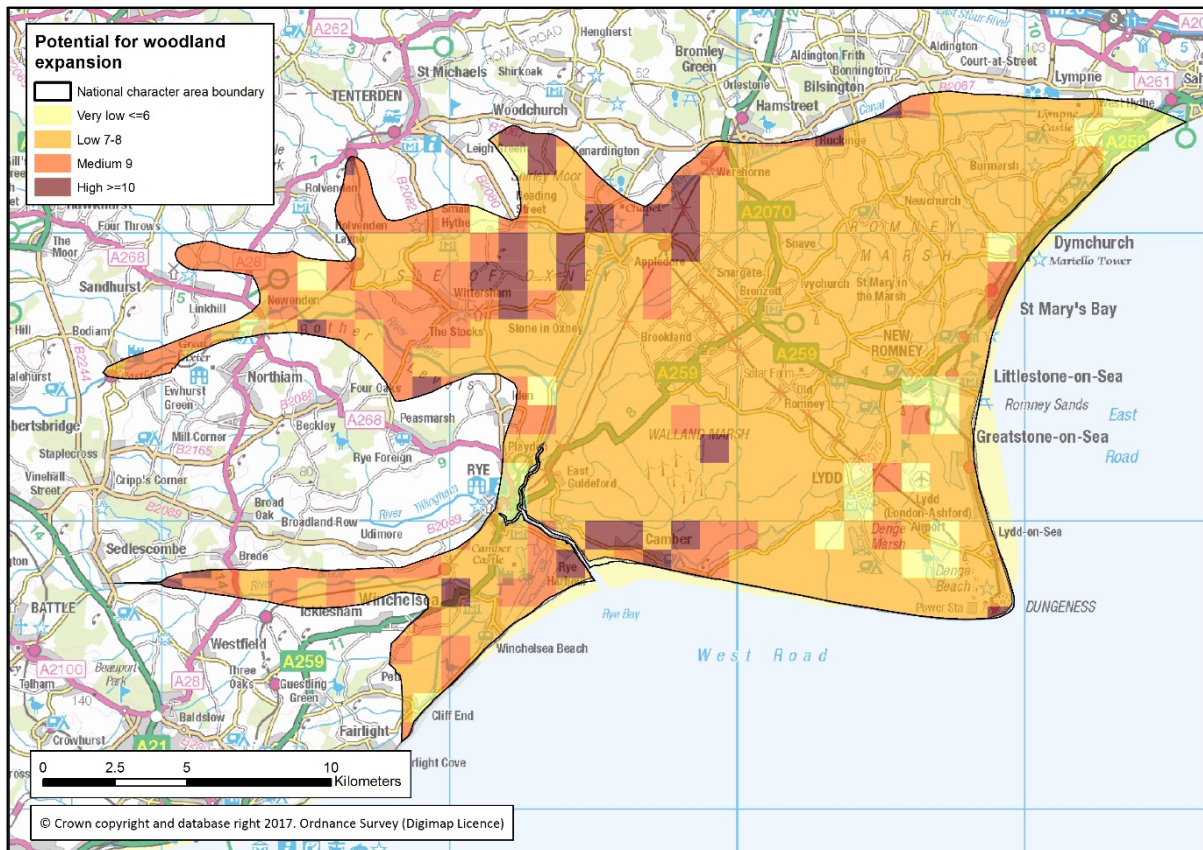
Romney Marshes is a small NCA, an irregular area of reclaimed marshes on the south coast between Hythe and Hastings. The coastal boundary forms a small promontory, whilst the inland boundary is marked by old sea cliffs. On its western edge, the NCA extends up the lower reaches of the Rivers Rother and Brede and their tributaries, and which fall with the High Weald AONB. A small portion of the Kent Downs AONB extends into the northern boundaries of the NCA. It is a remote landscape of open agricultural land divided by drainage ditches and banks, with some hedgerows on higher land. It is included within the South East Mixed (Woodland) Agricultural Landscape Type, and agriculture is mixed between livestock-rearing, mostly sheep, and arable, with a field pattern of small to medium fields, mainly irregular in form. The coast at Dungeness has extensive shingle beaches, and there are small areas of sand dunes at Camber Sands. The settlement pattern is fairly dispersed, with farmsteads, hamlets and very small villages scattered across much of the NCA. Around the coast, the settlement pattern is more nucleated, with the small towns of Rye, Lydd and New Romney set back from the coast. The coastline east of Dungeness is largely built up with a narrow band of settlements including New Romney, St Mary's Bay and Dymchurch. The road pattern adds to the sense of isolation, comprising minor roads, apart from a main road linking Rye to the coastal settlements and Hythe, and a branch connecting to Ashford, inland. The Romney Marshes are characterised by its open character and there is an absence of woodland cover across much of the area. Woodland accounts for only 1% of the NCA, of which just under half is ancient woodland. Apart from very fragmentary woodland around the fringes of some settlements, woodland is found mostly on the Isle of Oxney, on the northern bank of the River Rother.

The Historic Environment Character

The early history of Romney Marshes has been the subject of some debate. Originally a shallow bay, by the Roman period it appears to have been an area of salt marsh protected by a shingle barrier, with a tidal inlet near Hythe. The Roman fortress at Stutfall would have been sited on the northern shore of the inlet. By the end of the Roman period, the area was probably flooded because of a rise in sea levels, burying the Roman landscape under alluvium. Reclamation seems to have been carried out piecemeal from the early medieval period, with exploitation of the area for grazing and cultivation. These piecemeal reclamations are known as *innings*, and by the 11th century much of the north and east of the marshes appear to have been settled, with settlement in the south and west on areas of slightly higher land. Romney, Rye and Winchelsea were Cinque Ports in the later medieval period, though sea inundations in the later part of the medieval period led to the loss of Winchelsea and a new planned town, New Winchelsea, replaced it. Some other settlements were also lost to the sea at this time. The area has long played a key role in coastal defence, from the 16th century fort of Camber Castle, to the early 20th century sound mirrors built to detect enemy aircraft and numerous Second World War defences. There are also defences from the Napoleonic Wars, including a redoubt and Martello towers at Dymchurch and Rye, as well as the Royal Military Canal.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates a low level of opportunities for new woodland. Such a low score is to be expected given the open character of most of the NCA. There are very limited opportunities for new woodland around existing areas in the west, around Wittersham on the Isle of Oxney, for example, and around Rye and Camber.



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