

NCA 124 Pevensey Levels

Overview

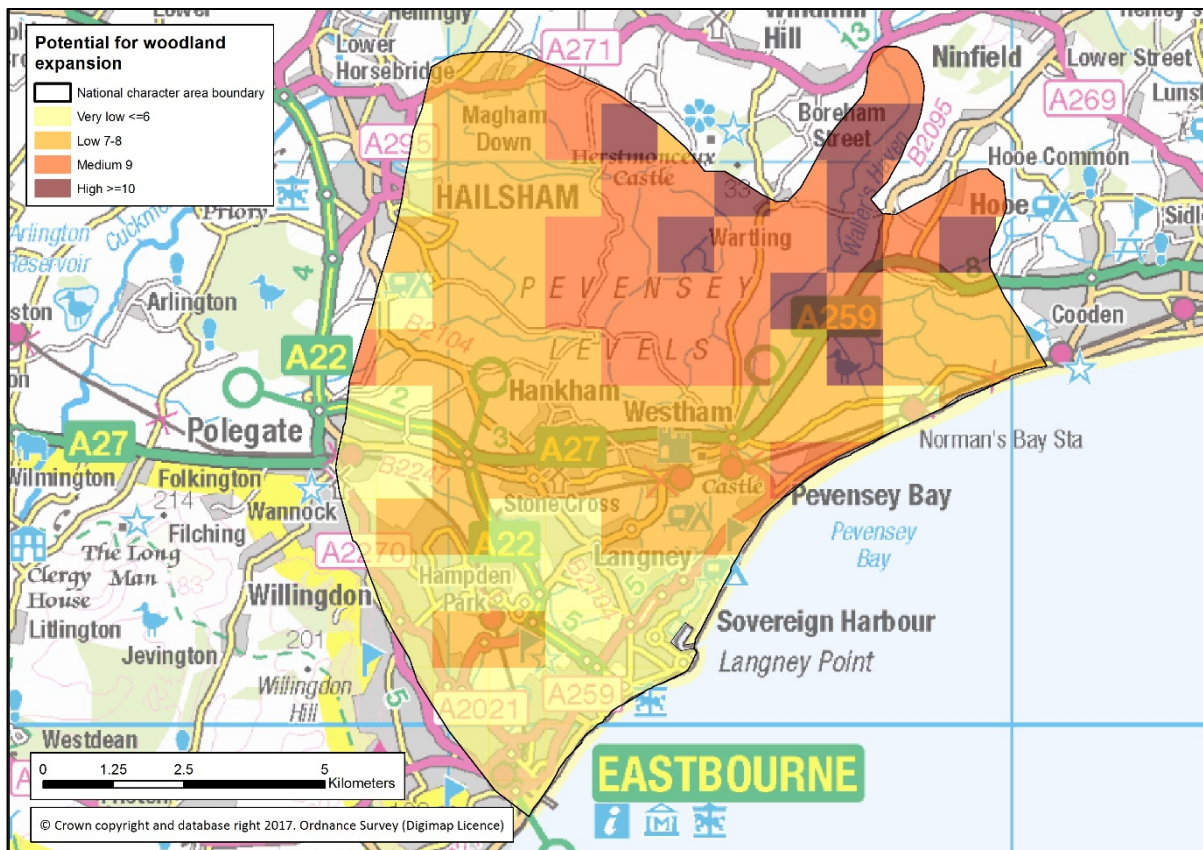
The Pevensey Levels is a small NCA comprising the largest tract of wetland in East Sussex. Situated within the South East Mixed (Woodland) Agricultural Landscape Type, it is an open landscape of reclaimed wetland, mainly used as pasture. The fields are small and mostly irregular, divided by ditches and banks, with some hedgerows and fences alongside roads. Settlement is very sparse across the reclaimed marshes, mainly comprising a few scattered farms. On the higher land around the edge of the marsh, however, settlement is nucleated, focused on Eastbourne with surrounding villages at Westham, Hailsham, Hankham, Pevensey and Pevensey Bay. Main roads link the settlements on the western edge and along the coastline, but only one major road crosses the marshes, linking Eastbourne to Bexhill. The woodland coverage is extremely low, at only 1.5%, only 12% of which is ancient woodland. Woodland is restricted to higher land, mainly around settlements, with some scrub-lined ditches and occasional roadside trees.

The Historic Environment Character

The wetland nature of the Levels is the most significant factor in the historical development of the area. In the Bronze Age and Iron Age, for example, excavations on the north-east side of Eastbourne revealed the remains of wooden trackways and platforms that have been likened to Flag Fen. In the Roman period, the Levels appear to have been intertidal, with only islands of higher land remaining dry. One of these islands, Pevensey, was the location for a Roman Saxon Shore fort, that was then reoccupied in the Anglo-Saxon period. The origins of the settlement are uncertain, but it had become a town by the late Anglo-Saxon period. The element 'ey' in the place-name of Pevensey is likely to derive from the Anglo-Saxon word for island, though it has also been suggested that it may come from the word 'ēa', meaning river. Other 'ey' names are found in the area, including Northeye, a deserted late medieval settlement, and these small areas of higher land would have attracted settlers from an early date. Most settlement was concentrated on the higher ground around the levels, for example there have been excavations of a Roman villa and Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at Eastbourne. It was at Pevensey that the Normans landed in 1066, and work began on the castle fortifications immediately, utilising the standing remains of the Saxon Shore fort. Pevensey grew as a town and port, and became one of the Cinque Ports in the early 13th century. It declined significantly in the later medieval period as the haven silted up, and in the 15th century it was involved only in coastal trade, with boats drawn up on the beach. The reclamation of the marshes (known as innings) was a gradual process throughout the medieval period, helped by the silting of the haven and the establishment of salt marsh through coastal shingle drift. Sea inundations in the 14th century, however, led to the desertion of several settlements, including villages such as Northeye, and moated sites. The Levels were used not only for grazing cattle, but also for salt-making, a process which had been on-going since at least the time of the Domesday survey. The area was considered vulnerable to invasion during the Napoleonic Wars, when a redoubt was built at Eastbourne, and Martello towers constructed along the coast.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates a low level of opportunities for woodland expansion. There are limited area of potential on the eastern edge, around the edges of the higher land. There may also be possibilities for some woodland planting on the fringes of Eastbourne, though the grain of the mapping is too coarse within such a small NCA to pick up any potential in this area.



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