

NCA 129 Thames Basin Heaths

Overview

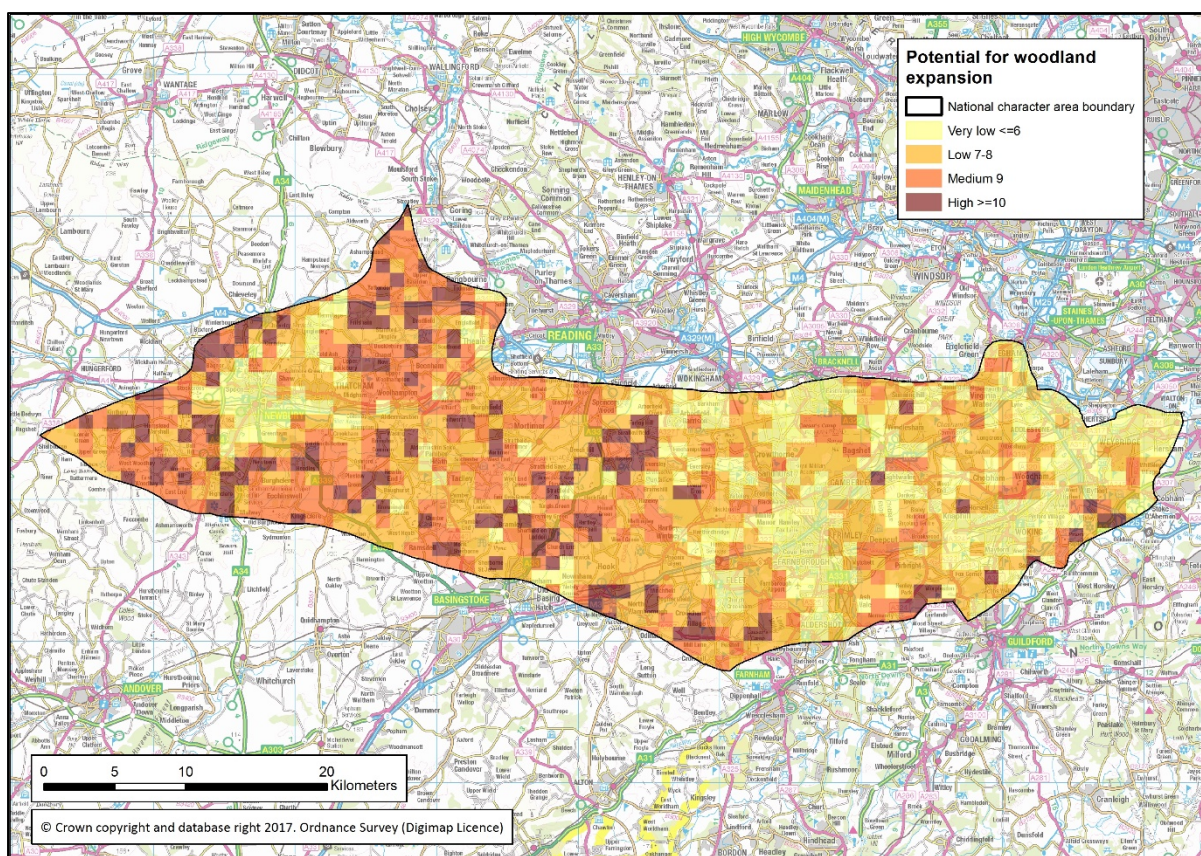
The NCA is an east-west band that covers parts of the counties of Berkshire, Hampshire and Surrey. It extends from the Thames Valley west of Newbury, in the west, to Weybridge in the east. It extends as far south as Aldershot, and as far north as Bracknell. The western end of the NCA falls within the North Wessex Downs AONB. The NCA lies in the London Basin, and is drained by the River Thames and some of its major tributaries. It is an area of varying soils and agricultural practice, and is included within the South East Mixed (Woodland) Agricultural Landscape Type. The dominating field pattern is of small, irregular fields with hedgerow boundaries, though with some medium-sized fields associated with arable crops. Former heathland, enclosed in the 19th century, has a more regular field pattern enclosed by hawthorn hedges, and in the Kennet Valley, fields are often divided by drainage ditches or post and rail fences. On urban fringes, riding schools and stud farms feature strongly. There are areas of unenclosed common heathland on the higher land. The rural settlement pattern is predominantly dispersed, with a high density of hamlets and farmsteads, including several moated sites. The eastern section is more urban in character, however, though with areas of low density housing with extensive gardens and golf courses. Further west are historic market towns such as Newbury. The largest settlements include Ascot, Camberley, Farnborough, Woking, Newbury, Kingsclere and Reading. It is a major communications corridor, both road and rail, and includes the M3, M4, M25 and A34. Despite having several major urban areas and transport routes, the NCA has a high level of woodland coverage, at 26%, of which 18% is ancient woodland. The high percentage of woodland is partly the result of the dominant acid, sandy soils, which have been covered with predominantly coniferous plantation, particularly to the east between Bracknell and Aldershot. Further west, there is a patchwork of smaller woodlands, and it is in this area where more ancient woodland is found.

The Historic Environment Character

There are important archaeological remains of all periods within the NCA, from early prehistory onwards, particularly linked to the exploitation of the rivers. Features include henges, long and round barrows, late prehistoric linear earthwork boundaries and ancient field systems. Amongst the Roman settlements is the city of Silchester, to the north of Basingstoke, founded close to an Iron Age settlement, and which became an important node in the road system. The poor soils limited agriculture in the medieval period, which meant there were extensive areas of heathlands, and substantial areas were designated as hunting forests. The lack of intensive agriculture and the lower density of settlement allowed the development of large country estates in the post medieval period, especially as it was within easy reach of London. Large parklands include Stratfield Saye, Dogmersfield and The Vyne. Where there were better soils, small-scale farms included arable, but also had a wood pasture economy and were commonly involved in small-scale industry such as coppicing and brick-making.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The opportunities for new woodland are low, according to the mapping of historic and natural attributes, partly because of the large urban areas in the east of the NCA. Here woodland expansion around the already extensive woodland would be limited because of the built environment. The mapping does indicate higher potential for new woodland to the west of the area, though here there needs to be regard for the high archaeological potential. The NCA profile highlights the opportunities for planting wet woodland, and using woodland to address water run-off, reduce soil erosion and diffuse pollution. The profile places a greater emphasis on conserving existing areas of ancient woodland, and restoring replanted areas, as well as replanting some of the extensive conifer plantations. Any new woodland should respect historic field patterns, particularly to help reinforce the historic landscape character.



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