

NCA 132 Salisbury Plain and West Wiltshire Downs

Overview

The NCA is a largely rural landscape, extending across the rolling chalk landscape of southern Wiltshire, and is included within the Chalk and Limestone Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type. It lies between the valleys of the Rivers Test and Avon in the south, and its southern boundary follows the line of the Avon Valley. It extends west to the border with Somerset, including a small part of the chalk ridge that extends across the county boundary. Its northern boundary follows the edge of the chalk escarpment. The rolling chalklands dominate and unify landscape with steep escarpments and sheltered chalk valleys. Parts of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONBs lies within the NCA, accounting for just under 30% of the total area, and the area also includes the Salisbury Plain section of the Stonehenge, Avebury and Associated Sites World Heritage Site. Large areas of the farmed land are dominated by arable production in an open landscape of large fields bounded mainly by low post and wire fences. In the valleys, there is more grazing land, particularly on the flood plains where there are the remains of relict watermeadow systems. Large parts of Salisbury Plain are dominated by the military training area, where parts have been returned to chalk downland. There has also been arable reversion around Stonehenge. It is a landscape of nucleated settlement, with the main urban centre being Salisbury in the south. Large areas are very sparsely settled, with small towns, villages and hamlets concentrated in the rivers valleys. Military housing has had a major impact on the area, particularly around Warminster, Amesbury and Tidworth. Salisbury is a communications hub, with major roads passing through it. Although the A303, a key route accessing the south west, passes through the centre of the NCA, most of the main roads follow the line of river valleys. The main rail lines from London to the south west, and from Southampton to Bristol, also pass through Salisbury. The NCA is quite well-wooded, with a coverage of 10.5%, of which around a third is ancient woodland. Much of the woodland is made up of shelter belts and copses on the high downlands, with other woodland mostly restricted to valley sides and steep slopes. The largest concentration of tree cover is on the high land between the Wylve and Nadder Valleys, in the south of the NCA, which includes the ancient woodlands of Grovely Woods and Great Ridge.

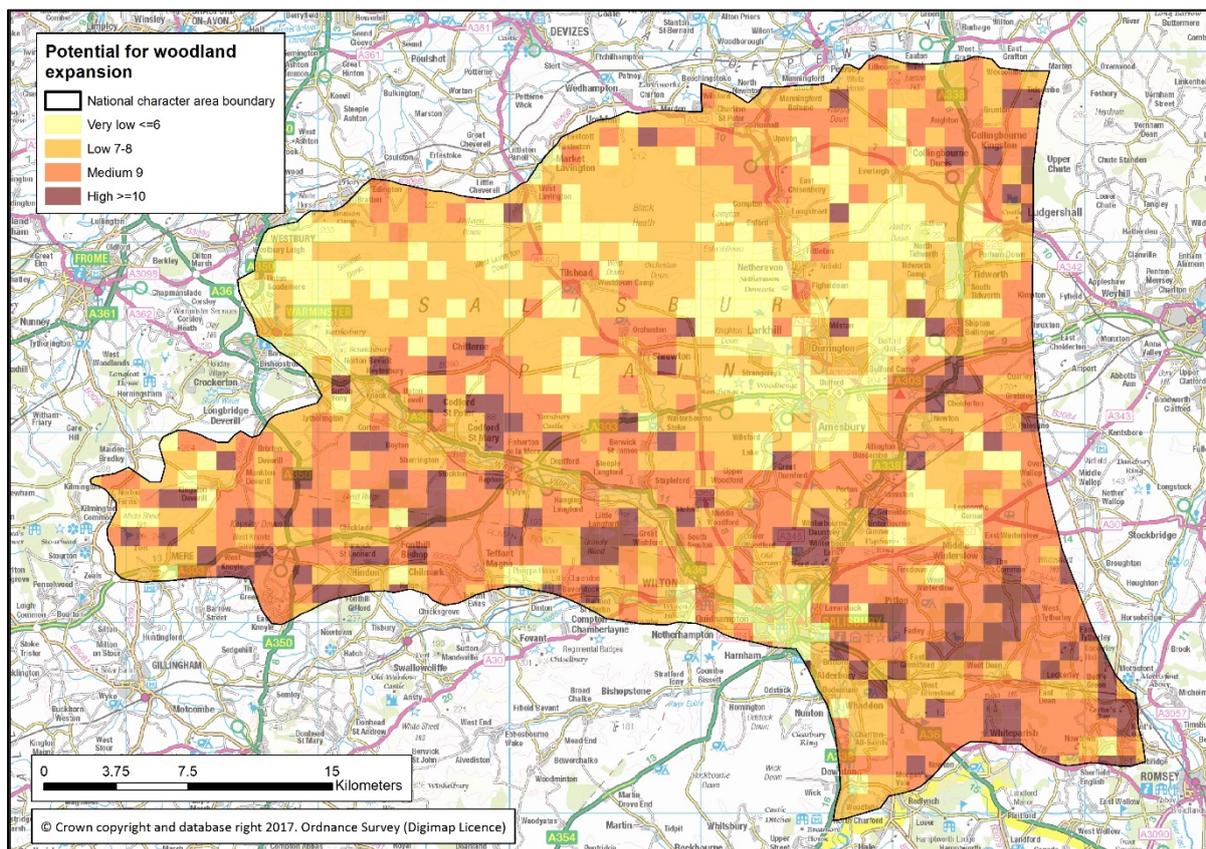
The Historic Environment Character

The area has an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage, and includes the Stonehenge part of the Stonehenge, Avebury and Associated Sites World Heritage Site. The World Heritage Site Statement of Outstanding Universal Value describes Stonehenge as the most architecturally sophisticated prehistoric stone circle in the world and, alongside the associated monuments and associated landscapes, they demonstrate Neolithic and Bronze Age ceremonial and mortuary practices, including settlements, burial grounds, earthworks and megalithic monuments. Elsewhere in the NCA, the richness of the archaeological record is reflected in the extensive areas of scheduled monuments, which include multi-period landscapes such as Thornham Down prehistoric and medieval landscapes, and Orcheston Down Romano-British landscape. The management of the Salisbury Plain military training area has contributed to the preservation of numerous earthworks and monuments of all periods. The high chalk downs have well-preserved earthworks of Roman rural settlement. Medieval settlement appears to have been largely planned and was focused on the river valleys, with

meadows and arable fields in the valleys, and common grazing on the downs. Salisbury, the only city in the NCA and its largest urban settlement, was a new town laid out on a grid plan in the later medieval period. It had been moved from its original location, at the site of the Iron Age hillfort of Old Sarum. Salisbury Plain has been a focus of military activity from the 19th century, including pre-1914 military aviation sites and structures at Larkhill, Netheravon and Upavon. The most complete group of hangars and other buildings of a grass flying field of the First World War period survives at Old Sarum.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The potential for woodland expansion within the NCA is low, according to the mapping of historic and natural environment attributes. The restrictions of the extensive archaeological remains, the character of the open chalk downs and the needs of the extensive military training area, limit the opportunities for woodland planting. Where the mapping does indicate opportunities, they are mainly in the south around the more wooded area to the east of Salisbury, and on the wooded areas of the downs between the Nadder and Wylve valleys to the south of Salisbury Plain. These areas are archaeologically sensitive, and care needs to be taken in planning any expansion of existing woodland.



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