

NCA 133 Blackmoor Vale and the Vale of Wardour

Overview

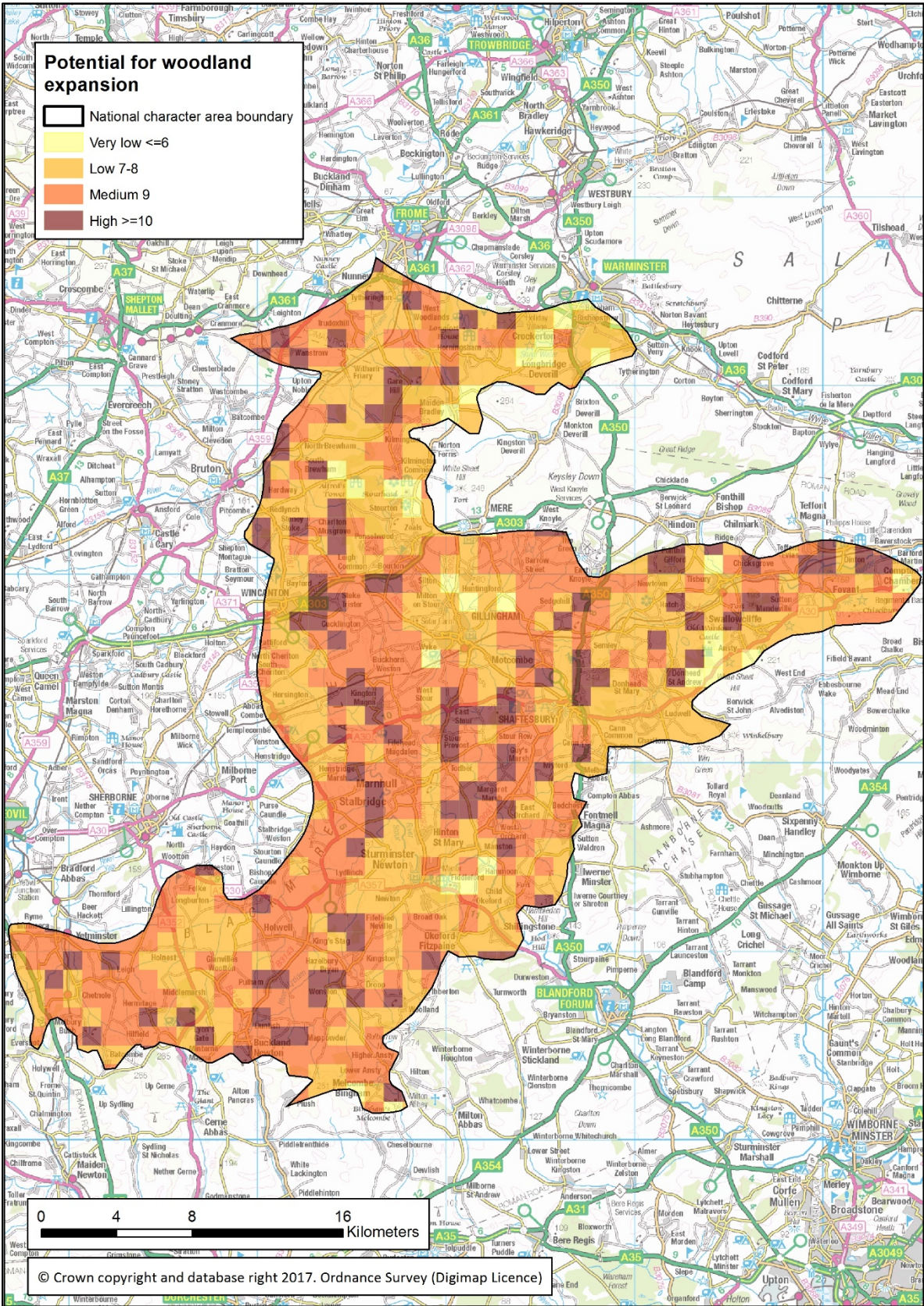
The NCA has a lowland character based on the clay vales and Greensand terraces of the River Stour and its tributaries, and the upper valleys of the Rivers Nadder and Frome. It sits astride the counties of Somerset Wiltshire and Dorset, is largely rural in character and lies within the Western Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type. The eastern section lies within the West Wiltshire Downs AONB, comprising around 27% of the NCA, and the southern edge lies within the Dorset AONB, accounting for 8% of the total area. There is some arable cultivation and there are some areas of regular fields, but it is a largely pastoral landscape, with small irregular enclosures bounded by mature hedgerows. The urban settlements are made up of small market towns, such as Wincanton, Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton, and the high density of rural settlement is a complex mixed pattern of villages, hamlets and dispersed farmsteads. The NCA is crossed by the major trunk road, A303, linking London to the south west, and the north-south A350, but otherwise the road pattern one of mainly local roads linking settlements. The woodland coverage is 11% of the NCA, of which just under half (46%) is ancient woodland. The character is of scattered woodlands, dense hedgerows and hedgerow trees, with woodland found particularly on the steep scarp slope of the Upper Greensand in the north of the NCA, and within the large landscaped parks such as Stourhead and Longleat. The largest areas of woodland, in the form of broadleaf and coniferous trees, is found along the Upper Greensand scarp between Warminster and Wincanton.

The Historic Environment Character

Early settlement was limited by the heavy clay soils of the vales, and prehistoric activity and Roman settlement appears to have been restricted to the lighter, more easily settled Limestone hills and prominent sites on the Chalk. There is evidence that the clay vales were settled by late Saxon times, and much of the land was divided up into estates, the borders of which have been preserved in some parish boundaries. In the later medieval period, the pattern of settlement and farming seems to have been mixed, with some regular, planned villages with common arable fields, and areas of irregular enclosure with assarting from woodland. There was a royal centre at Gillingham which, with the area near Sherborne, became Royal Hunting Forests. Particularly in the north of the NCA, large estates developed in the early post medieval period, and became the focus for large landscape parks. Stourhead, for example was based on a late medieval park, whilst Wardour developed from a medieval castle (Old Wardour) and deer park, and Longleat from a medieval priory. Stourhead is considered to be an internationally significant designed landscape and it, along with Longleat, is registered as a grade I park and garden.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping indicates a medium level of opportunity for woodland expansion within the NCA. Areas of high opportunity for woodland planting are scattered throughout the NCA, but particularly across the clay vales. The NCA profile does not highlight any specific opportunities relating to woodland expansion, but it does emphasise the need to restore and enhance existing habitats within the farming landscape and the extensive designed landscapes. New woodland planting should be small-scale but could link existing habitats, particularly through the extensive network of mature hedgerows and hedgerow trees.



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