

# NCA 134 Dorset Downs and Cranborne Chase

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## *Overview*

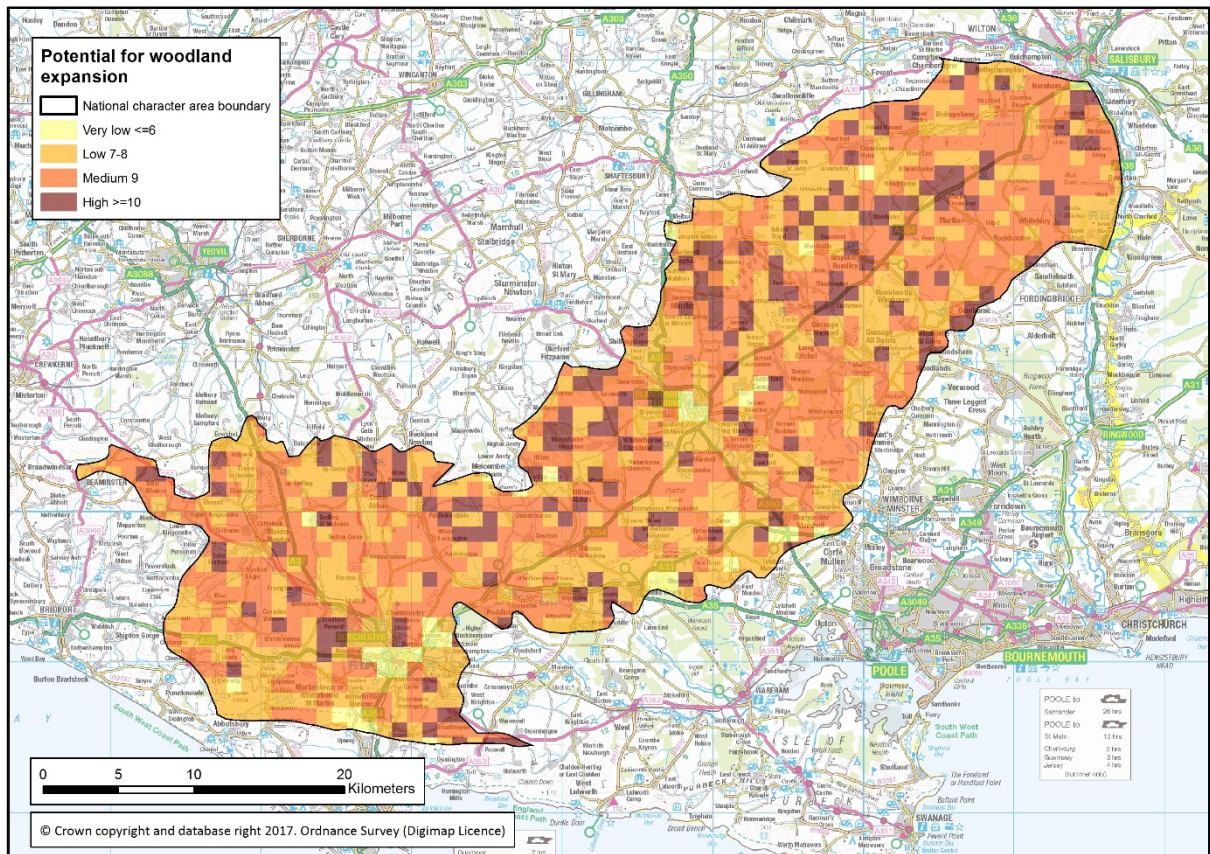
The NCA comprises a broad belt of Chalk downland that stretches from Salisbury in the north east to south of Dorchester in the south, and is included within the Chalk and Limestone Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type. It has a steep scarp slope to the north west and the rolling dip slope descends to the Dorset heaths in the south east. Nearly 80% lies within an AONB: 43% is within the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB and 35% within the Dorset AONB. The area has extensive arable and grazing land, including significant lowland calcareous grassland. The field pattern is of medium- to large-scale enclosures, with a mixture of regular and irregular boundaries, reflecting piecemeal enclosure and enlargement over time. There are also areas of large regular fields, particularly in the south east. The settlement pattern is largely rural and is dominated by planned villages, though on the higher land there are sparsely distributed isolated farmsteads. The main settlements are Dorchester, the county town of Dorset, and Blandford Forum. The NCA is crossed by the A350 and A354 trunk roads, but the main road network comprises mostly local routes. The woodland coverage is 11% of the NCA, of which 37% is ancient woodland. Shelterbelts, woodlands clumps and copses containing ancient hazel coppice characterise Cranborne Chase, and there are many small coppices on the Dorset Downs.

## *The Historic Environment Character*

The chalk downs were easily cleared and settled in prehistory, and this has left a rich legacy of archaeological remains from the Mesolithic period onwards, and there is a significant concentration of visible Neolithic and later prehistoric monuments in the NCA, including Hambledon Hill, Maiden Castle and Maumbury Rings. From the Bronze Age and later, there is evidence of quite dense settlement, in the form of burial mounds, field systems and boundary dykes. Dorchester was an important Roman centre and regional administrative centre. The surrounding landscape was well settled in the Roman and early medieval periods. In the later medieval period, Cranbourne Chase was the centre of a royal hunting forest, and by the post medieval period several large estates with landscape parks had been established, some based around former religious estates. The Chalk downs were utilised for sheep farming, particularly for wool production, and from the end of the medieval period, watermeadow systems were developed, which produced an early flush of grass in the spring and hay for winter fodder. An intensification of arable production in the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw large areas of the downs converted to cultivation.

## *Opportunities for Woodland Expansion*

The mapping indicates a medium level of opportunity for woodland expansion within the NCA. Areas of potential planting area are scattered across the NCA, but are concentrated around Cranbourne Chase, where new planting could expand existing woodland, and along the sides of the main river valleys. The NCA profile supports such an approach, particularly as a way of strengthening and linking existing habitats. The profile emphasises the need to conserve the historic landscape character, and stresses the opportunity to restore historic woodland. It also emphasises the importance of the archaeological remains within the NCA, and care would need to be taken to not only avoid damaging sites and their setting through planting, but allowing their sustainable management through continued grazing.



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