

# NCA 135 Dorset Heaths

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## *Overview*

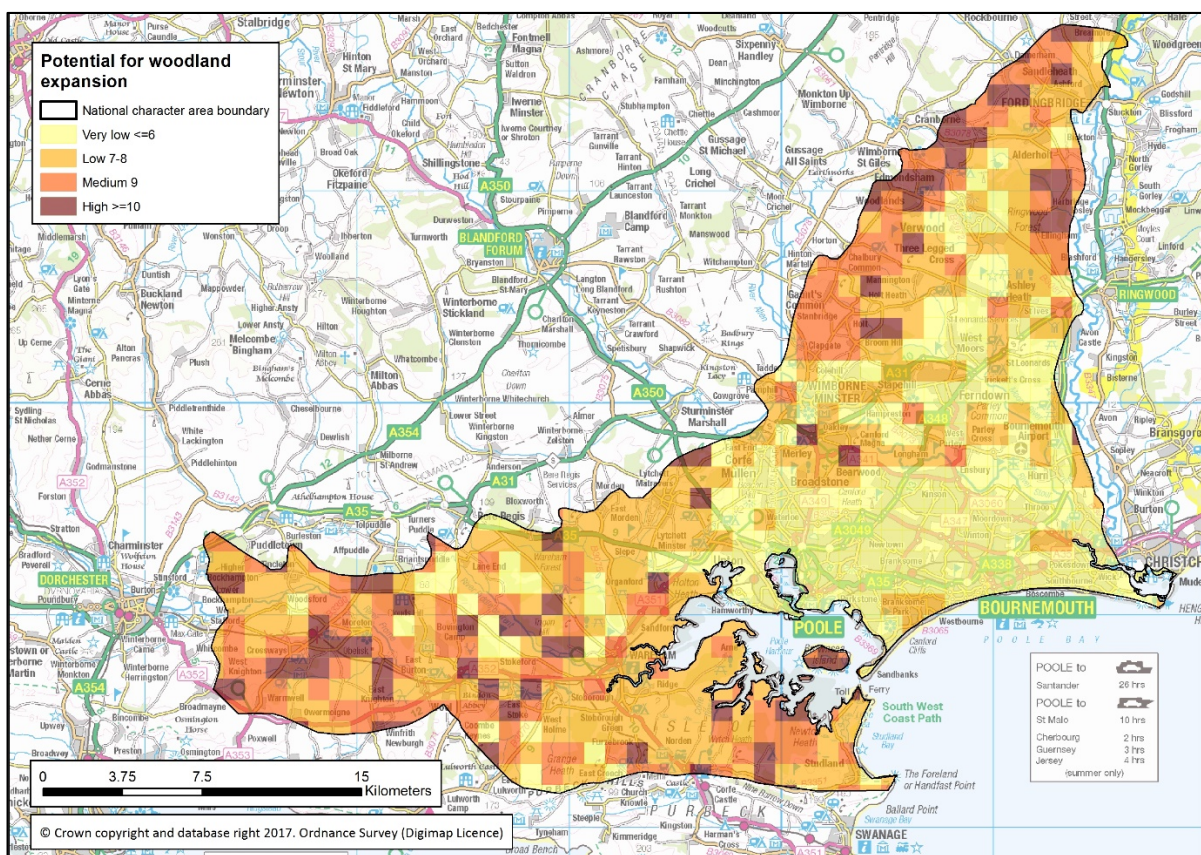
The NCA covers the Poole Basin, an area of sands and clays on the edge of the Chalk ridge in Dorset and to the west of the New Forest. It is bounded by the coastline to the south east, between the town of Christchurch and Studland Point. The coastline includes Poole Harbour, into which flows the main rivers flowing through the basin: the Rivers Avon, Frome, Piddle and Stour. The NCA, which lies within the South East Mixed (Woodland) Agricultural Landscape Type, has a gently undulating landscape around its periphery, though it is predominantly low-lying. The south-eastern edge of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB extends into the NCA, but the main area of designated landscape is the Dorset AONB, which covers around 20% of the NCA. Agriculture is dominated by pasture, but with some arable, particularly maize. Fields are generally small and irregular, bounded by hedgerows or fences, particularly where the soils are mainly either sandy and infertile, or thick clay. There are larger, more regular fields in the river valleys and where there has been land reclamation. Settlement is dominated by the Poole-Bournemouth-Christchurch conurbation. Inland there are historic market towns, such as Wareham and Wimborne Minster, as well as historic villages such as Wool. The nucleated settlement pattern is interspersed with low densities of isolated farmsteads. The NCA is a communications hub, centred on the coastal conurbation, with key road routes and railway lines focused particularly on Bournemouth. The NCA is well-wooded, with a coverage of 23% of the total area, of which only 10% is categorised as ancient woodland. The majority of woodland cover is coniferous plantation, particularly in areas of former heathland that started to be planted from the 1920s. There are small areas of wet woodland and ancient semi-natural woodland, for example near Edmonsham, Holt Forest (as wood pasture) and Creech.

## *The Historic Environment Character*

There is evidence for prehistoric settlement in the area, mainly in the form of Neolithic and earlier stone tools, numerous Bronze Age barrows and Iron Age camps, such as Hengistbury Head. Poole Harbour is a dominant feature in the historic character of the NCA. It was an important landing stage from late prehistory, and a large natural harbour for the Roman fleet. The area was also the focus for a major pottery industry producing Black Burnished Ware, from the Iron Age into the Roman period, and a centre of salt production. There were important settlement centres in the Anglo-Saxon period, including Wareham, and Wimborne Minster, which continued as market centres in the later medieval period. Wool production and exports was a significant factor in the medieval economy, based around the extensive heathland grazing. Poole was a staple port for the export of wool, becoming a borough in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Pottery production, too, was important to the economy of the area, centred on Verwood. Beginning in the medieval period, pottery manufacture reached its peak in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, spreading more widely across the area, for example to Poole in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The loss and fragmentation of the heathlands was the result of land reclamation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and exacerbated by increasing urbanisation and commercial forestry plantations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping indicates only a low level of opportunity for woodland expansion within the NCA. The area is already well-wooded, though this is dominated by commercial forestry, particularly coniferous plantations. Where there are areas of potential identified by the mapping, these are restricted to the northern and south-western margins of the NCA, on rising ground. The low levels of opportunity for new woodland reflects the environmental opportunities identified by the NCA profile, which emphasises the need to expand heathland and heath-related habitats, including through the removal of coniferous woodland. The NCA profile does highlight the potential for new riparian woodlands, and planting in urban and peri-urban areas, and this would be compatible with some of the areas of potential indicated by the mapping.



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