

NCA 138 Weymouth Lowlands

Overview

The NCA comprises a long strip of the south coast, defined by complex bands of Chalk Limestone and clay. It stretches from Ringstead Bay, near Durdle Door, in the east, to the edges of Bridport in the west. It lies wholly within the Dorset AONB, and the coastal strip, including Chesil Beach, is part of the Dorset and East Devon Coast World Heritage Site. The NCA forms the link to the Isle of Portland, at one end of Chesil Beach, an extensive shingle bar. Chesil Beach and the saline lagoon, known as The Fleet, which it encloses, are key features of the area. It is included within the Chalk and Limestone Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, and is a largely rural landscape, dominated by pastoral agriculture with some cereal production. The field pattern is mainly of large, regular fields bounded by low hedgerows and some drystone walls. Settlement is dominated by the town of Weymouth, a coastal resort and harbour town. The settlement pattern is one of sparse nucleation, with villages located mostly on the lower valley slopes, with some farmsteads on the valley sides. Apart from the A354, which is the main road access to Weymouth, the road pattern is a local one, linking local communities. There is a very low coverage of woodland, accounting for only 5% of the NCA, of which less than a quarter is ancient woodland. Trees are sparsely distributed across the NCA, though there are more extensive woodlands in the sheltered valleys and there are groups of trees around settlements.

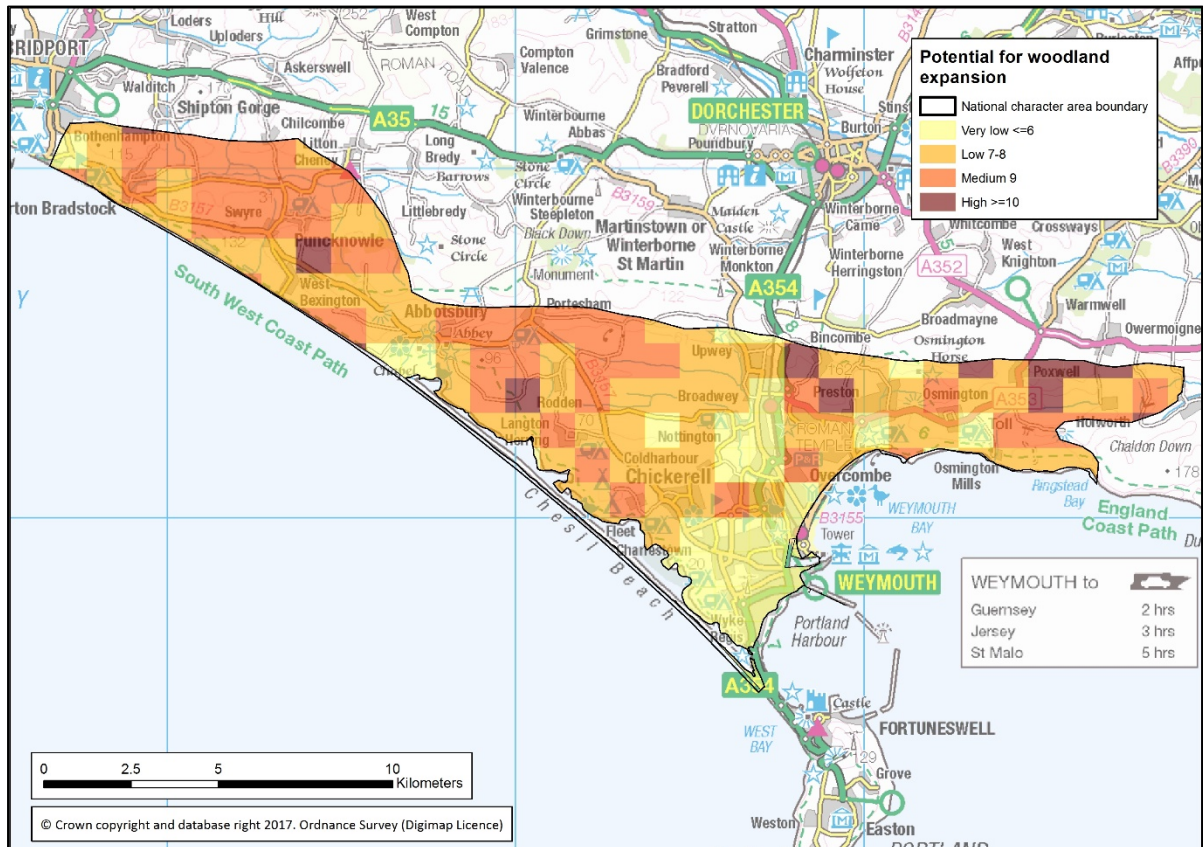
The Historic Environment Character

Like the surrounding chalk landscapes inland, there is evidence for human activity from early prehistory, including several sites of Mesolithic date along the edge of The Fleet, and the area seems to have been cleared and settled from an early date. There is a good survival of earthwork monuments, including many burial mounds dating from the Neolithic and Bronze Age, and there is widespread evidence for Iron Age and Romano-British activity, including field systems, settlements and cemeteries. There is a Romano-British villa and Romano-Celtic temple near Preston, to the north-east of Weymouth. Weymouth and Melcombe Regis, on opposing sides of the Wey Estuary, were established as boroughs and ports by the 12th century. Both towns were successful and grew as fishing ports and trading centres with France, the two eventually united by Act of Parliament in 1571. The other main medieval centre in the area was Abbotsbury, established as a Benedictine monastery in the 11th century, a successful market town and fishing industry grew up around it. Weymouth became one of the earliest sea bathing resorts in the 18th century, growing in popularity under the patronage of George III. The town continued to grow, particularly after the opening of the railway, and it also became a naval base in the 1850s with the construction of maritime defences and new harbour facilities. The area was important during the First and Second World Wars, and The Fleet was used to test the 'bouncing bomb'. It is considered a nationally important defence landscape with lines of anti-tank defences, pillboxes, battery emplacements and observation posts.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates a low level of opportunity for woodland expansion within the NCA, reflecting the open, farming landscape of large fields, as well as the extensive urban area around Weymouth. The NCA profile indicates opportunities to plant woodland around the coast at Osmington, in order to

protect important geological features, as well as enhancing the network of small woodlands across the area, particularly around the town of Weymouth as a means of water retention and to aid preservation of tranquillity. The importance of the extensive archaeological remains in the NCA, and the historic farming landscape should be considered when designing new planting, however, and new woodland should be on a small scale.



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