

NCA 141 Mendip Hills

Overview

The Mendip Hills NCA comprises a long, east-west Limestone ridge that rises steeply from the Somerset Levels to the south, and is included within the Chalk and Limestone Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type. To the north and east it merges with the Cotswolds and Yeovil Scarplands. Over half the area lies within the Mendip Hills AONB, which also extends a short way to the north of the NCA. It extends from Shepton Mallet in the east to the outskirts of Weston-super-Mare in the west, and is a largely rural landscape dominated by pasture farming. On the Limestone plateau of the western half of the NCA, fields are medium-sized, regular and bounded mainly by drystone walls, with grazing by dairy cattle. On the escarpments, there are remnant sheepwalks and fields are smaller and more irregular with hedgerow boundaries. Here, grazing is by beef cattle and sheep. The main towns are Wells and Shepton Mallet, both of which lie on the southern edge of the NCA. The main villages are spread around the slopes and springlines below the Limestone plateau, and there are some isolated farmsteads on the lower slopes of the escarpment as well as on the plateau itself. The NCA is crossed by several major road routes, though mostly lying outside the AONB, including the A37, A38 and M5. The area is well-wooded, with a total coverage of 13.5%, of which nearly a quarter is ancient woodland. The plateau and hilltops are largely treeless, apart from a few old ash pollards, and shelterbelts and conifer plantations. There is a wide range of woodland on the slopes and valleys of the NCA, particularly in the eastern Mendips, where there is a complex landscape of agricultural land and wooded valleys.

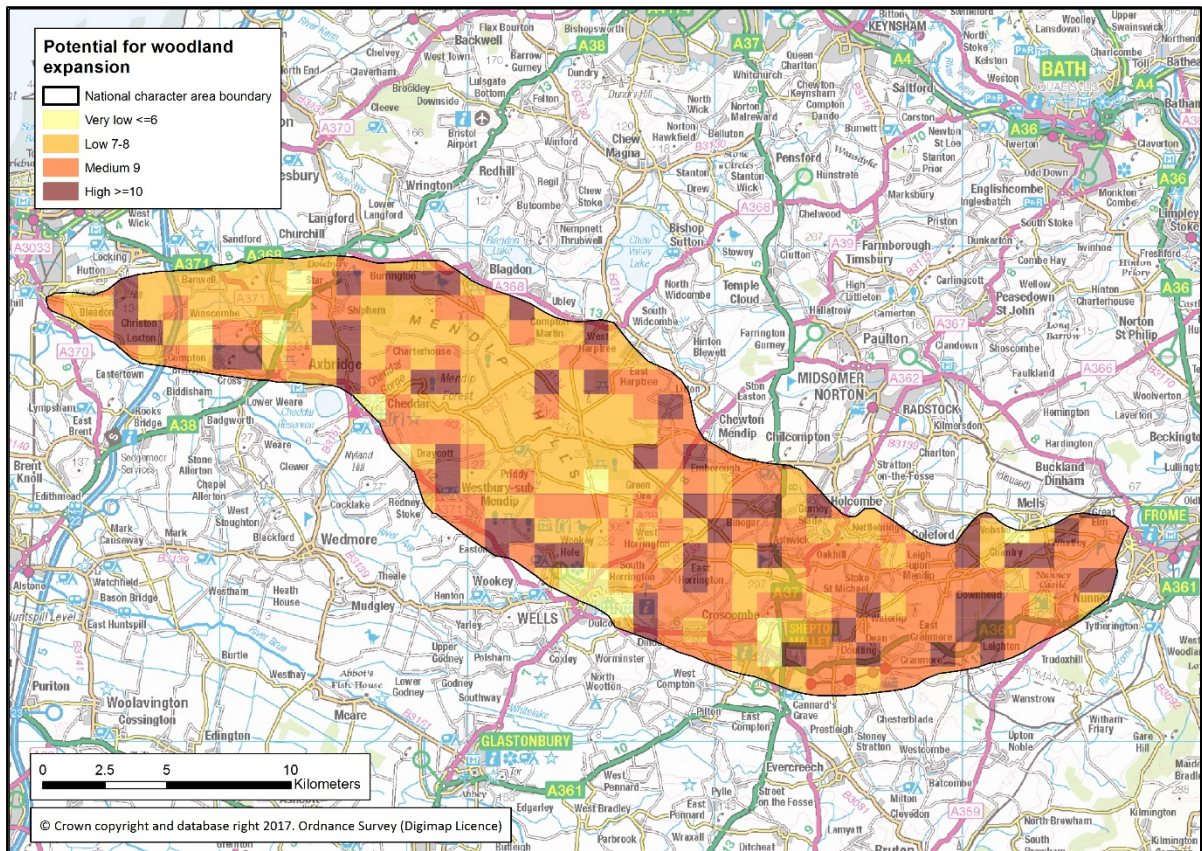
The Historic Environment Character

The Limestone plateau has a rich and wide range of archaeological monuments dating from the Palaeolithic period onwards, including flint and chert tools, early Mesolithic human remains, cave deposits, burial mounds, henges and hillforts. The area was important for mining lead, silver and other metals, probably from the Iron Age, but especially in the Roman period. There is widespread evidence for Roman settlement and industry, including villas. The Romans built an early fort at Charterhouse, possibly with an amphitheatre, which became an important and extensive centre for lead mining and processing. Lead mining continued to be an important extractive industry through the medieval period and up to the end of the 19th century. The small city of Wells was established as a town in the Saxon period, based on a minster church and 8th-century bishop's see, and it became a chartered borough in the 12th century and the seat of the Bishop of Bath and Wells. The Bishop, along with Glastonbury Abbey, owned large parts of the plateau in the medieval period, including the lead mines. They also farmed through granges, particularly using the open sheepwalks to raise sheep for wool, supplying the cloth industry in the surrounding settlements, such as Wells and Shepton Mallet.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates a medium level of opportunity for woodland expansion within the NCA, mostly around the scarp slopes of the plateau and in the eastern half of the NCA, in the more densely settled areas around Wells and Shepton Mallet. Many of the areas of higher potential for woodland planting are around existing woodland, which would fit into the opportunity highlighted by the NCA profile to restore, expand and link fragmented areas of broadleaf woodland. Any new planting would

also have to be sympathetic to the need to conserve the historic pattern of fields and settlements, as well as the need to protect the wide range of archaeological features on and around the plateau and the industrial heritage of the whole NCA.



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