

NCA 142 Somerset Levels and Moors

Overview

The NCA is dominated by a very low lying, flat landscape, mostly lying below 10m above sea level, including some areas almost at sea level, but with occasional outliers of bedrock forming high points, such as Brent Knoll at 137m above sea level. The character of the area is shaped by several major rivers and their catchments that flow into the levels and moors, including the Rivers Axe, Brue, Cary, Parret and Yeo. The NCA, which lies within the Weston Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, is a rural landscape of wet pasture, arable and wetlands, divided by ditches, or rhynes, in a rectilinear grid pattern that reflects a history of drainage and reclamation. More irregular enclosures, the result of older drainage and reclamation programmes, are found along the coastal strip. It is the largest area of lowland wet grassland in Britain, and livestock grazing by cattle and sheep is the main form of agricultural land use, though there is also some arable cultivation. There has been extensive peat extraction in the Brue Valley, which has left a legacy of distinctive rectangular ponds, many of which are now managed as nature reserves and fish farms. The settlement pattern is largely rural in character, though there are urban areas around the edges, such as Clevedon and Nailsea to the north, Glastonbury to the east and Taunton and Langport to the south. Within the NCA, the main towns are Weston-super-Mare, Bridgwater and Burnham-on-Sea. Rural settlement is dominated by dispersed hamlets and farmsteads. Where there are villages, they tend to be small and concentrated on the low hills formed from fossilised marine deposits. A major, north-south communications corridor crosses the NCA, including the West Coast main railway line to Exeter, the A38 and M5 motorway. The majority of roads are local, however, connecting settlements within the NCA and are characterised by the processes of wetland reclamation. Roads running across areas of earlier, irregular reclamation tend to be sinuous, whilst roads across more recent reclamation tend to be straight. In both cases, roads follow the lines of causeways, drainage channels and flood embankments. Woodland coverage is extremely low, at only 2% of the total area, of which just over 15% is ancient woodland. Orchards are a feature of the landscape, particularly on the edge of the levels, and there are lines of pollarded willows along the banks of the rhynes. There are small woodlands on the higher ground, for example on the north side of the Polden Hills, which are within the Mid Somerset Hills NCA but extend into the Somerset Levels and Moors. There are shelter belts around farmsteads and decoy ponds, and plantations around the former peat cuttings in the Brue valley.

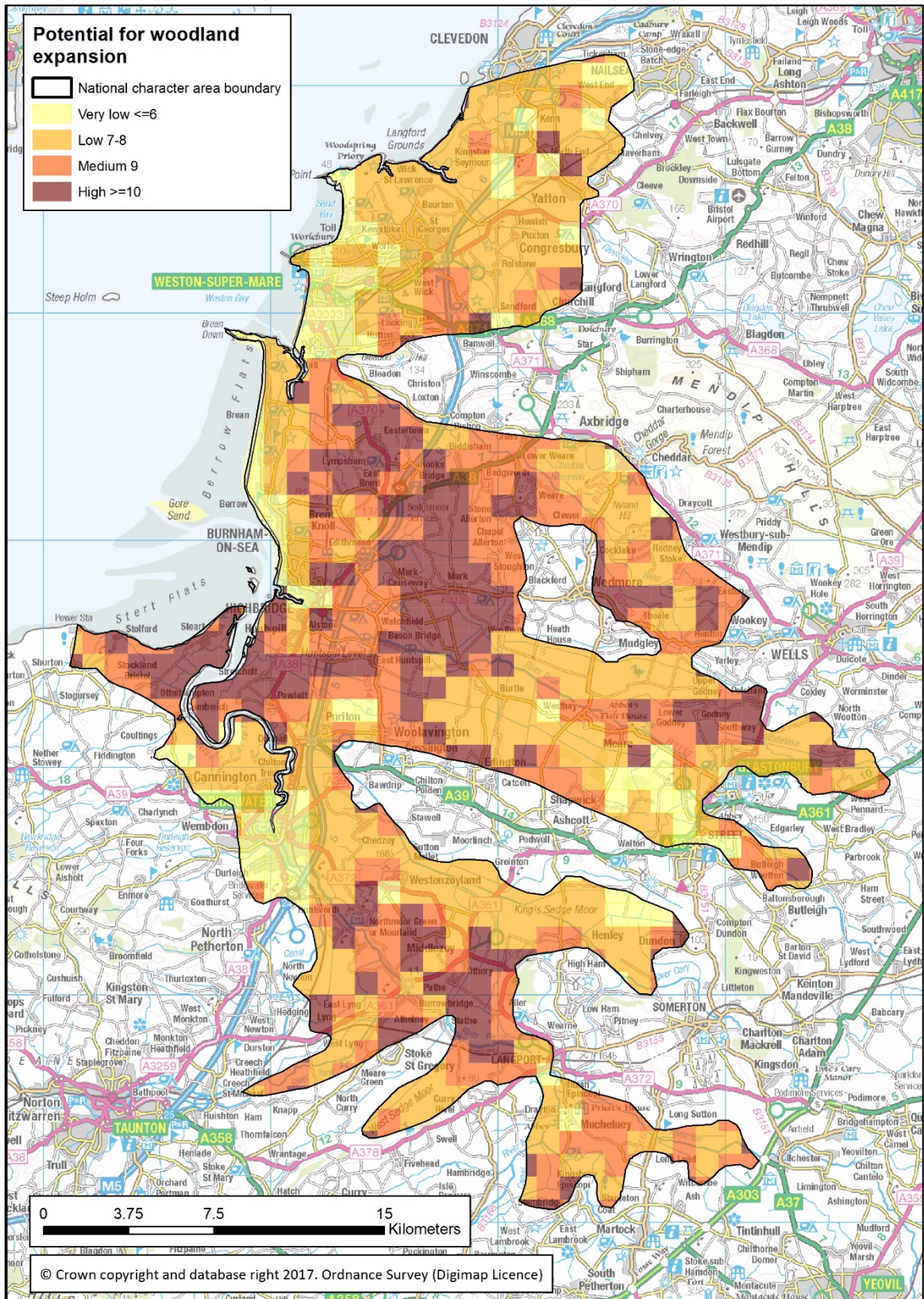
The Historic Environment Character

The extensive marshes provided a rich habitat of resources that were exploited from early prehistory. The surrounding higher lands, and the islands within the levels and moors, provided dry land for settlement. High points, such as Brean Down on the coast, and higher land on the margins, such as at Middlezoy, have provided evidence of human activity from the Palaeolithic period onwards. Within the wetlands, there is a remarkable record of organic finds dating from the Neolithic period and later, including the network of wooden trackways recorded as part of the Levels project. By the Iron Age there were substantial settlements in the levels, including lake villages at Glastonbury and Meare. Resources continued to be exploited throughout the Roman period, and there is evidence for Roman saltings along the coast, as well as inland at Burtle Moor in the Brue valley. Major

reclamation of the marshes was driven by the monasteries, such as Glastonbury Abbey, from the 11th century, including the cutting of drainage ditches, the building of causeways and realigning the River Brue. Medieval enclosures are characterised by irregular fields with raised droveways, and oval infields bordered by farmsteads. Bridgewater, on the River Parret, developed as a port in the later medieval period, becoming a centre for the coal trade in the 19th century. Large-scale, systematic reclamation was undertaken from the 18th century, often with steam-driven pumps, and following the Second World War. On the coast, Weston-super-Mare and Burnham-on-Sea developed as resorts in the 19th century, particularly after the opening of the railway in 1841.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates a high level of potential for woodland expansion within the NCA, though this reflects a very low level baseline. The mapping highlights areas in the valley of the River Parret as well as along the coast and inland from Burnham-on-Sea. The NCA profile suggests that there is potential for the re-creation of wet woodland, though the whole area has a high potential for archaeological remains and well-preserved medieval enclosures. The mapping does not take account of Historic Landscape Characterisation, nor non-designated archaeological remains. Any new woodland, therefore, should not take place without references to these further sources of information.



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