

# NCA 146 Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringes

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## *Overview*

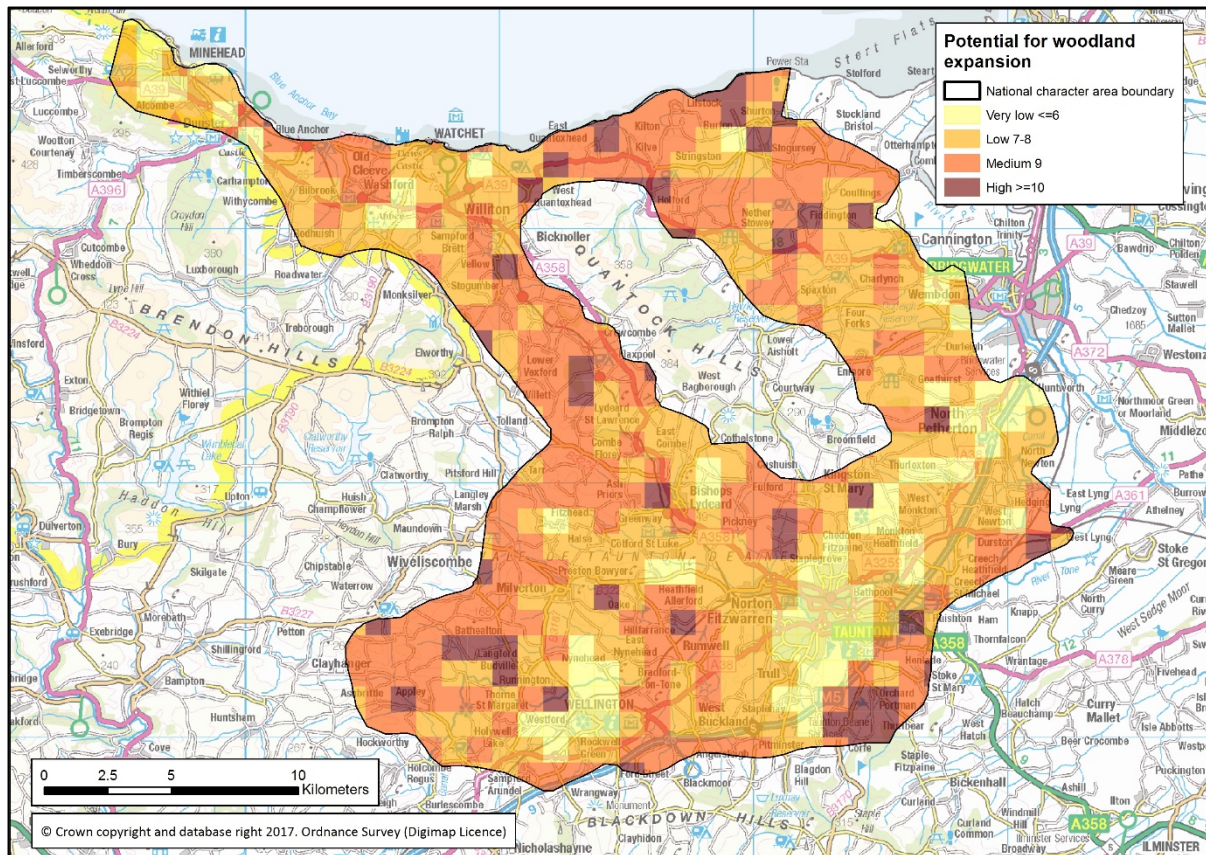
The NCA is a lowland landscape of mixed physical character, ranging from the open, windswept coast on the Bristol Channel, across the undulating low hills, to the gentle Taunton Vale and flood plain of the River Tone. The NCA lies within the Western Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, and it surrounds the uplands of the Quantocks NCA. The Quantock Hills AONB extends into the Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringes, accounting for around 5% of the total area. It is a densely settled area, though primarily rural in character. It is a mixed farming landscape, mainly grazing livestock and dairying, with some cereal production. Market gardening and orcharding also feature. Fields are generally medium-sized and irregular, bounded by thick, mixed-species hedgerows, though with more regular fields bounded by hawthorn on the River Tone vale. The largest settlement is Taunton, the county town of Somerset, and other large settlements are Wellington and Minehead. The overall settlement pattern is one of nucleated settlement, with small towns and substantial villages such as Watchet, Bradford-on-Tone and Bishops Lydeard. There is a major communications corridor along the southern edge of the NCA, including the M5 motorway, A38 and the main rail line to Exeter, as well as the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal. It is not a well-wooded area, with a coverage of only 6%, of which just over one fifth is ancient woodland. Woodland is generally sparse, though there are more wooded areas south of Taunton and on the fringes of the NCA.

## *The Historic Environment Character*

Visible evidence for prehistoric activity is found mainly on the higher ground on the fringes of the NCA, adjacent to Exmoor and the Quantock Hills. Archaeological work has revealed below-ground evidence for prehistoric settlement, such as cropmark evidence of enclosures, and the excavation of Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement near Taunton. Prehistoric hillforts are evidence of the importance of prominent landmarks, such as Cannington and Norton Camp, not just from the Bronze Age and Iron Age, but also before the defences were constructed in the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, as well as reoccupation in the Roman period. The present-day settlement pattern reflects that of the medieval period, when the area appears to have been densely populated. There was a Romano-British rural settlement at Taunton, and in the early medieval period, it was a burh with its own mint. A large area around Taunton was part of the Bishop of Winchester's estate from the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It was a borough by the time of the Domesday Survey, and it became the county town in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century. The wool trade was an important part of the medieval economy, and Taunton and Wellington grew as a result. The prosperity of the area is reflected in the number of gentry houses and ornamental landscapes, including several registered parks and gardens such as Poundisford Park, which originated as a medieval deer park. On the coast, Minehead was a port from the medieval period, with a prosperous trade along the coast and with South Wales and Ireland. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the tourism industry grew in importance, reflected in the large houses and hotels dating to the Victorian and Edwardian eras.

## Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates a low level of potential for woodland expansion within the NCA, with the few clusters of higher opportunity mostly lying around Taunton Vale. The NCA profile identifies several opportunities for woodland creation and enhancement, though generally as part of wider environmental opportunities. It does highlight, however, opportunities to create woodland around developments in order to mitigate landscape impact, plant woodland to restore and connect existing habitats, and to use new woodland to help reduce erosion, particularly along the coast.



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