

## NCA 147 Blackdowns

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### *Overview*

The Blackdown Hills NCA lies mostly in Devon, but straddles the border with Somerset and Dorset. It is bounded to the south by the coast with high cliffs, almost the entire length of which is within the Dorset and East Devon Coast World Heritage Site. From the coast, the NCA stretches as far north as the M5 motorway, and 78% of the area is designated as AONB. The northern half covers almost all the Blackdown Hills AONB, whilst the southern half lies within the East Devon AONB. Lying within the Upland and Upland Fringe Agricultural Landscape Type, it is a tranquil, rural landscape comprising a northern plateau incised by valleys and combes, south of which is a strong north-south trend of rivers, ridges, valleys. It is a mixed farming landscape, with mostly pasture in regular fields bounded by low hedgerows on the plateau. Agriculture is dominated by livestock farming, mainly cattle and sheep, with some arable, particularly within the valleys. The settlement pattern is mixed, with a high degree of dispersion, particularly on the higher land where isolated farmsteads predominate. There are individual farmsteads and hamlets strung along the lower valleys sides and spring lines, whilst towns and villages are in the valley bottoms, close to the rivers. The main settlements inland are Honiton, Chard, Axminster, with Lyme Regis, Sidmouth and Seaton on the coast. Major roads are focused on connecting the key settlements, such as Honiton and Axminster, and link to the coastal towns. The main route to the south west, the A303/A30, passes through Honiton. Most of the road network, however, is local in character. The area is well-wooded, with a coverage of 14%, of which only around 15% is ancient woodland. The landscape has a well-wooded appearance, particularly on scarp slopes and valleys sides, but also with shelter belts, avenues and both deciduous and coniferous plantations.

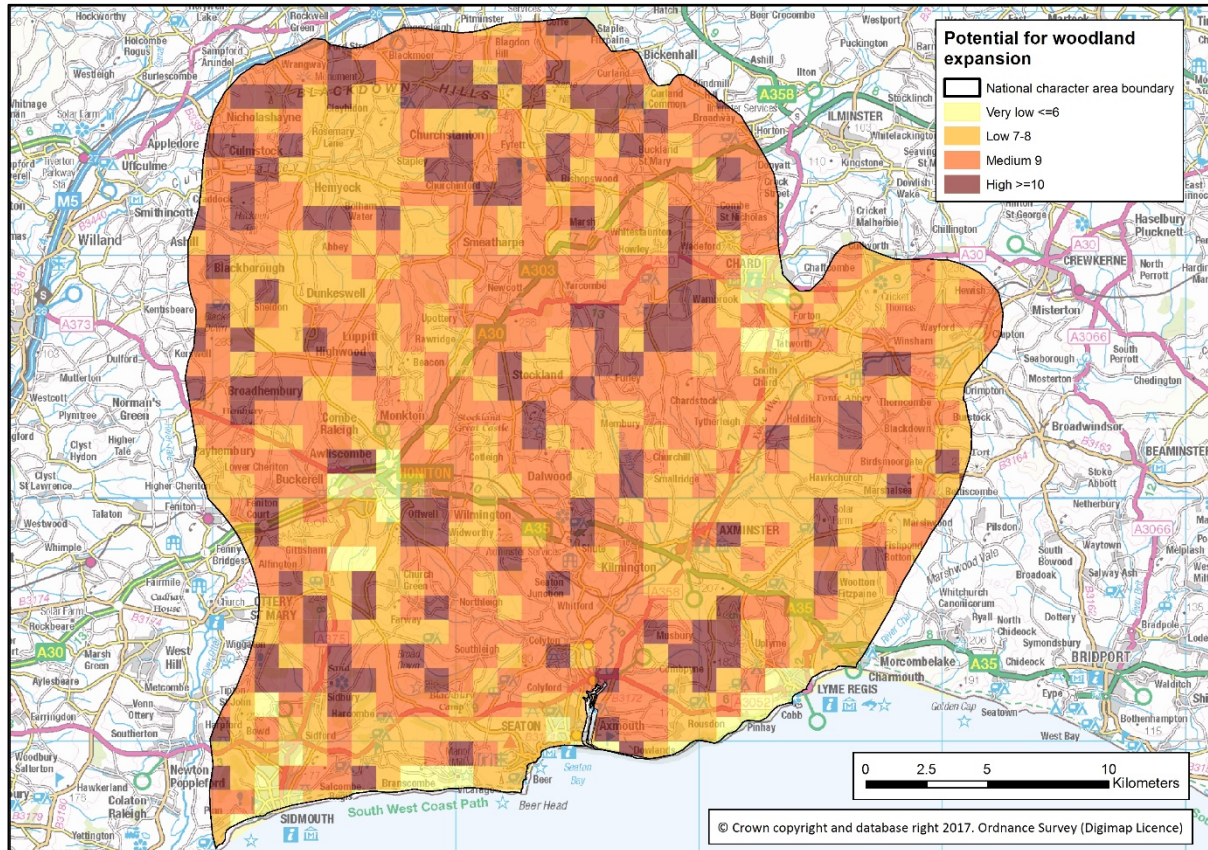
### *The Historic Environment Character*

There is evidence of extensive settlement and land use from early prehistory, including Palaeolithic and Mesolithic activity in coastal areas, as well as causewayed enclosures, barrows, field systems, hillforts and camps. The remains of roads, villas and farmsteads indicate the area was well-settled in the Roman period, alongside industrial activities such as iron extraction and stone quarrying. Iron production continued into the Middle Ages, and this, along with stone quarrying has left scars on the plateau from open-cast workings. The agricultural landscape in the medieval period was one of pastoral farming, mixed with some arable. The valley meadows and coastal salt marshes provided rich grazing land for sheep, supplying materials for the local textile industries. In the post medieval period, Honiton became well-known for lace-making, and Axminster for carpets. The fishing towns of Lyme Regis, Seaton and Sidmouth developed as seaside resorts in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### *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 clusters of higher potential along the sides of the upper river valleys and along the northern scarp slope of the Blackdown Hills, which is echoed in the NCA profile. The NCA profile also identifies potential new woodland sites in wetland areas, but also suggests woodland clearance for the restoration of heathland. The

lower valley sides and coombes are also areas of anciently enclosed land, and care should be taken when designing new woodland, or extending existing woodland, to avoid impact on historic field patterns. A number of archaeological monuments are located within woodland on the upper slopes and tops of the valleys and coombes, and consideration should be given to removing woodland from within and around these areas, and implementing suitable grazing regimes to maintain a grass sward.



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