COUNTY: OXFORDSHIRE **SITE NAME:** HARPSDEN WOOD

Status: Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981

Local Planning Authorities: South Oxfordshire District Council, Oxfordshire District Council

National Grid Reference: SU761804

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 175 **1:10,000:** SU78 SE

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1990 **Date of Last Revision:**

Area: 25.83 ha 63.83 ac

Other information: Within Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification

Harpsden Wood supports a range of woodland stand types reflecting the underlying geology and has a rich flora with over 40 species associated with a long continuity of woodland cover. It also contains populations of plant species with a restricted distribution in the Oxfordshire Chilterns.

This ancient wood occupies a plateau and adjacent north facing slope of a dry valley. It lies mainly on the acidic clay with flints though Upper Chalk underlies the northern slopes and the eastern edge. Two contrasting soils are associated with the parent material; on the plateau there is a sandy clay with flints and pebbles of the Berkhampstead complex and, on the slopes, a dry, silty, chalky brown soil of the Coombe series.

The major part of the wood has a high forest structure composed of a mosaic of the acid pedunculate oak-ash-beech and oak-beech types with variable numbers of oak, ash, cherry and birch. It has a sparse understorey of shrubs including holly, elder and hazel. Brambles are locally dominant in the field layer and there are frequent patches of tufted hair-grass *Deschampsia cespitosa* and foxglove *Digitalis purpurea*. Some areas with impeded drainage support goat willow together with soft-rush *Juncus effusus*, yellow pimpernel *Lysimachia nemorum* and two species relatively uncommon in the Chilterns, great wood-rush *Luzula sylvatica*, a species of acid soils mainly found in the north and west of Britain, and pendulous sedge *Carex pendula* which prefers acidic, but base-rich heavy, often clay, soils.

In contrast the northern slope supports calcareous pedunculate oak-ash-beech woodland with whitebeam and old maple standards and an underwood of hazel coppice, dogwood, guelder rose, wayfaring tree, spindle, privet, honeysuckle and, rarely, old coppiced wych elm stools. Ash is regenerating freely where there are openings in the canopy. The ground flora is very diverse and includes woodruff *Galium odoratum*, dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis*, sanicle *Sanicula europaea*, goldilocks buttercup *Ranunculus auricomus*, wood barley *Hordelymus europaeus* and, on the leached clay soil at the foot of the slope, common cow-wheat *Melampyrum pratense*, a species of restricted distribution in the Chilterns. Other locally uncommon plants occur in deep beech litter on the northern slope. Broad-leaved helleborine *Epipactis helleborine*, which occurs sparingly in woods throughout Britain, is present in a number of localities and is very variable in form, partly dependent on the intensity of light available. Another orchid, the green-flowered helleborine *E. phyllanthes*, a self-pollinating plant restricted to woods in Southern England, is found in one area. The narrow-lipped helleborine *Epipactis leptochila*, a plant not recognised as a separate species until 1921 and with an uncertain distribution in Britain, has also been recorded. Two uncommon plant species which feed on decaying plant material and have fungal associates in their rootstocks, also occur: bird's-nest orchid *Neottia nidus-avis* has a widely scattered, but localised distribution in Britain, whereas the less common yellow bird's-nest *Monotropa hypopitys* is more strictly associated with the southern chalk.