

File ref:

County: Hampshire **Site Name:** Old Winchester Hill SSSI

Local Planning Authority: Hampshire County Council, Winchester City Council

National Grid Reference: SU 645209

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 185 **1:25,000:** SU 62

Area: 64.58 (ha) 159.58 (ac)

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1951

Date of Last Revision: 1979

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 22 August 1986

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

62 hectares of the Site of Special Scientific Interest form Old Winchester Hill National Nature Reserve, owned and managed by the Nature Conservancy Council. The National Nature Reserve was declared in 1951 and a small extension declared in 1971.

Reasons for Notification:

Old Winchester Hill is situated on the East Hampshire chalk, overlooking the Meon Valley at the western extremity of the South Downs. The reserve represents an important element in the series of chalk downland National Nature Reserves in the middle of the range of decreasing oceanicity from west to east across southern England. All stages in the sere from open grassland through scrub to mature woodland are represented.

The majority of the rich grazed grassland is of sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina* type but with the full range of characteristic downland grasses present. On the south-facing slope of the Iron Age hill-fort an interesting short, diverse, thermophilous community has developed. This stretch of downland is renowned as one of the richest botanical sites in southern England, containing probably the largest population of the scarce round-headed rampion *Phyteuma tenerum* in the country. This species is associated here with horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*, clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata*, autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*, yellow-wort *Blackstonia perfoliata* and small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*. The grassland also holds notable colonies of orchids, namely fragrant *Gymnadenia conopsea*, pyramidal *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, bee *Ophrys apifera*, frog *Coeloglossum viride*, greater butterfly *Platanthera chlorantha*, man *Aceras anthropophorum* and autumn lady's tresses *Spiranthes spiralis*.

An extensive stand of juniper *Juniperus communis*, mixed with yew *Taxus baccata* and whitebeam *Sorbus aria*, is conspicuous on the same hill face which contrasts strongly with the moss-rich north-facing slopes. The juniper colony contains in excess of 5,000 bushes of varying ages, representing one of the largest stands in Hampshire and about 5% of the total population in southern England. Careful manipulation of the grazing regime is encouraging the regeneration of this declining shrub species – a rare phenomenon on most of its remaining downland localities. The specific invertebrate fauna associated with this shrub is well represented on this site.

Additional ecological interest in the grassland is provided by the local development of chalk heath where clay-with-flints overlies the chalk, and leaching of minerals and nutrients has allowed ling *Calluna vulgaris* and other calcifuges to establish.