

COUNTY: DORSET                      SITE NAME: MORCOMBELAKE

DISTRICT: WEST DORSET

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

Local Planning Authority: DORSET COUNTY COUNCIL, West Dorset District Council

National Grid Reference:        SY 396942        Area: 24.7 (ha.) 61.11 (ac.)  
   SY 405945

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 193                      1:10,000: SY 39 SE,  
SY 49 SW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): –                      Date of Last Revision: –

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1991                      Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

A new site.

Site lies within Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the West Dorset Heritage Coast.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Situated to the south of the Marshwood Vale in West Dorset, Morcombelake comprises a variety of habitats that strongly reflect the underlying geology. In the west the site lies on the sands and marls of the Middle Lias and here herb-rich neutral grassland of a type now uncommon both in Dorset and nationally is found. Hardown Hill in the east of the site is formed by Gault and Upper Greensand deposits over Lias rocks. This has resulted in more acidic soil conditions indicated by the presence of heathland, a habitat that has a restricted distribution in West Dorset.

The meadows largely support a variant of the Crested Dog's-tail-Common Knapweed *Cynosurus cristatus*-*Centaurea nigra* type of grassland. The sward contains a variety of grasses including abundant Common Bent *Agrostis capillaris*, Sweet Vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, Meadow Brome *Bromus commutatus*, Rough Meadow-grass *Poa trivialis* and Crested Dog's-tail, with occasional Quaking-grass *Briza media*, and Heath-grass *Danthonia decumbens*. Spring Sedge *Carex caryophyllea* and Glaucous Sedge *C. flacca* are also present locally.

A wide range of herbs occur and these form a significant component of the sward. Common Cat's-ear *Hypochoeris radicata*, Meadow Vetchling *Lathyrus pratensis*, Ox-eye Daisy *Leucanthemum vulgare*, Goat's-beard *Tragopogon pratensis*, Betony *Stachys officinalis* and Yellow Rattle *Rhinanthus minor* are all present while Common Knapweed and Common Spotted Orchid *Dactylorhiza*

*fuchsii* are abundant. The nationally scarce Corky-fruited Water-dropwort *Oenanthe pimpinelloides* is also common here.

Damp hollows have developed in several areas within the meadows and associated with these areas are many plants characteristic of wet conditions. These include frequent Yellow Iris *Iris pseudacorus*, Great Horsetail *Equisetum telmateia*, Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, Greater Bird's-foot trefoil *Lotus uliginosus*, and Water Mint *Mentha aquatica*.

Heathland of the Western Gorse–Bristle Bent *Ulex gallii*–*Agrostis curtisii* type dominates the plateau of Hardown Hill. This community has closer affinities to the heaths of East Devon than those of South-east Dorset. The main component of this community is Heather *Calluna vulgaris* with lesser amounts of Bell Heather *Erica cinerea*, Western Gorse, Bristle Bent and locally Cross-leaved Heath *E. tetralix* and Bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus*. Common Dodder *Cuscuta epithimum* a plant parasitic on Gorse and Heather is also present. Lichens, particularly *Cladonia* spp., are frequent.

At the junction of the plateau and the steep slopes the heath vegetation grades into acid grassland dominated by Bristle Bent. The sward supports many species typical of such grasslands including Wood Sage *Teucrium scorodonia*, Tormentil *Potentilla erecta*, Sheep's Sorrel *Rumex acetosella*, Heath Bedstraw *Galium saxatile* and small amounts of Devil's-bit Scabious *Succisa pratensis*.

The plateau slopes support Gorse *Ulex europaeus* and Oak *Quercus robur* scrub with dense stands of Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* dominating some areas.

A small adit provides an important hibernation site for the nationally rare Lesser Horseshoe Bat *Rhinolophus hipposideros*\*

The invertebrate fauna of the site has not been extensively studied but it is known that Hardown Hill supports a high diversity of hoverflies, and it is thought likely that this is mirrored by other invertebrate groups.

\*This species is listed in Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.