

COUNTY: CAMBRIDGESHIRE **SITE NAME:** LITTLE PAXTON WOOD

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

Local Planning Authorities: Huntingdonshire District Council

National Grid Reference: TL 170635

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 153 **1:10,000:** TL 16 SE

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

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1989 **Date of Last Revision:**

Area: 44.9 ha 110.95 ac

Other information: This is a new addition to the Cambridgeshire Schedule.

Description and Reasons for Notification

Little Paxton Wood is located approximately three kilometres north-west of St Neots. It is situated on heavy calcareous boulder clay and represents a typical example of wet ash-maple woodland, which is found over such soils in lowland England. This type of woodland has undergone a significant decline over recent years. In the past the wood was managed as a coppice-with-standards. This management, the great antiquity of the wood, and the seasonally waterlogged soils, have given rise to an extremely diverse flora which includes one nationally restricted species, as well as a number of species which are of very local occurrence in Cambridgeshire.

The canopy is dominated by old coppice stools of ash *Fraxinus excelsior* and field maple *Acer campestre*. Oak *Quercus robur* is present as standards but is only frequent in the northern part of the wood. Willows *Salix* spp. and aspen *Populus tremula* are present where soils are more waterlogged.

The shrub layer is extremely diverse, both in terms of the structure and the species present. Much of it is dominated by derelict hazel *Corylus avellana* coppice. In other areas both common and Midland hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* and *C. laevigata* form a discontinuous shrub layer with associated species including dogwood *Cornus sanguinea*, wild privet *Ligustrum vulgare*, crab apple *Malus sylvestris*, wayfaring-tree *Viburnum lantana*, spindle *Euonymus europaeus* and guelder-rose *Viburnum opulus*.

The ground flora is heavily influenced by the soil moisture content. In the drier parts there are continuous carpets of dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis* and bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* and other species such as enchanter's nightshade *Circaea lutetiana* and yellow archangel *Lamiastrum galeobdolon* occur only sparsely. A double wood bank and ditch runs along the western side of the wood and a number of interesting species occur on this feature. These include wood melick *Melica uniflora*, sweet violet *Viola odorata* and spiked star-of-Bethlehem *Ornithogalum pyrenaicum*. The latter is a nationally restricted species which is here at the north-eastern limit of its British range.

As the soil becomes moister the dog's mercury becomes less dominant and gradually a greater number of plant species are represented in the ground flora. In the wettest areas of the wood the vegetation is a complex mosaic of species such as primrose *Primula vulgaris*, pale wood violet *Viola reichenbachiana*, wood sedge *Carex sylvatica*, wood avens *Geum urbanum*, sanicle *Sanicula europaea*, wood spurge *Euphorbia amygdaloides*, herb-Paris *Paris quadrifolia*, common spotted-orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and twayblade *Listera ovata*. Greater butterfly-orchid *Platanthera chlorantha* and violet helleborine *Epipactis purpurata* are present.

A stream and associated areas of unimproved neutral grassland and blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* scrub provide additional habitats which are of value to wildlife in general.