

**COUNTY:** BERKSHIRE

**SITE NAME:** INKPEN AND WALBURY HILLS

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

**Local Planning Authorities:** Newbury District Council, Berkshire County Council

**National Grid Reference:** SU365622

**Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000:** 174 **1:10,000:** SU36 SE, SU36 SW

**Date Notified (Under 1949 Act):** 1954 **Date of Last Revision:** 1975

**Date Notified (Under 1981 Act):** 1983 **Date of Last Revision:**

**Area:** 92.4 ha 228.3 ac

**Other information:** The site lies within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, adjacent to Walbury Hill (297 m), the highest point on the chalk in England. The area has historic interest and is of national archaeological importance. The site formerly included West Woodhay Down to the east, part of which is now a separate SSSI. Recent boundary changes have been made to exclude areas which are no longer of special interest.

### **Description and Reasons for Notification**

Inkpen and Walbury Hills comprise the largest area of unimproved chalk downland in Berkshire, traditionally managed by grazing. The site also contains some of the best examples of ancient ash-wych elm woods in the county. Other habitats include ungrazed rough grassland, scrub and mature mixed hedgerows. The area is important for insects and supports a wide range of breeding, wintering and migrating birds.

The chalk grassland flora is varied in nature over the area, particularly with regard to aspect, south-facing slopes generally supporting more species than north-facing slopes. Species of particular interest include chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*, woolly thistle *Cirsium eriophorum* and dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris*, which are now becoming rare in the county due to the loss of suitable chalk grassland habitat.

Much of the grassland is kept closely grazed, generally by sheep, producing a close turf in which many species of grasses occur together, often with a wide variety of herbs. Most frequent grass species include red and sheep's fescues *Festuca rubra* and *F. ovina*, quaking grass *Briza media*, meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratensis*, hairy oat-grass *A. pubescens*, crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha* and yellow oat-grass *Trisetum flavescens*. Another species typical of grassland, upright brome *Bromus erectus*, occurs locally and is dominant in ungrazed areas including the roadside embankments and verges. Other herbs which are common and widespread over the site include glaucous sedge *Carex flacca*, hoary plantain *Plantago media*, stemless thistle *Cirsium acaule*, squinancywort *Asperula cynanchica*, lady's bedstraw *Galium verum*, rough hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus* and ragwort *Senecio jacobaea*.

The north-facing slopes of Inkpen Hill, Gallows Down and Walbury Hill generally support a grass-rich turf which also contains mosses in abundance. Typical chalk grassland herbs are well-represented, but are less frequent than in some south-facing areas. Species include hoary plantain, ribwort plantain *Plantago lanceolata*, self-heal *Prunella vulgaris*, cowslip *Primula veris*, bird's-foot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, lady's bedstraw, germander speedwell *Veronica chamaedrys*, small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria* and dwarf thistle. The slopes are noted for their populations of meadow saxifrage *Saxifraga granulata*, an unusual species on chalk grassland, other species of interest including autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*, twayblade *Listera ovata* and woolly thistle which is frequent to the north of Walbury Hill, but is rare or absent elsewhere on the site.

Between Rivar and Little Rivar Copses lies an ungrazed area of grassland dominated by false oat-grass *Arrhenatherum elatius* and tufted hair-grass *Deschampsia cespitosa*. The area is rather acidic in character, especially at the top of the

slope where heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile* and tormentil *Potentilla erecta* occur, with a large area of gorse scrub. Other plants include frequent ragwort, marsh thistle *Cirsium palustre* and common valerian *Valeriana officinalis*. This is an important area for insects, especially butterflies, which include marbled white and dark green fritillary.

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Predominantly south-facing areas of chalk grassland occur below Combe Gibbet and Walbury Hill. Species more frequent on these slopes include wild thyme *Thymus praecox* ssp *arcticus*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba major*, hairy violet *Viola hirta*, harebell *Campanula rotundifolia* and smooth hawk's-beard *Crepis capillaris*. On Walbury Hill mouse-ear hawkweed *Hieracium pilosella* and musk thistle *Carduus nutans* are particularly common and locally, where the soil is acidic, sheep's sorrel *Rumex acetosella* and sweet vernal grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* occur.

On the south-facing slope below Combe Gibbet, the well-grazed chalk turf is of a type which is very rich in species and would normally support between 25 and 40 species of plants per square metre. Here, a number of characteristic species occur which are rare or absent in other parts of the site. These include horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, yellow-wort *Blackstonia perfoliata*, clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata*, common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, dropwort and field scabious *Knautia arvensis*. Other species which are more common in this area include chalk milkwort, fairy flax *Linum catharticum*, eyebright *Euphrasia nemorosa*, wild thyme, small scabious and rough hawkbit. Several orchids may be seen, including common spotted *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, fragrant *Gymnadenia conopsea* and pyramidal *Anacamptis pyramidalis*. The area contains many active anthills and chalkhill blue butterflies have been recorded.

The site includes three small ancient coppice woodlands consisting mainly of ash, wych elm, oak, field maple and hazel. The field layer in these is composed largely of dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis* and nettle *Urtica dioica*, with a variety of typical woodland plants such as red campion *Silene dioica*, Solomon's seal *Polygonatum multiflorum*, primrose *Primula vulgaris*, early dog-violet *Viola reichenbachiana*, yellow archangel *Lamiastrum galeobdolon* and wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa*. Herb-Paris *Paris quadrifolia* is also frequent, having a preference for ancient woodlands on chalky soils. Unusual plants include ramsons *Allium ursinum*, toothwort *Lathraea squamaria* which is a parasite on the roots of hazel, and the uncommon wood forget-me-not *Myosotis sylvatica*. Less common trees include beech, whitebeam, downy birch, crab apple and wild cherry. Shrubs are plentiful, especially in the wood margins and hedgerows, with species including hawthorn, elder, wayfaring tree, dogwood, spindle and traveller's joy.

Though much of these woods stand on Middle Chalk, with little or no soil, some clay-with-flints capping in places gives rise to fragments of oak-hazel woodland, with bluebells *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, wood sorrel *Oxalis acetosella* and broad-buckler fern *Dryopteris dilatata*. Badger setts have been present in Rivar copse for many years.

The variety of habitats at Inkpen and Walbury is important for birds. The woods and hedgerows support a wide range of typical breeding species including resident woodpeckers, treecreeper and willow tit, and summer visitors such as chiff-chaff, willow warbler, blackcap and lesser whitethroat. Open areas support numerous meadow pipits, grey partridge and the rare stone curlew which visits the downland for feeding. In spring visitors include migrant wheatears, whinchat and ring ouzel.

Large flocks of yellow hammers, chaffinches, brambling, redwings and fieldfares occur in winter, hedgerows and scrub being particularly important at this time of year for food and shelter. The site attracts kestrels, sparrowhawks and other birds of prey, including buzzards which are restricted to this part of Berkshire.