

COUNTY: OXFORDSHIRE

SITE NAME: WHITECROSS GREEN AND ORIEL WOODS

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

Local Planning Authorities: Cherwell and Aylesbury Vale District Councils
Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire County Councils

National Grid Reference: SP603144

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 164, 165 **1:10,000:** SP51 SE, SP61 SW

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1985 **Date of Last Revision:**

Area: 64.1 ha 158.4 ac

Other information: Purchased from the Forestry Commission in 1984 by the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Naturalists Trust (BBONT).

Description and Reasons for Notification

A tract of ancient woodland, extremely rich in plant and animal life, encompassing parts of two former royal forests, Shotover and Bernwood, and of which the boundary has remained unchanged since before 1590. A substantial part of the lower-lying Whitecross Green Wood, situated on damp and heavy Oxford Clay, was felled and replanted with Scots pine in 1964, but this is being progressively removed to favour the regeneration of native species. Oriel and the adjacent Upper Wood are dense stands of neglected hazel, maple and ash coppice with oak standards and pockets of sallow, which occupy the higher though still predominantly wet ground of the Corallian escarpment.

Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* is abundant throughout, while other trees and shrubs include birch, aspen *Populus tremula*, goat willow *Salix caprea*, wild service *Sorbus torminalis*, midland hawthorn *Crataegus laevigata*, spindle *Euonymus europaeus*, buckthorn *Rhamnus catharticus*, dogwood *Cornus sanguinea*, guelder rose *Viburnum opulus* and honeysuckle *Lonicera periclymenum*. Sycamore is confined to the southern corner of Upper Wood. Typical of the field layer are bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, yellow archangel *Lamiastrum galeobdolon*, sanicle *Sanicula europaea* and enchanter's nightshade *Circaea lutetiana*, together with the less common cow-wheat *Melampyrum pratense*, broad and purple helleborines *Epipactis helleborine* and *E. purpurata* and narrow-leaved everlasting pea *Lathyrus sylvestris*. Dead wood and old stumps abound, especially of elm and oak.

The site is traversed by herb-rich grassy rides, some of which have been cut annually and even grazed by the former tenant's solitary cow. Of the numerous species to be found in these rides, examples are primrose *Primula vulgaris*, cowslip *P. veris*, common spotted and greater butterfly orchids *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and *Platanthera chlorantha*, twayblade *Listera ovata*, pepper saxifrage *Silva silaus*, stone parsley *Sison amomum*, greater burnet *Pimpinella major*, yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor*, grass vetchling *Lathyrus nissolia*, centaury *Centaureum erythraea*, common and trailing tormentils *Potentilla erecta* and *P. anglica*, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis* and cut-leaved cranesbill *Geranium dissectum*.

Ditches line some of the damper rides. There is a pond at the foot of the scarp slope and an area of marsh on the slope itself. In these wetter areas no less than eight species of sedge *Carex* and six of rush *Juncus* are to be found, as well as bugle *Ajuga reptans*, ragged robin *Lychnis flos-cuculi*, wild angelica *Angelica sylvestris*, marsh thistle *Cirsium palustre*, marsh and fen bedstraws *Galium palustre* and *G. uliginosum*, corn and water mints *Mentha arvensis* and *M. aquatica*, meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, hemp agrimony *Eupatorium cannabinum*, sneezewort *Achillea ptarmica*, lesser spearwort *Ranunculus flammula* and dominating the marsh - great horsetail *Equisetum telmateia*.

The twenty-four butterflies recorded to date include particularly strong colonies of wood white *Leptidea sinapis*, white admiral *Ladoga camilla* and the nationally rare black hairstreak *Strymonidia pruni*, as well as purple emperor *Apatura iris*, though the pearl-bordered fritillary *Boloria euphrosyne* has not been seen for two seasons and may have been lost. Among the moths which have been identified, the blue-bordered carpet *Plemyria rubiginata* and four-dotted footman *Cybosia mesomella* are of restricted distribution. Other recorded insects include the dragonfly *Aeshna juncea*, the local fly *Xylota lenta* whose larvae feed on deadwood, and the spectacular great green bush cricket *Tettigonia viridissima* at the northern edge of its range in Britain.

Over thirty breeding bird species have been observed, of which the nightjar and nightingale are particularly notable. The woods harbour large numbers of fallow and muntjac deer, grass snakes are common in the more open areas, and the pond contains crested newts *Triturus cristatus*.