COUNTY: BERKSHIRE **SITE NAME:** CHILTON FOLIAT MEADOWS

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

Local Planning Authorities: Kennet District Council, Newbury District Council
Wiltshire County Council, Berkshire County Council

National Grid Reference: SU315703

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 174 **1:10,000:** SU37 SW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1971 **Date of Last Revision:**

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

Area: 54.6 ha 134.9 ac

Other information: The site lies in the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Description and Reasons for Notification

Chilton Foliat Meadows comprises an extensive system of wet neutral meadows, watercourses, tall fen vegetation and scrub. This complex of wet habitats is unusual in Wiltshire, and unimproved meadows in particular have declined nationally due to extensive farming techniques. The site supports a diverse flora and a variety of birds, the meadows being one of the most important areas in the county for breeding waders.

The site occupies the banks of the River Kennet in east Wiltshire and has developed on alluvial deposits which overlie Upper Chalk. The fields, variously grazed or cut for hay, are largely dominated by typical meadow grasses such as tufted hair-grass *Deschampsia cespitosa*, sweet verbal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* and meadow foxtail *Alopecurus pratensis*, with scattered hard rush *Juncus inflexus* in the damper areas. One meadow in particular exhibits a wide range of species characteristic of damp unimproved neutral grassland. At least ten species of sedge can be found here, among them distant sedge *Carex distans*, tawny sedge *C. hostiana*, brown sedge *C. disticha* and flea sedge *C. pulicaris*. Typical herb species such as marsh valerian *Valeriana dioica*, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis* and marsh ragwort *Senecio aquaticus* are all locally frequent, whereas the less common southern marsh orchid *Dactylorhiza praetermissa*, early marsh orchid *D. incarnata* and bogbean *Menyanthes trifoliata*, a species scarce in Wiltshire, are more scattered.

The meadows are dissected by an extensive series of ditches and drains; these are characterised by an abundance of wet-loving species including meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, creeping Jenny *Lysimachia nummularia*, greater pond-sedge *Carex riparia*, yellow iris *Iris pseudacorus* and marsh-marigold *Caltha palustris*. The damp areas adjacent to these ditches are often dominated by tall fen species such as reed canary-grass *Phalaris arundinacea* and reed sweet-grass *Glyceria maxima*. Of additional interest are the clear waters of the River Kennet which flows through the meadows, harbouring a variety of aquatic plant species and invertebrates.

Much of the site is occupied by an extensive wet area of dense willow carr. Goat willow *Salix caprea* and grey willow *S. cinerea* predominate, with occasional purple willow *S. purpurea*, a species uncommon in the county. Open areas occur within the dense scrub containing stands of common reed *Phragmites australis*, whilst in other places the scrub grades into wet ash and alder woodland. Here, the ground flora is characterised by tussocks of pendulous sedge *Carex pendula* and the damp nature of the soil has encouraged an abundance of liverworts and mosses to flourish.

The juxtaposition of the various habitats beside the unpolluted River Kennet renders this area exceptionally favourable for breeding birds. The low-lying wet meadows comprise the best area in the Kennet Valley for waders such as snipe, redshank and lapwing. The stands of dense scrub, along with the old hedges and pollarded willows which bound the meadows, support a variety of breeding warblers including whitethroat, grasshopper warbler, sedge warbler and nightingale, while reed bunting breeds on the edge of the tall fen vegetation. The river margins provide valuable habitat for breeding coot, little grebe and mallard, and green sandpipers visit the area regularly during the winter months.