

COUNTY: DORSET

SITE NAME: SYDLING VALLEY DOWNS

DISTRICT: WEST DORSET

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

Local Planning Authority: WEST DORSET DISTRICT COUNCIL, Dorset County Council

National Grid Reference: ST 642010 Area: 72.6 (ha.) 179.4 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 194 1:10,000: ST 60 SW, SY 69
NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1952 Date of Last Revision: 1977

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

Other Information:

Site formerly known as Buckland and Hog Hills and Crown Point.
Boundary now amended.

Reasons for Notification:

About 12 km north east of Dorchester, this site occupies chalk slopes on the east side of the valley of the Sydling Water, a small tributary of the River Frome. Its major interest and importance lie in its chalk grassland which, on predominantly west facing slopes, supports rich and varied plant and animal communities typical of the chalk of west-central Dorset. Included in the site is some ancient woodland which has considerable biological interest.

The grassland of the slopes is typically dominated by Sheep's Fescue/Red Fescue *Festuca ovina/F. rubra* with other important grasses including Meadow Oat *Avenula pratensis*, Quaking Grass *Briza media*, Crested Dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus*, and small amounts of Heath Grass *Danthonia decumbens* and Crested Hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha*. The sedges *Carex flacca* and *C. caryophyllea* are frequent and generally this grassland is very rich in herbs the most frequent being Small Scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*, Devil's-bit *Succisa pratensis* (locally very abundant), Salad Burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, Stemless Thistle *Cirsium acaule*, Rockrose *Helianthemum nummularium*, Rough Hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus*, Kidney Vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*, and Burnet Saxifrage *Pimpinella saxifraga*.

The flora of the higher slopes in places has a more acid character reflecting an under-lying deposit of Clay with Flints over the chalk. Typical species of the lower, more alkaline parts of these areas are Salad Burnet and Rockrose. Dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris* and Saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria* are frequent and Sweet Vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* and Creeping Bent *Agrostis stolonifera* become the dominant grasses. Here close-cropped Ling *Calluna vulgaris* and other acid-loving plants such as Western Gorse

Ulex gallii and Woodsage *Teucrium scorodonia* are found in the very unusual situation of growing next to plants typical of chalky soils.

The woodland is dominated by Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* or Oak *Quercus robur* with frequent Maple *Acer campestre* and an understorey of Hazel *Corylus avellana*. The wooded slopes are covered by abundant flints with a dense covering of the moss *Thamnobryum alopecurum*. Typical of old woodland it has a rich field layer. Many of the trees support a luxuriant growth of lichens, including *Usnea articulata* which is confined to the south west of England.

The varied nature of this site is reflected in an abundance of many of the commoner animals but the butterflies are particularly noteworthy. There is a strong colony of very local Marsh Fritillary *Eurodryas aurinia* in one of its few surviving chalk downland sites as well as good populations of typical downland butterflies such as the local Chalkhill Blue *Lysandra coridon*.