

SITE NOTIFIED TO SECRETARY OF STATE ON 8 OCTOBER 1986

COUNTY: DORSET SITE NAME: CHRISTCHURCH HARBOUR

DISTRICT: CHRISTCHURCH AND BOURNEMOUTH

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

Local Planning Authority: DORSET COUNTY COUNCIL, Christchurch
Borough Council, Bournemouth Borough Council

National Grid Reference: SZ 175915 Area: 353.2 (ha.) 872.8 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 195 1:10,000: SZ 19 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1964 Date of Last Revision: 1977

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1986 Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Site previously known as Christchurch Harbour, Solent Meads and Hengistbury Head.

Site amended by addition and deletion and now includes Stanpit Marsh LNR.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

The site comprises the drowned estuary of the rivers Stour and Avon and the peninsula of Hengistbury Head. The varied habitats include saltmarsh, wet meadows, drier grassland, heath, sand dune, woodland and scrub and the site is of great ornithological interest.

Hengistbury is a stratigraphically important bridging exposure, linking the Tertiary formations out-cropping around Poole and Christchurch Bays. It will also provide an important comparative locality in the eventual correlation of the Eocene sediments of St. Catherines Hill. The Boscombe Sands, exposed at the base of the cliff are important not only in the environmental and geographical reconstruction of very late Auversian (Upper Bracklesham) time, but also contain a unique type of bituminous sand. The upper part of the cliff exposes an unusual, 'marginal' variety of the Barton Beds.

Christchurch Harbour contains substantial areas of saltmarsh, some of which has recolonised old salt-pans, forming a complex pattern of low and high level salt marsh communities. The low level saltmarsh, whilst locally containing small amounts of Cord-grass *Spartina anglica*, is dominated by Salt Marsh Grass *Puccinellia maritima* with abundant Sea Aster *Aster tripolium*, Sea Lavender *Limonium vulgare*, Sea Arrow-grass *Triglochin maritima*, Sea Plantain *Plantago maritima* and Mud Rush *Juncus gerardii*. Higher level marsh is dominated by Sea Couch *Elymus pycnanthus*, Sea Rush *Juncus maritimus* and Red Fescue *Festuca rubra*. Reed *Phragmites australis* locally forms extensive beds and Sea

Club-rush *Scirpus maritimus* is present in large patches on the edges of the creeks and within the salt marsh. *Eleocharis parvula*, a rare Spike-rush, occurs in a small area of mud below the saltmarsh.

On the banks of the River Stour grazed fields with varying amounts of saline influence, dominated by Creeping Bent *Agrostis stolonifera*, have interesting communities of marsh plants. These include Marsh Marigold *Caltha palustris*, Yellow Flag *Iris pseudacorus*, Ragged Robin *Lychnis flos-cuculi*, Tubular Water Dropwort *Oenanthe fistulosa* and occasional plants of the saltmarsh such as Parsley Water Dropwort *O. lachenalii*, Sea Arrow-grass and Sea Plantain. The drains hold Reed, Reed Sweet-grass *Glyceria maxima* and Greater Pond Sedge *Carex riparia* as well as the uncommon and attractive Flowering Rush *Butomus umbellatus*.

Dry heathy grassland occurs on Hengistbury Head. The dominant grasses are bents, *Agrostis* spp. but patches are dominated by Fine-leaved Sheep's-fescue *Festuca tenuifolia*, Ling *Calluna vulgaris* and Bell Heather *Erica cinerea* with the mosses *Pseudoscleropodium purum* and *Dicranum scoparium* and the lichens *Cladonia portentosa* and *Hypogymnia physodes*. The flatter ground of Hengistbury Head supports dry heath dominated by Ling with Dwarf Gorse *Ulex minor* or wetter heath with Cross-leaved Heath *Erica tetralix* and Purple Moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*.

Dunes, dominated by Marram *Ammophila arenaria* have developed at the foot of the cliff behind the Hengistbury Head breakwater. With the Marram are other species including Lyme Grass *Elymus arenarius*, Sand Sedge *Carex arenaria*, Sea Rocket *Cakile maritima*, Sea Sandwort *Honkenya peploides* and Sea Bindweed *Calystegia soldanella*. Smaller patches of Marram dominated dunes occur on the face and top of the cliff top and quite extensive areas of dune grassland also occur on Warren Hill and Whitepits Rough. This unusual cliff-top grassland is dominated by Sand Sedge with varying amounts of Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* and Ling. Mixed woodland and scrub occurs on the north side of Warren Hill. It contains Pedunculate Oak *Quercus robur*, birch *Betula* spp. and Common Sallow *Salix cinerea*.

The *Foraminiferida* (zooplankton) of the Harbour have been the subject of detailed study and the Harbour waters are believed to be important as a breeding and nursery area for several fish including Bass *Dicentrarchus labrax*, thick-lipped Mullet *Mugil labrosus* and thin-lipped Mullet *M. capito*, and Pollack *Pollachius pollachius*.

This is a rich site for invertebrates. About 260 species of beetle have been recorded, several of which are local or rare. There are at least 4 nationally rare hoverflies and 14 breeding species of dragonfly. Other well represented groups include spiders, grasshoppers and bush crickets, and moths.

The birds of Christchurch Harbour are well recorded and there is an impressive list of species. Rare breeding birds include Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* and Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*, and spotted Crake *Porgana porgana* is

frequently recorded. Jack Snipe *Hymnocyptes minimus* is regularly present in winter with the commoner wintering species which include good numbers of Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*. The site is very important for bird migration, frequently holding large numbers of migrants with Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*, Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* and Firecrest *Regulus ignicapillus* particularly well represented. Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* is also a regular visitor on passage.