

Date Notified: 29 September 1989

File ref: SJ 69/5

County: Greater Manchester **Site Name:** Astley & Bedford Mosses

District: Wigan

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

Local Planning Authority: Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council

National Grid Reference: SJ 692975 **Area:** 92.2 (ha) 227.8 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 109 **1:10,000:** SJ 69 NE

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

Other Information:

1. This is a new site.
2. Part of the site is a nature reserve owned and managed by the Lancashire Trust for Nature Conservation.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Astley and Bedford Mosses are situated 14 km west of the centre of Manchester and 4 km south-east of Leigh. The site lies adjacent to the Liverpool to Manchester railway and is bordered on the other sides by agricultural land. It represents one of the largest remaining fragments of Chat Moss, a lowland raised mire some 25 square kilometres in extent developed over tills and Late-glacial flood gravels overlying Triassic sandstones of the Sherwood Sandstones Group. Most of the original extent of Chat Moss has been drained and reclaimed for agriculture or cut over for peat such that Astley and Bedford Mosses, although also subject in the past to some of these impacts, are higher than the surrounding countryside and still retain a considerable depth of peat.

The major habitats present are modified mire communities, heathland, woodland and acidic grassland, all developed over the cut peat surface and subject to variations of wetness according to the residual topography or drainage patterns.

Existing areas of mire are dominated by common cottongrass *Eriophorum angustifolium* and hare's-tail cottongrass *E. vaginatum* with occasional deergrass *Trichophorum cespitosum*. Bog mosses are scarce but *Sphagnum cuspidatum*, *S. recurvum*, *S. tenellum*, *S. fimbriatum* and *S. subnitens* occur in patches in the cottongrass, between tussocks of purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea* or in and alongside some of the ditches.

As the peat becomes increasingly drier, the mire community is replaced by a monospecific sward of purple moor grass in which very few other species are present. Downy birch *Betula pubescens* also begins to establish with the result that a large proportion of the site exists as a mixture of these two species. This community varies in density from a closed birch woodland to a 'savannah'-like grassland with occasional trees.

Heather *Calluna vulgaris*, although scattered throughout, also dominates one area of heathland at the north eastern edge of the site, where cranberry *Vaccinium oxycoccus* also occurs.

The site is important for birds, in particular wintering raptors such as hen harrier, short-eared owl and merlin, and it supports breeding species such as curlew and long-eared owl. Nightjars, precariously confined to the remnant lowland mosslands in the county, may also breed.