

COUNTY: BERKSHIRE/HAMPSHIRE

SITE NAME: COMBE WOOD AND
LINKENHOLT HANGING

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

Local Planning Authorities: Newbury District Council, Berkshire County Council
Test Valley Borough Council, Hampshire County Council

National Grid Reference: SU357576

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 174 **1:10,000:** SU35 NE, SU36 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1975 **Date of Last Revision:**

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1983 **Date of Last Revision:** 1987

Area: 107.5 ha 265.8 ac

Other information: Within North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Description and Reasons for Notification

An extensive area of semi-natural woodland situated in a sheltered valley near to the point where the counties of Berkshire, Hampshire and Wiltshire meet. The woodland is partly ancient and partly of secondary original, incorporating some small areas of chalk grassland and scrub which are relicts of open downland.

The site lies predominantly on well-drained, shallow rendzina soils overlying Upper Chalk; with deep calcareous loams occurring in the valley bottoms and more acidic soils derived from clay-with-flints on some plateau areas.

The woodland consists of stands of ash-field maple on the more calcareous soils, and birch-pedunculate oak on the acid clays. Wych elm, beech and whitebeam occur locally.

The northern part of the wood appears to have been managed as 'wood pasture' at some stage during its history, as indicated by the open structure of mature oaks, including some pollards, and the sparse understorey of hazel with a very poor ground flora. Other parts of the wood consist of ancient coppice, the best example being Linkenholt Hanging which has some fine stands of ash and maple, a well-developed hazel understorey and a diverse ground flora.

The structural diversity of the wood, combined with the sheltered, humid situation provide ideal conditions for many species of mosses and lichens to grow, particularly epiphytic species which colonise the trunks and branches of trees. Typical of ancient woodland are the lichens *Bacidia biatorina*, *B. atropurpurea*, *Opegrapha ochrocheila*, *Pertusaria hemisphaerica* and *Thelotrema lepadinum* and the mosses *Orthotrichum lyellii* and *Zygodon baumgartneri*. Rare lichens include *Strangospora ochrophora* which in Britain is rare outside western valleys and *Peltigera horizontalis* which occurs in old forests. Uncommon mosses include *Leucodon sciuroides*, *Neckera pumila* and a rare variety of *Heterocladium heteropterum* which was discovered growing on chalk pebbles in the wood.

The ground flora is dominated by bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* and rosebay willowherb *Chamerion angustifolium* in more open parts or bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* and dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis* in areas where the canopy is denser. Many species typical of ancient woodland also occur, including wood spurge *Euphorbia amygdaloides*, Solomon's seal *Polygonatum multiflorum*, wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa* and early purple orchid *Orchis mascula*. Uncommon species include wood forget-me-not *Myosotis sylvatica*, the parasitic toothwort *Lathraea squamaria* and wild daffodil *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*. Some species such as herb paris *Paris quadrifolia* and sweet woodruff *Galium odoratum*, grow on base-rich soils and are locally frequent in some parts of the wood.

A variety of woodland insects are known from the site, including many beetles (Coleoptera) and flies (Diptera) which are often associated with dead or decaying wood. Species recorded include the cardinal beetle *Pyrochroa coccinea*, the soldier beetles *Malthodes fibulatus*, *M. maurus* and *M. mysticus*, the hoverflies *Volucella pellucens* and *Baccha* sp. and the robber fly *Neoitamus cyanura*. Butterflies include speckled wood, white admiral and purple hairstreak. The clearings and woodland edges also attract many species of insects, including the hoverfly *Platycheirus scutatus*.

Birds are numerous and hole-nesting species such as woodpeckers, tits and nuthatch are well represented. A large herd of fallow deer is resident in the wood and exerts a powerful influence on regeneration.

The remnants of grassy downland support a rich chalk flora which includes autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*, meadow saxifrage *Saxifraga granulata*, clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata* and common spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*. Nearby areas of scrub are composed of hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, dogwood *Cornus sanguinea*, wild privet *Ligustrum vulgare* and other shrubs. These areas support many insects including the Pyralid moth

Pyrausta nigrata, the common ground-hopper *Tetrix undulata* and butterflies such as marbled white and dark green fritillary, a declining species in Britain. The day-flying humming-bird hawk moth *Macroglossum stellatarum*, normally a continental immigrant, has also been recorded.