

SITE NOTIFIED TO THE SECRETARY OF STATE ON 31 JANUARY 1991

COUNTY: DERBYSHIRE

SITE NAME: VIA GELLIA WOODLANDS

DISTRICT: DERBYSHIRE DALES

SITE REF: 15 WKY

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

Local Planning Authority: DERBYSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, Peak Park Joint Planning Board, Derbyshire Dales District Council

National Grid Reference: SK 245574 to
SK 292570

Area: 208.1 (ha.) 514.2 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 119

1:10,000: SK 25 NE and SK NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1954

Date of Last Revision: 1980

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1991

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Site previously named 'Ible and Middleton Woods'. Site boundary amended by addition and deletion.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Situated at the south-eastern edge of the Peak District Carboniferous limestone massif, the site comprises the dale of the Via Gellia, from Cromford in the east for a distance of 5 km to just south of Grangemill in the west.

This steep-sided limestone dale, with many bluffs and screes, is an ancient woodland site which supports a type of ash-elm-hazel woodland of restricted national distribution. The woodland grades into hazel scrub communities and species-rich grasslands. In the past the area has been extensively worked for lead minerals, leaving numerous derelict mines and large areas of spoil, much of which has now become re-vegetated with ash woodland, calcareous grassland and large areas of a specialised metallophyte vegetation on heavy-metal enriched mine spoil. This exceptional combination of woodland, scrub, spoil, and grassland habitats, supports at least twelve nationally notable species of vascular plant, with many other plants of local scarcity. A good invertebrate fauna, including many nationally notable species, is found throughout the area. The site includes the winter hibernation sites of at least four bat species in the disused mines and caverns.

Large parts of the woodlands have a well developed semi-natural structure although there are some relatively small areas of conifer and sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* plantation. Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* is the dominant species, while wych elm *Ulmus glabra*, which was formerly co-dominant, is now mainly restricted to the understorey because of dutch elm disease. Sycamore has become co-dominant in the more disturbed areas of the woodland. Field maple *Acer campestre* forms a frequent component of the canopy in some areas, together with small-leaved lime *Tilia cordata*. The nationally scarce large-leaved lime *Tilia platyphyllos* grows within the undisturbed areas of the woodland, usually on the limestone bluffs.

The woodland structure is often complex with a diverse shrub layer dominated by hazel *Corylus avellana* and hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* with abundant field maple, rowan *Sorbus aucuparia* and dogwood *Cornus sanguinea*. Scarcer species include spindle *Euonymus europaeus* which is locally very uncommon, and the nationally rare shrub mezereon *Daphne mezereum*.

The ground flora is very variable, and reflects the degree of modification of the woodland structure. More modified areas are dominated by areas of dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis*, false brome *Brachypodium sylvaticum*, or ivy *Hedera helix*. In the more undisturbed woodland areas there are a number of species present indicative of ancient calcareous woodland, including woodruff *Galium odoratum*, sanicle *Sanicula europaea*, lily-of-the-valley *Convallaria majalis*, and herb-Paris *Paris quadrifolia*; together with the nationally notable species wood barley *Hordelymus europaeus*, narrow-leaved bittercress *Cardamine impatiens* and yellow star-of-bethlehem *Gagea lutea*.

At the upper edges of the valley, the diverse understorey of much of the woodland grades into species-rich scrub-dominated areas, often on limestone scree. Hazel is the dominant species in this habitat, with some areas locally dominated by purging buckthorn *Rhamnus catharticus* or blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* with scattered small ash and rowan. The ground flora of these scrub areas is exceptional in its richness, combining elements of both woodland and calcareous grassland; together with species only found here in this habitat. This rich assemblage of species contains dog's mercury, wood melick *Melica uniflora*, and lily-of-the-valley, which are usually associated with woodland, and abundant rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, marjoram *Origanum vulgare*, and other elements usually associated with open calcareous grassland. Also present and more typical of this habitat are stone bramble *Rubus saxatilis*, mountain melick *Melica nutans*, and columbine *Aquilegia vulgaris*, with the nationally scarce dark-red helleborine *Epipactis atrorubens* and limestone fern *Gymnocarpium robertianum*.

The scrub at the woodland edge grades into a complex mosaic of calcareous and neutral grasslands together with areas of abandoned metal-enriched spoil supporting a specialised metallophyte flora.

Areas which overlay limestone outcrops or are on steep slopes and are well grazed, have a short, tight, species-rich sward of meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratense*, glaucous sedge *Carex flacca*, rockrose, salad burnet, wild thyme *Thymus praecox*, mouse-ear hawkweed *Hieracium pilosella*, and the nationally rare limestone bedstraw *Galium sternerii*. Such areas also support other locally scarce species including fragrant orchid *Gymnadenia conopsea*, frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride*, and burnt-tip orchid *Orchis ustulata*.

Where slopes are more gentle and soils deeper, there are neutral grasslands usually dominated by false oat-grass (*Arrhenatherum elatius* and cock's-foot *Dactylis glomerata*); with greater knapweed *Centaurea scabiosa*, devil's-bit scabious (*Succisa pratensis*) and betony *Stachys officinalis*, as typical species.

Old lead rakes cross many of these grassland areas and nationally important metallophyte communities thrive here. The distinctive metallophytes alpine pennycress *Thlaspi alpestre* and 'leadwort' *Minuartia verna* occur within a sward dominated by sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina* and thyme; together with other calcicoles. The small scarce fern, moonwort *Botrychium lunaria*, is often associated with this community. The large expanse of spoil which forms the valley side below Ball Eye Mine has an exceptionally large population of alpine pennycress. Areas within the disused quarries have become colonised with plants tolerant of the dry calcareous conditions including bee orchid *Ophrys apifera* and fly orchid *O. insectifera*.

Among the lower plants, the lichens are best recorded with locally scarce species growing both on trees and rocks. *Opegrapha atra* is a very restricted species which grows on ash as does *Catillaria chalybeia* whose more usual habitat is gritstone

rocks. *Squamarina crassa* grows here on limestone, in one of only three Peak District sites.

The variety of habitats within the site contain many diverse associations of plant species and complex vegetation structures. These support varied assemblages of invertebrates, including nationally notable species and species of local importance. Butterflies and moths are the most extensively recorded group. Twenty three species of butterfly are present, making this site one of the best in Derbyshire. These include the nationally notable northern brown argus *Aricia artaxerxes* and the regionally scarce small pearl-bordered fritillary *Boloria selene*, dark green *Argynnis aglaja* and silver-washed *A. paphia* fritillaries and white-letter *Strymonidia w-album* and green *Callophrys rubi* hairstreaks. The moths include the nationally rare cistus forester *Adscita geryon*, chalk carpet *Scotopteryx bipunctaria cretata*, and brindled ochre *Dasypolia templi*. Locally important species include the triple-spotted clay *Xestia ditrapezium*, scorched carpet *Ligdia adustata*, and small white wave *Asthena albulata*.

From limited recording, two Red Data Book craneflies have been recorded: *Limonia masoni*, and *Tipula alpina*, for which this is the only known site in Derbyshire.

The site supports more ant species than any other known site in Derbyshire and is typical of more southerly sites in the country. The hairy wood ant *Formica lugubris* is to be found here on its only known site on limestone in the county as it is usually associated with upland gritstone woods. The same is true of the slug *Limax cinereoniger*.

Over 200 beetle species have been collected from the site including glow worm *Lampyrus noctiluca*.

The valley, with its extensive woodlands and variety of other habitats, supports a full complement of common birds typical of the best of the limestone dales. All three species of woodpecker; lesser spotted *Dendrocopos minor*, great spotted *D. major* and green *Picus viridis* are to be found. Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* occupy some tree top nest sites and kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* breed on cliff faces. The valley bottom stream supports breeding dipper *Cinclus cinclus* and grey wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*, with one or more territories extending the full valley length. Kingfishers *Alcedo atthis* are seen in the lower end of the valley and willow tit *Parus montanus* and the locally scarce marsh tit *P. palustris* also breed here.

Recent survey work has revealed that the disused mines and caverns of the valley are widely used by at least four bat species for winter hibernation; brown long-eared *Plecotus auritus*, daubenton's *Myotis daubentonii*, whiskered *M. mystacinus* and natterer's *M. nattereri*.