

**County:** Hampshire **Site Name:** St. Catherine's Hill SSSI

**Local Planning Authority:** Hampshire County Council, City of Winchester Council

**National Grid Reference:** SU 484274

**Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000:** 185

**1:25,000:** SU 42

**Area:** 41.5 (ha) 102.5 (ac)

**Date Notified (Under 1949 Act):** 1951

**Date of Last Revision:** 1971

**Date Notified (Under 1981 Act):** 22 August 1986

**Date of Last Revision:** –

**Other Information:**

23ha of the Site of Special Scientific Interest is a Hampshire and Isle of Wight Naturalists' Trust nature reserve by agreement with the owner.

**Reasons for Notification:**

The Site of Special Scientific Interest comprises chalk grassland scrub occupying the spur of St. Catherine's Hill and an adjoining dry valley. The varied topography, soil depth and aspect gives rise to distinct differences in the plant communities. The thin rendzina soils of the slopes and summit of the Iron Age hill fort are carpeted in a closely-cropped sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina* dominated sward with a rich herb flora including abundant thyme *Thymus praecox*, common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium* and salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, carline thistle *Carlina vulgaris*, felwort *Gentianella amarella*, horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*, fairy flax *Linum catharticum*, clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata*, autumn lady's tresses *Spiranthes spiralis* and frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride*. This short sward contrasts with the well-developed field layer occupying the north-facing slope of the adjoining dry valley. Here upright brome *Bromus erectus* and meadow fescue *Festuca pratensis* are abundant, with a variety of tall herbs, including wild carrot *Daucus carota*, yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor*, perforate St. John's wort *Hypericum perforatum*, basil *Clinopodium vulgare* and betony *Stachys officinalis*. Several plants normally associated with wetter grassland, notably devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, hemp agrimony *Eupatorium cannabinum*, saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria* and fleabane *Pulicaria dysenterica* all occur commonly in the sward. Further diversity is provided by the eastern extremity of the SSSI, which comprises a species-rich short-sward chalk turf on a series of ancient bank and ditch earthworks. Of particular note are the large number of locally distributed species present, including a substantial proportion of bastard toadflax *Thesium humifusum* and isolated juniper bushes. The site as a whole contains practically the full range of downland orchids, though many are in small numbers.

Extensive blocks of hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* with privet *Ligustrum vulgare*, blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, rose *Rosa* species and dogwood *Cornus sanguinea* occupy the north-facing slopes of the valley and hill fort, with isolated shrubs scattered elsewhere. The presence of young sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus*, Norway maple *Acer platanoides*, birch *Betula pendula*, oak *Quercus robur* and whitebeam *Sorbus aria* provides an early indication of an eventual succession to woodland. Further scrub invasion is kept in check by physical removal and regular cattle grazing. A small mature beech *Fagus sylvatica* hanger occupies part of the summit of the hill fort.

The grassland supports colonies of the locally distributed chalkhill blue butterfly *Lysandra coridon* particularly at the eastern end of the site, and the more sheltered parts of the site are generally very rich in invertebrates.

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