

County: Dorset **Site Name:** Black Hill Down SSSI, Dorset

District: West Dorset

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

Local Planning Authority: West Dorset District Council, Dorset County Council

National Grid Reference: ST 668005, ST 675015 & **Area:** 71.84 (ha) 177.52 (ac)
ST 680995

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 194 **1:10,000:** SY 69 NE, ST 60 SE

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

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

Other Information:

Site adjoins Giant Hill SSSI. New site.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

This grassland site occupies steep, mostly Middle Chalk slopes on the east side of the River Cerne valley to the south of Cerne Abbas. These slopes support a herb-rich sward which also includes areas of scrub and, on small areas of superficial clay with flints, some acidic grassland. The butterfly fauna includes large populations of several declining species.

The sward is of the sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina*, meadow oat *Avenula pratensis* type. Other grasses which are frequent and typical in this turf are quaking grass *Briza media*, red fescue *F. rubra* and crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha*, with glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* and spring sedge *C. caryophyllea*. Heath grass *Danthonia decumbens* occurs locally.

The herb component of the sward is very rich with abundant stemless thistle *Cirsium acaule*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor* and rough hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus*. Other frequent herbs of this grassland include harebell *Campanula rotundifolia*, squinancywort *Asperula cynanchica*, rockrose *Helianthemum nummularium*, cowslip *Primula veris* and autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*. Very typical of west/central Dorset chalk are frequent devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, betony *Stachys officinalis*, small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria* and clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata*. The site also supports several orchid species including pyramidal orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, bee orchid *Ophrys apifera*, fly orchid *O. insectifera*, frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride* and fragrant orchid *Gymnadenia conopsea*.

The more acidic communities of the clay-with-flints above the slopes are dominated by common bent *Agrostis capillaris*, red fescue *Festuca rubra* and sweet vernal grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* with frequent tormentil *Potentilla erecta* and wood sage *Teucrium scorodonia*. Scrub of common gorse *Ulex europaeus*, blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* and wayfaring tree *Viburnum lantana* is also an important feature in parts of this site.

The variety in habitat structure and aspect provides suitable conditions for several local and one declining species of butterfly. Green hairstreak *Callophrys rubi*, grizzled skipper *Pyrgus malvae* and small blue *Cupido minimus* all occur, whilst there are large populations of brown argus *Aricia agestis*, chalkhill blue *Lysandra coridon* and marsh fritillary *Eurodryas aurinia*.