

COUNTY: KENT SITE NAME: WEST BLEAN AND THORNDEN WOODS

BOROUGH: CANTERBURY

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

Local Planning Authority: Canterbury City Council

National Grid Reference: TR 154636 Area: 762.5 (ha.) 1884.2 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 179 1:10,000: TR 16 NE; TR 16 SE; TR 16 SW

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

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

Other Information:

This new site is to be included with the adjacent East Blean Woods, Church Woods and Ellenden Wood in the revised Blean Woods Nature Conservation Review site*.

Description:

West Blean and Thornden Woods, lying to the north of Canterbury, comprise a mosaic of ancient semi-natural woodland and conifer plantation within the ancient Blean Forest complex and include several rare woodland types. The area is noted for birds with over 50 species of breeding bird having been recorded. The woodland also supports a diverse invertebrate fauna including 5 nationally rare** and 13 nationally scarce species. The woods are situated on London Clay and gravel drift deposits which have given rise to a range of free to poorly drained moderately acidic soils.

Management within the broadleaved woodland compartments range from coppiced sweet chestnut *Castanea sativa* and birch *Betula spp*, through coppice-with-standard to high forest dominated by sessile oak *Quercus petraea* and beech *Fagus sylvatica*. Peripheral areas of more mixed coppice include hornbeam *Carpinus betulus*, ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, hazel *Corylus avellana* and field maple *Acer campestre*. About one third of the site has been clear felled and replanted with conifers such as Corsican pine *Pinus nigra* and Scots pine *Pinus sylvestris*.

The high forest is characterised by a diverse shrub layer with many species typical of ancient woodlands including wild service tree *Sorbus torminalis*, midland hawthorn *Crataegus laevigata*, wild crab-apple *Malus sylvestris* and butcher's broom *Ruscus aculeatus*. Ground flora is dominated by bramble *Rubus fruticosus* and bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, with an abundance of honeysuckle *Lonicera periclymenum* and lesser periwinkle *Vinca minor*. Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* and heather *Calluna vulgaris* predominate the more open acidic areas within the forest, whilst dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis* is found growing profusely on the more base rich slopes. The differing ages of the coppiced areas have given rise to a diversity of habitats that support a wealth of ground flora species including wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa*, hairy woodrush *Luzula pilosa*, wood spurge *Euphorbia amygdaloides* and common cow-wheat *Melampyrum pratense*. Permanently wet areas are common over the impervious London Clay. Associated with these are crack willow *Salix fragilis*, alder *Alnus glutinosa*, pendulous sedge *Carex pendula* and tufted hair grass *Deschampsia cespitosa*.

Lying to the north of Thornden Woods are several small agriculturally unimproved pastures which provide excellent feeding habitat for invertebrates and birds. The grassland supports a diversity of plants including pepper saxifrage *Silaum silaus*, dyers

greenweed *Genista tinctoria*, meadow vetchling *Lathyrus pratensis* and black knapweed *Centurea nigra*.

Many of the invertebrates that have been found here are associated with the early stages of the coppice cycle and with other open areas in woodland. The site is a particularly important locality for the nationally rare and specially protected heath fritillary butterfly *Mellicta athalia* whose larvae feed on common cow-wheat. Other species that favour the more open spaces include the nationally scarce lead coloured pug moth *Eupithecia plumbeolata* and the pearl bordered fritillary butterfly *Boloria euphrosyne*. A nationally rare ladybird *Coccinella distincta* inhabits the nests of the red wood ant *Formica rufa* which are very abundant within coppice and at the edge of rides.

A small number of scarce species associated with mature timber and dead-wood habitats have been found, and two nationally scarcer water beetles *Agabus chalconatus*, found in shady woodland pools and *Hydraena testacea*, typical of flowing water are also recorded from the wood.

The wide range of woodland habitat types present within the site supports an exceptional diversity of birds, and the site has well-established breeding populations of many of the scarcer bird species found in the area. Species for which the site is particularly important include hobby *Falco subbuteo*, woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*, long-eared owl *Asio otus*, nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*, tree pipit *Anthus trivialis*, nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*, grasshopper warbler *Locustella naevia*, and willow tit *Parus montanus*.

This site also supports an important local population of the declining and specially-protected hazel dormouse *Muscardinus avellanarius*.

* 'A Nature Conservation Review' edited by D A Ratcliffe, 1977, Cambridge

** Listed in the Red Data Book: 2, Insects edited by D B Shirt 1987, NCC.