

County: Hampshire **Site Name:** Stockbridge Down SSSI

Local Planning Authority: Hampshire County Council, Test Valley Borough Council

National Grid Reference: SU 380349

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 185 **1:25,000:** SU 33

Area: 69.5 (ha) 171.7 (ac)

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1971 **Date of Last Revision:** 1979

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1985 **Date of Last Revision:** –

Other Information:

The plateau and part of the escarpment is owned by the National Trust: this area is also land common to the burghers of Stockbridge.

Reasons for Notification:

Stockbridge Down comprises a wide range of chalk scrub and grassland communities occupying a north-west facing chalk scarp and an extensive plateau on clay-with-flints. The various stages in seral development, ranging from short-sward chalk grassland, through mixed scrub to yew *Taxus* and beech *Fagus* woodland, are considered to be of outstanding ecological interest.

The open downland, dominated by meadow fescue *Festuca pratensis*, is rich in herbs, including horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*, stemless thistle *Cirsium acaule*, fairy flax *Linum catharticum*, mignonette *Reseda lutea*, thyme *Thymus drucei*, thyme-leaved sandwort *Arenaria serpyllifolia* and the parasitic knapweed broomrape *Orobanche elatior*.

Bronze Age round barrows and earthworks of an early Iron Age hill fort provide local diversity of soil depth and aspect which gives rise to local assemblages of more prostrate calcareous plants.

Three distinct scrub communities are represented. On the north-facing escarpment there is a mixed scrub with juniper *Juniperus communis*, privet *Ligustrum vulgare*, hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* and *Rosa* species as co-dominants. Up to 14 shrub species have been recorded in a 10 × 10 metre quadrant. This area shows evidence of succession to yew-wood and contrast with an area of young, regenerating juniper on a south-facing slope of upright brome *Bromus erectus* grassland, and probably of post-myxomatosis age. The clay capping of the plateau supports an unusually advanced scrub of hawthorn, blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* and gorse *Ulex europaeus* with a field layer of creeping bent *Agrostis stolonifera*, tufted hair-grass *Deschampsia cespitosa* and nettle *Urtica dioica*.

The particular juxtaposition of plateau and scarp scrub communities found within this Site of Special Scientific Interest is now an uncommon feature on downland, most formerly similar sites having been converted to arable or ley.

Stockbridge Down supports a wide range of calcareous grassland and scrub butterflies, including chalk-hill blue *Lysandra coridon*, marbled white *Melanargia galathea* and dark green fritillary *Mesoacidalia aglaja*. A good cross-section of moths is also present. Notable records

include 7 varieties of the pug moth *Eupithecia* species, and the locally distributed oblique-striped moth *Mesotype virgata*, well outside its usual cliff-top grassland range.