

SITE NOTIFIED TO THE SECRETARY OF STATE ON 12 JUNE 1987

COUNTY: DORSET      SITE NAME: FONTMELL AND MELBURY  
DOWNS

DISTRICT: NORTH DORSET

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

Local Planning Authority: NORTH DORSET DISTRICT COUNCIL, Dorset  
County Council

National Grid Reference: ST 886193                      Area: 287.9 (ha.) 711.3 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 183, 184              1:10,000: ST 81 NE, 82 SE, 91  
NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1977                      Date of Last Revision: –

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1987                      Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Part owned by National Trust. Part managed as a nature reserve by the Dorset  
Trust for Nature Conservation. Boundary amended by extension and deletion.  
Fontmell Down previously notified as Fontmell Down SSSI.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

This large site, comprising part of the edge of the chalk escarpment holds  
unimproved chalk grassland and scrub communities which are typical of north  
east Dorset and have high botanical and entomological interest.

The grassland shows wide variety related to variation in soil type, aspect and  
grazing pressure. The main grassland type is characterised by the dominance of  
Sheep's Fescue *Festuca ovina* with Meadow Oat *Avenula pratensis* and,  
especially on slopes with a southerly aspect, is exceptionally rich in associated  
plants. Frequent grasses of this turf include Quaking Grass *Briza media* and  
Crested Hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha* and the sedges *Carex flacca* and *C.*  
*caryophyllea* are abundant. The many chalk herbs include Horseshoe Vetch  
*Hippocrepis comosa*, Chalk Milkwort *Polygala calcarea* and the very local  
Early Gentian *Gentianella anglica* and Bastard Toadflax *Thesium humifusum*.  
Orchids are well represented in these swards and include amongst others,  
Fragrant Orchid *Gymnadenia conopsea*, Frog Orchid *Coeloglossum viride* and  
Lesser Butterfly Orchid *Plantanthera bifolia*, the last two of very local  
occurrence in the county.

Taller swards are often dominated by Upright Brome *Bromus erectus* and Wood  
False Brome *Brachypodium sylvaticum* and contain Greater Knapweed  
*Centaurea scabiosa* in some abundance, occasionally parasitised by the local

Knapweed Broomrape *Orobanche elatior*. Swards on north-facing slopes are characterised by a large proportion of mosses, especially *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus*, *Pseudoscleropodium purum* and *Calliergon cuspidatum* as well as much more uncommon species such as *Rhodobryum roseum*.

Swards on the less steep slopes, particularly near the tops of the downs, contain fewer chalk plants and tend to be dominated by Bent Grasses *Agrostis* spp. and Crested Dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus*. Meadow Saxifrage *Saxifraga granulata* is locally plentiful in these swards on the higher slopes of Ashmore Down.

In a few places there are very interesting areas of strongly acid soils, associated with screes of loose flint and chalk. Here Ling *Calluna vulgaris* is frequent, with several other typical heathland plants including the mosses *Pleurozium shreberi* and *Dicranum scoparium* and the lichen *Cladonia portentosa*.

Parts of the downs support scrub communities which, as is typical of north east Dorset, contain a range of species: Bramble *Rubus fruticosus* agg., Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, Privet *Ligustrum vulgare*, Hazel *Corylus avellana* and Dogwood *Cornus sanguinea* are frequent constituents and Wayfaring Tree *Viburnum lantana*, Buckthorn *Rhamnus catharticus* and Whitebeam *Sorbus aria* also occur. On the higher slopes there are stands of Common Gorse *Ulex europaeus*.

The diversity of habitat afforded by different grassland types and scrub accounts for the rich invertebrate fauna of this site. Butterflies are the best known group and as well as the commoner downland species being present in very good numbers, several notable species also occur. These include the rare Silver Spotted Skipper *Hesperia comma* and the uncommon and declining Duke of Burgundy *Hamaeris lucina*, Adonis Blue *Lysandra bellargus* and Marsh Fritillary *Eurodryas aurinia*. Other uncommon insects of this site include the beetle *Lagris hirta*, the Weevil *Mononychus punctum-album* and the Froghopper *Aphrophora alni*.