

Notification Date: 20 February 1989

COUNTY: GWENT, GLOUCESTERSHIRE, SITE NAME: UPPER WYE GORGE
HEREFORD AND WORCESTER

DISTRICT: MONMOUTH, FOREST OF DEAN, SOUTH HEREFORDSHIRE

Status: Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as amended. Part of the site is a National Nature Reserve under Section 19 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949

Local Planning Authority: GWENT COUNTY COUNCIL, Gloucestershire County Council, Hereford and Worcester County Council, Monmouth District Council, Forest of Dean District Council, South Herefordshire District Council

National Grid Reference: SO 560155 Area: 245.1 (ha.) 605.7 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 162 1:10,000: SO 51 NW, SO 51 NE, SO 51 SW,
SP 51 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1969 Date of Last Revision: 1974

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

Other Information:

The site is listed in 'A Nature Conservation Review' edited by D A Ratcliffe, C.U.P., 1977. Lies within the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Part of the site is owned and managed as a nature reserve by the Hereford Nature Trust. Site boundary alteration (extension and deletion). Site formerly known as 'Wye Valley – Symonds Yat'. Site includes former sites King Arthur's Cave, Little Doward Cliffs and Woodside Reserve. King Arthur's Cave is a Scheduled Ancient Monument under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

The woodlands of the lower Wye Valley form one of the most important areas for woodland conservation in Britain, comparable with the Caledonian pinewoods, the oceanic oakwoods of Western Britain, the New Forest and the mixed coppices of East Anglia. Semi-natural woodland is abundant and virtually continuous along the gorge. The woods are a mixture of many types, some of which are very localised, eg the lime-sessile oak stands on limestone, beech stands on both acid and alkaline soils in which lime *Tilia* spp., elm *Ulmus* spp., oak *Quercus* spp. and other species share dominance. Most woods are a rich mixture of stand types which are believed to be similar in composition to the original natural woods of the valley. Many rare and local species are present, including some of the rarest native tree species, eg large-leaved lime *Tilia platyphyllos*, whitebeams *Sorbus* spp. and trees close to the edge of their European range, eg hornbeam *Carpinus betulus* and beech *Fagus sylvatica*. Furthermore these woods sit in a matrix of unimproved grassland and other semi-natural habitats which, together with the woods, make the Wye Valley one of the most diverse, rich and attractive areas in southern Britain.

The site lies on the banks of the River Wye where it has cut a spectacular meandering gorge through Old Red Sandstone and Carboniferous Limestone in the vicinity of Symonds Yat. It consists of one of the most extensive blocks of semi-natural broadleaved woodland in the whole of the Wye Valley. Other habitats represented include woodland streams, small areas of limestone grassland and limestone rock outcrops. The site is also important for Pleistocene mammal remains.

Biology

The woodlands have a range of soil types which are generally alkaline in character although in places more acidic surface layers have developed. The variety of rocks and soil types has resulted in a very diverse broadleaved woodland with ten different types of woodland having been identified with a correspondingly varied ground flora.

Beech woodland is dominant over much of the area in association with sessile and pedunculate oak *Quercus petraea* and *Q. robur*, ash *Fraxinus excelsior* and silver birch *Betula pendula*. The woodlands are noted for several nationally rare and scarce tree species such as large-leaved lime which occurs mainly on the lower slopes, and the whitebeams *Sorbus eminens*, *S. anglica*, *S. rupicola* and *S. porrigentifformis*. The shrub layer contains hazel *Corylus avellana*, wych elm *Ulmus glabra*, field maple *Acer campestre* and relict small-leaved lime *Tilia cordata* coppice. The herb layer is variously dominated by bramble *Rubus fruticosus*, bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* or dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis* and includes several scarce and locally uncommon species such as wood barley *Hordelymus europaeus*, stinking hellebore *Helleborus foetidus*, narrow-leaved bitter-cress *Cardamine impatiens* and wood fescue *Festuca altissima*.

Sessile oak-lime woodland, which is restricted nationally, covers large areas of the southern and eastern parts of the site. Beech, ash, birch and wych elm contribute to the canopy and hazel is the dominant shrub species. The ground flora is dominated by bramble, great wood-rush *Luzula sylvatica* and false brome *Brachypodium sylvaticum* with bracken and bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus* in the more acidic areas.

A smaller area of alder *Alnus glutinosa* woodland occurs along a streamside, associated with ash and goat willow *Salix caprea*. Opposite-leaved golden-saxifrage *Chrysosplenium oppositifolium* is present in the herb layer.

Lady Park Wood, in the south-western part of the site, is especially important for woodland research and survey. Much of the site has received no silvicultural management for over forty years, the remainder for over one hundred years. This has enabled detailed studies to be made of natural changes taking place and furthers the understanding of natural succession in native broadleaved woodland.

On the northern side of the gorge, a series of limestone bluffs, the Seven Sisters, support small relict grassland communities. These contain a number of uncommon species such as bloody cranes-bill *Geranium sanguineum* and three nationally scarce sedges – dwarf sedge *Carex humilis*, soft-leaved sedge *C. montana* and fingered sedge *C. digitata*. Another small area of herb-rich limestone grassland, on the plateau above the gorge, contains such characteristic species as common rock-rose *Helianthemum chamaecistus*, columbine *Aquilegia vulgaris* and wild madder *Rubia peregrina*.

This variety of habitats supports a diverse fauna including badger *Meles meles*, fallow deer *Dama dama* and greater and lesser horseshoe bats *Rhinolophus ferrumequinum* and *R. hipposideros*, which use a series of caves and mines within the site as a winter roost. The woodland breeding birds include buzzard *Buteo buteo*, wood warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*, pied flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca*, nuthatch *Sitta europaea* and tawny owl *Strix aluco* with raven *Corvus corax* and peregrine *Falco peregrinus* nesting on cliff ledges. The rich invertebrate fauna includes two nationally rare insects, a fly *Hilara media* and a wasp *Omallus puncticollis* and several uncommon butterflies such as wood white *Leptidea sinapis*, pearl bordered fritillary *Boloria euphrosyne* and white admiral *Limenitis camilla*.

Geology

A number of caves on the north side of the river contain Pleistocene deposits which are rich in mammal remains. Merlin's Cave, a moderately large cave, has yielded remains of lemmings and pika (a lagomorph), whilst King Arthur's Cave is of great importance for its sequence of mammal faunas from successive horizons. The oldest deposits have yielded rich faunas including spotted hyena, mammoth, woolly rhino, reindeer, red deer and horse while later units, of probable Devensian (late-glacial) age contain a 'cold' fauna of reindeer,

lemming and steppe pika, but lack hyena, mammoth and rhino. Upper Palaeolithic artefacts have been found in the same deposits. A series of six smaller caves with similar deposits run north-eastwards; like King Arthur's Cave they have much potential for future research, as does Seven Sisters Cave, a large rock shelter, or abris, containing extensive unworked deposits. Collectively these sites are of considerable importance for studies of Pleistocene vertebrate faunas.