

Notification Date: 11 March 1987

COUNTY: GLOUCESTERSHIRE

SITE NAME: LOWER WYE GORGE

DISTRICT: FOREST OF DEAN

SITE REF: 15 WYG

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

Local Planning Authority: GLOUCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, Forest of Dean District Council

National Grid Reference: ST 548983, ST 537967 Area: 29.2 (ha.) 72.3 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 162 1:10,000: ST 59 NW, NE & SW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1954 Date of Last Revision: 1974

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

Other Information:

Part new site, part formerly included within Wye Gorge – Lancaut SSSI.
Part managed as a nature reserve by the Gloucestershire Trust for Nature Conservation.
Within the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

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, e.g. 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, e.g. large-leaved lime *Tilia platyphyllos*, whitebeams *Sorbus* spp. and trees close to the edge of their European range, e.g. 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, makes the Wye Valley one of the most diverse, rich and attractive areas in southern Britain.

The site consists of ancient semi-natural woodland on the steep eastern slopes of the Wye Valley between Dannel Hill and Tutshill. It is of importance as a varied and species-rich area of limestone gorge woodland, with floristic affinities to some other gorge sites in south west England. Of particular interest at the western edge of the site is the transition from saltmarsh to valley woodland bordering the tidal River Wye.

Dense woodland covers all but the steepest cliffs and scree slopes of the gorge. A number of different types of woodland are present, with stands variously characterised by wych elm *Ulmus glabra*, ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, field maple *Acer campestre*, small-leaved lime *Tilia cordata*, oaks *Quercus petraea* and *Q. robur*, beech and alder *Alnus glutinosa*. The site is especially noted for its diversity of endemic whitebeam species which include the nationally rare *Sorbus porrigentiformis* and *S. rupicola*. A small area of mixed plantation in Chapelhouse Woods retains many features of ancient woodland, including some very large yews *Taxus baccata*.

The ground flora is equally varied reflecting the different stand types. While generally dominated by a mixture of ivy *Hedera helix*, bramble *Rubus fruticosus* agg., and dog's

mercury *Mercurialis perennis*, it also contains nationally restricted species such as narrow-leaved helleborine *Cephalanthera longifolia*, narrow-leaved bitter-cress *Cardamine impatiens* and stinking hellebore *Helleborus foetidus*. Locally uncommon plants include white helleborine *Cephalanthera damasonium*, bird's-nest orchid *Neottia nidus-avis*, green hellebore *Helleborus viridis*, wild madder *Rubia peregrina* and columbine *Aquilegia vulgaris*. Parts of the site, especially Ban-y-Gor Wood, have a rich bryophyte flora.

Cliff ledges and rock debris also provide habitats for scrub vegetation and an assortment of rare and uncommon plants such as soft-leaved sedge *Carex montana*, fingered sedge *C. digitata*, lesser calamint *Calamintha nepeta*, bloody crane's-bill *Geranium sanguineum* and mountain melick *Melica nutans* – occurring here at its most southernly station in Britain.

The steep cliffs of Wintour's Leap are a breeding site for birds such as raven *Corvus corax* and kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*.