

SITE NOTIFIED TO THE SECRETARY OF STATE ON 7 JUNE 1988

COUNTY: DORSET SITE NAME: HANDCOCKS BOTTOM

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 895128, 897135, Area: 54.9 (ha.) 135.7 (ac.)
899129, 893124
& 900120

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 195 1:10,000: ST 81 SE, ST 91 SW

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

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1988 Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Site boundary amended by extensions and deletions. The site falls within the Cranborne Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Forming a relic and western outlier of Cranborne Chase, the ancient, semi-natural woodland at Handcocks Bottom surrounds the former medieval deer park of Harbins Park. The light base-rich soils associated with the underlying chalk and drift have given rise to rich and diverse plant communities, typical of the woodland of the Dorset Chalklands. The virtual absence of atmospheric pollution and the continuity of woodland cover on the site have led to the development of an important lichen flora. Also present is an area of chalk grassland and scrub which supports an extensive assemblage of butterflies.

The woodland consists largely of Ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, Pedunculate Oak *Quercus robur* and Field Maple *Acer campestre* with an understorey of Hazel *Corylus avellana*, which was previously worked on a coppice rotation. Silver Birch *Betula pendula* is a frequent component within the woodland over the slightly more acidic soils whereas Whitebeam *Sorbus aria*, which is infrequent within Dorset, is present only in the calcareous areas. There is a good range of lime-loving shrubs including Wild Privet *Ligustrum vulgare*, Dogwood *Cornus sanguinea* and Spindle *Eunonymus europaeus*, as well as the more ubiquitous Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* and Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*. The rich ground flora, also reflects the geological variation within the wood, with Dogs Mercury *Mercurialis perennis*, Wood Anemone *Anemone nemorosa*, Yellow Archangel *Lamium galeobdolon* and Sanicle *Sanicula europaea* frequent throughout much of the wood, whereas Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, Wood-sorrel *Oxalis acetosella* and Creeping

Soft-grass *Holcus mollis* are more frequent within the more acidic northern and western areas. The Greater Butterfly Orchid *Platanthera chlorantha* is one of four orchid species which occur throughout the woodland.

A total of 93 epiphytic lichens have been recorded within the woodlands, at least eight of these being indicators of woodland sites with a long history of ecological continuity. Epiphytes thrive within the more open areas of ageing Hazel coppice, with many species of crustose lichen of the *Graphidion* community being present including *Thelotrema lepadinum* and *Arthonia didyma* which is restricted to old woodland areas in Dorset. The Ash and Oak are the most significant standard trees for the lichen communities that they support, several species of restricted occurrence being present including *Bacidia biatorina*, *Catillaria sphaeroides* and *Schismatomma cretaceum*. *Lobaria pulmonaria*, a species now extinct over much of England due to atmospheric pollution, is found in one part of the wood; other rare species include *Parmelia reddenda* which is found on the bark of Maple, and *Cladonia parasitica*, found on the woodland floor in one of its few Dorset locations.

Extending southwards from Handcocks Bottom is a steep, west-facing chalk bank which supports a herb-rich sward of calcareous grassland with patches of dense scrub. Present within this diverse sward is the nationally rare Dwarf Sedge *Carex humilis* which, within Dorset, is confined to the north-eastern chalklands. The scrub species present include Wayfaring-tree *Viburnum lantana* and Gorse *Ulex europaeus* as well as much Wild Privet, Oak and Blackthorn. A large number of butterfly species have been recorded from this area, including the scarce and declining Marsh Fritillary *Euphydryas aurinia* and Duke of Burgundy Fritillary *Hamearis lucina*; the Common Forester moth *Adscita statices* is also known to occur here. The open woodland areas also contain good numbers of butterflies, including three additional species of Fritillary.