

COUNTY: SOMERSET

SITE NAME: ASHAM WOOD

DISTRICT: MENDIP

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

Local Planning Authority: Mendip District Council, Somerset County Council

National Grid Reference: ST 705460 Area: 140.6 (ha) 347.5 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 183 1:10,000: ST 74 NW, SW,
ST 64 NE, SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1963 Date of Last Revision: 1972

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1984 Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Site area reduced since last Revision. Nature Conservation Review Grade I Site. Part leased and managed by the Somerset Trust for Nature Conservation.

Description:

Asham Wood is the largest and most diverse of the ancient semi-natural woods in the Mendips. Despite recent partial destruction due to quarrying it remains one of the most important.

The wood occupies 2 deep valleys and the intervening plateau. Most of the underlying rocks are calcareous Carboniferous Limestones and Shales, but Devonian Portishead Beds outcrop along the northern valley. The soils are neutral to strongly alkaline over the limestone, but mildly acid over the Devonian beds. Unlike other Mendip ancient woods the soils include a full range from excessively drained skeletal soils on the limestone outcrops to permanently wet conditions along the streamside. Mostly, however, the soils are freely-drained clay loams with a degree of flushing along the lower slopes of the valleys.

Several woodland types occur within the wood. On the heavy acid soils of the northern valley slopes one finds acid Pedunculate Oak-Hazel-Ash woodland. Along the valley bottom the Alder *Alnus glutinosa* is mostly on neutral-alkaline mineral soils, but in parts of the southern valley Alderwood was more extensive and wet, and is classified as base-rich springline Alderwood. On the limestone plateau and slopes the woodland is a mixture of dry Ash-Maple woodland and Maple-Ash-Lime woodland. The latter being more abundant south of Tunscombe Bottom. Both these types are particularly characteristic of Mendip woodlands and indeed are better developed here than elsewhere in Britain. Finally, on the steep slopes of Tunscombe Bottom and Leighton Hanging Wych Elm *Ulmus glabra* is present and generates a further type, calcareous Ash-Wych Elm woodland. This is found both on the flushed lower slopes and on rock outcrops, where Yew *Taxus baccata* is abundant. This range of woodland types is greater than in other Mendip ancient woods, and it includes the 2 types of nationally limited distribution which are especially characteristic of this area. All these woodland types have long been treated as coppice-with-standards, a system which seems to have finally died out here as late as 1950. The principal feature of interest is the abundance of stub and small pollards of Pedunculate Oak *Quercus robur*, Ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, Field Maple *Acer campetre* and Small-leaved Lime *Tilia codata*. Indeed, Pedunculate Oak in particular is a complete mixture of all treatment forms: standards of maiden origin, pollards, stubs and low-cut coppice. A similar structure can be seen in other Mendip Ash-Lime woods, but not as well developed as at Asham. Within the coppice system shrubs survived as opportunists in clearings and many are now widespread, notably: Guelder Rose *Viburnum opulus*,

Wayfaring Tree *V. lantana*, Dogwood *Cornus sanguinea* and Spindle *Euonymus europaeus*. Holly *Ilex aquifolium*, Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, Crab Apple *Malus sylvestris* and Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* are less common. Rowan *Sorbus aucuparia* is restricted to areas with more acid soils.

The principal species of the ground vegetation vary with soil type and drainage, but they include Dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis*, Wood Anemone *Anemone nemorosa* and Ivy *Hedera helix* on the alkaline soils, Ramsons *Allium ursinum* on the flushed alkaline slopes, Creeping Soft-grass *Holcus mollis* on the acid soils of the northern valley and Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria* along the wet valley sides. Species normally restricted to ancient woodlands include Herb Paris *Paris quadrifolia*, Solomon's Seal *Polygonatum multiflorum*, Lily of the Valley *Convallaria majalis*, Toothwort *Lathraea squamaria*, Yellow Archangel *Lamiastrum galeobdolon* and Wood Melick *Melica uniflora*. The nationally rare Narrow-leaved Bittercress *Cardamine impatiens* is of special interest while other species of note include Columbine *Aquilegia vulgaris*, Adder's tongue *Ophioglossum vulgatum*, Wild Daffodil *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*, Small Teasel *Dipsacus pilosus*, Common Spotted Orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, Broad-leaved Helleborine *Epipactis helleborine*, Early-purple Orchid *Orchis mascula*, Water Avens *Geum rivale* and Hybrid Avens *Geum x intermedium*. The widespread occurrence of Meadow Saffron *Colchicum autumnale* in woodland is also unusual.

The generally sheltered and humid conditions provide an ideal environment for a wide range of lower plants. 114 species of Moss, 21 species of Liverwort, and 122 species of Fungi have been recorded.

Resident breeding butterflies include the local Grizzled Skipper *Pyrgus malvae*, Silver-washed Fritillary *Argynnis paphia* and Purple Hairstreak *Thecla quercus*. The site supports 41 species of Mollusca. Of particular interest are the nationally rare snails *Ena montana* and *Acicula fusca*.

Buzzard *Buteo buteo*, Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*, Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*, Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* and Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* have bred in the woodland in recent years.