

COUNTY: KENT SITE NAME: FOLKESTONE TO ETCHINGHILL
ESCARPMENT

DISTRICT: SHEPWAY

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

Local Planning Authority: Shepway District Council

National Grid Reference: TR 171394 to Area: 269.5 (ha.) 666.2 (ac.)
TR 235376

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 179 1:10,000: TR 13 NE, TR 23 NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1951 Date of Last Revision: 1981
1984 (part)

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1985 (part) Date of Last Revision: 1986

Other Information:

This site is included in 'A Nature Conservation Review'. The site also includes Holywell Coombe Geological Conservation Review site. There have been several boundary amendments.

Reasons for Notification:

This extensive area of chalk grassland and scrub is located on the steep escarpment north of Folkestone. The site is one of the largest remaining areas of unimproved chalk downland in Kent. Three nationally rare plants listed on Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and specially protected by law, are present; late spider orchid *Ophrys fuciflora*, early spider orchid *Ophrys sphegodes* and bedstraw broomrape *Orobanche caryophyllacea*. Asholt Wood at the western end of the site is regarded as one of the best examples of a coppiced ash woodland in the county. It has an outstanding lichen flora and a diverse breeding bird community. The site also supports an outstanding assemblage of insects including many local and rare species. Part of the site, Holywell Coombe, is of importance for its fossil remains.

Most of the downland is dominated by tor-grass *Brachypodium pinnatum* and fescues *Festuca* species in a mixed sward of quaking grass *Briza media*, crested hair-grass *Koeleria cristata* and upright brome *Bromus erectus*. Many herbs characteristic of unimproved grassland are present such as horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, squinancywort *Asperula cynanchica* and small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*.

There is a thin scattering of shrubs, mainly hawthorn, along most of the escarpment. Extensive areas of dense hawthorn and gorse scrub are present, particularly along the top and bottom of the slopes. Ash and oak have become established in some areas and are developing into secondary woodland. Among the dense scrub at Holywell is a marshy area dominated by greater willowherb *Epilobium hirsutum* and hemp-agrimony *Eupatorium cannabinum*. A number of springs emerge from the foot of the escarpment.

The site supports a diverse insect fauna including a number of nationally rare flies, moths and butterflies. Of special interest is the annulet moth

Gnophos obscuratus which is noted for its different genetic colour forms. This is the only known locality in Britain for the form *fasciata*. In addition the nationally rare straw belle moth *Aspitates gilvaria* is found here. Among the butterflies the locally uncommon adonis blue *Lysandra bellargus* and small blue *Cupido minimus* are two species with a restricted distribution.

Asholt Wood is situated on the Gault Clay at the foot of the escarpment. The soils are poorly drained and range from highly calcareous near the chalk scarp, to neutral with some mildly acidic patches.

The woodland has been managed as coppice-with-standards in the past but most has been neglected for many years. Ash and hazel with some field maple are the main coppiced species beneath pedunculate oak standards. Coppiced alder occurs along Seabrook Stream which runs through the middle of the wood. Small patches of hornbeam coppice are present in the more acidic areas. The shrub layer is sparse but varied and includes several species characteristic of calcareous soils such as dogwood and spindle.

The woodland ground flora is dominated by dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis*, enchanter's nightshade *Circaea lutetiana*, tufted hair-grass *Deschampsia caespitosa* and brambles *Rubus fruticosus*. Uncommon plants such as thin-spiked wood sedge *Carex strigosa*, stinking iris *Iris foetidissima* and fly orchid *Ophrys insectifera* also occur.

The breeding bird community includes many typical woodland species such as great spotted woodpecker, tawny owl, nuthatch and treecreeper.

The geological interest of Holywell Coombe can be defined as follows:

'An important Pleistocene sequence of Devensian, Late-glacial and Flandrian spring and slope deposits containing fossil molluscs, plant remains and fossil beetles occurs within this Chalk coombe. A key feature of the deposits is that they allow changes in the fossil molluscan fauna to be compared with vegetation zones and standard pollen zones. A series of mollusc assemblage zones defined on the basis of the successive mollusc faunas at Holywell Coombe is now established as a standard against which to compare and date other sites in southern England where similar mollusc assemblages occur. Holywell Coombe is therefore a key Pleistocene reference site.'