

COUNTY: DORSET SITE NAME: HIGHER HOUGHTON

DISTRICT: NORTH DORSET

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

Local Planning Authority: NORTH DORSET DISTRICT COUNCIL, Dorset County Council

National Grid Reference: ST 801050 Area: 139.0 (ha.) 343.5 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 194 1:10,000: ST 70 NE, SE; 80 NW, SW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1970 Date of Last Revision: –

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

Other Information:

Reasons for Notification:

This site, which covers three dry valleys in chalk with adjacent plateau, has grassland and woodland of great diversity reflecting variation in its soils. The chalk grassland and scrub communities are particularly rich and well developed and provide excellent examples of types found in east-central Dorset.

The chalk slopes of Heath Bottom, Park Bottom and above Bully Wood have swards largely dominated by Sheep's and Red Fescues, (*Festuca ovina* and *F. rubra*). A range of other grasses are present including Meadow Oat *Avenula pratensis*, Crested Hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha*, Wood False-brome *Brachypodium sylvaticum*, Heath Grass *Danthonia decumbens* and Tall Fescue *Festuca arundinacea*. These swards are generally very rich in herbs typical of chalk downland with Rockrose *Helianthemum nummularium* and Rough Hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus* particularly abundant. Valerian *Valeriana officinalis* is locally important and the scarce Early Gentian *Gentianella anglica* also occurs.

Small areas of scrub provide interfaces against the surrounding downland which are important for the invertebrate fauna and are a prominent feature of this site. In their diversity of species including Dogwood *Cornus sanguinea*, Buckthorn *Rhamnus cathartica*, Spindle *Euonymus europaeus* and Whitebeam *Sorbus aria*, the scrub communities show strong affinities to those of central-southern England.

Swards of more neutral/acid character with high contents of Creeping Bent *Agrostis stolonifera*, Common Bent *A. capillaris*, Sweet Vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* and Red Fescue, occur on the deeper soils and over plateau deposits of Clay with Flints. On the deeper soils some of the typical

chalk species still occur but only infrequently and the local appearance of Lousewort *Pedicularis sylvatica* reflects damper more acid conditions.

The semi-natural woodland is of two main types. On the chalk slopes there is Ash *Fraxinus excelsior*/Hazel *Corylus avellana* coppice, with a varied ground flora dominated by Dog's Mercury *Mercurialis perennis*. The more acid soils of the higher ground support Oak *Quercus robur* woodland (much of it old coppice) with an understorey containing Holly *Ilex aquifolium* and Hazel. Here there is a characteristic acid ground flora including Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scriptus* and Great Wood-rush *Luzula sylvatica* and the mosses *Polytrichum formosum* and *Dicranum scoparium*.

The extent and diversity of habitat encourages strong populations of woodland and grassland animals and the sheltered chalk slopes are favoured by the typical down-land butterflies including the local Chalkhill Blue *Lysandra coridon*.