

County: Dorset **Site Name:** Breach Fields

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 853223, ST 853230 **Area:** 11.38 (ha) 28.12 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 183 **1:10,000:** ST 82 SE

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

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1991 **Date of Last Revision:** –

Other Information:

New site.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Lying to the west of Shaftesbury, the site comprises three west-facing fields on slopes which overlie Gault Clay and Upper Greensand. These fields have been relatively little modified by agricultural improvement and support species-rich neutral grassland which is now rare both in Dorset and nationally.

The grassland is of the crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus* – common knapweed *Centaurea nigra* community type and supports a wide variety of native grasses and herbs. Prominent amongst the grasses are heath grass *Danthonia decumbens*, common bent *Agrostis capillaris* and red fescue *Festuca rubra*, with crested dog's-tail, sweet vernal grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* and Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus* occurring at variable frequency. The herb component is especially rich and includes many species characteristic of unimproved grassland such as devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis* which is present in unusual abundance in the north of the site. Betony *Stachys officinalis*, pignut *Conopodium majus* and the nationally scarce corky-fruited waterdropwort *Oenanthe pimpinelloides* are all frequent, and heath spotted and southern marsh-orchids *Dactylorhiza maculata* and *D. praetermissa* occur locally. Swards on shallower soils and steeper slopes support a slightly different flora which includes mouse-ear hawkweed *Hieracium pilosella*, spring sedge *Carex caryophyllea*, rough hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus* and tormentil *Potentilla erecta*. The occurrence of the local dyer's greenweed *Genista tinctoria* is a feature of the southernmost field.

Damp hollows and seepages support lush vegetation dominated by soft and jointed rushes *Juncus effusus* and *J. articulatus*, with herbs such as greater bird's-foot trefoil *Lotus uliginosus*, cuckoo flower *Cardamine pratensis*, ragged-robin *Lychnis flos-cuculi* and marsh thistle *Cirsium palustre*. Mixed hedgerows of hazel *Corylus avellana*, hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* and occasional mature pedunculate oak *Quercus robur* with small areas of bramble *Rubus fruticosus* and common gorse *Ulex europaeus* scrub add to the diversity of the site.