

COUNTY: WILTSHIRE

SITE NAME: PARSONAGE DOWN

DISTRICT: SALISBURY

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

Local Planning Authority: Wiltshire County Council, Salisbury District Council

National Grid Reference: SU 050412

Area: 188.6 (ha.) 466.1 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 184

1:10,000: SU 04 SW, SU 04 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1971

Date of Last Revision: 1973

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1986

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Part of a National Nature Reserve owned by the Nature Conservancy Council. Site boundary amended.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Parsonage Down is one of the most outstanding chalk downland sites in Britain. Situated on the Upper Chalk of the southern edge of Salisbury Plain, the site is of particular interest as an extensive area of flat and gently sloping land, much of which has escaped ploughing and other agricultural improvement during the last 100 years.

For at least 60 years the site has been grazed extensively by hardy breeds of cattle and sheep at a carefully regulated stocking rate; this continuity has been important in maintaining plant and animal diversity. Further evidence, both archaeological and documentary, has contributed to a detailed knowledge of land use history which is an important facet of the interest of Parsonage Down.

The botanically-rich grassland which covers most of the site is broadly referable to the sheep's-fescue -- meadow oat-grass *Festuca ovina* -- *Avenula pratensis* type. However red fescue *Festuca rubra* and downy oat-grass *Avenula pubescens* also occur in areas of herb-rich turf. This unusual feature may be related to local soils and topography.

A remarkable variety of vascular plants occur within the sward; it is common to record over 30 species in a square metre. Of the 28 grasses and sedges occurring on the site, dwarf sedge *Carex humilis* and glaucous sedge *C. flacca*, heath-grass *Danthonia decumbens*, yellow oat-grass *Trisetum flavescens* and crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha* are widespread. Herbs which typify the south west Wiltshire chalk are common on the site and include saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria*, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, betony *Stachys officinalis*, yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor* and dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris*. Many plants which exist at Parsonage Down have a restricted distribution in Britain. Amongst these are early gentian *Gentianella angelica*, bastard-toadflax *Thesium humifusum*, chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*, dodder *Cuscuta epithymum* and field fleawort *Senecio integrifolius*. Orchids are well represented and include burnt and green-winged orchids *Orchis ustulata* and *O. morio* and frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride*.

Periodically, from prehistoric times to the last war, parts of the down have been used for crop production. An area ploughed and resown during the last war has since been left unimproved and now holds small quantities of typical downland plants such as salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor* and clustered bellflower *Campanula glomerata*. Adjacent to high quality downland, this area is of value for the study of recolonisation of chalk grassland.

The regularity of grazing has restricted scrub development on the down. However gorse *Ulex europaeus* and hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* occur locally as clumps with bramble *Rubus fruticosus agg* and dog rose *Rosa canina*. To the west of the site are more extensive areas of scrub.

Limited invertebrate study has so far revealed several interesting species. The rare spiders *Xysticus cristatus* and *Oxyptila simplex* were noted in 1980, whilst several notable true flies (diptera) including *Leptarthrus brevirostris* and *Meonura minutissima* were recorded in 1982. The well grazed sward supports typical downland butterflies such as marbled white *Melanargia galathea* and brown argus *Aricia agestis*.

Birds which rely on the downland for breeding include lapwing, grey and red-legged partridge, whilst areas of scrub support yellowhammer and turtle dove.