

COUNTY: HAMPSHIRE  
MEADOWS SSSI

SITE NAME: ASHFORD HILL WOODS AND

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

Local Planning Authorities: HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council

National Grid Reference: SU 563620

Ordnance Survey Sheets: 1:50,000: 174                      1:25,000: SU 56

Hectares/Acres: 142.1/351.13

Date Notified (1949 Act): –

Date of Last Revision: –

Date Notified (1981 Act): 21 August 1986

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

20.36 ha. of the Site of Special Scientific Interest have been purchased by the Nature Conservancy Council as a National Nature Reserve.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Ashford Hill Woods and Meadows Site of Special Scientific Interest comprises an extensive and varied complex of woodlands and agriculturally unimproved meadows lying in a broad shallow valley on the London Clays and Lower Bagshot Beds. The site is remarkable in its habitat quality, diversity of communities and number of rare and threatened species, and is without comparison in central southern England. It embraces ancient species-rich coppice woodland, secondary woodland on former common land, hay meadows, grazed meadowland and peaty flushed areas, drained by a clear unpolluted small river. The intimate juxtaposition of habitats within a small area gives rise to great biological richness.

The Holt woodlands are partly ancient and partly derived from formerly open common land and comprise a rather species-poor oak dominated woodland with a patchy coppice layer and an acidic ground flora. Though some parts are managed commercially on a long rotation which includes conifers, the woods are structurally highly favourable to invertebrates, with a rich and diverse fauna associated with the large clearings, wide grassy rides and the long margin with the meadows which provide nectar sources for woodland insects. The wood is the only known North Hampshire site for the pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly *Boloria euphrosyne*, and is possibly the only remaining county site for high brown fritillary *Argynnis adippe*. Its northern margin also harbours the rare spider *Araneus marmoreus pyramidatus*.

Redlands Copse is ancient woodland exhibiting a wide range of stand types, including extensive mixed sessile oak *Quercus petraea*/pedunculate oak *Q. robur* woodland on the dry acidic soils, small, frequently transitional stands of ash/field

maple *Acer campestre* and ash/hazel wood and a number of alder dominated stands with alder buckthorn *Frangula alnus*, wood horsetail *Equisetum sylvaticum* and greater tussock sedge *Carex paniculata*. The woodland as a whole supports a very rich flora which includes many species considered to be characteristic of long established woodland in southern England, for example, lily-of-the-valley *Convallaria majalis*, large bitter-cress *Cardamine amara* in abundance, wood club-rush *Scirpus sylvaticus* and smooth-stalked sedge *Carex laevigata*.

Between the woodlands lies the richest complex of acid to neutral meadows in south central England, both in terms of general meadow species (318 species recorded to 1985) and in terms of meadow 'indicator' species, with 47 of the 60 species considered as being indicators of ancient unimproved meadows in the geographical region having been recorded. Much of the botanical richness arises from the variety of soil types, ranging from dry, rather acidic, sandy loams to neutral clayey soils in the wet flood plain, with both base-poor and base-rich peaty flushes throughout; and from the different management history of individual meadows, some of which are cut for hay with aftermath grazing, some mown but ungrazed, and others grazed but not mown. Each meadow supports a different assemblage of flowers and insects. The dry grazed pasture has abundant anthills and is dominated by such plants as dyer's greenweed *Genista tinctoria*, pepper saxifrage *Silaum silaus* and devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*. The wet grazed pasture has an exceptionally rich flora including several orchid species, marsh valerian *Valeriana dioica* and numerous sedges *Carex* species. The flora of the hay meadows is different again, with such species as yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor*, betony *Stachys officinalis* and the rare marsh stitchwort *Stellaria palustris* at its only known Hampshire locality. The peaty flushes support early and southern marsh orchids *Dactylorhiza incarnata* and *D. praetermissa*, flea sedge *Carex pulicaris*, lousewort *Pedicularis sylvatica* and marsh lousewort *P. palustris*. The meadows support many rare or uncommon species including, in addition to those already mentioned, green winged orchid *Orchis morio*, bog pimpernel *Anagallis tenella*, adder's tongue fern *Ophioglossum vulgatum*, abundant meadow thistle *Cirsium dissectum*, and 19 species of sedge including *Carex pallescens*, *C. disticha* and *C. vesicaria*.

The grassland swards provide important feeding areas for the woodland insects as well as acting as an ecological link between the two woods. The number of margins and transitions between habitats is extremely high. Such combinations of good quality habitats are now very rare, and are thought essential to the survival of many invertebrates. Overall the area has an exceptionally rich and diverse invertebrate fauna, with, for example, 31 species of butterfly (including six species of fritillary) and over 400 species of moth including such uncommon species as the heart moth *Dicycla oo*, the orange moth *Angerona prunaria* and the pale oak eggar *Trichiura crataegi*.