

Citation

Isle of Wight

Newtown Harbour SSSI

Local Planning Authorities: Isle of Wight County Council
South Wight Borough Council

National grid reference: SZ 425915 **Area:** 619.28 ha

Ordnance Survey sheets: 1 : 50,000: 196 **1 : 25,000:** SZ38
SZ48
SZ49

Date notified (1949 Act): Newtown Harbour 1951 **Last revision:** 1959

Date notified (1981 Act): Newtown Harbour 1984 **Last revision:** 23.02.95
Hart's Farm Meadows 1986 **Date confirmed:** 21.11.95

Other information

The site includes two former SSSIs known as Newtown Harbour SSSI and Hart's Farm Meadows SSSI. Part of the site is a Local Nature Reserve and part is proposed as a National Nature Reserve. The SSSI includes land which has been proposed for designation under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance and as a Special Protection Area under EU Directive 79/409 on the Conservation of Wild Birds.

Reasons for Notification

The site includes extensive areas of estuarine mudflats and saltmarsh that form a dendritic pattern of tidal creeks which make up the Newtown Estuary. Surrounding and sloping down to the estuary are extensive areas of unimproved grassland, woodland and scrub, interspersed with ponds and hedgerows. The site is bordered to the north by The Solent shore. This consists of rapidly eroding vegetated cliffs, sand and shingle spits, beaches and large areas of intertidal mud, sand, and shingle which are important geomorphological features. The harbour includes a saline lagoon which supports a specialised invertebrate community including a nationally rare species. The estuary and peripheral land is a very important component of The Solent estuarine system which supports internationally important over-wintering populations of wildfowl and waders, and important breeding populations of waders, gulls and terns. The site supports a rich flora including eight nationally scarce species and a diverse invertebrate fauna including three nationally rare (Red Data Book) species and 14 nationally scarce species¹.

Saltmarsh has developed on the fringes of most of the creeks and in places has developed into an extensive sward. The Newtown saltmarsh, which constitutes nearly half of that found on the Isle of Wight, is remarkable in being a mixed species community in which saltmarsh-grass *Puccinellia maritima* and sea-lavender *Limonium vulgare* are dominant rather than cord-grass *Spartina* which dominates most saltmarshes around the Solent. There is an

¹ Nationally rare species are equivalent to those listed in the British Red Data Book which includes those considered endangered, vulnerable or rare.

Nationally scarce/notable species are those found within the range of 16-100 10km squares in Britain.

abundance of associated saltmarsh species including thrift *Armeria maritima* and sea-milkwort *Glaux maritima*. Cord-grass is restricted to localised depressions and areas of bare mud such as old salt pans. The upper saltmarsh community is dominated by sea couch grass *Elymus pycnanthus* with sea aster *Aster tripolium*, and locally the two nationally scarce species marsh-mallow *Althaea officinalis* and golden-samphire *Inula crithmoides*. The lower marsh is characterised by the presence of two nationally scarce glasswort *Salicornia* species and annual sea-blite *Suaeda maritima*.

The tidal creeks and runnels that cross the saltmarsh expose large expanses of bare mud at low tide. This is largely unvegetated although an algal carpet of *Enteromorpha* develops in the summer months. The mudflats support a rich invertebrate fauna which provides a food resource for the estuarine bird populations.

The estuary mouth is guarded by shingle and sand spits which are features of geomorphological interest. They also display a plant community characteristic of a saltmarsh/sand dune interface. This is dominated by sea beet *Beta vulgaris*, halberd-leaved orache *Atriplex hastata*, yellow horned poppy *Glaucium flavum*, and sea spurge *Euphorbia paralias*, with thrift in the more mature and stable areas. The nationally scarce sea-heath *Frankenia laevis* also occurs here. The sandy top of the western spit has developed a sand dune plant community including marram grass *Ammophila arenaria*.

The intertidal areas of The Solent shore are largely unvegetated although beds of eel-grass, including the nationally scarce *Zostera noltii*, occur locally. Eel-grass is an important food source for the Brent goose *Branta bernicla*. The vegetation of the rapidly eroding sea cliffs display a range of succession communities.

Newtown Quay lagoon is the remains of an old saltworks. There is no freshwater flow into the lagoon but seawater enters at each tide through a culvert. This saline habitat supports several specialised lagoonal species including the nationally rare insensible shrimp *Gammarus insensibilis*², here at its only Isle of Wight location.

Much of the grassland which slopes down to the saltmarsh is of considerable age and remains largely unaffected by modern agricultural improvement. These grasslands, together with several improved meadows, provide feeding and roosting grounds for a large number of wildfowl and waders. Newtown Rifle Range is the largest area of unimproved hay meadows on the Isle of Wight. These are very rich in grassland plants with a total of 77 species recorded, including several which are strongly associated with old meadows. These include adder's-tongue fern *Ophioglossum vulgatum*, heath dog-violet *Viola canina* and a remarkable abundance of green-winged orchids *Orchis morio*. The remaining grassland retains a plant community rich in a number of species that are becoming increasingly uncommon. These include an abundance of dyer's greenweed *Genista tinctoria*, ox-eye daisy *Leucanthemum vulgare* and corky-fruited water-dropwort *Oenanthe pimpinelloides*. In places where Bembridge Limestone outcrops, a calcareous grassland has developed dominated by glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* with quaking grass *Briza media*, upright brome *Bromopsis erecta* and common centaury *Centaureum erythraea*. Hart's Farm meadows are divided by ancient hedgerows into several small fields, the field pattern preserving the features of a medieval settlement. Particularly species-rich meadows, to the east of Hart's Farm, are characterised by plants of slightly calcareous soils such as rest-harrow *Ononis repens*, burnet rose *Rosa pimpinellifolia*, cowslips *Primula veris* and selfheal *Prunella vulgaris*. To the west of Hart's

² Species as listed under Schedule 5 in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended)

Farm, a single meadow which has traditionally been mown for hay contains a particular abundance of green-winged orchids and adder's-tongue fern.

Scattered throughout the grasslands are numerous ponds. These are rich in aquatic fauna and flora and represent very good examples of eutrophic farm ponds on the Isle of Wight. These ponds provide habitat for dragonflies including the emperor dragonfly *Anax imperator*.

Several woodlands occur within the site, ranging from Hummet Wood in the east, Locks Copse, Town Copse, Walters Copse, Fleetlands Copse, and Windgate Copse in the south and several small woods alongside the creeks to the west. The woodland is largely of a coppice-with-standards structure, with a canopy dominated by pedunculate oak *Quercus robur* and ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, commonly with field maple *Acer campestre*. The coppice layer is dominated by pedunculate oak dominated by hazel *Corylus avellana* with a variety of other shrubs associated with calcareous soils such as privet *Ligustrum vulgare*, dogwood *Cornus sanguinea*, and spindle *Euonymus europaeus*. There are a number of species associated with old woodlands such as butcher's broom *Ruscus aculeatus*, bluebells *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* and wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa*. Examples of this woodland under active coppice management are found at Locks and Town Copses where the coppice regime has created an extremely diverse woodland supporting butterflies including silver-washed fritillary *Argynnis paphia* and white admiral *Ladoga camilla*. The woodlands around Newtown Harbour support red squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*³, a species which in southern England is largely confined to the Isle of Wight.

Newtown Harbour SSSI forms an important component of The Solent estuarine system which has been identified as an internationally important site for over-wintering wildfowl and waders, supports nationally important breeding populations of black-headed gull and of three species of tern listed on Annex 1 of the EU Birds Directive. The estuary and adjacent meadows provide important feeding and roosting grounds for significant numbers of over-wintering waterfowl including nationally important populations of dark-bellied Brent goose and black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa*. Other species include teal *Anas crecca*, wigeon *A. penelope*, shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*, redshank *Tringa totanus*, greenshank *T. nebularia*, golden plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, curlew *Numenius arquata*, whimbrel *N. phaeopus*, dunlin *Calidris alpina*, and snipe *Gallinago gallinago*. The site also supports a colony of breeding black-headed gull, small numbers of breeding sandwich tern *Sterna sandvicensis* and common tern *S. hirundo*, and has supported a colony of little tern *S. albifrons*. Breeding redshank and lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, species whose breeding habitat is rapidly declining in Britain, occur in small numbers on the saltmarsh and adjacent meadows.

The diverse habitats support a rich invertebrate fauna including three nationally rare species, 14 nationally scarce species, and 34 invertebrates which are scarce in a local context. The meadows and woodlands support a rich butterfly fauna including marbled white *Melanargia galathea*, common blue *Polyommatus icarus*, and grizzled skipper *Pyrgus malvae* and the rare (RDB3) fly *Dorycer graminum*. The endangered (RDB1) wolf spider *Aulonia albimana* whose distribution is now confined to the Isle of Wight is recorded at Newtown Rifle Ranges.

³ Species as listed under Schedule 5 in the wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended).