

COUNTY: KENT            SITE NAME: HOLLINGBOURNE DOWNS

DISTRICT: MAIDSTONE

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

Local Planning Authority: MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

National Grid Reference: TQ 841564–857552    Area: 60.9 (ha.) 150.5 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 178, 188, 189    1:10,000: TQ 85 NW, NE & SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1968            Date of Last Revision: 1981

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1986            Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

Reasons for Notification:

This section of the North Downs escarpment supports a variety of habitats characteristic of calcareous soils, including unimproved chalk grassland and beech woodland with oak and ash. A number of plant species indicative of the chalk soils are present, including the rare mat-grass fescue *Vulpia unilateralis*, musk orchid *Herminium monorchis* and man orchid *Aceras anthropophorum*.

Chalk grassland overlies the steeper slopes of the escarpment and has become established in disused chalk workings. The sward is dominated by tor-grass *Brachypodium pinnatum*, upright brome *Bromus erectus* and sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina*, and a number of typical downland herbs are present. These include horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor* and dwarf thistle *Cirsium acaule*. Less common plants which occur include chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea* and, in an old chalk pit, musk orchid and man orchid. In a chalk quarry, whitebeam and yew scrub has developed over a herb rich turf which includes the very rare mat-grass fescue. Elsewhere in the site, areas of scrub are chiefly of hawthorn and elder, over a sward of tor-grass. The scrub is most dense on the heavier soils at the top of the scarp.

Much of the south-eastern part of the site comprises mixed deciduous woodland. On the plateau, sweet chestnut coppice with standards of pedunculate oak, ash and sycamore merges with an extensive area of very large hawthorn at the top of the slope. There is some secondary woodland of ash and yew, and on the steeper escarpment slopes beech high forest is present with some hazel coppice.

The understorey and ground flora of much of the woodland is sparse, although in secondary woodland areas and on woodland edges several shrub species indicative of calcareous soils are present. These include wayfaring-tree *Viburnum lantana*, dogwood *Cornus sanguinea* and traveller's-joy *Clematis vitalba*. The ground flora is generally dominated by dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis*, with bluebell

*Hyacinthoides non-scripta* on the heavier soils. Less common species present include white helleborine *Cephalanthera damasonium* and fly orchid *Ophrys insectifera*, which are found on the thin chalky soils of the steeper slopes.

At the western end of the site there are some small areas of woodland dominated by pedunculate oak and ash with an understorey mainly of hawthorn and elder. Purging buckthorn *Rhamnus catharticus* is also present, indicative of the chalk soils.