COUNTY: BERKSHIRE **SITE NAME:** STREATLEY WARREN

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

Local Planning Authorities: Newbury District Council, Berkshire County Council

National Grid Reference: SU553806

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 174 **1:10,000:** SU58 SW/SE

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1988 **Date of Last Revision:**

Area: 31.1 ha 76.8 ac

Other information: The site lies within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification

The site consists of the head of a dry chalk valley situated in the Berkshire/Oxfordshire downs, an area now largely converted to intensive arable farming. More than half the site comprises unimproved flower-rich chalk grassland which has been maintained by grazing. This habitat is now very rare in Berkshire where a survey in 1985 found that only about 180 ha remain, equal to less that 0.5% of the chalk outcrop in the county. The site provides important habitats for insects and birds.

The unimproved grassland occurs mainly on the steeper slopes, consisting of an intimate mixture of grasses, sedges and broad-leaved herbs, many of which are typical of chalky or dry soils and are rarely found in other types of habitat. Examples include frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride*, fragrant orchid *Gymnadenia conopsea*, dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris*, kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria* and harebell *Campanula rotundifolia*. Present also is the early gentian *Gentianella anglica*, a rare species endemic to the British Isles and virtually restricted to southern chalk.

Characteristic grasses comprise red and sheep's fescue *Festuca rubra* and *F. ovina*, quaking grass *Briza media*, hairy oat-grass *Avenula pratensis* and crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha*. These are fine-leaved species forming a close-knit turf, particularly in well-grazed areas. Upright brome *Bromus erectus* is abundant in less grazed areas.

Herbs common and widespread over the area include glaucous sedge *Carex flacca*, hoary plantain *Plantago media*, stemless thistle *Cirsium acaule*, rough hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*, wild thyme *Thymus praecox* and autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*.

Other species include squinancywort *Asperula cynanchica* and fairy flax *Linum catharticum*, which occur more commonly in the shorter turf; and black knapweed *Centaurea nigra*, burnet saxifrage *Pimpinella saxifraga* and wild basil *Origanum vulgare* which are plentiful in the upright brome-dominated areas.

The diversity of plant life provides food and nectar sources for insects and other invertebrates. Butterflies recorded include marbled white, small heath, ringlet and common blue. The abundance of ant-hills over parts of the site indicates long continuity of the turf. Birds feeding and nesting in the open grassland include skylark, grey partridge and lapwing; the last preferring the plateau areas.

Areas of scrub consist of native shrubs and trees, including whitebeam, hawthorn, buckthorn and elder. Juniper, an evergreen coniferous shrub, occurs naturally here in its only Berkshire locality. The shrub is inhabited by a variety of bird species, including willow warbler, blackcap, lesser whitethroat and yellowhammer.