

COUNTY: OXFORDSHIRE

SITE NAME: CHIMNEY MEADOWS

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

Local Planning Authorities: West Oxfordshire District Council

National Grid Reference: SP 352000

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 164 **1:10,000:** SP30 SW, SP30 SE,
SU39 NW, SU39 NE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1975 **Date of Last Revision:** 1977

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

Area: 49.7 ha 122.8 acres

Description and Reasons for Notification

The site consists of six neutral, unimproved and semi-improved alluvial meadows which support a botanically rich sward and are of local importance for breeding birds, particularly waders.

Chimney Meadows are situated on flat ground at an altitude of 65 metres and are bordered on their south-western and south-eastern sides by meanders of the River Thames. The alluvial deposits have weathered to produce stoneless calcareous clayey soils of the Thames series.

The grassland communities of the four meadows lying to the north of the site are dominated by crested dog's tail *Cynosurus cristatus*, perennial rye-grass *Lolium perenne*, meadow barley *Hordeum secalinum*, creeping bent *Agrostis stolonifera*, hairy sedge *Carex hirta* and glaucous sedge *C. flacca*. The local presence of fairy flax *Linum catharticum* and cowslip *Primula veris* suggests relatively dry conditions. Common spike rush *Eleocharis palustris* and marsh bedstraw *Galium palustre* are indicative of base-rich soils. Other species present include yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor*, adder's tongue *Ophioglossum vulgatum*, pepper-saxifrage *Silvaum silaus*, lesser hawkbit *Leontodon taraxacoides*, meadow crane's-bill *Geranium pratense*, meadow rue *Thalictrum flavum*, carnation sedge *Carex panicea* and quaking grass *Briza media*. A colony of the uncommon snake's head fritillary *Fritillaria meleagris* persists in one of the meadows, whilst one of the northern-most fields contains a population of green-winged orchid *Orchis morio*. The absence of great burnet *Sanguisorba officinalis* and the relatively infrequent occurrence of meadow brome *Bromus commutatus* suggests that hay cutting has been an occasional rather than consistent management practice in these fields.

The grassland community within the wettest and largest meadow lying to the south of the site is dominated by red fescue *Festuca rubra*, crested dog's tail, Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus*, hairy sedge and brown sedge *Carex disticha*. Water horsetail *Equisetum fluviatile* and adder's tongue are notably abundant. The presence of the former as a prominent component throughout the sward suggests that the area was formerly much wetter.

An adjoining meadow of semi-improved permanent pasture which is generally poor in herbs supports a community consisting of about equal proportions of grasses, rushes and sedges. Particularly prominent are tufted hair-grass *Deschampsia cespitosa*, perennial rye-grass, creeping bent, crested dog's tail, hard rush *Juncus inflexus*, jointed rush *Juncus articulatus*, soft rush *Juncus effusus*, lesser pond sedge *Carex acutiformis*, hairy sedge and glaucous sedge.

Chimney Meadows are intersected by ditches, most of which are blocked with reed canary-grass *Phalaris arundinacea*, reed sweet-grass *Glyceria maxima*, branched bur-reed *Sparganium erectum*, bulrush *Typha latifolia*, common fleabane *Pulicaria dysenterica* and common comfrey *Symphytum officinale*. The ditches are lined by pollarded crack willow *Salix fragilis* and some hawthorn.

Wading birds which nest in Chimney Meadows include curlew, snipe and redshank. All these are now uncommon breeding species in Oxfordshire following the widespread drainage and agricultural improvement of suitable grassland habitats along the Thames Valley and its tributaries.