COUNTY: BERKSHIRE SITE NAME: AVERY'S PIGHTLE

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: SU435651

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 174 1:10,000: SU46 NW

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1985 Date of Last Revision:

Area: 1.3 ha 3.2 ac

Description and Reasons for Notification

Avery's Pightle consists of a small, flat, low-lying field supporting a species-rich unimproved meadow community. This habitat is now rare and rapidly declining in Britain. Research in west Berkshire has shown that 115 ha of this habitat was lost during the 13 years ending 1976.

The site overlies the Reading Beds. The soils are typical stagnogleys, consisting of poorly-drained, seasonally-waterlogged loams and clays.

The richness of the community, the presence of plant species normally confined to unimproved meadows, and the relicts of a former ridge and furrow system, all suggest that this site has a long history of traditional management of grazing and hay-cutting, without ploughing, re-seeding, or the use of modern herbicides or artificial fertilisers. The word 'pightle' in fact is an ancient term for a small enclosure or meadow or pasture land, first recorded in southern England in the 13th century.

Avery's Pightle is a particularly fine example of a *Cynosurus cristatus-Centaurea nigra* meadow and pasture community. Species present throughout the site and which are characteristic of this community include sweet vernal grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, cock's-foot *Dactylis glomerata*, red fescue *Festuca rubra*, Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus*, crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus*, ribwort plantain *Plantago lanceolata*, red clover *Trifolium pratense* and white clover *T. repens*. The site belongs to a sub-community characterised by the presence of heath grass *Danthonia decumbens*, in which species typical of more base-poor grasslands become prevalent, including tormentil *Potentilla erecta*, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, smooth hawkbit *Leontodon autumnalis* and meadow vetchling *Lathyrus pratensis*.

A total of 24 species of grass and 113 species of herb have been recorded from this small field. Of these 12 are plants normally confined to ancient grasslands within southern England. They are distributed unevenly over the site which may partly reflect differences in drainage and management. Adder's-tongue *Ophioglossum vulgatum*, pepper saxifrage *Silaum silaus* and sneezewort *Achillea ptarmica* occur mainly in the drier, shorter grazed field to the south, whereas dyer's greenweed *Genista tinctoria*, meadow thistle *Cirsium dissectum* and betony *Stachys officinalis* are found in the wetter, more grass-dominated ground to the north. Within a scrubby area at the north-eastern corner there is a small colony of broad-leaved helleborine *Epipactis helleborine*, and the wet ditch on the north-western side supports water whorl grass *Catabrosa aquatica*.