COUNTY: BERKSHIRE SITE NAME: BOWDOWN AND CHAMBERHOUSE WOODS

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: SU509654

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 174 1:10,000: SU56 NW

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1983 Date of Last Revision:

Area: 66.81 ha 165.10 ac

Other information: Part of the site is managed as a nature reserve by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Naturalists Trust.

Description and Reasons for Notification

This site occupies about a mile of the wooded scarp where the plateau of Greenham and Crookham Commons drops down to the floor of the Kennet Valley. It includes a wide range of semi-natural habitats partly reflecting the geology plateau gravels and Bagshot Beds on the higher ground overlying London Clay, which outcrops on the lower slopes. The scarp is deeply incised with numerous valleys which carry small spring-fed streams with a very constant flow of unpolluted, nutrient-poor water. These valleys and large areas of seepage zones on the slopes support woodland dominated by alder, mostly growing from large old coppice stools.

The higher ground supports heathland, acid grassland, mixed scrub with birch, oak, hawthorn and birch, hazel, rowan, cherry and, locally, wych elm. Where the ground becomes wetter alder and willows *Salix fragilis*, *cinerea* and *caprea* appear, but below this onto the clay the woodland is dominated by ash and contains field maple, English elm, aspen, crab apple, blackthorn, dogwood, guelder rose *Viburnum opulus* and field rose *Rosa arvensis*.

The woodland ground flora is exceptionally rich, with several different communities. The areas on London Clay support Solomon's seal *Polygonatum multiflorum*, herb paris *Paris quadrifolia*, pignut *Conopodium majus*, early purple orchid *Orchis mascula*, great woodrush *Luzula sylvatica*, wild daffodils *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* and the sedges *Carex strigosa*, *C. sylvatica* and *C. remota*. The wetter areas support both species of golden saxifrage *Chrysosplenium oppositifolium* and *C. alternifolium*, great bitter cress *Cardamine amara*, blackcurrant *Ribes nigrum*, giant horsetail *Equisetum telmateia*, wood club-rush *Scirpus sylvaticus*, the sedges *Carex laevigata* and *C. pseudocyperus*.

The heathland and acid grassland supports an interesting range of uncommon plants such as heath cudweed *Gnaphalium sylvaticum*, dwarf gorse *Ulex minor*, least bird's-foot *Ornithopus perpusillus*, blinks *Montia fontana* and fragrant agrimony *Agrimonia odorata*.

The variety of habitats obviously contributes to the diversity of fauna which includes roe deer *Capreolus capreolus*, dormouse *Muscardinus avellanarius*, sparrowhawk *Accipter nisus*, woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*, tree pipit *Anthus trivialis*, green woodpecker *Picus viridis* and great spotted woodpecker *Dendrocopus major* in addition to the more common woodland birds. Reptiles are well represented, with adder *Vipera berus*, grass snake *Natrix natrix*, slow worm *Anguis fragilis* and common lizard *Lacerta vivipera*.

The insect fauna is very rich with, for example, purple emperor *Apatura iris*, white admiral *Limenitis camilla*, purple hairstreak *Thecla quercus* and grayling butterflies, and at least ten species of dragonfly including *Agrion virgo*, *Cordulegaster boltonii* and *Anax imperator*.