

SITE NOTIFIED TO THE SECRETARY OF STATE ON 23 JUNE 1995

COUNTY: SOMERSET      SITE NAME: SHAPWICK HEATH

DISTRICT: SEDGEMOOR

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

Local Planning Authority: SOMERSET COUNTY COUNCIL, Sedgemoor District Council

National Grid Reference: ST 430403      Area: 393.99 (ha.) 973.55 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 182      1:10,000: ST 44 SW, ST 43 NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1967      Date of Last Revision: –

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1986      Date of Last Revision: 1995

Other Information:

The major part of the SSSI is Shapwick Heath National Nature Reserve (first declared in 1961 with additions up to 1995). The site includes the old Canada Farm SSSI (notified under 1949 Act in 1967).

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Shapwick Heath, part of the Somerset Levels Wetlands, is a former raised bog lying below 4 metres ODN in the basin of the River Brue. The site includes the last remnant of active raised bog on the Somerset Levels and Moors. The soils are principally of the Turbary series acid peats, modified in most parts by cutting. Altcar series reed peats occur on the western fringe of the site. Several low, sandy hillocks (burtles) occur in the Canada Farm area.

A variety of grassland communities has developed in the unimproved pastures and hay meadows. There are good examples of the nationally rare and threatened species-rich 'mire' type meadows characterised by Common Sedge *Carex nigra*, Carnation Sedge *Carex panicea*, Purple Moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*, Meadow Thistle *Cirsium dissectum* and Devil's-bit Scabious *Succisa pratensis*. Drier grasslands include the Common Knapweed *Centaurea nigra*/Crested Dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus* type, with frequent Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaris*, Quaking Grass *Briza media* and Oval Sedge *Carex ovalis*.

Wet heathy grassland is also present having many species in common with the mire community, but dominated by Purple Moor-grass and Common Bent *Agrostis capillaris* with large patches of Bog Myrtle *Myrica gale*, Creeping Willow *Salix repens* and Cross-leaved Heath *Erica tetralix*. *Sphagnum* moss forms carpets over the wettest parts of the heath.

Large populations of orchids are associated with the 'mire' type and heathy communities, notably Fragrant Orchid *Gymnadenia conopsea*, Lesser Butterfly Orchid *Platanthera bifolia* and Southern Marsh Orchid *Dactylorhiza praetermissa*. Other nationally restricted vascular plants include Marsh Cinquefoil *Potentilla palustris*, Marsh Fern *Thelypteris thelypteroides* and the national rarities Marsh Pea *Lathyrus palustris* and Milk Parsley *Peucedanum palustre*.

The remnant of active raised bog occurs on the eastern part of the site at Ashcott Heath. The bog is a mosaic of wet heath, *Sphagnum* moss carpet, Bog Myrtle, old peat cuts, ditches and scrub. Several plants with very restricted distributions in southern Britain are associated with the acid bog conditions including Small Bur-reed *Sparganium minimum*, Small Bladderwort *Utricularia minor* and Hare's-tail Cottongrass *Eriophorum vaginatum*. Other plants of interest are Bog Asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum*, Bog-bean *Menyanthes trifoliata*, Round-leaved Sundew *Drosera rotundifolia* and Ivy-leaved Bellflower *Wahlenbergia hederacea*. Drier parts of the ancient bog surface are now colonised by fen woodland and scrub dominated by Alder *Alnus glutinosa* and willows *Salix spp.*, with Downy Birch *Betula pubescens* and Pedunculate Oak *Quercus robur*. The marshy ground and open pools in this woodland support a rich flora including large stands of Royal Fern *Osmunda regalis* and Tussock Sedge *Carex paniculata*.

Although many field ditches on Shapwick Heath are infilled or overgrown, the open ditches and abandoned peat cuts have diverse aquatic and bank-side floras. Emergent species of note are Lesser Water-plantain *Baldellia ranunculoides*, Water-violet *Hottonia palustris* and Greater Water Parsnip *Sium latifolium*. Floating species include the nationally rare Rootless Duckweed *Wolffia arrhiza* and in the submerged layer are the nationally restricted species Whorled Water-milfoil *Myriophyllum verticillatum* and Fen Pondweed *Potamogeton coloratus*.

The site supports a diverse community of terrestrial and aquatic invertebrates. National rarities are the Large Marsh Grasshopper *Stethophyma grossum* found on *Sphagnum* moss bogs, the Greater Silver Diving Beetle *Hydrophilus piceus* and the Lesser Silver Diving Beetle *Hydrochara caraboides* which is now confined nationally to the Brue Basin Peat Moors. The nationally restricted Hairy Dragonfly *Brachytron pratense* and the Ruddy Darter *Sympetrum sanguineum* breed in the ditches and flooded peat cuts. The site has interesting butterfly populations including Marsh Fritillary *Euphydryas aurinia* and Marbled White *Melanargia galathia*.

The great diversity of habitats supports at least 64 species of breeding birds including Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* and Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* in wet fields, Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia* and Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* in scrubby areas, and Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* and Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* in flooded old peat cuttings.

The flora and fauna communities associated with the wetland habitats present on Shapwick Heath are dependent generally on high water levels and to provide for hydrological management, the site covers a discrete hydrological block bounded on the south by high ground and on the east, west and north by the road to Ashcott, Black

Ditch Rhyne and the South Drain respectively. Water on the site is derived from three main sources, rainfall, the South Drain and the Polden Hills to the south.

The site is used by Otters *Lutra lutra*.