

File ref:

County: Somerset **Site Name:** Axbridge Hill and Fry's Hill

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: Sedgemoor District Council, Somerset County Council

National Grid Reference: ST 433555 **Area:** 64.8 (ha) 160.1 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 182 **1:10,000:** ST 45 SW, NW

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

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1990 **Date of Last Revision:** –

Other Information:

A new site. Within Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

This is a nationally important botanical site, for both vascular and non-vascular plants, situated on the southern escarpment of the Mendip Hills. It also contains a roosting site for two nationally rare species of bat and a wide range of butterfly species.

The site is on a steep slope with a southerly aspect. Carboniferous limestone, with smaller outcrops of Triassic Dolomitic Conglomerate, are widely exposed on the steepest parts of the slope and in many other scattered outcrops. Scree slopes are also common. The soils, mostly calcareous loams of the Crwbin Series, vary in depth with position on the slope.

A variety of habitats closely related to soil type and slope are present. Much of the site is herb-rich, unimproved calcareous grassland. On the steepest slopes with thinnest soils, grasses such as sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina* and crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha* are common and the nationally rare Somerset hair-grass *Koeleria vallesiana* occurs. The most abundant herb species here are common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, wild thyme *Thymus praecox*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, dwarf thistle *Cirsium acaule* and many others including squinancywort *Asperula cynanchica*, purging flax *Linum catharticum*, autumn lady's tresses *Spiranthes spiralis*, carline thistle *Carlina vulgaris*, yellow-wort *Blackstonia perfoliata*, lady's bedstraw *Galium verum*, small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria* and autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*. On the upper slopes on the deeper soils grasses such as red fescue *Festuca rubra*, Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus*, sweet vernal grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* and common bent *Agrostis capillaris* are more abundant, as are herbs such as dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris* and glaucous sedge *Carex flacca*.

On the deeper soils scattered patches of bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* are also frequent and areas of limestone heath occur where calcicolous plants grow with calcifugous plants such as western gorse *Ulex gallii*, heather *Calluna vulgaris*, bell heather *Erica cinerea* and tormentil *Potentilla erecta*.

The rock outcrops and scree slopes are particularly important botanically. The very thin soils here support populations of one nationally rare species, Cheddar bedstraw *Galium fleurotii* and four nationally scarce species, pale St John's-wort *Hypericum montanum*, sea storksbill *Erodium maritimum*, dwarf mouse-ear *Cerastium pumilum* and spring cinquefoil *Potentilla tabernaemontani*. Ferns

including rustyback *Ceterach officinarum*, wall-rue *Asplenium ruta-muraria* and maidenhair spleenwort *A. trichomanes* grow on the rocks themselves.

The site is also nationally important for non-vascular plants, especially lichens which grow on the bare rock and thin calcareous soils. The saxicolous community includes twelve species of special note. The terricolous community includes four nationally rare species *Cladonia convoluta*, *C. symphicarpa*, *Psora decipiens* and *Placidiopsis custanii*, with Fry's Hill being a particularly important location for this last named species. The rock and bare soils also support a number of interesting bryophytes including the nationally rare *Gymnostomum vindulum*.

Deciduous scrub and woodland occur on the lowest parts of the slopes and on many of the scree slopes; gorse *Ulex europaeus* is fairly widespread on the upper slopes. These areas are important as shelter, roosting and nesting sites for mammals, birds and invertebrates.

There is a roosting site for greater horseshoe bat *Rhinolophus ferrumequinum* and lesser horseshoe bat *R. hipposideros*, both of which are nationally rare. Dormice *Muscardinus avellanarius* are found in the woodland.

Twenty-five species of butterfly have been recorded and these include: brown argus *Aricia agestis*, green hairstreak *Callophrys rubi*, dark green fritillary *Argynnis aglaja* and marbled white *Melanargia galathea*.