

COUNTY: Avon

SITE NAME: MONKSWOOD VALLEY

DISTRICT: NORTHAVON, WANSDYKE

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

Local Planning Authority: Avon County Council, Northavon District Council, Wansdyke Council

National Grid Reference: ST 754710                      Area: 30.7 (ha) 75.9 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 172                      1:10,000: ST 77 SE, ST 77 SW

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

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

Other Information:

A new site. Site within proposed Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty extension

Description and Reasons for Notification:

This site comprises a woodland and grassland complex with associated mature hedges, scrub and flushes situated on sloping land to the north and south of the Monkswood Reservoir and river. The ancient, semi-natural woodlands within the site have been classified as of the Ash-field Maple-Dog's Mercury *Fraxinus excelsior* – *Acer campestre* – *Mercurialis perennis* type of woodland which has a restricted distribution in Great Britain. The grasslands vary in character with calcareous grassland of the Upright Brome *Bromus erectus* type on the steep slopes to the north and west of the site. Elsewhere the sward is of a more mesotrophic nature with the Crested Dog's-tail – Common Knapweed *Cynosurus cristatus* – *Centaurea nigra* type of grassland. Both of these grassland community types now have a limited distribution in Great Britain.

The site is on underlying Jurassic strata but soil conditions vary throughout. On the lower slopes and flat areas towards the river, the soil is of the Curtisden Association, a silty soil with a slowly permeable, subsoil which displays some waterlogging. On the slopes there is Evesham I Association soil, a slowly permeable, calcareous clayey soil which is associated with irregular terrain.

The woodlands are for the most part associated with the sloping land on the site but some are present on the flatter ground with wet areas at the base of the slopes. The woods on the northern slopes are on more free draining soils. The dominant tree species is Ash which occurs both as standard trees especially with Hazel *Corylus avellana* coppice and also as trees grown from coppice. There is also much Wych Elm *Ulmus glabra*, although this persists only as young trees in the shrub layer or as standing and fallen dead wood. Pedunculate Oak *Quercus robur* is scattered throughout the woods, in some areas as the standard tree with Hazel coppice. Sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* occurs occasionally as a standard and also a tree grown from coppice, while Small-leaved Lime *Tilia cordata* is of much rarer occurrence.

The shrub layer is dominated by Hazel, the majority of which has been managed as coppice. Field Maple *Acer campestre* is also common as both a shrub and as a tree species, while other understorey species include Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, and Elder *Sambucus nigra*.

The woods support a diverse ground flora dominated by Dog's Mercury and Ramsons *Allium ursinum*, and includes Primrose *Primula vulgaris*, Sanicle *Sanicula europaea*, Goldilocks Buttercup *Ranunculus auricomus*, Yellow Archangel *Lamiastrum*

*galeobdolon*, Wood Anemone *Anemone nemorosa*, Early Dog-violet *Viola reichenbachiana*, Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, Herb-Paris *Paris quadrifolia*, False Brome *Brachypodium sylvaticum* and Wood-sedge *Carex sylvatica*. In the damper areas species which are more tolerant of such wet conditions predominate including: Tufted Hair-grass *Deschampia cespitosa*, Pendulous Sedge *Carex pendula*, Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria* and Marsh-marigold *Caltha palustris*. Of particular note in the woodland ground flora are good populations of Solomon's-seal *Polygonatum multiflorum*, Wild Daffodil *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* and Toothwort *Lathraea squamaria*.

The calcareous grassland north of the river, in the extreme west and east of the site, is on very steep, south-facing land, which is terraced and supports occasional anthills. The most frequent grasses in these areas are Upright Brome, Sweet Vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*, Red Fescue *Festuca rubra*, Quaking-grass *Briza media*, Crested Dog's-tail and Common Bent *Agrostis capillaris*. The herb component is especially diverse with the following species common throughout – Dwarf Thistle *Cirsium acaule*, Cowslip *Primula veris*, Lady's Bedstraw *Galium verum*, Common Rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, Mouse-ear Hawkweed *Hieracium pilosella*, Cat's-ear *Hypochoeris radicata*, Early-purple Orchid *Orchis mascula*, Hoary Plantain *Plantago media*, Salad Burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, Small Scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*, Clustered Bellflower *Campanula glomerata*, Fairy Flax *Linum catharticum*, Betony *Stachys officinalis*, Harebell *Campanula rotundifolia* and Horseshoe Vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*.

The grassland to the south of the reservoir and river, and also the remaining fields on the north-side, are of a more mesotrophic nature. The common grass species are Red Fescue, Sweet Vernal-grass, Common Bent, Yorkshire-fog *Holcus lanatus* and Crested Dog's-tail. Herbs which are frequent in the sward include Pignut *Conopodium majus*, Field Woodrush *Luzula campestris*, Lousewort *Pedicularis sylvatica*, Early-purple Orchid, Cat's-ear, Common Knapweed *Centaurea nigra*, Cowslip, Betony, Yarrow *Achillea millefolium*, Rough Hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus*, Bluebell, Devils'-bit Scabious *Succisa pratensis* and Oxeye Daisy *Leucanthemum vulgare*.

Along the flush lines in one of these fields, the species present reflect the wetter nature of the land with plants such as Tufted Hair-grass, Soft-rush *Juncus effusus* and Hard-rush *Juncus inflexus*, Cuckoo-flower *Cardamine pratensis*, Wavy Bitter-cress *Cardamine flexuosa*, Water Mint *Mentha aquatica*, Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria* and Common Fleabane *Pulicaria dysenterica*.

Further interest is added to this site by the presence of scrub and thick, mature hedges with Ash, Field Maple, Hawthorn, Blackthorn and Bramble *Rubus fruticosus* agg.