

COUNTY: EAST SUSSEX SITE NAME: LEWES DOWNS

DISTRICT: LEWES

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

Local Planning Authority: LEWES DISTRICT COUNCIL

National Grid Reference: TQ 437103 Area: 149.8 (ha.) 370.2 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 198 1:10,000: TQ 41 SW SE,
TQ 40 NW NE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1953 Date of Last Revision: 1978

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

Other Information:

This is a Nature Conservation Review Site and lies within the South Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Part of the site is a National Nature Reserve and part is a reserve of the Sussex Trust for Nature Conservation.

Reasons for Notification:

Lewes Downs is an isolated block of downland which forms part of the South Downs. It is important for the extremely rich chalk grassland and scrub vegetation, which contains a number of southern and oceanic-southern species as well as a nationally-rare orchid. The site also supports a rich invertebrate fauna including a rare moth, and an important breeding community of downland birds.

This block of downland has a south-facing scarp slope which is an unusual feature within the South Downs. The majority of the site comprises unimproved species-rich chalk grassland, developed on steep slopes over thin rendzina soils. Other habitats which add to the diversity and interest of the site include areas of mixed scrub and semi-natural woodland.

The richest parts of Lewes Downs are the Old Chalk Pit, Bible Bottom, Mallong Combe and parts of Mount Caburn. Here the sward is dominated by sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina* and upright brome *Bromus erectus* grasses which form a springy turf with an abundance of characteristic herbs of chalk grassland. Salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, yellow-wort *Blackstonia perfoliata* and squinancy wort *Asperula cynanchica* are widespread, and in Caburn Bottom an exceptional quantity of marjoram *Origanum vulgare* occurs and is important as a food plant for the chalkhill blue butterfly. A number of plants occupying a strictly southern distribution within the British Isles are found on the warm south facing slopes of Mallong Combe and Mount Caburn including chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea* and round-headed rampion *Phyteuma tenerum*. One of the largest British colonies of the burnt-tip orchid *Orchis ustulata* occurs on the upper slope of Mount

Caburn, intermittently appearing with the nationally rare early-spider orchid *Ophrys sphegodes*. The orchid flora here, in Caburn Bottom and on the steeper slopes of the chalk pits in the far north of the site is exceptional for its variety and for the number of individual plants. Bee *Ophrys apifera*, fly *O. insectifera*, frog *Coeloglossum viride* and musk orchids *Herminium monorchis* are all present.

Scrub which has invaded in several areas, is composed mainly of hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, wayfaring tree *Viburnum lantana*, blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, dogwood *Cornus sanguinea* and wild privet *Ligustrum vulgare*.

Areas of ash *Fraxinus excelsior* woodland occur on the eastern edge of the site and south of Mallings Combe, where sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* becomes locally dominant. Beneath this canopy hawthorn and elder *Sambucus nigra* form a shrub layer with a ground flora of dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis* and ground ivy *Glechoma hederacea*. Mezereum *Daphne mezereum*, an unusual shrub with a restricted distribution also occurs in these woods. The rich habitat mosaic at this site fosters an exceptional Lepidopteran fauna (butterflies and moths), including the adonis blue *Lysandra bellargus* and the chalkhill blue *L. coridon* butterflies. All three British forester moths *Adscita* species have been recorded here along with the locally rare annulet moth *Gnophos annulata*.

A number of typical downland birds breed on the site including kestrel, corn bunting, grasshopper warbler and meadow pipit. This is also an important overwintering area for thrushes and finches.