

COUNTY: EAST SUSSEX SITE NAME: FIRLE ESCARPMENT

DISTRICT: WEALDEN

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

Local Planning Authority: LEWES DISTRICT COUNCIL, Wealden DC

National Grid Ref: TQ 480061 Area: 301.3 (ha.) 744.6 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheets 1:50,000: 198, 199 1:10,000: TQ 40 NE, NW.  
TQ 50 NW, SW

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

Date notified (Under 1981 Act): 1985 Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

A new site. The site lies within the South Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Reasons for Notification:

An extensive stretch of chalk grassland on north facing slopes of the South Downs. The diverse flora includes several unusual plants and one that is nationally rare.

Chalk grassland is now a nationally uncommon habitat due to agricultural improvement. At this site chalk grassland is restricted to the thin rendzina soils of the steep escarpment. Deeper soils at the foot of the escarpment carry mature woodlands. Chalk scrub is scattered throughout the area of unimproved grassland.

A large part of the downland is rich in plant species. Abundant species include fairy flax *Linum catharticum*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, milkwort *Polygala calcarea* and the grasses, sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina* and upright brome *Bromus erectus*. Taller grasslands are dominated by upright brome, tor grass *Brachypodium pinnatum* and false oat grass *Arrhenatherum elatius*. A number of unusual chalk downland plants occur on the site including pyramidal orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, common spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, bee orchid *Ophrys apifera*, felwort *Gentianella amarella*, clove pink *Dianthus caryophyllus*, and a plant that is restricted to chalk in the south part of Britain, round headed rampion *Phyteuma tenerum*. The rarest plant, however, is the early spider orchid *Ophrys sphegodes*. This orchid is known in only a few, southern localities in the UK and receives special protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Scrub is invading ungrazed areas throughout the site. Belts of gorse *Ulex europaeus* are most prominent but blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, wayfaring tree *Viburnum lantana* and dogwood *Cornus sanguinea* also occur in places. The Firle, Roundhead and Loose plantations at the foot of the escarpment consist of mature beech *Fagus sylvatica* with ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, sycamore *Acer*

*pseudoplatanus*, hazel *Corylus avellana* and hawthorn above a sparse ground flora of  
dogs mercury *Mercurialis perennis* and slender false-brome *Brachypodium sylvaticum*.