COUNTY: BERKSHIRE SITE NAME: BOXFORD WATER MEADOWS

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

1981

Local Planning Authorities: Newbury District Council, Berkshire County Council

National Grid Reference: SU428719

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 174 1:10,000: SU47 SW

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

Area: 14.0 ha 34.6 ac

Other information: Within North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification

Boxford Water Meadows comprise a series of flood pastures and disused water meadows along the River Lambourn. Patches of alder and sallow scrub occur. The site overlies alluvium and the soils consist of calcareous alluvial gleys.

Traditionally the water meadows would have been managed as pasture for cattle or horses, controlled flooding along specially constructed carrier streams providing a supply of warm water in spring to encourage early growth of the sward. The water meadows at Boxford have not been grazed, with the exception of the southern-most field, for between 5 and 20 years and the vegetation types present reflect both this and the gradient in soil moisture, the plant communities grading from *Carex acutiformis* swamp and fen to *Cynosurus cristatus-Caltha palustris* flood-pasture and water-meadow vegetation southwards across the site.

The northern-most meadows contain many species characteristic of the *Carex acutiformis* community including lesser pond-sedge *Carex acutiformis*, common marsh-bedstraw *Galium palustre*, water mint *Mentha aquatica*, marsh valerian *Valeriana dioica*, wild angelica *Angelica sylvestris*, meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, marsh horsetail *Equisetum palustre* and false oat-grass *Arrhenatherum elatius*. The meadows are dominated by lesser pond-sedge, meadowsweet, reed canary-grass *Phalaris arundinacea*, reed sweetgrass *Glyceria maxima* and great willowherb *Epilobium hirsutum*, with abundant common marsh-bedstraw, angelica, marsh horsetail, water mint, marsh valerian and marsh-marigold *Caltha palustris*. Greater tussock-sedge *Carex paniculata*, branched bur-reed *Sparganium erectum* and water dock *Rumex hydrolapathum* are locally prominent.

Southwards across the site the meadows become drier and the vegetation grades into a *Cynosurus cristatus-Caltha palustris* community. Many of the plants, particularly characteristic of this community are present, including crested dog'stail, marsh marigold, meadowsweet, creeping buttercup *Ranunculus repens*, meadow buttercup *R. acris*, yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor*, common spike-rush *Eleocharis palustris*, fen bedstraw *Galium uliginosum*, red fescue *Festuca rubra*, Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus* and rough meadow-grass *Poa trivialis*. Other species present which add to the diversity of the flora include water avens *Geum rivale*, square-stalked St John's wort *Hypericum tetrapterum*, southern marsh orchid *Dactylorhiza praetermissa* and red bartsia *Odontites verna*.

A total of 17 species of grass, 7 species of sedge and 76 species of grassland herb have been recorded. Several of these are normally associated with ancient meadows with a long history of freedom from improvement and disturbance, such as devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, water avens *Geum rivale*, marsh pennywort *Hydrocotyle vulgaris*, yellow rattle, brown sedge *Carex disticha*, bogbean *Menyanthes trifoliata* and the uncommon flat-sedge *Blysmus compressus*.

The meadows support breeding snipe and freshwater crayfish *Astacus pallipes* have been recorded regularly and recently. The insect fauna is diverse, with species rare in Berkshire such as the beetles *Cantharis pallida* and *Subcoccinella 24-punctata* and the bug *Neophilaenus campestris*.