

File ref: SJ 28/6

County: Merseyside **Site Name:** Heswall Dales

District: Wirral

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

Local Planning Authority: Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council

National Grid Reference: SJ 261821 **Area:** 29.6 (ha) 73.1 (ac)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 108 **1:10,000:** SJ 28 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1979 **Date of Last Revision:** –

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1983 **Date of Last Revision:** 1986

Other Information:

1. The site boundary has been extended at this revision.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Heswall Dales is located 1 km north west of the town of Heswall. The site is underlain by Triassic sandstone over which podsollic soils have developed and consists of a number of small deep water worn valleys. These soils support a fine representative dry heathland community which has been invaded by bracken, birch-oak woodland and gorse scrub. Damp heath and acidic marshy grassland has developed along some of the natural water courses.

Heswall Dales is regarded as the second best example of lowland heath in Merseyside. It is ranked second to Thurstaston Common which is larger and botanically more diverse.

The majority of the dry heath is dominated by heather *Calluna vulgaris* with wavy hair-grass, mat-grass, gorse *Ulex europaeus* and bilberry also important components of this community. Tormentil *Potentilla erecta* and heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile* are the commonest herbs. On the drier sandier soils this habitat type gives way to an assemblage of bell heather *Erica cinerea* and western gorse *Ulex gallii*. This latter species has a distinct western distribution in Britain and is found on only a few localities in Merseyside.

The wetter areas are dominated by purple moor-grass with cross-leaved heath *Erica tetralix*, sharp-flowered rush, bulbous rush, soft rush and deer grass *Trichophorum cespitosum*. Common cotton-grass *Eriophorum angustifolium* and tawny sedge *Carex hostiana* are also important constituents of this community. These wet areas are the most interesting botanically and contain such species as many-stalked spike rush *Eleocharis multicaulis* and green-ribbed sedge *Carex binervis*, both of which have a very localised distribution in Merseyside.

Birch-oak woodland has developed over some of the site. The younger woodland is mainly composed of silver and downy birch with pedunculate oak and rowan occasionally found. In the older more mature woodland, birch is still the main tree species, but oak and rowan are more abundant and whitebeam *Sorbus aria*, hawthorn and elder are common in the understorey. Alder and grey willow are found in wetter parts of the wood, principally along

the stream which runs through the eastern-most dale. Pendulous sedge *Carex pendula* is also commonly found on the site.