COUNTY: BERKSHIRE **SITE NAME:** COOMBE WOOD, FRILSHAM

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: SU545735

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 174 **1:10,000:** SU57 SW

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1985 **Date of Last Revision:**

Area: 19.68 ha 46.95 ac

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

Description and Reasons for Notification

This site consists of an ancient woodland (earliest records date from 1640). There is a diverse flora, including many species normally confined to ancient woodland, which varies with differences in soils and with the range of woodland stand types represented.

Coombe Wood is situated on a gentle slope of north-westerly aspect. Reading Beds underlie the north-western half of the site, giving way to London Clay in the south-east, with Plateau Gravels at the north-eastern corner. The soils range from sandy to clayey, consisting predominantly of acid stagnogleys of the Wickham Four type. The ground is poorly drained and streamlets and flushed areas outcrop along some of the rides.

Four woodland stand types are represented. Acid pedunculate oak-hazel-ash occurs mainly on the London Clays, and supports a ground flora in which bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* and dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis* are prominent. This grades into fine examples of lowland hazel-pedunculate oak woodland to the west. There are small areas of lowland hazel-sessile oak woodland on the lower slopes. This is a rare stand type nationally with a very localised distribution in Berkshire. The northernmost compartments comprise acid, gravelly soils between Reading and Newbury. A notable feature of the ground flora of this stand type is greater wood rush *Luzula sylvatica*. This species has a widespread national distribution, but is very rare in central southern England and, within Berkshire, Coombe Wood is exceptional for the abundance of this plant, which carpets much of the woodland floor.

There is a diverse flora, including 36 species which in southern England are normally confined to ancient woodlands. Species which are notably uncommon in Berkshire include pale sedge *Carex pallescens*, thin-spiked sedge *Carex strigosa*, scaly male fern *Dryopteris affinis*, golden rod *Solidago virgaurea* and bitter vetch *Lathyrus montanus*.

An important feature of the woodland is the interconnecting system of wide rides, which support many plants typical of damp grasslands, including ragged robin *Lychnis flos-cuculi*, common spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, marsh bedstraw *Galium palustre*, water mint *Mentha aquatica* and lesser spearwort *Ranunculus flammula*. The sunny but sheltered and humid conditions within the rides, with their fringe of nectar-producing flowers, provide ideal feeding and display grounds for invertebrates. Butterflies of note which have been recorded include white admiral and dark green fritillary.