

County: Suffolk **Site Name:** Cavenham-Icklingham Heaths

District: Forest Heath

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

Local Planning Authority: Forest Heath District Council, Suffolk County Council

National Grid Reference: TL 755733 **Area:** 418.76 ha, 1,034.34 acres

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50 000: 143,155 **1:10 000:** TL 77 SW & SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1952 **Date of Last Revision:** 1975

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1983 **Date of Last Revision:** 1998

Other information: The site is a Biogenetic Reserve, Nature Conservation Review Site and also includes Cavenham Heath National Nature Reserve.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Cavenham-Icklingham Heaths consists of a large-scale mosaic of heath, grassland, woodland and fen which straddles the flood-plain of the River Lark. Most of the site is on acidic soil.

Grassland and heath occupies most of the site. There is a range of heath vegetation including areas of heather-dominated heathland, areas which contain some heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) dispersed within acidic grassland and areas of acid grassland. The acid grassland is generally dominated by red fescue (*Festuca rubra*), sheeps fescue (*Festuca ovina*) or sand sedge (*Carex arenaria*). Sand sedge areas can be very uniform but elsewhere there are good numbers of associated plant species. These include heath bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*), harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*) and common centaury (*Centaureum erythraea*). A number of lichens and mosses are present in the acid grassland and in some places are very abundant, forming lichen heath.

This mosaic of heathland, acid grassland and lichen heath and the transitions between them is very typical of the Breckland and adds considerably to the interest of this site.

The flood plain of the River Lark is largely occupied by cattle-grazed meadow grassland, much of which has been partly drained, either deliberately or as a result of lower water levels in the river. The wetter areas have a good range of marshy grassland species such as ladies smock (*Cardamine pratensis*), purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*). The rest of the grassland is rather variable and the drier areas have a rather limited range of plant species.

The lowest areas of land in the flood plain still support tall fen in which reed (*Phragmites australis*) and sweet grass (*Glyceria maxima*) are dominant. Great tussock sedge (*Carex paniculata*) was formerly more widespread; many plants have degenerated because of drying out. This has also favoured the spread of willow scrub.

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Cavenham-Icklingham Heaths (cont...)

Woodland occupies considerable areas. Some was originally planted but most arose naturally by the invasion of grassland or heath. The two most widespread types are:-

- (a) Dry woodland on ex-heathland dominated by silver birch (*Betula pendula*) with some oak (*Quercus robur*) and a sparse ground flora which includes the cushion moss (*Leucobryum glaucum*);
- (b) Damp to wet woodland which is dominated by downy birch (*Betula pubescens*), alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) and willow (*Salix* spp). This type of woodland has a richer ground flora; including several ferns, amongst them the lady fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*), the oak fern (*Gymnocarpium dryopteris*) and the marsh fern (*Thelypteris palustris*); marsh plants such as reed (*Phragmites australis*) and hemp agrimony (*Eupatorium cannabinum*), and in one area a carpet of *Sphagnum* moss.

Cavenham-Icklingham Heaths are notable for a number of nationally and locally rare plants. These include Breckland wild thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*), spring speedwell (*Veronica verna*), maiden pink (*Dianthus deltoides*), mossy stonecrop (*Crassula tillaea*) and drooping brome (*Bromus tectorum*). The site also supports a wide range of bryophytes, including several nationally scarce species, and is the best site in West Suffolk for *sphagnum* mosses.

The diverse habitats attract a wide range of birds including whinchat, wheatear, hobby and hen harrier. Nightjar, woodlark and stone curlew breed here and it is an important gathering ground for stone curlews in the autumn.

The site is of national importance for an outstanding assemblage of invertebrate species arising from the very varied and extensive habitats. Examples of rare and endangered species present include the spider *Clubiona rosserae* and the soldier-fly *Odontomyia angulata*.