COUNTY: BERKSHIRE SITE NAME: HOLIES DOWN

**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: SU594798

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 174 1:10,000: SU58 SE

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1988 Date of Last Revision:

Area: 5.76 ha 14.2 ac

Other information: The site lies within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

## **Description and Reasons for Notification**

The site comprises an area of unimproved chalk grassland, a habitat now becoming increasingly rare in Berkshire. This is grazed and supports a large number of species of flowering plants in close association.

About 180 ha of chalk grassland remains in Berkshire, equal to less than 0.5% of the chalk outcrop in the county. Holies Down lies at the eastern end of the Berkshire/Oxfordshire Downs, an extensive area of chalk downland, now largely converted to intensive arable farming. In southern England generally, chalk grassland has also diminished, due mainly to agricultural improvement since the war.

Glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* is abundant over much of the site, forming a short turf with fine-leaved grasses such as red and sheep's fescue *Festuca rubra* and *F. ovina*, quaking grass *Briza media* and yellow oat-grass *Trisetum flavescens*. Coarser grasses include upright brome *Bromus erectus* and tor-grass *Brachypodium pinnatum*, two species characteristic of chalk downland, which are locally common over the site.

Fewer grasses occur on the steeper south-east facing slopes where grazing has promoted the diversity of chalk flowers. Most abundant species are stemless thistle *Cirsium acaule*, eyebright *Euphrasia nemorosa*, mouse-ear hawkweed *Hieracium pilosella*, rough hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus*, fairy flax *Linum catharticum*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor* and ragwort *Senecio jacobea*. Species which are locally abundant or generally common over the site include common spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*, wild thyme *Thymus praecox*, hairy violet *Viola hirta*, squinancywort *Asperula cynanchica*, small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*, hawkweed ox-tongue *Picris hieracioides* and rest-harrow *Ononis repens*.

Many of the species which occur are characteristic of agriculturally unimproved calcareous grasslands and in southern England may often be restricted to this type of habitat. Other species in this category which occur at Holies Down include common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, yellow-wort *Blackstonia perfoliata* and pyramidal orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis*.

The diversity of flowering plants in chalk grassland provides important food and nectar sources for insects. Because of its south-facing and sheltered aspect, Holies Down is likely to be important for groups of insects such as bees, grasshoppers and butterflies which thrive in warm conditions.