

COUNTY: BEDFORDSHIRE

SITE NAME: BLOW'S DOWN

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

Local Planning Authorities: South Bedfordshire District Council
Bedfordshire County Council

National Grid Reference: TL 033214

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 166 **1:10,000:** TL 02 SW

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

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1989 **Date of Last Revision:**

Area: 33.1 ha 81.9 ac

Description and Reasons for Notification

Blow's Down is part of the Lower Chalk escarpment situated to the south east of Dunstable. Here the escarpment changes abruptly from a north west aspect to south west facing and the chalk is capped by clay. These marked geographical and geological features which also include a small disused quarry and old banks associated with medieval cultivation terraces, have influenced the development of a wide range of grassland communities which are a particular feature of this site.

Blow's Down is a rich and varied site with a large area of open, unimproved grassland. Such sites have declined nationally and Blow's Down is a fine example of what little remains of this important habitat. This site is partly grazed by cattle maintaining the species rich grassland sward.

The grassland communities vary in type from those characteristic of chalk to more neutral types associated with the deeper soils where chalk is overlain with clay.

Skimpot Quarry is dominated by upright brome *Bromus erectus* and a range of characteristic chalk grassland species including meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratensis*, kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*, squinancy wort *Asperula cynanchica*, dwarf thistle *Cirsium acaule*, common spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria* and wild thyme *Thymus polytrichus*.

The grassland of the north west escarpment has a strong mesotrophic element associated with deeper soils. Downy oat-grass *Avenula pubescens* and upright brome are the dominant grasses. Common knapweed *Centaurea nigra*, rough hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus*, common bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, burnet-saxifrage *Pimpinella saxifraga* and yellow-rattle *Rhinanthus minor* are all frequent in this area.

The banks of the medieval cultivation terraces support a short herb-rich sward characterised by frequent meadow oat-grass, quaking-grass *Briza media*, sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina*, glaucous sedge *Carex flacca*, squinancy wort, dwarf thistle and large thyme *Thymus pulegioides*.

Away from these banks the south west facing slope supports a more neutral grassland with frequent crested dog's tail *Cynosurus cristatus*, yellow oat-grass, plantain species, *Plantago* spp. and clover species *Trifolium* spp., intermixed with more characteristic calcareous grassland species such as dwarf thistle, sainfoin *Onobrychis viciifolia*, bee orchid *Ophrys apifera*, salad burnet, small scabious and large thyme.

A large population of the nationally rare great pignut *Bunium bulbocastanum* occurs on the site with plants scattered along both faces of the escarpment.

A rich invertebrate fauna is recorded for Skimpot Quarry including the nationally rare beetle *Odontaeus armiger* and several other nationally uncommon species.

Scattered hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* scrub occurs on the north west facing slope and on the lower slopes of Skimpot Quarry adding further diversity to the site. These areas and the site in general is locally well known as a staging post for migrating birds.

Some areas of semi-improved grassland are included as they form part of the same grazing unit.

Re-presentation of details approved by Council. Re-typed September 1998.

Site area calculated by GIS 19 April 1998.