

COUNTY: GREATER LONDON SITE NAME: FARTHING DOWNS AND
HAPPY VALLEY

BOROUGH: CROYDON

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

Local Planning Authority: LONDON BOROUGH OF CROYDON

National Grid Reference: TQ 303572 Area: 120.5 (ha.) 297.8 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 187 1:10,000: 25 NE & 35 NW

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

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1987 Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

This site was formerly known as Farthing Downs and Devil's Den. There are several boundary changes, including extensions at Happy Valley.

Reasons for Notification:

Farthing Downs and Happy Valley support the most extensive area of semi-natural downland habitats remaining in Greater London. The site is of particular interest for its species-rich chalk and neutral grasslands, and for an area of ancient woodland known as Devilsden Wood. These habitats hold a large variety of herb species of restricted distribution in the County, including some which are nationally scarce. In addition the grasslands support the largest British colony of the nationally rare greater yellow-rattle *Rhinanthus angustifolius*.

The chalk of the North Downs comes to the surface over most of the site but is overlain by clay-with-flints on the western slopes of Happy Valley. The distribution of grassland and woodland communities reflects this variation in geology and the associated changes in soil types.

The most diverse chalk grasslands occur on the thin rendzina soils on the eastern and north western sides of Happy Valley. The sward is dominated by upright brome *Bromus erectus* with quaking grass *Briza media* and other typical chalkland grasses. The herb flora is especially rich containing many species that are characteristic of unimproved chalk grassland but are of restricted occurrence in London owing to loss of this habitat. These include dwarf thistle *Cirsium acaule*, wild basil *Clinopodium vulgare*, horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, field scabious *Knautia arvensis*, common milkwort *Polygala vulgaris*, sainfoin *Onobrychis viciifolia* and hairy violet *Viola hirta*. These grasslands are also noted for their orchid flora with eight species being recorded, including the nationally scarce man orchid *Aceras anthropophorum*. Round-headed rampion *Phyteuma orbiculare*, another nationally scarce plant, also occurs.

The clay soils support a neutral grassland community. Sweet vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* and red fescue *Festuca rubra* are the most abundant grass species, with crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus*, tall fescue *Festuca arundinacea* and a range of other meadow species. Amongst the rich herb component are meadow and bulbous buttercup *Ranunculus acris* and *R. bulbosus*, common sorrel *Rumex acetosa* and yellow-rattle *Rhinanthus minor*. Woolly thistle *Cirsium eriophorum*, an uncommon species in the county is found on the lower slopes.

The chalk grasslands of Farthing Downs have been disturbed by the encroachment and subsequent removal of thick scrub. In consequence the flora is intermediate between the

chalk and neutral grasslands of Happy Valley. This area contains a large population of dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris*, an uncommon plant in London.

All three grassland communities are of particular importance for the great abundance of greater yellow-rattle. This plant is nationally rare and specially protected by legislation, being known from only six localities in Great Britain. Farthing Downs and Happy Valley supports the major part of the total British population and is actively managed to safeguard and increase its abundance.

Devilsden Wood lies on the western side of Happy Valley and straddles both chalk and clay soils. It has a high forest structure with ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, pedunculate oak *Quercus robur* and hazel *Corylus avellana* throughout. Over chalk, yew *Taxus baccata* features in the understorey with a diverse ground flora predominated by dog's mercury *Mercurialis perennis*. Small groves of small beech *Fagus sylvatica* are also found here with white helleborine *Cephalanthera damasonium*, a scarce London plant, on the forest floor. The woodland over the clay-with-flints is distinguished by large stands of mature wild cherry *Prunus avium*. Species indicative of ancient woodland include midland hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, sweet woodruff *Galium odoratum*, bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, yellow archangel *Lamiastrum galeobdolon* and bird's-nest orchid *Neottia nidus-avis*.