

COUNTY: BEDFORDSHIRE

SITE NAME: COOPER'S HILL

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

Local Planning Authorities: Mid Bedfordshire District Council
Bedfordshire County Council

National Grid Reference: TL 028376

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 153 **1:10,000:** TL 03 NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1951 **Date of Last Revision:** 1970

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1984 **Date of Last Revision:**

Area: 18.06 ha 51.7 ac

Other information: A large part of the SSSI is a Local Nature Reserve managed by the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire.

Description and Reasons for Notification

Cooper's Hill is the best remaining example in Bedfordshire of the once more extensive heathland situated on the thin acidic soils of the Lower Greensand ridge. The site is one of the most northerly examples of lowland heath representing the Anglo-Norman association. Lowland heath has a limited distribution in south eastern England where it has declined markedly in recent years.

Although parts of the site were planted with trees in the 19th century, these were later removed and the typical heathland flora has survived with its unique community of insects. Where the Ampthill clay reaches the surface on the edge of the site, springs occur and form wet flushes supporting rich marsh plant communities. A small acidic mire has developed supporting locally uncommon plant species and representing a type of habitat very rare in Bedfordshire.

The heathland flora is dominated by heather *Calluna vulgaris* and fine grasses: common bent *Agrostis capillaris*, wavy hair grass *Deschampsia flexuosa* and sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina*. Other characteristic species include heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile*, wood sage *Teucrium scorodonia* and mouse-ear hawkweed *Hieracium pilosella*.

Succession from heath to woodland is taking place, demonstrated by the spread of bracken *Pteridium aquilinum* and scrub species such as silver birch *Betula pendula*, bramble *Rubus fruticosus*, gorse *Ulex europaeus* and broom *Cytisus scoparius*, but management is being undertaken to control these successional changes and conserve the heathland plant community.

Additional interest and diversity are provided by two areas of woodland which have developed on the marshy areas. The northerly wood is mainly willow *Salix* spp., with ash *Fraxinus excelsior*. Birch has colonised the peaty soils of the acidic mire which supports species uncommon in the county, such as purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea* and marsh violet *Viola palustris* at its only remaining station in the county. The southerly wood is principally oak *Quercus robur* and ash with abundant stands of greater horsetail *Equisetum telmateia* and a rich variety of typical marsh species. Dry woodland has also developed with oak and birch dominating the canopy above a thinly-developed scrub layer.

The site has a rich and varied invertebrate fauna including species of very limited distribution in the county.