COUNTY: BERKSHIRE SITE NAME: BRIFF LANE MEADOWS

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

1981

Local Planning Authorities: Berkshire Council, Newbury District Council

National Grid Reference: SU544702

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 174 1:10,000: SU57 SW

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1986 Date of Last Revision: 25 March 1993

Area: 8.69 ha 21.47 ac

Other information: Within North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification

Briff Lane Meadows largely comprises unimproved species-rich neutral to slightly acidic grassland, a nationally rare and declining habitat. Also present are a small stream, hedges, belts of deciduous woodland at field edges and, locally, extensive patches of blackthorn-dominated scrub.

The predominantly westward facing gentle slopes support soils which are mostly poorly drained, seasonally waterlogged loams and clays derived from outcrops of Reading Beds and London Clay. In recent years all but one of the six meadows have been cut for hay and then grazed by sheep in the autumn. The whole site has a long history of traditional management, with no application of pesticides or artificial fertilisers and no ploughing or other disturbance of the turf.

Grassland plants which occur frequently throughout Briff Lane Meadows include widespread species such as common knapweed *Centaurea nigra*, tormentil *Potentilla erecta*, selfheal *Prunella vulgaris*, red fescue *Festuca rubra*, sweet vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum* and Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus*. Other species are more restricted in distribution across the site, due partly to variation in soil moisture conditions.

The driest and most sandy area has a distinctive flora with large populations of devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, dyer's greenweed *Genista tinctoria*, cowslip *Primula veris* and heath-grass *Danthonia decumbens*. At present this area is ungrazed, other than by rabbits, and is being progressively invaded by blackthorn scrub. Wet land to the south is characterised by abundant meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, great burnet *Sanguisorba officinalis*, greater bird's-foot trefoil *Lotus uliginosus* and tufted hair-grass *Deschampsia cespitosa*, as well as patches of the locally scarce meadow thistle *Cirsium dissectum*. The remainder of the grassland is transitional, both in terms of soil moisture and botanical composition. It supports other species including meadow vetchling *Lathyrus pratensis*, common spotted-orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor*, sharp-flowered rush *Juncus acutiflorus*, carnation sedge *Carex panicea* and pale sedge *C. pallescens*.

All the grassland at Briff Lane Meadows is considered to be representative of the *Danthonia decumbens* sub-community of the *Cynosurus cristatus-Centaurea nigra* meadow and pasture community. However, some of the sward shows affinity with the *Lathyrus pratensis* sub-community, whilst other areas share characteristics of the *Alopecurus pratensis-Sanguisorba officinalis* flood meadow community. All these vegetation types are now of extremely limited and still declining distribution in Berkshire and in much of England, due to the widespread use of modern intensive farming techniques.

The hedges and woodland strips support a wide range of native tree, shrub and ground flora species, including oak, ash, hazel and moschatel *Adoxa moschatellina*.