

COUNTY: WILTSHIRE SITE NAME: WYLE & CHURCH DEAN DOWNS

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

Local Planning Authorities: SALISBURY DISTRICT COUNCIL, Wiltshire County Council

National Grid Reference: SU 002361 Area: 80.9 (ha.) 200 (ac.)
 SU 013360

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 184 1:10,000: ST 93 NE
 SU 03 NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1951 Date of Last Revision: 1975

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

Other Information:

Part of the site is a National Nature Reserve owned by the Nature Conservancy Council and a further part is subject to a management agreement with the Nature Conservancy Council under Section 15 of the Countryside Act, 1968. The site lies within the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Wylde and Church Dean Downs are two extensive blocks of floristically rich chalk grassland, supporting the third largest British colony of tuberous thistle *Cirsium tuberosum*, together with several other species of nationally restricted distribution. Lying on gentle and therefore potentially ploughable slopes, the site is one of very few remnants of the plateau grassland which once covered much of the southern part of Salisbury Plain.

The main part of Wylde Down occupies a shallow dry valley running north-south and shows evidence of an extensive Celtic field system. The uniformly rich, short turf has been maintained by many years of grazing by sheep and Ayrshire cattle and supports as many as forty species of plant within a square metre. Of importance is the abundance of the nationally restricted dwarf sedge *Carex humilis*, while other major components of the sward are sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina*, quaking-grass *Briza media*, meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratensis* and glaucous sedge *Carex flacca*. The rich assemblage of herbs present includes frequent salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, dropwort *Filipendula vulgaris*, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis* and dwarf thistle *Cirsium acaule*. There is an exceptional abundance of species indicative of long continuity of grazing, for example horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*, saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria*, frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride* and the nationally scarce bastard-toadflax *Thesium humifusum*, field fleawort *Senecio integrifolius* and burnt orchid *Orchis ustulata*. Unlike the majority of chalk grassland sites, high plant diversity is maintained in the valley bottom, where anthills are numerous and populations of

both green-winged orchid *Orchis morio* and the uncommon meadow saxifrage *Saxifraga granulata* occur.

Botanically rich grassland extends south of Wyllye Down, but is confined to the valley sides. This area is no longer stock grazed and in marked contrast with the remainder of the site supports a tall sward with scattered scrub. Of particular importance is the presence of the large colony of the nationally rare tuberous thistle, while the widespread occurrence of dyer's greenweed *Genista tinctoria*, a plant rarely found on chalk downland, is also of interest. A small area of developing ash woodland occurs in addition to a wide variety of shrubs including wild privet, spindle, wayfaring tree and hawthorn. The scrub and long vegetation form a habitat mosaic of great value to butterflies such as marsh fritillary, dark green fritillary, chalkhill blue and Duke of Burgundy, a species of nationally restricted distribution.

Church Dean Down lies a kilometre to the east of Wyllye Down and is mainly of south-easterly aspect. Farmed under the same regime, the sward is rich in species but interestingly the dwarf sedge is scarce. Anthills are exceptionally abundant here and support a number of trailing species such as squinancywort *Asperula cynanchica* and wild thyme *Thymus praecox*, growing with annuals such as common whitlowgrass *Erophila verna*.