

COUNTY: BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

SITE NAME: BURNHAM BEECHES

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

Local Planning Authorities: South Bucks District Council

National Grid Reference: SU950857

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 175 **1:10,000:** SU98 NW, NE, SW, SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1951 **Date of Last Revision:** 1983

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1985 **Date of Last Revision:**

Area: 374.6 ha 925.7 ac

Other information: Formerly included Littleworth Common, now a separate SSSI. The southern half of the area is owned by the Corporation of the City of London and has been open to the public since 1880.

Description and Reasons for Notification

An extensive area of the Burnham Plateau where Thames gravels and underlying Reading Beds give rise to acid soils supporting mature and developing woodland, old coppice, scrub and heath. There are ancient oak and beech pollards of which the latter are a celebrated feature of international renown. Fragments of wet heath and bog, as well as an alder wood and a number of ponds coincide with springs and wet flushes, and with a small stream which in places cuts down to the Chalk producing swallowholes. This complex of habitats, of which none are widely represented in Buckinghamshire and one (the ancient pollards) is virtually unique, harbours numerous plants, birds and invertebrates of regional importance, as well as several nationally rare species.

Mature woodland dominated by beech, with or without oak, includes the ancient pollards as well as high forest, and represents a particular type of beechwood originally described (as *Fagetum ericetosum*) by A G Tansley in his **British Islands and Their Vegetation** of 1939. Beech is regenerating well in several areas. Oak also occurs elsewhere both with hazel, where the latter was previously coppiced, and with birch and pine where developing woodland is invading former heathland. Alder grows in one of the small wet valleys and an interesting rarity is the wild service tree *Sorbus torminalis*. Plantations of pine, spruce and larch have been established in the northern part of the site.

Holly, honeysuckle and the alien *Rhododendron ponticum* are the main components of the shrub layer of the woodlands, and bracken and brambles frequently dominate the ground flora, but in places these are lacking and the woodland floor may bear no more than scattered patches of wavy hair-grass *Deschampsia flexuosa* and cushions of the distinctive moss *Leucobryum glaucum*. Other woodland plants include broad buckler fern *Dryopteris dilatata*, the sedges *Carex sylvatica* and *C. remota*, bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, woodruff *Galium odoratum*, enchanter's nightshade *Circaea lutetiana*, wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa*, wood sorrel *Oxalis acetosella*, wood sage *Teucrium scorodonia*, wood avens *Geum urbanum*, the semi-parasitic cow-wheat *Melampyrum pratense* and the exceptionally rare bladderseed *Physospermum cornubiense*, long known here but otherwise found only in Devon and Cornwall. The wetter parts of the woods contain such species as bugle *Ajuga reptans*, water mint *Mentha aquatica*, marsh violet *Viola palustris*, wood club-rush *Scirpus sylvaticus* and wood horsetail *Equisetum sylvaticum*, of which the last three are particularly notable.

The heathland is diminishing in extent through invasion either by bracken or by scrub and woodland, but fragments remain and there are particularly good tracts in the rides of Egypt Woods. Typical of the drier areas are heather *Calluna vulgaris*, bell heather *Erica cinerea*, early hair-grass *Aira praecox*, heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile*, heath milkwort *Polygala serpyllifolia*, betony *Betonica officinalis* and the hawkweed *Hieracium sabaudum*, as well as gorse *Ulex europaeus*, broom *Cytisus scoparius* and a few old junipers *Juniperus communis*, these last of special interest because

of the drastic decline in this species in southern England and its virtual confinement now to the Chalk. Wet heath also supports heather, but associated species here are purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*, cross-leaved heath *Erica tetralix* and dwarf gorse *Ulex minor*.

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The wetter grounds, margins of ponds and swallowholes and the areas of open water provide a further selection of plant species of which many are now scarce. Examples are water horsetail *Equisetum fluviatile*, great reedmace *Typha latifolia*, sharp-flowered rush *Juncus acutiflorus*, yellow flag *Iris pseudacorus*, bog bean *Menyanthes trifoliata*, lesser spearwort *Hypericum elodes*, greater bladderwort *Utricularia vulgaris*, white and yellow water-lilies *Nymphaea alba* and *Nuphar lutea*, and some six species of bog moss *Sphagnum* spp.

Invertebrate life is well represented at Burnham Beeches. The area has long been known for its wood ants *Formica rufa* and hornets *Vespa crabro* and it is a top international site for rare woodland slugs such as *Limax tenellus* and *L. cinereoniger*. Records of butterflies and moths have been somewhat neglected here, but the dead wood of the beech and oak pollards provides habitat for several very rare beetles, including *Ischnomera sanguinicollis* which is classified as Grade 3 in the Red Data Book of threatened species. Other notable insects are the black darter dragonfly *Sympetrum danae* and the bog bush cricket *Metrioptera brachyptera*.

Among the mammals, the dormouse still occurs. Some 56 species of birds breed regularly including sparrowhawk and hawfinch among the all-year-round residents and redstart, nightjar and nightingale among the summer visitors.