COUNTY:	BERKSHIRE		SITE NAME: HOGS HOLE
Status:	Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981		
Local Planning Authorities:		Newbury District Council, Berkshire County Council	
National Grid Reference:		SU379598	
Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000:		174	1:10,000: SU35 NE, SU36 SE
Date Notified (Under 1981 Act):		1988	Date of Last Revision:

Area: 23.5 ha 58.1 ac

Other information: The site lies within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Description and Reasons for Notification

An area of traditionally managed chalk downland and scrub supporting a diverse flora and fauna. The site represents one of the largest intact areas of unimproved chalk grassland in the north Wessex Downs area, and has a special significance in Berkshire, where a survey in 1985 found that only 180 ha of this habitat remains, equal to 0.35% of the chalk outcrop in the county.

Hogs Hole consists of a dry valley, or combe, cut in the Middle and Upper Chalk. The steep east and west-facing valley sides support only thin rendzina soils, an unusual feature being lines of bare chalk and flint scree. The valley opens out in its southern part, the remainder of the site consisting of a moderately steep and undulating south-facing slope and a steep west-facing slope rising to a plateau area.

Most of the site has been grazed by sheep, which have encouraged a close-knit turf to develop, in which several species of grasses are co-dominant and a wide variety of chalk flowers are to be found. The sward is of a type characterised by sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina*, meadow oat-grass *Avenula pratensis*, stemless thistle *Cirsium acaule* and squinancywort *Asperula cynanchica*. The other principal grasses comprise red fescue *Festuca rubra*, quaking grass *Briza media*, crested hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha*, hairy oat-grass *Avenula pubescens*, Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus* and yellow oat grass *Trisetum flavescens*. Glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* is also very common.

A wide range of typical chalk grassland herbs occur, many of which are widespread and common over the site. These include mouse-ear hawkweed *Hieracium pilosella*, rough hawkbit *Leontodon hispidus*, lady's bedstraw *Galium verum*, wild basil *Clinopodium vulgare*, eyebright *Euphrasia nemorosa*, salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, common milkwort *Polygala vulgaris* and hoary plantain *Plantago media*.

Other species, of less frequent occurrence, include horseshoe vetch *Hippocrepis comosa*, common rockrose *Helianthemum nummularium*, bulbous buttercup *Ranunculus bulbosus*, hairy violet *Viola hirta*, autumn gentian *Gentianella amarella*, musk thistle *Carduus nutans*, common spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and spring sedge *Carex caryophyllea*. Several of these are restricted to chalk grassland in Berkshire and are now becoming scarce in the county.

The site supports a large population of ant-hills, indicating long continuity of the turf. These are often colonised by wild thyme *Thymus praecox* and the less common large thyme *T. pulegioides*, together with species such as fairy flax *Linum catharticum* and thyme-leaved sandwort *Arenaria serpyllifolia*.

In the northern part of the site there is an area of mixed scrub composed of hawthorn, elder, wild privet, blackthorn, sycamore, crab apple and wayfaring tree, with some mature ash and whitebeam. Plants growing here include shade-tolerant species more typical of woodlands, such as red campion *Silene dioica*, wood avens *Geum urbanum*, herb-robert *Geranium robertianum* and enchanter's nightshade *Circaea lutetiana*. The surrounding rough grassland is dominated by upright brome *Bromus erectus* and false oat-grass *Arrhenatherum elatius*. The scrub is inhabited by a number of breeding birds including willow warbler, garden warbler, lesser whitethroat, long-tailed tit, yellowhammer and tree pip

Only the valley floor shows signs of agricultural improvement where perennial rye grass *Lolium perenne* and white clover *Trifolium repens* have been found. High nutrient levels in these areas have encouraged the growth of nettles *Urtica dioica* and thistles *Cirsium* spp.