

COUNTY: WEST SUSSEX SITE NAME: WALTHAM BROOKS

DISTRICT: HORSHAM

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

Local Planning Authority: HORSHAM DISTRICT COUNCIL

National Grid Reference: TQ 025159, TQ 021152 Area: 48.6 (ha.) 120.1 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey sheet 1:50,000: 197 1:10,000: TQ 01 NW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): – Date of Last Revision: –

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

Other Information:

A new site which lies within the South Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and is a reserve of the Sussex Wildlife Trust.

Reasons for Notification:

This area of alluvial grazing marsh adjacent to the River Arun is of national importance for wintering birds. The site represents one of a few surviving areas of grazing marsh in West Sussex; the marsh and the ditches which dissect it support a species-rich community of aquatic plants, including one nationally rare species.

The majority of the site lies on poorly drained river alluvium but better drained grasslands in the western part are on river gravels and Folkestone sands. The low-lying alluvial areas are so poorly drained that a semi-permanent lake has formed between the Old Canal and a main drainage ditch (at TQ 027158). The lush grasslands and expanses of open water provide important feeding and roosting areas for a diversity of wintering birds; they also support several species of breeding bird.

The drier grasslands on river gravels west of the railway line are dominated by red fescue grass *Festuca rubra* and have scattered stands of hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna* and gorse *Ulex europaeus* scrub; these dry grasslands support a rich assemblage of fungi. East of the railway line the grassland becomes progressively wetter and rushes *Juncus* species, tufted hair grass *Deschampsia cespitosa*, sedges *Carex* species and creeping buttercup *Ranunculus repens* dominate the sward. The wet alluvial grasslands support several plants which are scarce in West Sussex including bog pimpernel *Anagallis tenella*, marsh marigold *Caltha palustris*, southern marsh orchid *Dactylorhiza praetermissa*, common cotton grass *Eriophorum angustifolium*, pepper saxifrage *Silaum silaus* and small water-pepper *Polygonum minus*; the latter plant has a restricted distribution nationally.

The Old Canal (which is tidal up to Coldwaltham Lock at TQ 024157), the lake margins and the ditches all support a variety of plant species. The submerged aquatic flora includes various pondweeds *Potamogeton* species, spiked water-milfoil *Myriophyllum spicatum* and waterweed *Elodea nuttallii*. The marginal fen, shallow water and bankside

communities which fringe the open water areas are of particular note for the presence of two plants which have a nationally restricted distribution; the cut grass *Leersia oryzoides* is now restricted to less than 15 sites in Britain while greater water-parsnip *Sium latifolium* is largely confined to sites in the south and east of the country. Other plants which occur on the open water margins include flowering rush *Butomus umbellatus*, yellow flag *Iris pseudacorus*, bulrush *Schoenoplectus lacustris*, arrowhead *Sagittaria sagittifolia* and frogbit *Hydrocharis morsus-ranae*.

The site supports over 1% of the British wintering population of 3 bird species. The numbers of wintering Bewick's swan have exceeded 100 in recent years and have approached levels which are of European significance. Also of national importance are the numbers of wintering teal and shoveler. Other birds which over-winter in large numbers include wigeon, pintail, lapwing, mute swan, fieldfare and redwing. Amongst the birds which breed at the site are lapwing, snipe, redshank, yellow wagtail, reed warbler, shelduck, mute swan, grasshopper warbler, whitethroat and yellowhammer.