

COUNTY: GREATER LONDON

SITE NAME: BENTLEY PRIORY

BOROUGH: HARROW

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

Local Planning Authority: London Borough of Harrow

National Grid Reference: TQ 156927

Area: 55.1 (ha.) 136.2 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 176

1:10,000: TQ 19 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1975

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1990

Other Information:

Formerly part of the Stanmore and Harrow Weald Commons and Bentley Priory SSSI. Part of the site is a Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust Nature Reserve. There are several boundary amendments.

Reasons for Notification:

Bentley Priory comprises an intricate mosaic of unimproved neutral grassland, ancient and long-established woodland, scrub, wetland and open water. This combination of habitats is uncommon in Greater London. Several plant species which are rare or scarce in Greater London are present and the site supports a characteristic breeding bird community.

The site lies on the south-facing slopes of a ridge capped by Pebble Gravels. The lower parts lie on London Clay; further north the transitional Claygate beds of sand and loam flank the central valley, while pebble gravels are present on the northern extremity. The soils are freely-draining and acidic in the north and vary through sands and loams to the heavy neutral soils in the majority of the site. Streams and springs arise at the junction of the impervious London clay and the overlying Claygate beds, including the Edgware Brook, which has been dammed to form a lake. Boot Pond in the extreme south-east is also spring fed.

Bentley Priory supports some of the largest neutral meadows in Greater London, with transitions to more acidic conditions on the northern slopes and to marshy grassland at the lowest levels and around streams and flushes. These grasslands have been traditionally maintained by grazing. In general, common bent grass *Agrostis capillaris* is ubiquitous with red fescue *Festuca rubra*, Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus* and crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus* all common. The more acidic, freely-draining pastures in the north are characterised by the occurrence of sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina* and occasional wavy hair-grass *Deschampsia flexuosa*. On the clay creeping bent *Agrostis stolonifera* is frequent, with tufted hair-grass *Deschampsia cespitosa*, rye grass *Lolium perenne* and meadow fescue *Festuca pratensis*.

Herbs associated with the grasslands include common knapweed *Centaurea nigra*, self-heal *Prunella vulgaris*, common and greater bird's-foot trefoils *Lotus corniculatus* and *L. uliginosus*, and sneezewort *Achilles ptarmica* in the damp areas around Boot Pond. Also found here is great burnet *Sanguisorba officinalis*, a species scarce in Greater London. On the higher slopes, where ant hills are locally frequent, species such as harebell *Campanula rotundifolia* and heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile* are present while on the Claygate beds pignut *Conopodium majus* occurs with adder's tongue *Ophioglossum vulgatum* which is scarce in Greater London and pepper saxifrage *Silaum silaus*, both of which are largely associated with old meadows.

Scrub occurs in stands throughout the grassland, mainly dominated by mature hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, with gorse *Ulex europaeus* and broom *Cytisus scoparius* in the north and occasional guelder rose *Viburnum opulus* on the clay site. The site is unusual in London for the presence of five species of rose, including glaucous dog-rose *Rosa dumalis* at its only London locality and short-styled field-rose *R. stylosa* and small-flowered sweet-briar *R. micrantha* which are both scarce in Greater London.

Heriot's Wood is the largest ancient woodland in the Borough of Harrow, and is dominated by hornbeam *Carpinus betulus* and pedunculate oak *Quercus robur*. Many of the hornbeam trees are mature multi-stemmed standards derived from old coppice stools. Midland hawthorn *Crataegus laevigata*, a species strongly associated with old woodland, occurs in the shrub layer with silver birch *Betula pendula* and common hawthorn *C. monogyna*. The deep shade cast by hornbeam combined with cattle grazing limits the ground flora which is dominated by bramble *Rubus fruticosus* with wavy bitter-cress *Cardamine flexuosa* in damp areas. This stand grades into lowland hazel -- pedunculate oak woodland near Bentley Priory Lake outflow, with alder *Alnus glutinosa* in the wet flushes. A diverse ground flora includes remote sedge *Carex remota*, a species strongly associated with ancient woodland, creeping-jenny *Lysimachia nummularia* and great horsetail *Equisetum telmateia*. Other woodland on the site contains a more varied canopy including wild cherry *Prunus avium* and rarely wild service-tree *Sorbus torminalis*, both of which are largely associated with ancient woodland. The ground flora, though dominated by bramble, includes many species typical of ancient woodland such as ramsons *Allium ursinum*, pendulous sedge *Carex pendula*, wood sedge *Carex sylvatica*, wood millet *Milium effusum*, greater burnet-saxifrage *Pimpinella major*, goldilocks buttercup *Ranunculus auricomus*, sanicle *Sanicula europaea* and soft shield-fern *Polystichum setiferum* which is scarce in Greater London.

The streams flowing south and east through the site and the flushes on the slopes support a flora including common spike-rush *Eleocharis palustris*, together with water horsetail *Equisetum fluviatile* which is scarce in London.

Both Boot Pond and Bentley Priory have a diverse marginal and emergent vegetation including imperforate St John's-wort *Hypericum maculatum*, rare in Greater London, and cyperus sedge *Carex pseudocyperus* and greater tussock-sedge *Carex paniculata*, both scarce in Greater London.

Bentley Priory supports a characteristic breeding bird community, with many of the species associated with the mature woodland. These include all three British species of woodpecker: green *Picris viridis*, greater spotted *Dendrocopus major* and lesser spotted *D. minor*, nuthatch *Sitta europaea*, tawny owl *Strix aluco*, treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* and tree sparrow *Passer montanus*. Also breeding at this site is hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*, which is often associated with mature hornbeam woodlands and has a localised distribution both in London and nationally.