COUNTY: NORTHAMPTONSHIRE  SITE NAME: HELMDON DISUSED RAILWAY

District: South Northamptonshire

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

Local Planning Authority: South Northamptonshire District Council

National Grid Reference: SP 587430
SP 59 39

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 152
1:10,000: SP 54 SE, SP 53 NE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1990
Date of Last Revision: 1991

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1990
Date of Last Revision: 1991

Area: 16.64 (ha) 41.12 (ac)

Other Information: This site was added to the Northamptonshire Schedule in 1990 and the boundary extended in 1991.

Description and Reasons for Notification

The site is an extensive length of disused railway cutting and embankment, supporting plant communities typical of Jurassic limestone grassland, a habitat type now scarce throughout Britain and particularly so in Northamptonshire.

Three distinct grassland communities are represented, reflecting the underlying soil conditions as well as past and present management practices. The steeper slopes of the cutting are characterised by upright brome Bromus erectus grassland supporting a wide variety of herbs including dwarf thistle Cirsium acaule, salad burnet Sanguisorba minor, devil’s-bit scabious Succisa pratensis, common spotted-orchid Dactylorhiza fuchsii, bee orchid Ophrys apifera and green-winged orchid Orchis morio. Along the old railway track itself small rabbit grazed limestone spoil heaps have developed a very rich floral community including kidney vetch Anthyllis vulneraria, mouse-ear hawkweed Hieracium pilosella and fairy flax Linum catharticum. On the shallower slopes of the site a more mesotrophic sward dominated by false oat-grass Arrhenatherum elatius is present.

The site supports a rich butterfly fauna including the nationally scarce wood white Leptidea sinapis and five nationally declining species. Of particular note is the presence of small blue Cupido minimus at its only Northamptonshire locality.

There are also areas of mixed scrub, both continuous and scattered, plus developing woodland which provide the site with additional habitat of general wildlife value.