

COUNTY: KENT SITE NAME: COMBWELL WOOD

BOROUGH: TUNBRIDGE WELLS

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

Local Planning Authority: TUNBRIDGE WELLS BOROUGH COUNCIL

National Grid Reference: TQ 706 342 Area: 110.82 (ha.) 173.73 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 188 1:10,000: TQ 73 SW, TQ 63 SE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1968 Date of Last Revision: 1981

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

Other Information:

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Combwell Wood is an ancient wood on Tunbridge Wells Sandstone, with deep-stream valleys (gills) in which peat has accumulated. The wood has a large number of plants that are typical of south-eastern ancient woodlands, these being particularly associated with the gills and the open rides. The former contain several uncommon 'Atlantic' bryophytes (mosses and liverworts) as well as two nationally scarce** water beetles (Coleoptera).

Much of the site has traditionally been managed as coppice, but undisturbed woodland cover has probably persisted continuously along the steep sided gills maintaining the moist mild climate suitable for the 'Atlantic' bryophytes. These are thought to be survivors from the Atlantic climatic period of Western Europe, about 5000 years ago.

The coppiced woods contain much sweet chestnut *Castanea sativa* with both silver and hairy birch *Betula pendula* and *B. pubescens*, and scattered oak *Quercus robur* standards. The ground flora contains much bramble *Rubus fruticosus* and bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*, but it is on the rides and open glades that particularly diverse plant communities occur. Here heather *Calluna vulgaris* is abundant, with several species that are scarce in Kent* such as saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria*, allseed *Radiola linoides*, lesser centaury *Centaureium pulchellum* and the nationally rare*** moss *Atrichum angustatum*.

The epiphytic lichen flora is also very rich, with a range of species characteristic of ancient woodland, such as *Thelotrama lepachinum* and the nationally scarce *Cyphelium sessile*.

In the gills, and other wet flushes alder *Alnus glutinosa* is frequent, over lady fern *Athyrium filix femina*, opposite-leaved golden-saxifrage *Chrysosplenium oppositifolium* and the bog-moss *Sphagnum palustre*. The moist mild micro-

climate of the gills is suitable for several 'Atlantic' bryophytes that are most frequently found in Western Britain, and are rare in the South-east of England, such as the mosses *Hookeria lucens* and *Hyocomium armoricum*. In the flushes and shaded woodland pools there are two nationally scarce species of water beetles, *Agabus chalconatus* and *Hydroporus neglectus*, as well as several others that are local in distribution.

*Scarce in Kent: recorded from between 1 and 5% of the 2 km × 2 km tetrads in Kent.

**Nationally scarce: recorded from between 16 and 100 10 km squares in Britain.

***Nationally rare: recorded from 15 or less 10 km squares in Britain.