

VICARAGE MEADOWS SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST



Small white orchid © RG Woods

YOUR SPECIAL SITE AND ITS FUTURE

‘Your Special Site and its Future’ is part of our commitment to improve the way we work with Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) owners and occupiers. In it, we explain what is special about the wildlife on your site, and what care is needed to look after its wildlife into the future.

All SSSIs are considered to be of national importance and we recognise the crucial role that owners and occupiers play in their management and protection. We need you to share your views and knowledge of this site with us, to help safeguard it.

We hope that you will find ‘Your Special Site and its Future’ interesting and helpful. Please contact us if there is anything about the site and its management that you would like to discuss.

What is ‘special’ about the wildlife at Vicarage Meadows SSSI?

The special features at Vicarage Meadows are:

- **Unimproved acid grassland**, with associated marshy grassland and spring-fed bog.

The dry acid grassland supports an unusual variety and abundance of wild flowers, including several that are uncommon or declining in Britain. The wetter areas support rush pasture, purple moor-grass mire and bog vegetation, reflecting natural variations in the acidity of the ground water.

Unimproved lowland grasslands are now a rare feature of the countryside, most areas having been converted to more intensive agricultural use. Those that are left support many specialised plants and animals that are well adapted to low nutrient conditions and cannot survive in intensively managed pastures.

- **Small-white orchid**

The best known site in Brecknock for this regionally rare plant.

- **Fragrant Orchid**
- **Greater Butterfly Orchid**
- **Wood Bitter-vetch**

The best known site in Brecknock for these three plants that are all declining in Britain.

As well as the features listed above, Vicarage Meadows has other habitats that contribute to the special wildlife interest. These include broad-leaved semi-natural woodland, hedgerow, and ditches. The mixture of habitats is important for much of the wildlife and except where it is specified below, management of this site should aim to look after these habitats and species as well as those listed above.

What do we want Vicarage Meadows SSSI to look like?

The following is a description of how we would like to see the features at Vicarage Meadows:

At least a quarter of the site is flower-rich dry, unimproved acid grassland, making up a large proportion of the western field, and part of the upper slope of the eastern field. During the summer months it provides a colourful display of wild flowers. The main grasses are fescues, bents and sweet vernal grass, whilst other flowers present include common knapweed, eyebright, common bird's-foot-trefoil, pignut, betony, tormentil, devil's-bit scabious, dyer's greenweed, great burnet and bitter vetch. Of the more unusual plants, wood bitter-vetch is particularly abundant, fragrant and greater butterfly orchids are common and small white orchid is occasionally seen in the

western field. The scarce soft-leaved sedge grows amongst the grasses along the slope in the eastern field. Unusually, woodland flowers such as bluebell and wood anemone may also be found within the grassland sward.

Flowers of devil's-bit scabious, tormentil and marsh violets can be seen growing amongst tussocks of purple moor-grass and sharp-flowered rush in the marshy grassland. Scattered boggy flushes add variety to these wetter areas and are generally marked by an abundance of sedges including star sedge and carnation sedge as well as bog asphodel, common cottongrass, and bog-mosses. Less acidic water feeds a small flush in the western field, where flea sedge, tawny sedge and round-leaved sundew can be found.

Plants indicating disturbance and nutrient enrichment, such as thistles, soft rush, docks, creeping buttercup, and perennial rye-grass, and others indicating under-grazing and succession to scrub, such as cock's-foot, and tufted hair-grass are not prominent in the sward. Bracken and scrub are scarce, being largely confined to the field edges, and bare ground is not noticeable in these grassland or wetland areas.

For each plant of particular interest, the population is stable, or increasing and is sustainable in the long term, the range is not contracting, sufficient habitat exists to support the plant and the factors that may affect the plant or its habitat are under control.

What management is needed on Vicarage Meadows SSSI and why?

Although Vicarage Meadows is an excellent place for wildlife it will only remain so if the necessary management continues. CCW's priority is to work with you to ensure that this management is carried out.

What does this mean in practice?

There are a number of different factors that could damage the special features at Vicarage Meadows if they are not properly managed. These are the ones we regard as most important:

- **Soil fertility**

Soil fertility is naturally low at this site and the plants that occur are specially adapted to these conditions. The application of any agricultural fertilizers or lime may upset the natural balance of this site, and have a detrimental effect on the habitat and reducing the diversity of plant species with a corresponding increase in agricultural species such as rye grass, white clover, docks, and thistles.

Stock feeding could lead to habitat damage from localised nutrient enrichment and trampling and should therefore be avoided on the site.

- **Drainage**

The soil in the lower parts of Vicarage Meadows is naturally wet with springs discharging on the upper slopes both within, and higher up beyond, the site boundary. The wetland habitats are dependent on a steady supply of ground and surface water. Consequently, it is important that the natural drainage pattern of the site is preserved and no new drainage work is carried out.

However, the site was subjected to a drainage effort in the 1970s, in which three deep ditches were excavated, running down the slope of the eastern field. These were then linked by a ditch running across the slope, and additional ditches were cut to drain the deep peat in the lowest part of the site.

Although the effect of the ditches will have been to alter the spread of water lower down the slopes and consequently may have altered the plant assemblages present, over time there has been settling of the original material removed and placed along the edges to create the ditches. This means that it would now be difficult to simply fill the ditches in and restore the original hydrology.

One of the main problems that the ditches have created is that they pose a hazard to grazing animals, adding a complication to site management. This management problem has been overcome by fencing around the deepest, and most treacherous areas.

- **Scrub and bracken encroachment and shading**

Problems of invasive scrub include aspen suckering across the slope in the eastern field, and birch and willow scrub growing lower down slope in both fields. However, the presence of some bushes is important for birds and insects so that scrub should not be removed completely.

If grazing does not prevent the spread of scrub, control may be necessary to prevent loss of grassland. Cutting and careful treatment of the stumps with a suitable herbicide would be an appropriate method. It is important to remove any cut material to the edges of the site to avoid smothering the more important plant communities.

Scattered bracken grows on the drier grassland banks. Cutting of the bracken (or pulling where it is limited in extent) will be beneficial in preventing it increasing in dominance at the expense of grassland plants, which may otherwise be shaded out.

The beech hedge, which divides the two fields, provides dense cover and may cause shading of the grassland, limiting the growth of certain plants. The programme of tree felling, coppicing and pollarding which has been started on the mature trees in the hedge should continue in the future if shading is still a problem.

In addition some management is essential to conserve the special features and maintain them in their current condition. This includes:

- **Grazing**

An appropriate grazing regime is necessary to maintain the diversity of the grasslands. The previous history of light to moderate grazing has been an important factor in determining the present character of the site.

Grazing wetter grassland in spring and late summer/autumn prevents overwhelming domination by rushes and purple moor-grass, maintains the diversity of plant species and prevents the spread of scrub. Insufficient grazing of the drier grassland would lead to domination by coarse grasses and could encourage invasion by bracken and scrub. Heavy grazing could lead to the elimination of sensitive species, and could cause localized physical damage to the sward leading to invasion by 'weedy' species.

If sheep only are used, this is likely to provide insufficient grazing of the wetter areas, and will tend to lead to overgrazing of the drier areas. Therefore, ponies or cattle or a combination of ponies/cattle and sheep should be used to graze the site. Continuous winter grazing should not be undertaken because of the lack of growth at this time of year at this altitude, although it may be of benefit to graze some of the purple moor-grass dominated areas by hardy ponies during the winter months.

The drier grassland of the western field should not usually be grazed until mid September to allow for hay to be cut from part of the site and also allow for flowers to set seed within the uncut areas. This will help maintain the characteristic low growing herbs in the sward.

Electric fencing may be required in both fields to encourage stock to graze the purple moor-grass areas or if poaching occurs, for example in the area around the old barn in the eastern field.

Generally, grazing should aim to maintain a varied habitat structure in the wetland areas and a relatively short sward in the drier grassland at the end of the growing season.

- **Mowing**

The drier areas of the western field have been mown for some years for a late hay cut and this traditional management seems to favour the rich assemblage of plants present. However, in more recent years the field has been divided into two and one half not mown to allow more continuous cover for insects and other wildlife throughout the summer/ early autumn. The half not mown should be alternated every year and the grazing stock re-introduced to both halves in the autumn.

In addition, to complement the site grazing some selective mowing and removal of cuttings from within the purple moor-grass dominated grassland could be undertaken to help reduce the domination by coarse grass tussocks. This should encourage stock into these areas to graze, thus helping to diversify the sward and prevent the spread of scrub.

Finally

Our knowledge and understanding of wildlife/geology is continually improving. It is possible that new issues may arise in the future, whilst other issues may disappear. This statement is written with the best information we have now, but may have to change in the future as our understanding improves. Any information you can provide on the wildlife of your site, its management and its conservation would be much appreciated.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of your SSSI, or have any concerns about your SSSI, please contact your local CCW office.

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