

COUNTY: SURREY SITE NAME: ESHER COMMONS

BOROUGH: ELMBRIDGE

Status; Site of special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as amended

Local Planning Authority: ELMBRIDGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

National Grid Reference: TQ 130623          Area: 358.3 (ha.) 885.4 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheets 1:50,000: 176/187    1:10,000: TQ 16 SW

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1955          Date of Last Revision: 1975

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1986          Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:

1. Esher Commons SSSI was formerly known as Esher and Oxshott Commons SSSI.
2. The boundary of the site has been amended at renotification by several deletions and extensions.
3. The site includes Common Land.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

Esher Commons which includes much of Arbrook, Esher, Oxshott, West End and Fairmile Commons and the Ledges, covers a large tract of land between the River Mole, Oxshott and Esher. The site lies partly on the acidic soils of the Bagshot Beds and Plateau levels locally overlain by peat, and partly on the damp, clay soils of the Claygate Beds.

Heathland, grassland, scrub, woodland and areas of marsh, bog, and open water, present a rich variety of habitats supporting many species of plants and animals. In particular, this site is famous as an important area for invertebrates and has been studied for many years.

Most of the site was formerly heathland used as common grazing land. Like many lowland heaths in Britain, it has not been grazed for many years and has now become very overgrown with scrub and secondary woodland. Scattered areas of heath survive, and are dominated by ling *Calluna vulgaris* where the soil is dry. This is often mixed with bell heather *Erica cinerea* or bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*, supporting a range of characteristic heathland insects including the scarce silver-studded blue butterfly *Plebejus argus*. In the waterlogged area near Black Pond, the heathland is dominated by cross-leaved heath *Erica tetralix* and purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*. This grades into the bog around Black Pond, which is dominated by bog mosses *Sphagnum* spp., hair-moss *Polytrichum commune* and common cotton-grass *Eriophorum angustifolium*, with other characteristic plants such as round and long-leaved sundews *Drosera rotundifolia* and *D. intermedia*, bog asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum* and marsh St John's wort *Hypericum elodes*.

The dense scrub which covers much of the former heathland is composed of gorse *Ulex europaeus*, the birches *Betula pubescens* and *B. pendula* and grey sallow *Salix cinerea*. In many places this has developed into a proper woodland of birch, willow, sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* and pedunculate oak *Quercus robur*, and further large areas are covered in

pine plantation. Some heathland plants survive here in rides and clearings. Active management in some areas is helping the recovery of heathland from woodland scrub.

There is an area of mature woodland, much of which is ancient, above the river Mole at the Ledges. This is dominated by oak, chestnut *Castanea sativa* and beech *Fagus sylvatica*, or in the wetter areas by birch, sycamore and alder *Alnus glutinosa*. The ground flora shows the characteristic richness of ancient woodland and includes bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, goldilocks *Ranunculus auricomus*, nettle-leaved bellflower *Campanula trachelium*, and moschatel *Adoxa moschatellina*. Also found are the nationally scarce greater dodder *Cuscuta europaea*, lesser chickweed *Stellaria pallida* and heath cudweed *Gnaphalium sylvaticum*. The wettest areas support plants such as greater tussock-sedge *Carex paniculata*, large bitter-cress *Cardamine amara* and opposite-leaved golden saxifrage *Chrysosplenium oppositifolium*.

Black Pond, one of several areas of open water within the site, is poor in nutrients with boggy margins, while Middle Lake and the two ponds on West End Common are richer, fringed with fen vegetation including reedmace *Typha latifolia*, floating sweet-grass *Glyceria fluitans*, marsh pennywort *Hydrocotyle vulgaris* and a Surrey rarity, marsh dock *Rumex palustris*.

Over 2000 species of insects are known to have been found within the site, a great number of which are nationally scarce or rare. It is likely that some of these have disappeared recently due to the loss in area of open heathland, but the site still supports an outstanding community of insects and other invertebrates. Among these are dragon- and damselflies (Odonata), including such scarce species as the brilliant emerald dragonfly *Somatochlora metallica* and the small red damselfly *Ceriatagrion tenellum*, and butterflies and moths (Lepidoptera) including the scarce white letter hair-streak butterfly *Strymonidia w-album*. Over 800 species of beetle (Coleoptera) have been recorded; rare species include a water beetle *Graphoderus cinereus*, a ladybird *Coccinella distincta*, and a bark beetle *Platypus cylindrus*.