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COUNTRYSIDE COUNCIL FOR WALES**

SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST CITATION

SWANSEA

COURTHOUSE GRASSLANDS

Date of Notification: 2002

National Grid Reference: SS 560910

OS Maps: 1:50,000 Sheet number: 159
1:10,000 Sheet number: SS59 SE

Site Area: 22.7 ha

Description:

Courthouse Grasslands is of special interest for its marshy grassland and species-rich neutral grassland, with associated areas of broadleaved woodland and scrub. The site is also of special interest for the nationally scarce marsh fritillary butterfly *Eurodryas aurinia*.

The site is situated close to Swansea Airport, at the eastern end of the Gower peninsula, adjacent to Fairwood Common. It comprises a small group of gently undulating enclosures, varying in altitude from 50 to 80 m, with a generally south-westerly aspect. The site lies on Millstone Grit, overlain by glacial deposits, at the edge of the South Wales coalfield. Soils are predominantly wet loamy, cambic stagnohumic gleys of the Wilcocks series, with well-drained brown earths of the East Keswick series, in the south.

The majority of the site supports a variety of marshy grassland communities, often intergrading, dominated by purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*, with frequent tormentil *Potentilla erecta*, greater bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus pedunculatus* and sweet vernal-grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*. Of particular interest are stands of fen-meadow, where the grassland is generally more species-rich, and includes frequent glaucous sedge *Carex flacca*, carnation sedge *C. panicea* and devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, accompanied by base-demanding species such as tawny sedge *Carex hostiana* and flea sedge *C. pulicaris*. Meadow thistle *Cirsium dissectum*, and the liverwort *Aneura pinguis* and moss *Ctenidium molluscum* are locally present. In the west of Courthouse Grassland, a more heathy form of fen-meadow occurs, characterised by species such as cross-leaved heath *Erica tetralix*, saw-wort *Serratula tinctoria*, bog asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum* and the bog-moss *Sphagnum auriculatum*. This grades into small areas of wet heath, where cross-leaved heath, heather *Calluna vulgaris* and deergrass *Trichophorum cespitosum* are prominent.

Also present are small stands of marshy grassland dominated by, sharp-flowered rush *Juncus acutiflorus* and soft rush *J. effusus*, with frequent greater bird's-foot-trefoil and common marsh bedstraw *Galium palustre*.

The neutral grassland of special interest occurs in close proximity to the fen-meadow and zonations between the two vegetation types are well displayed. The neutral grassland is characterised by a combination of grasses, sedges and herbs, and is particularly species-rich, with

a base-enriched, flushed element. Typical species include common bent *Agrostis capillaris*, crested dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus*, quaking-grass *Briza media*, glaucous sedge, common knapweed *Centaurea nigra*, common bird's-foot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, devil's-bit scabious, tormentil and heath-grass *Danthonia decumbens*.

Bands and small blocks of woodland and scrub are a feature of the site, and add to its ecological diversity.

Uncommon species at Courthouse Grasslands include petty whin *Genista anglica*, many-stalked spike-rush *Eleocharis multicaulis* and the hybrid rush *Juncus x diffusus* (hard rush *Juncus inflexus* crossed with soft rush *J. effusus*). There is also a population of whorled caraway *Carum verticillatum*, which is frequent in the fen meadow.

The site provides suitable habitat for the marsh fritillary and contributes to the area used by a metapopulation of the butterfly, thought to be centred on adjacent common land. Adults and larvae have been seen in recent years at Courthouse Grasslands, and the butterfly's larval food plant devil's-bit scabious is common throughout much of the marshy grassland, as well as some of the neutral grassland.

Remarks:

1. The site supports vegetation assignable to the *Molinia* meadows on calcareous, peaty or clayey-silt-laden soils *Molinion caeruleon*, and Northern Atlantic wet heaths with *Erica tetralix*. These are habitats listed on Annex I of the EC Habitats Directive (Directive 92/43/EEC on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and Wild Flora and Fauna).
2. The marsh fritillary is included on Annex IIa of the EC Habitats Directive and Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and is a Biodiversity Action Plan species.
3. The SSSI is included within the Gower commons candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC).
4. Courthouse Grasslands is a new site. It is adjacent to Fairwood, Pengwern and Welsh Moor Commons SSSI and within Gower Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).