

SITE NOTIFIED TO THE SECRETARY OF STATE ON 28 FEBRUARY 1986

COUNTY: SOMERSET      SITE NAME: ST DUNSTAN'S WELL  
CATCHMENT

DISTRICT: MENDIP

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

Local Planning Authority: MENDIP DISTRICT COUNCIL, Somerset County  
Council

National Grid Reference: ST 668475      Area: 39.8 (ha.) 98.3 (ac.)  
ST 655475

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 183      1:10,000: ST 64 NE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1967      Date of Last Revision: 1972

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

Other Information:

Formerly known as Stoke St Michael Slocker. Site boundary amended since last  
Revision.

Description and Reasons for Notification:

a) Geological

St Dunstan's Well Catchment is an important and well-known cave system which includes a series of spectacularly-decorated caves which in total extend to about 4 miles of mapped passage. The caves were formed mainly by the erosive action of water flowing beneath the water-table at considerable pressure (so called 'phreatic' development), but as the water table has fallen many of the caves now lie well above it and the system now contains a variety of cave formations (stalagmites, stalactites and calcite curtains) which in their extent and preservation are unsurpassed in Britain. Shatter Cave and Withyhill Cave are generally considered to be the finest decorated caves in Britain in terms of their sheer abundance of pure white and translucent calcite deposits. These caves and the sediments which occur in and are associated with them, record a long and detailed geological history which extends back through much of the Pleistocene Ice Age and this makes them of great importance to geologists studying the geological evolution of southern England.

b) Biological

An area of nationally rare species-rich unimproved calcareous grassland of the Sheep's-fescue-Meadow Oat-grass type occurs in the field to the east of Stoke Lane Quarry. Sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina*, Meadow Oat-grass *Avenula pratensis*, Crested Dog's-tail *Cynosurus cristatus* and Common Bent *Agrostis capillaris* are the most common grasses. Crested Hair-grass *Koeleria macrantha*, Downy Oat-grass *Avenula pubescens*, Yellow Oat-grass *Trisetum flavescens* and Heath Grass *Danthonia*

*decumbens* also occur. Glaucous Sedge *Carex flacca* and Spring Sedge *C. caryophylla* are abundant. Herbs of interest include Lady's Mantle *Alchemilla filicaulis*, Devil's-bit Scabious *Succisa pratensis*, Salad Burnet *Sanguisorba minor*, Cowslip *Primula veris*, Fairy Flax *Linum catharticum*, Common Rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium* and Wild Thyme *Thymus praecox*. Early-purple Orchid *Orchis mascula* and Common Spotted-orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* are widespread.

Small numbers of Greater Horseshoe Bat *Rhinolophus ferrumequinum*, Lesser Horseshoe Bat *R. hipposideros* and Natterer's Bat *Myotis nattereri* hibernate in the cave system.