

Sites of Special Scientific Interest in Headington

- by Keith Frayn

Keith Frayn is a Headington resident who enjoys walking and outdoor activities. He has written several previous articles for Headington Monthly.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs, usually called 'triple-S-Is') are sites where there is especially interesting wildlife or geology. There are just over 4000 SSSIs in England. Natural England is responsible for identifying and protecting them under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. We are fortunate to have four SSSIs in Headington: Brasenose Wood and Shotover Hill, the Lye Valley, Rock Edge and Magdalen Quarry. Judy Webb and I wrote about the Lye Valley in the June 2013 issue of Headington Monthly, and there is now a Friends of Lye Valley group with a website at <http://www.headington.org.uk/lyevalley/> if you would like to know more. Brasenose Wood and Shotover Hill is a large site managed by the City Council as a Country Park, and is designated because it is a remnant of the ancient Shotover Forest with 'exceptionally rich' flora including many plants characteristic of ancient woodland, but also for its richness in animal life (birds and insects). Most Headington residents know Shotover well. Here I want to say more about the other two, Rock Edge and Magdalen Quarry. These are designated as SSSIs purely for their geology. They are owned and managed by the City Council and they are both remnants of former quarries.



Rock Edge

Rock Edge is a prominent 1.8 hectare site (4.5 acres) on the corner of Windmill and Old Roads. Its SSSI citation describes how the exposed rock faces have helped to demonstrate the geography of this area in the Upper Jurassic age, about 145 million years ago, and especially the existence of a coral reef, which would

have been situated in a warm, shallow sea similar to the present-day Bahamas! Do explore the exposed rock face (near the York Road side) to see the different rock layers and the embedded fossils.



Fossil at Rock Edge

The citation for Magdalen Quarry is very similar, but this little gem of a site (also a Local Nature Reserve) is much less well known. It was one of the last quarries to be worked in Headington. It is small (0.4 hectares, 1.0 acres), and tucked away off Gladstone Road: follow William Kimber Crescent beside the Community Centre and take the lane to the left leading to the Scout Hut; the entrance is to the right of the hut. There was an open day here in 2011 (see Stephanie Jenkins' report at http://www.headington.org.uk/news/items/2011/magdalen_quarry.html) but unfortunately its condition has deteriorated since then: the explanatory sign-board is missing, and it is overgrown with brambles, nettles and bindweed.



Magdalen Quarry

But it is still a rather mysterious place to explore in the heart of Headington. These SSSIs are precious and we should be glad to have them: do go and visit them.