SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: THE GREAT HEATH OF PORTLAOISE

SITE CODE: 000881

The Great Heath of Portlaoise, otherwise known as the Great Heath of Maryborough, is located by the main Portlaoise to Monasterevin road about 6km north of Portlaoise. Much of the proposed Natural Heritage Area (NHA) is made up by The Heath Golf Club.

The main vegetation is that of an acidic grassland formed mainly of Sweet Vernal-grass (*Anthoxanthum odoratum*), Creeping Bent (*Agrostis stolonifera*), Common Bent (*A. capillaris*), and Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*) with various herbs typical of acidic places, such as Heath Bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*), Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*) and Bitter-vetch (*Lathyrus linifolius*). Other herbs indicate areas where the soil is not as acidic. Mosses such as *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus* are typical.

The flatter central areas have accumulated peat, which has since been cut away, but the vegetation still reflects an organic soil with plants such as Mat-grass (*Nardus stricta*), Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*). The north-east of the NHA area slopes slightly to the east, here there is no trace of peat, the area is less intensively managed than elsewhere and the vegetation is generally taller with some additional species such as Tufted Hair-grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*) and Star Sedge (*Carex echinata*). Stands of Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) scrub are scattered throughout, and are controlled by occasional burning.

There are two small wetlands within the site.

The first, Bog Lough, lies between the golf course and the road, and here amongst the bushy Gorse there are patches of particularly rich grassland with Sheep's fescue (*Festuca ovina*), Pill Sedge (*Carex pilulifera*), and several other sedges (*Carex* spp.). The open water is fringed by Water Horsetail (*Equisetum fluviatile*) and patches of Bulrush (*Typha latifolia*) with other emergent species such as Lesser Water-parsnip (*Berula erecta*). Common Water-crowfoot (*Ranunculus aquatilis*) and duckweeds (*Lemna minor* and *L. trisulca*) make up the aquatic flora.

The second wetland is a fen in front of the Catholic Church in the western end of the site. Here calcareous springs feed the area and the vegetation is consequently markedly different from the rest of the site. Black Bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*), Blunt-flowered Rush (*Juncus subnodulosus*) and Purple Moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) predominate. Species such as Fragrant Orchid (*Gymnadenia conopsea*) and Bog Pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*) also testify to its mineral enrichment.

Between these areas is winter wet grassland which constitutes an important part of the site with an abundance of Common Sedge (*Carex nigra*), *Sphagnum denticulatum* and another moss *Aulacomnium palustre*.

The Great Heath is perhaps something of a misnomer, it is more an acid grassland than a heath and it is no longer as extensive as it used to be. Lowland acidic grassland of this type is now very rare in Ireland, having declined due to liming and fertilisation. Although this site has not escaped disturbance, (it includes the Golf course, a G.A.A. pitch, small areas of ploughing, horse gallops, motorbike trails, caravans and most recently the Portlaoise By-Pass), the integrity of the vegetation has survived remarkably well. Apart from the rarity of the grassland formation, the site also supports plant species that are rare in the county, such as the Few-flowered Spike-rush (*Eleocharis quinqueflora*) and Fen Bedstraw (*Galium uliginosum*) both from the wetland areas. The range of variation on site according to peat content, moisture content and base status of the soil, adds an extra dimension of interest to the site.

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