COUNTY: SOMERSET SITE NAME: PRIDDY CAVES

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: SOMERSET COUNTY COUNCIL, Mendip District Council

National Grid Reference: ST 540505
ST 549500

Area: 67.6 (ha.) 167.0 (ac.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 182

1:10,000: ST 55 SW, SE
ST 54 NW, NE

Date Notified (Under 1949 Act): 1965, 1966

Date of Last Revision: 1971

Date Notified (Under 1981 Act): 1988

Date of Last Revision: –

Other Information:
The site includes the following sites of special scientific interest notified under Section 23 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949: Eastwater Cavern SSSI and Swildon's Hole SSSI. The entrance to St Cuthbert's Swallet is incorporated in the adjacent Priddy Pools SSSI. The site lies within the Mendips Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. A Geological Review site.

Description and Reasons for Notification:
The Priddy Caves System contains about 16km of surveyed cave passages divided between a number of major and minor networks. The three largest networks, Swildon's Hole, St Cuthbert's Swallet and Eastwater Cavern exceed 100 metres in depth; in all the caves the detailed disposition and form of the passages can be seen clearly to have followed marked lines of natural weakness in the rocks. The two most extensive systems are those of St Cuthbert's Swallet and Swildon's Hole, both of which were formed by the erosive action of water flowing beneath the water-table at considerable pressure (so-called phreatic development). Swildon's Hole is a world famous example of a shallow depth phreatic cave, which shows a very well developed dendritic pattern of drainage and contains extensive clastic and stalagmite fills. St Cuthbert's Swallet is a classic example of a deep phreatic cave system, containing inclined bedding plane mazes at many levels, fault-guided rifts and some magnificent chambers; in successive phases of sediment deposition, stalagmite deposition and stream erosion have been recognised. Eastwater Cavern is a steep labyrinthine swallet cave, which was the first of its kind to be opened in Britain, by Herbert Balch in 1902; the cave exhibits classic relationships between wide, low inclined bedding planes ('traverses') and deep narrow 'canyons' and also, contains Mendips' largest penetrable boulder ruckle.

Hunter's Hole is an excellent example of a shaft complex draining a closed depression. The roof of the main shaft shows a variety of features such as soil and boulder bridges

and scalloped and speleothem lined rifts, all draining the surface depression. This cave differs from the others at Priddy in apparently not having formed as a stream swallet.

Cave sediments found within the systems, together with the information which can be deduced from the physical form of the caves, provide geologists with the means to obtain a better understanding of the geological evolution of southern Britain during the Ice Ages.