

Butterfly
Conservation

**HERTFORDSHIRE
AND MIDDLESEX
BRANCH NEWSLETTER**

ISSUE *51*

DECEMBER 2007

Reflections,

by David Chandler

It is the second week of Advent and 2007 draws to a close. We are experiencing the type of wintry cold snap in Hertfordshire that was far more regular an occurrence in times when I was a boy in the 1960's. In those days the Grand Union Canal in King's Langley regularly froze over. Of course that was a long time ago.

Looking back at the turn of another year and over a lifetime of watching butterflies I ponder on cycles; not the ones with two wheels, but regular cyclical events I have observed. In my lifetime of observations, I've seen weather patterns subtly change over the

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decades and as a result seen species like the Marbled White and Comma become more commonplace but the once common Wall has become locally scarce.

Walls used to be so familiar to me during my school summer holidays that I used to not think of seeing one as an event as I do now. In those days, I would have had to cycle 20 miles to somewhere like Ivinghoe Beacon to see a Marbled White but these days, to see a Wall, apart from a few hanging on in North Bedfordshire, I'd have to travel in my car to the coast, where, like the Grayling, this species finds the sunnier, drier conditions that coastal regions enjoy, more to its liking.

Earlier in the last century, in the 1920s, I'm told, the Comma was confined to the hop growing areas of Hereford & Worcestershire but by the 1960's you occasionally did see one in the gardens of Hertfordshire and I recall it being quite an event to glimpse one, yet, nowadays, we think of Commas as commonplace in the south of England.

The changes in the abundance of some species maybe, in cases like the Wall and the Marbled White, primarily down to climate change, but the Comma's resurgence came mostly from its adaptation to its environment, when it changed its primary food plant from hops to nettles. Habitat fragmentation and loss has played a big part in the changes I've seen over the last fifty years but I'm not going to whine on about this at this juncture, because this time of year is all about reflections. Reflecting on the joy of life that another year will bring, reflecting on what I have seen and done in my own small way and reflecting on the differences, but in some way it all being just the same.

The wheel turns and the world cycles and we all ride along together, hopefully enjoying the ride as the view changes. Happy Christmas and New Year to you all.

**Butterfly Conservation
Hertfordshire & Middlesex Branch**

Spring Meeting

Saturday 15th March 2008

**To be held at St. Thomas's Church Hall
Prince George Avenue
Oakwood, Enfield
Middlesex, N14 4SN
Grid Reference: TQ297957 [Map 176 or 177]**

Time: 2 for 2.30pm - 5.30 pm

Presentations

**Butterflies of Southern France (part 2) – Roger Gibbons
Second presentation to be confirmed**

The Sales and Plant Stand will be present

Refreshments will be available

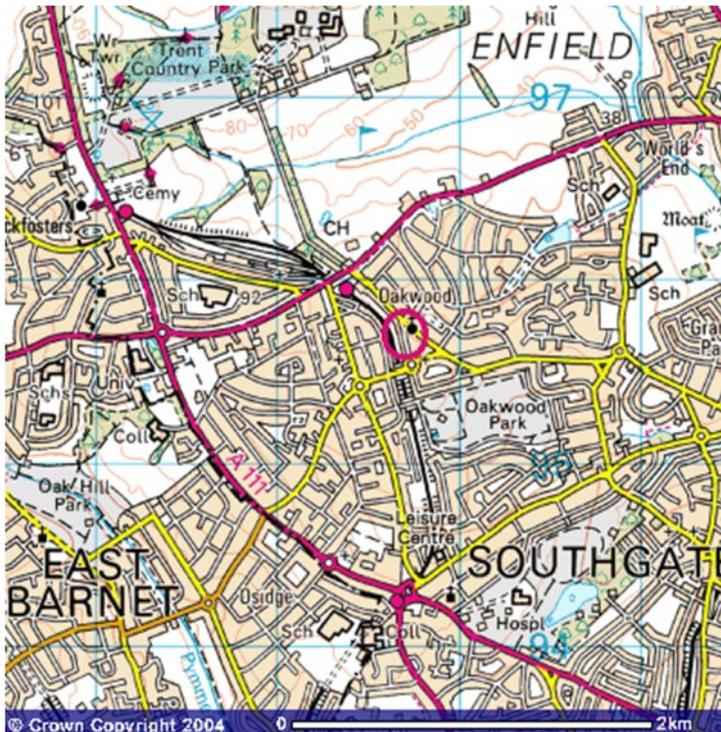
Spring Meeting – Saturday 15th March 2008

Our second meeting of 2008, will be our Spring Meeting and is intended to be a second chance to socialise during the first months of the year. We want members to come along and meet other members and just have a chat and share their butterfly and moth news. For the Spring Meeting we will be returning to St. Thomas' Church Hall in Oakwood.

For the last two years, Roger Gibbons has spent the summer living in southern France with camera very close to hand at all times! We have seen Roger's wonderful butterfly images on many occasions when he has brought selections along to show members either in his own presentation or at the end of meetings. We therefore thought it would

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be nice to give him another slot. The committee have not agreed the final programme as this newsletter goes to print but full details will be available on the branch website www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk when confirmed. We look forward to seeing you – non members are very welcome.



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The Parish Church of St. Thomas, Oakwood, Enfield is only a short walking distance from Oakwood Station. Oakwood is on the Piccadilly line with easy underground links to London and south west Middlesex. If travelling by car, the church hall is only a short distance from the M25. From the M25, exit at Junction 24 and follow the signs for

Cockfosters (A111). After about 3 miles, and less than ½ mile after Cockfosters Underground Station, there will be a roundabout. Take the 1st exit sign-posted Enfield (A110). Prince George Avenue is on the right immediately after Oakwood Station. Continue for about 400yds and St. Thomas's is on the right on the corner of Prince George Avenue and Sheringham Avenue (see map - church marked **O**). The car park is entered from Prince George Avenue and is just beyond the church if coming from the Oakwood Station direction.

**Can you Spare a Few Hours a Month to
Help Raise Urgently Needed Funds for our
Ongoing Conservation Work Throughout the UK?**

We are seeking volunteer fundraisers to contribute a few hours each month to help Butterfly Conservation raise much-needed funding:

Could you help promote Butterfly Conservation's mobile phone recycling scheme to raise funds for our work?

Fifteen million mobile phones are replaced every year and each phone that is recycled could earn Butterfly Conservation £2.50 towards our conservation work through the 'Greener Solutions' mobile phone recycling scheme.

Could you promote the importance of Legacy gifts to Butterfly Conservation among our members and supporters?

Large or small gifts to charity made in a Will are free of inheritance tax and cost the donor nothing in his or her lifetime. A legacy gift is one of the most effective ways of supporting Butterfly Conservation's work.

Could you help us launch and promote a new scheme to encourage our members to host a tea party in their garden for their friends, family and other visitors in aid of Butterfly Conservation?

Gardens are an increasingly important wildlife habitat in the UK and we want to encourage more people to 'garden for butterflies'. By hosting an informal tea party in their garden our members can help raise awareness of the importance of gardens for butterflies and raise some much needed funding for our work.

We need your help!

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Location: Anywhere, although you will need access to a phone and email, and some tasks involve occasional travel within the UK, for which out of pocket expenses will be reimbursed.

For more details or an informal discussion about any of these roles, contact Butterfly Conservation on 01929 400209, or by email info@butterfly-conservation.org

A Short History of Millhoppers, by John Noakes

As I am about to step down as reserve manager of Millhoppers I thought it would be timely to review the history and major events since its acquisition by Butterfly Conservation.

In 1998 a piece of land of approx 3 acres, called locally Millhoppers, came up for sale. It was mainly unimproved grassland and had not in living memory been ploughed.

It was ringed by an ancient hedge together with a number of black poplar trees. Traversing the site was a free flowing stream together with a marshy area. Surrounding part of the grassland was a large stand of backthorn. On the east side a public footpath wound round the edge of the land.

Millhoppers is a strange name; it was clear that there had been a mill here in ancient times but now the water table is much lower. Hopper is not to do with hopping across stones or indeed grain hoppers. Hopper is a corruption of an old Saxon word meaning a small enclosed space; hence a mill in a small enclosure.

The site, although privately owned, had been enjoyed by local villagers who used it for walks and picnics. Many senior villagers remember paddling in the stream as youngsters. Clearly local people considered Millhoppers to be of great sentimental value and did not want to see it change.

A group of villagers in Long Marston were very concerned that the land would be sold on for future development and in the short term would not be managed in a sympathetic manner. The Group felt it had

a considerable potential for a small nature reserve and at the same time being an amenity for the local population.

With these aims in mind each member contributed a sum of money to a fund and then approached Dacorum District Council to see if it would be prepared to make a grant to purchase the land. On looking at the site they considered it to be an important example of unimproved grassland and were sympathetic to the Group's aims. However they were not convinced as to its experience in conservation issues. Dacorum indicated to the Group that they would be prepared to help if they were backed by an organization who had expertise in conservation and who would also contribute financially.

Two of the Group were members of Herts and Middx Branch of Butterfly Conservation and put this proposition to this Branch. After consulting Head Office of Butterfly Conservation, the Herts & Middx Branch agreed to make available a large sum of money. Dacorum District Council was now satisfied there was sufficient conservation and financial backing to give a very considerable grant in order to purchase Millhoppers.

The money raised by the local Group was not used in the purchase of Millhoppers. Instead the Group drew up its own constitution calling itself the Millhoppers Management Group. All the grants for equipment and the various works carried out were applied for, channelled through and managed by this Group. Where grants were not available, the Group funded work and equipment itself.

Both the Branch and the local Group felt they should celebrate the achievement of acquiring Millhoppers in some way. Sadly, shortly before this event Gordon Benningfield, who was President of Butterfly Conservation, died. It had been hoped he would officially open the reserve. In the circumstances, his wife Betty, kindly agreed to open the reserve with the Mayor of Dacorum. At the event many local people attended as did members from Head Office and Herts & Middx Butterfly Conservation. The reserve was rightly dedicated to the memory of Gordon Benningfield.

Having acquired Millhoppers, advice was sought from Brian Sawford, the Branch's conservation officer, on how best to manage the reserve over the next few years. He produced a five year management plan setting out a strategy of grassland management with the aim of encouraging grassland butterflies. Coinciding with management plan a botanical survey was carried out. This acted as a baseline for future

reference. Even at this early stage regular butterfly transects were carried out from April to September by Margaret Noakes and this has continued ever since.

The first, rather formidable, task was to tackle the large expanse of grass. The Group decided to raid its own funds and purchase a Track Master Motor Scythe together with large rakes. This cut the grass and other herbage well but this all had to be raked off by a group of volunteers. This continued to be the strategy for the first few years. However the numbers in the working parties dwindled somewhat over time.

Fairly soon after acquiring the reserve it was plagued by vandalism. A new gate that had been purchased and erected was smashed down, as was a second and soon after replacement a car was driven through and set on fire. This was pretty depressing and added to this, the stream at the entrance was subjected to regular fly tipping. Chucking beer cans into the stream was annoying but had a lighter side. One morning I collected 137 cans and spread them out on my lawn at home. I was able to do our first audit on Millhoppers; that of the local drinking habits of presumably the youth of Long Marston!

The idea of a wooden gate was abandoned and a tough metal bar and posts commissioned, which has proved indestructible. It can be removed for access and there are still two metal inner locked gates. This effectively kept the vandals out but did make getting machinery into the reserve difficult; this still is a problem. Vandalism fortunately is now less of a problem.

There was a weak and narrow bridge crossing the stream which was inadequate to take the cutting equipment. The Group was fortunate to obtain a grant to build a solid bridge and it so happened that some engineers were rebuilding a nearby canal bridge and a good deal was struck with them. It did prove somewhat slippery in the wet so wire netting had to be fixed down to make it safe.

Grass cutting was becoming arduous and raking and disposing of the material even more so. The Group had been advised that the solution and indeed best policy was to bring in cattle. John and Margaret Noakes went on a grazing course and came back enthused but how to find cattle? The local farmers who were approached saw many problems not the least one being that the site was not secure. It was back again to try and get a grant to fund making the whole site secure with stock fencing. This proved quite expensive but again the Group

was fortunate and the site is now totally secure. Just prior to this a smaller grant was obtained to lay part of the hedge on the west side as the bushes and some trees were becoming too tall and the bottom of the hedge was thin and rather bare.

The Group was introduced to a farmer who used his cattle to graze Tring Park. He clearly was keen on conservation and cared for his animals. On advice from Butterfly Conservation Central Office a grazing contract was drawn up and four cows were introduced to the reserve in late autumn until early winter. Visually they made a rapid impact. They removed a lot of the coarse grass and the softer shoots of the blackthorn. The marsh area was puddled down, increasing the area and removing a lot of the streamside weeds. At this time, fortunately, the large stand of marsh marigolds had not emerged. Although in the reserve for only a few weeks there was no doubt it made our management much easier. A considerable amount of cutting and raking still had to be done and paths cut.

This regime continued for approx three years, butterflies seemed to be increasing in numbers particularly grassland species with a strong colony of Ringlets. At the far end of the reserve, finer grasses were more abundant with ant hills and nectar plants. This saw an increase in Common Blues and Small Coppers. It was now thought a good time to carry out a further expert botanical survey. This did show a clear link between the butterflies recorded on the regular transects and the presence of their larval host plants in good numbers on the reserve.

The reserve is not just about butterflies for there is a diverse bird population. Particular interesting features include a large badger set with a lot of evidence of their activity and 16 black poplars, all male! Many of these have become unsafe with branches breaking off. Most had been pollarded in the past and were due for more attention. A further grant was obtained in order to engage a tree surgeon to carry out this work.



Ringlet
Photo © Ian Small

Our most recent grant funded a notice board erected on the reserve together with a leaflet about Millhoppers. This coincided with an exhibition held at the Natural History Museum at Tring on Butterflies of Hertfordshire and

promoting the reserve

As indicated in the brief Annual Report, the farmer has had to withdraw his cattle from the reserve. It is really very disappointing as grazing is the undoubtedly the best strategy for grassland management but in the current circumstances fully understandable.

This brings the history up to date. I would have wished to hand over the reserve to the new manager in better shape. Millhoppers is very precious to all of us who have worked hard there. There are times, when jets are not flying over, that it would be difficult to tell which century one was in; there are few such places in the county. We are still custodians of this special piece of land and I am hopeful that it can be effectively and sympathetically managed for the future.

Another Beginner's Tale, by Diane Andrews

Encouraged by Andrew Wood's talk at the Branch meeting way back in March 2006, I'd decided it was time I tried learning something about moths and, later, inspired by John Sharpe's 'A Beginner's Tale' about butterfly-watching in the December 2006 Branch newsletter, I thought it might be of interest to write 'Another Beginner's Tale'. So here goes.

Armed with a copy of Waring and Townsend's "Field Guide to the Moths of Great Britain and Ireland" (expensive at £29.99, but invaluable to beginners like myself as it shows moths in their normal resting positions instead of as pinned specimens, and also has useful text to help identify the numerous "little brown jobs"), I began with some of the day-flying moths. The first one of note was a colourful Brimstone moth in our garden in May 2006. I then progressed to prancing about after Burnet Companion moths in Alexandra Palace park meadow in June – after initially thinking I might have found some early Small Skipper butterflies – followed by some Chimney Sweeper moths in Trent Park, Cockfosters, which I hadn't realised weren't generally common until Andrew Wood told me.

After managing to identify Silver-Y, Mother Shipton, Green Oak Tortrix, Hummingbird Hawkmoth and a few others without too much trouble by day, I decided to try some "sugaring" to see what I could find by night. I began on a warm evening in late July with a mixture

of what was readily available to hand in the kitchen at the time i.e. white, wine, sugar and mashed over-ripe banana, heated together and then cooled, with the addition of a few drops of Strongbow. I painted some of this gloop at dusk on the trunk of an old pear tree in our garden and was delighted when a Copper Underwing soon arrived to sample it. Suitably “hooked”, I then trotted up and down the garden with a torch at regular intervals on several evenings to see what had turned up.

Apparently, the Summer of 2006 was a good one for migrants and, on August 3rd, a Great Brocade moth obligingly settled on the sugar – I didn’t realise what beginner’s luck I’d had until I’d identified it from my book and consulted a few people. After that, I tried other “sugar” mixtures, including various combinations of red or white wine, brown or white sugar, black treacle, squashed fruit, plum jam, with a few drops of different alcoholic beverages added. I’m not fond of brandy, but was deterred from using a hitherto unopened present of a miniature of Remy Martin by a strangled yelp from husband !



Chimney Sweeper
Photo © Ian Small



Mother Shipton
Photo © Ian Small

Results varied, but a few drops of Strongbow seemed to be the favourite tipple. The Copper Underwings were the most confirmed boozers, continuing to slurp despite my torchlight, in contrast to my favourite moth, the stunningly beautiful Red Underwing, which was easily disturbed. Visitors varied in size from the large Old Lady to the small Currant Pug, in colour from the varying shades of brown on the Square-spot Rustic to the delicate grey and white markings of the Marbled Beauty, and in number from a few regular Copper Underwings all the August and September to a solitary Dark Chestnut

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in November. Altogether, I think I managed to identify about 40 macro-moths – so only about 860 to go before I'd seen them all ! Wasps, earwigs, bush crickets, woodlice, spiders, ants and slugs were also attracted to the sugar at night, and a Red Admiral occasionally came to the remains by day, like John Sharpe's Bacardi-loving butterfly.

More sugaring of the pear tree in 2007 and a first visit from a pretty Herald moth in June, followed by specimens of Copper Underwing and Old Lady again, among other species, but only one visit from a single Red Underwing this year, and two visits from a Bright-line Brown-eye (I see from my book that there is a Brown-line Bright-eye – Hmm! I now await sightings of the Confused, the Uncertain, the Suspected and the Anomalous, or maybe the Lettuce Shark, the Marbled Tuffet, the Oblique Carpet or the Three-humped Prominent – the index of names alone makes interesting reading !)



Red Underwing
Photo © Ian Kimber

coming to the sugar, so I thought I'd progress to the next stage of my



Marbled Beauty
Photo © Andrew Horbury

education – a light trap ! As I live in a street of terraced houses with gardens backing onto those of a parallel street, I thought I'd better not risk upsetting neighbours with a bright mercury vapour lamp. I'd already warned a nervous person next door that the light going round our garden at night was "only me" and not a potential burglar.

I am now, since August 16th, the proud possessor of a home-made, lobster-pot type trap, powered by a very cheap to run 11W UV bulb which I leave on all night; one neighbour assumed that the pretty

purple light was a special water feature for our pond. That first night I was delighted to trap 10 months (+ 2 escapees) of 6 species, including 3 Lesser Broad-Bordered Yellow Underwings and a Riband Wave, both common moths but “new” to me. Next night, which was warm and dry, there were 21 moths of 15 different species, the greatest variety of the whole year. The largest number of individual moths came on the night of September 6th, when I had 57, but of only 8 varieties, including 23 Large Yellow Underwings. I was thrilled by this, though I’ve since been told that in a “good” moth year I’d probably get 157 ! The Large Yellow Underwings seem to play dead when I remove them from the trap, whereas some of the other moths flap frantically for release as soon as they are touched. I need to set them free in various parts of the garden, especially away from a beady-eyed Robin which seems to fancy moths for breakfast. No rare ones this year, but some interesting “new” names e.g. Setaceous Hebrew Character. Plenty of wasps and craneflies and a few spiders and earwigs end up in the trap as well.

Of course this moth-watching can be very time-consuming. At the beginning, I used to spend ages flapping through Waring and Townsend trying to identify every moth. I had to learn, for example, that Large Yellow Underwings can have dark, chestnut or lighter-coloured forewings, instead of being three different species. I think I’m reasonably proficient at recognising a few of the more common varieties now, but maybe there are plenty more species to come, and there’s so much to learn about them beyond simple identification, so much that I don’t know. I’ve certainly enjoyed my first attempts at moth-recording and now realise what a myriad of interesting and delicately-patterned creatures I’ve been missing. I can thoroughly recommend it as a ‘hobby’ (and a useful contribution to Branch records via Andrew Wood) but be warned – if you’re anything like I am, its easy to become obsessed.

40th Anniversary of Butterfly Conservation

2008 is the 40th anniversary of the founding of Butterfly Conservation. The Society has changed out of all recognition over that period and a number of events to commemorate the anniversary are planned throughout the year. Watch out for special events and an anniversary logo on newsletters next year.

Copy Deadline for the Spring Newsletter will be

20 February 2008

NB it helps the editor if you can submit an electronic copy of your article (but don't worry if you can't). Files can be on disk or sent by e-mail to ian.small@lineone.net or send an article by post - address on back cover

PLEASE MAKE A SPECIAL EFFORT TO SEND CONTRIBUTIONS - THE NUMBER HAS DECLINED IN RECENT MONTHS - THE MORE I RECEIVE, THE MORE INTERESTING AND INFORMATIVE THE NEWSLETTER WILL BE.

BEST WISHES TO YOU AND YOUR FAMILY FOR 2008



Conservation Dates

Conservation work is one of the most important activities of the Society, as loss or neglect of suitable habitats is one of the major reasons for the decline in many of our butterflies as well as other wildlife.

Below are a series of dates across Herts. and Middlesex where you can help with essential management that aims to maintain the correct conditions on these sites for the wildlife that inhabits them. Several of the dates are run by the HMWT on their nature reserves.

Millhopper's Pasture SP 900149. Jez Perkins is taking over as Millhopper's Reserve Manager. He has two dates already scheduled for working parties at Millhoppers. One is on 6th January with Hemel Hempstead Conservation Volunteers the other is on 8th March to celebrate the 40th birthday of BC. Because of parking he would suggest people attending park at Wilstone village hall. The task will last from 10:00 am until 13:00 and there might even be birthday cake !!. Contact Jez Perkins on 07967 832627 .

Therfield Heath, TL 335400 First Sunday of each month from 10.00 a.m. - 1 p.m. Contact Paul Palmer, Clerk to the Conservators, on (01462) 675232

Ashwell Quarry Nature Reserve TL 252396 for the entrance off Hinxworth Road. Work parties on the third Sunday of each month starting at 10am. Contact Chris James on (01462) 742684

Hertford Heath TL 354111. For details ring Anthony Oliver on (01992) 583404.

Fryent Country Park - details from Leslie Williams at the Brent Ecology Unit on (0181) 206 0492

Patmore Heath TL 443257. Meet at 10.00 a.m. on the last Sunday of each month. Further details from Gavin Vicary (01279) 771933

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