

LEICESTERSHIRE ENTOMOLOGICAL SOCIETY

*SOME MID-CENTURY
LEICESTERSHIRE BUTTERFLIES*

by

Tom Robertson

Occasional Publications Series

Number: 10

Date: September 1994

ISSN 0957 - 1019

SOME MID-CENTURY LEICESTERSHIRE BUTTERFLIES

Tom Robertson, 348A Nine Mile Ride, Wokingham,
Berkshire RG11 3NJ

INTRODUCTION

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, it seems worth while to present some observations on butterflies of Leicestershire and Rutland (which was then a separate county) at about the middle of the century. These observations were made mainly between 1944 and 1953 and are based on diaries, recollections and hearsay; unless otherwise stated, the records are of my own observations.

SYSTEMATIC LISTING

The following list of butterflies is arranged according to "An Indexed List of British Butterflies and Moths" by JD Bradley & DS Fletcher (1986).

HESPERIIDAE

1525 *Carterocephalus palaemon* Pallas (Chequered skipper)

HA Buckler had a specimen from the railway triangle at Marefield in the 1930s I believe.

1526 *Thymelicus sylvestris* Poda (Small skipper)

Common and widespread. I took this butterfly in the north of the county. Also in large numbers, when a new housing estate was being laid out on old meadows in the southern part of Market Harborough.

1527 *Thymelicus lineola* Ochs. (Essex skipper)

I took one specimen flying with the small skipper in an old disused quarry at Uppingham, Rutland.

1531 *Ochlodes venata* Bram. & Gray (Large skipper)
My records of this common butterfly are for Market
Harborough and Burbage Wood.

1532 *Erynnis tages* Linn. (Dingy skipper)
My only Leicestershire record is for King Lud's
Entrenchments.

1534 *Pyrgus malvae* Linn. (Grizzled skipper)
My county records are King Lud's Entrenchments,
limestone workings near Kilby Bridge and a railway
cutting at Wigston.

PIERIDAE

1541 *Leptidea sinapis* Linn. (Wood white)
HA Buckler reported this as formerly occurring at
Burbage Wood, near Hinckley.

1545 *Colias crocea* Geoff. (Clouded yellow)
In 1947, a year of great immigration of this species,
the butterflies were plentiful in red clover fields
beside Burnmill Road between Market Harborough and
Great Bowden.

1546 *Gonepteryx rhamni* Linn. (Brimstone)
Widespread and common.

1549 *Pieris brassicae* Linn. (Large white)
Widespread and usually abundant.

1550 *Pieris rapae* Linn. (Small white)
Widespread and abundant

1551 *Pieris napi* Linn. (Green-veined white)
Widespread and abundant

1553

Anthocharis cardamines Linn. (Orange tip)

This was the first butterfly I recall having seen in Leicestershire. Males were plentiful as we sat outside our hutted billets at the airfield at Market Harborough in April-May 1944 as the Wellington bombers took off on their training flights. H Barrow had a gynandrous specimen (part male and part female) he had taken outside his garden in Barkby Road, Queniborough.

LYCAENIDAE

1559

Strymonidia pruni Linn. (Black hairstreak)

Although not apparently a true Leicestershire butterfly, this species was seen flying and settling at Dingley Warren just over the boundary into Northamptonshire. This hairstreak was seen on several occasions settled right on the county boundary!

1561

Lycaena phlaeas Linn. (Small copper)

Widespread and very plentiful in 1947. My records include Market Harborough, Great Bowden, Medbourne, Queniborough and near Kilby Bridge. HA Buckler had a homoeotic specimen (part of the underside forewing pattern replicated on the hindwing) from Marefield in May 1939.

1572

Aricia agestis D. & S. (Brown argus)

A strong colony was present on both sides of the Leicestershire-Lincolnshire border at Mere Road near Croxton Kerrial in 1953. HA Buckler had taken a specimen some years earlier in a railway cutting between Market Harborough and Lubenham.

1574

Polyommatus icarus Rott. (Common blue)

Occurred widely on roadsides, waste ground and railway cuttings. Good strong colonies were present at the old limestone workings near Kilby Bridge, at King Lud's Entrenchments, Mere Road and railway embankments at Wigston and Knighton. Other records include Great Bowden and the canal near Market Harborough.

1575

Lysandra coridon Poda (Chalkhill blue)

Although I have no experience of this butterfly in Leicestershire or Rutland, I feel sure that it would have occurred there in the past, probably in this century. The larval foodplant (horseshoe vetch) was plentiful in grassland adjacent to King Lud's Entrenchments. The habitat was very similar to habitats I knew in Northamptonshire and Lincolnshire which supported other chalk or limestone insects. In June 1953, Don Tozer took me to old ironstone workings near Pilton, Rutland, where I believe he had taken this butterfly.

1580

Celastrina argiolus Linn. (Holly blue)

While never in my experience common in the county, this butterfly could be seen in good numbers every year along the canal just north of Market Harborough especially beside a footbridge over the canal. My only other record is of a specimen taken on a hedgerow bramble at the top of Burnmill Road, Market Harborough.

1581

Maculinea arion Linn. (Large blue)

The Muschamp collection in the Leicester Museum housed a specimen of the large blue without data but bearing the orange disc on the pin denoting a Leicestershire specimen. When I questioned Muschamp about it he said, with a knowing smile, "it has the orange label so it must come from Leicestershire". Muschamp was then in his eighties and was visiting Switzerland each year to collect insects, mainly Diptera and Lepidoptera. He was a good field entomologist but rarely labelled his material but knew where it all came from. His collecting extended from the late 1800s so it is just possible that the Museum specimen is a genuine Leicestershire example. Alternatively, he might have brought livestock from the continent and reared it through in England. If the specimen still exists, referring it to an expert on this species might clarify its origins.

NEMEOBIIDAE

1582

Hamearis lucina Linn. (Duke of Burgundy fritillary)

I took this butterfly near King Lud's Entrenchments in June 1953 where there was a good colony. HA Buckler reported it to me in the same year from Owston Wood.

NYMPHALIDAE

1584 *Ladoga camilla* Linn. (White admiral)

My only knowledge of this species in the county is of seeing a specimen fly out of Dingley Warren and back into Northamptonshire where it was common at the Warren and at woods near Desborough.

1590 *Vanessa atalanta* Linn. (Red admiral)

As a migrant this species occurred in variable numbers from year to year. It was especially common in 1947 at fields of red clover beside Burnmill Road, Market Harborough and in an orchard at Little Bowden.

1591 *Cynthia cardui* Linn. (Painted lady)

Like the red admiral, this migrant occurred in variable numbers and was particularly common on red clover near Market Harborough in 1947.

1593 *Aglais urticae* Linn. (Small tortoiseshell)

Widespread and common. In Leicester itself, it was noted in the grounds of the University in 1951 and 1952.

1594 *Nymphalis polychloros* Linn. (Large tortoiseshell)

Don Tozer had a specimen he had collected at Barkby Holt many years ago.

1597 *Inachis io* Linn. (Peacock)

Widespread and common. In 1947 every patch of roadside stinging nettles seemed to have a colony of larvae but this was exceptional.

1598 *Polygonia c-album* Linn. (Comma)

Common along hedgerows immediately north of Market Harborough and on over-ripe fruit in an orchard at Little Bowden in about 1948.

1601 *Boloria euphrosyne* Linn. (Pearl-bordered fritillary)

A species which was formerly common over much of southern England but has since declined drastically. This woodland butterfly was numerous at woods near Desborough, Northamptonshire. My sole Leicestershire record is from King Lud's Entrenchments in June 1953.

1606 *Argynnis adippe* D. & S. (High brown fritillary)

This butterfly was flying in the company of the dark green fritillary outside a walled garden in Bradgate Park in 1952/1953. Don Tozer said "It must have returned to the area, we used to get it many years ago on Newtown Lane when it was still a lane". There are (or were) specimens in the Leicester Museum from Knighton Spinney from the early 1900s but despite searches I did not find it there in the 1950s.

1607 *Argynnis aglaja* Linn. (Dark green fritillary)

I took this butterfly in 1952 and 1953, flying with the high brown fritillary, outside a walled garden in Bradgate Park and settling on marsh thistles. I also saw it at close quarters in grassland near King Lud's Entrenchments.

1608 *Argynnis paphia* Linn. (Silver-washed fritillary)

Owston Wood was a well known former locality with specimens in the Leicester Museum but I have no personal knowledge of this butterfly in the county. I used to see it in small numbers in the late 1940s at woods near Desborough, Northamptonshire.

1610 *Eurodryas aurinia* Rott. (Marsh fritillary)

Not really a Leicestershire butterfly but Don Tozer told me "I once saw, while collecting at the Scraftoft railway cutting, a newly caught specimen which a schoolboy claimed he had just taken".

SATYRIDAE

- 1614 *Pararge aegeria* Linn. (Speckled wood)
Although this butterfly was common in neighbouring counties and right up to the Leicestershire border at Dingley Warren (Northamptonshire), my Leicestershire records were few. They included the roadside at Clack Hill (Market Harborough), railway cuttings at Wigston and Scraptoft and Burbage Wood.
- 1615 *Lasiommata megera* Linn. (Wall brown)
Now a species which seems to be under general decline over much of England, the wall brown was common and well distributed in the county 40-45 years ago. My records include Market Harborough (common in August 1947), a railway cutting at Wigston and old limestone workings near Kilby Bridge.
- 1620 *Melanargia galathea* Linn. (Marbled white)
I have no personal experience of this butterfly in the county but HA Buckler took one on the golf course at Market Harborough and K Clarke told me it was at Bloody Oaks Quarry, Rutland.
- 1625 *Pyronia tithonus* Linn. (Hedge brown; Gatekeeper)
Very common in Northamptonshire up to the border with Leicestershire in the south/south east (notable at the railway cutting at Great Oxenden). However, there were few mid-century records of this satyrid in Leicestershire. My only records were for the old limestone workings at Kilby Bridge and a railway cutting at Medbourne.
- 1626 *Maniola jurtina* Linn. (Meadow brown)
Widespread and common.
- 1627 *Coenonympha pamphilus* Linn. (Small heath)
Common in suitable habitats notably unimproved grassland, for example railway cuttings at Knighton and Scraptoft, and near a dried-up pond at Market Harborough.

DISCUSSION

Examination of the distribution maps in Emmet & Heath (1989) suggests that forty six species have occurred in reasonably recent times in vice county 55 (Leicestershire and Rutland). Of these, the purple emperor (*Apatura iris*) is doubtful and four are rare immigrants. My list includes thirty nine species but does not include the green hairstreak (*Callophrys rubi*), the purple hairstreak (*Quercusia quercus*), the white-letter hairstreak (*Strymonidia w-album*) or the small blue (*Cupido minimus*). So far as the last of these is concerned, I believe it was unknown in the county in mid-century. I searched for it on several occasions in a large area of larval foodplant (kidney vetch) in the railway cutting near Wigston without success. Further searches there might be productive. These four lycaenids are shown to be present in the county by the maps in Emmet & Heath (1989).

Five of my species (marbled white, silver-washed fritillary, wood white, chequered skipper and large tortoiseshell) are based on records other than my own but I have seen the specimens and know the circumstances of their captures. The remaining thirty one species are recorded on the basis of my own observations.

Most of the habitats referred to are of no exceptional interest, but several are, and some notes on these follow.

King Lud's Entrenchments - in 1952 and 1953, this general area consisted of unimproved limestone grassland that had been part of a former airfield and associated surroundings. A strip of woodland bordered a bank and a triangular plot of untended grassland with abundant horseshoe vetch, the larval foodplant of the chalkhill blue. Brief visits revealed the presence of the common blue, dark green fritillary and Duke of Burgundy fritillary as well as commoner butterflies. More intensive study would probably have revealed other species of interest.

The habitat seems to have been a remnant of the Lincolnshire oolite limestone and related to habitats such as Ancaster Crossroads (Lincolnshire) and Barnack Hills and Holes, Helpston Heath and Wansford (Northamptonshire). All these latter supported colonies of chalkhill blue and other limestone butterflies, such as the brown argus, in mid-century. The habitat probably formerly extended along the Lincolnshire Wolds and would have had the appropriate flora and fauna. It is just conceivable that this kind of habitat could be reestablished in the future if the decline in agricultural pressures were sustained and suitable conservation, refurbishment and restocking could be undertaken.

Mere Road, Sproxton - this is a former Roman road (like Ancaster Crossroads) but is unsurfaced and grassy. It belongs to the same limestone outcrop as King Lud's Entrenchments but had a rather different flora. It lies on the Lincolnshire side of the county boundary, of which it forms a part, but the flora and fauna extended into Leicestershire. A characteristic of the ground

flora was the presence of tussocks covered with common rockrose, the larval foodplant of the brown argus (which was plentiful on both sides of the border) and the green hairstreak which was not detected. Like King Lud's Entrenchments, just to the west, it was probably a remnant of a more extensive rich habitat.

Kilby Bridge limestone workings - these were a long-abandoned calcareous grassland habitat with a sunny southerly aspect between a railway and a canal. Lightly and intermittently grazed by sheep, it supported a rich calcareous grassland flora with abundant nectar plants and, among other interesting plants, the bee orchid and slender birdsfoot trefoil. A flooded clay or gravel pit at its south eastern end had a good waterside flora and was a habitat for the dragonfly *Sympetrum sanguineum*, not, so far as I knew, found elsewhere in the county at that time. This locality was of interest, not so much for the rarity of the butterflies present, but because of the number of species and their abundance.

Marefield railway triangle - this was one of HA Buckler's collecting localities in the 1930s and 1940s and is the only known Leicestershire locality for the chequered skipper. Buckler took one specimen when that butterfly was reasonably common in its other known localities. When I visited the locality in about 1962, it was of no particular interest, having reverted to agricultural use.

Other localities - the woods near Desborough (Brampton, Stoke and Bowd Lane woods) were representatives of the rich Northamptonshire parts of the Rockingham Forest and I have discussed their importance as a former habitat of the chequered skipper elsewhere (Robertson, 1981).

Some of the south east Leicestershire small woodland coverts looked to me as though they could be habitat for the black hairstreak but I never found it at any of them. If they are still unchanged (long-established tall blackthorn) it would be worthwhile undertaking an intensive search for this species by someone familiar with its requirements. Langton Caudle is a good example of these small woodlands.

REFERENCES

Emmet, AM & Heath, J (1989). *The Moths and Butterflies of Great Britain and Ireland*, 7(1), 370pp, Harley Books, Colchester.

Robertson, TS (1981). A former Northamptonshire locality for the chequered skipper butterfly *Carterocephalus palaemon* (Pallas). *Proc Trans Brit ent nat Hist Soc*, 14, 82-86.

LIST OF LOCALITIES MENTIONED

Ancaster Cross Roads (Ermine Street)	SK98-43-
Barnack Hills & Holes	TF075045
Barkby Holt	SK673095
Bloody Oaks Quarry	TF971107
Bradgate Park	SK52-10-
Burbage Wood	SP450945
Desborough Woodlands (several areas)	SP80-83-
Dingley Warren	SP760870
Great Bowden	SP740890
Great Oxenden	SP740838
Kilby Bridge limestone workings	SP620967
King Lud's Entrenchments	SK863279
Knighton Spinney	SK605009
Knighton railway cutting	SK593003
Langton Caudle	SP746938
Little Bowden	SP740867
Marefield railway triangle	SK741077
Market Harborough airfield	SP700885
Market Harborough Burnmill Road	SP733885
Market Harborough canal	SP724883
Market Harborough Clack Hill	SP750878
Market Harborough clover fields	SP735888
Market Harborough golf course	SP730850
Market Harborough railway cutting	SP714869
Medbourne railway cutting	SP801935
Mere Road	SK872276
Owston Wood	SK790065
Pilton quarry	SK915028
Queniborough Barkby Road	SK641118
Scraptoft railway cutting	SK665047
Uppingham quarry	SP865988