



Great Day for a Picnic



The sun shone down on a happy group of Graffham Picnickers

After last year's wash out picnic, it rained all day, there was some trepidation that this year might follow suit. However, the sun shone and made it Michael's magical mystery tour. Fifty people were tempted out by the fine weather and waited at St Giles Church for the tour to begin. Michael Blencowe had been up before the crack of dawn, ensuring that the overnight inhabitants of his two moth traps didn't attract the attention of hungry birds or other creatures such as hornets. Despite that he was his usual chipper self and after greeting us at the gate led us up the scarp and quoting from his newly published book, 'The Butterflies of Sussex' pointed out how valuable Graffham Down Reserves were to butterfly conservation in Sussex. He then took us on to see the amazing contents of his two moth traps; their powerful lights had



Olive Crescent



attracted some 140 species, the rarest being a couple of Olive crescents. Perhaps not the most stunning moth, but another scarce insect to add to Graffham Down's increasing rare list. Certainly, the moths with the greatest appeal were the three species of Hawk Moth he had caught. If you've never had one on the end of your nose you've lived too sheltered a life. Here is young Amelia Tytler proudly displaying her lovely pink and tan Elephant Hawk Moth under Michael's watchful eye. There were many moths of note including the once common and spectacular Garden Tiger, Large Emeralds and Blood Veins.

Butterflies didn't want to be outdone by their night time cousins and lined up to be seen. Silver-washed Fritillaries, Meadow Browns, Marbled

Whites and many other species all grabbed our attention, but the hoped-for star of the show the Purple Emperor laid low, or high perhaps as they spend most of their time in the canopy. The picnic began, Jim Kirke doling out caffeinated beverages to all and sundry. Suddenly a cry went up as a large powerful butterfly swooped over the assembled crowd. It was a female Purple Emperor that had been sitting in a nearby Rowan tree. She circled twice above our heads and then vanished around a corner into a Goat Willow. One lucky fellow managed a respectable photograph of the Empress, is she egg-laying perhaps? Just to be sure everyone saw her, she then made another pass before vanishing completely. It put the finishing touch to a splendid day.



The Maturing Grasslands of Dimmer

In 2014 the reserve known as Dimmer was transformed when Butterfly Conservation gave us funding that allowed three areas of woodland to be felled creating scallops alongside the existing linear grassland. The idea was to increase the amount of grassland in this reserve to encourage butterfly species to pass to and fro between the neighbouring Heyshott Down reserve and the grassland areas of Graffham Down. Many grassland species are loath to fly away from their home territory and positively refuse to fly out of their habitat area. No scrub or woodland for them.



Marsh Thistle



I have been monitoring the butterflies of this reserve for three years now and have seen considerable changes to the flora there. When first cleared the ground would have been typical of the woodland floor along this part of the Downland scarp, bare in places, but with plants such as Dog's Mercury dominating. Rapidly this changed as conditions such as light and humidity favoured grassland and levels of nutrients in the soil decreased. Dimmer is largely on the chalk, with little if any overlying clay. Nutrients are rapidly leached out of through the chalk, so woodland plants find it difficult to hang on. By 2015 all three scallops were dominated by thistles, not the creeping sort that is the bane of gardeners, but Marsh Thistle, a tall distinctive plant with multiple heads that flower at different times. The presence of a plant so named may seem strange, but is the result of chalk's ability to absorb water. Marsh thistles are useful to butterflies as they provide a good source of nectar over a long period and thistles provided me the opportunity to photograph this Comma at the end of July.



The following year Marsh Thistle had been largely superseded by Hemp Agrimony, another tall plant found in many woodland glades on the chalk. This plant is attractive to butterflies and seemingly Red Admiral butterflies, as I found 8 nectaring on this plant in August that year.

Hemp Agrimony

This year most of the Hemp agrimony had gone, being replaced by much shorter yellow St John's Wort. This plant doesn't seem to be particularly attractive to butterflies, which may be detrimental to the butterfly population of Dimmer. However, Marsh Thistle and Hemp Agrimony are still present, though in smaller numbers, which means that nectaring butterflies are concentrated to smaller patches making identification of difficult species easier. One such species rumoured to inhabit Graffham Down is the Dark Green Fritillary. This species is sufficiently like the Silver-washed Fritillary to make a good view necessary for a positive identification. I had never recorded them on Graffham Down before. However, these butterflies are continually on the move, flying rapidly over the ground. They stop only briefly to nectar. Marsh Thistle seemed to be their



continually on the move, flying rapidly over the ground.



Dark Green Fritillary

favourite tippie when I noticed not one but two moving strongly over the ground this July. I waited some considerable time by a likely looking plant when finally, one decided it needed refuelling. I had but a moment to identify it and then attempted a photograph. The photograph was very poor indeed (the photograph shown here is not mine), but good enough for Neil Hume BEM to assure me that it was indeed a Dark Green Fritillary. This species is not uncommon, but is renowned for being present in very small colonies that may pass unnoticed. They can increase dramatically when their prime habitat of short grassland with plentiful Hairy Violets becomes available. Our current management of Dimmer with grass cutting and sheep grazing is aimed at producing just such conditions, so in the future we hope to see larger numbers of these beautiful butterflies scudding over the grassland of Dimmer in June and July.

Tools and Water Troughs

The Trust has been fortunate to succeed in improving its resources through a number of different avenues. A major grant was secured from Kleinwort Charitable Trust that has enabled the Graffham Down Trust to upgrade our tractor and cutter collector. In addition, with the co-operation and support of Westerlands Stud and the South Downs National Park Authority the grant has allowed the Trust to install two water troughs in Paterson reserve. This opens up more flexibility in the types of animals that can be used to graze this reserve.

In addition, grants have been secured to allow us to purchase a pole chainsaw that allows us to more safely manage overhanging branches that encroach on the grassland and obstruct tractor access.



Finally the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) have once again been very generous in their support by providing a number of hand tools to support the increase in volunteers we are encountering at the work parties. In an effort to make the reserves as accessible as possible, the SDNPA have volunteered to replace the remaining styles in the reserves with kissing gates.

Fun at the GDT Quiz

The GDT quiz drew a large crowd again this year thanks to the inventive and sometimes slightly twisted humour of our master of ceremonies, Michael Blencowe, oh how we love him.

My favourite memories from the evening where the suggestion from Michael of a new Graffham publication, "The Ginny Monthly", and Mr. Blencowe, at the bar with microphone in hand requesting Jim Kirke to return to the bar to serve him. You had to be there, and hopefully, you will be in 2018.

The funds raised from the quiz are used to support the wonderful work done by volunteers on the GDT reserves.

Don't forget to have a look at Michael's new book, "The Butterflies of Sussex", available on Amazon.



Recent Changes to Work Parties Great Success

After a number of years of organising weekly work parties over the season from October through to March/April of each year, we decided to try something different in the 2016/17 season.

Our first step was to enlist a number of volunteer 4x4 owners to provide lifts up to the reserves, a massive thank you to all of those volunteers for their time, their fuel and their skill.

Our next step was to conjure up some basic motivation with the help of cake, tea and coffee. What could be better than a hot cup of tea or coffee and a piece of cake during a winter work party.

We also made a move to monthly work parties and finally we communicated high and wide using social media and through our evolving network.

The results have been fantastic, with a major step up in numbers of volunteers helping the Trust with the essential work required to maintain and enhance the reserves. Of great encouragement is the diversity of people helping us out and the distances people are prepared to travel. It is not uncommon for people to make the effort to come from places as far afield as London and Brighton. A complete revelation have been the geocachers (pictured below) who made two visits last year, made a fantastic impact and have encouraged us to set up our own geocache trail.



The month of May also saw the first anniversary of our co-operation with MIND Coastal West Sussex and South Downs National Park Authority to organise monthly work parties for clients of MIND. This co-operation has both resulted in continued improvements in the reserves and strengthened our relationship with the community.

The Beauty of the Downs

Below are a few photos showing the beauty of the Downs and how your work as volunteers really makes a difference.



The foxgloves in the Paterson reserve were amazing this year after the hard work performed clearing trees and scrub from the area.

Aquilegia in full bloom in Long Meadow



Early purple orchid



The cowslips in Dimmer ...



Work Parties 2017/18 - Do You Need a Lift Up the Downs?

Our first work party will be on **October 15th**. This season we are aiming for monthly 'mega' work parties calling on people from far and wide to help.

The plan is to meet at **St Giles Church at 9.45am**. We aim to have transport available to take people to the reserves and for cake to be provided.

Please can you bring along gardening gloves, strong shoes/boots and your own refreshments. The aim will be to stay in the reserves till around 14:30 to 15.30 (of course people are free to leave earlier if they wish).

Could you please email me at jimkirke@hotmail.com if you plan to come along so I can get a feel for numbers and therefore, the transport needs.

GDT Work Party Dates 2017/18

- **Sunday October 15**
- **Saturday November 11**
- **Sunday December 10**
- **Sunday January 14**
- **Saturday February 17**
- **Saturday Sunday March 17**
- **Saturday April 7 (volunteers BBQ)**