



HERTFORDSHIRE AND MIDDLESEX BRANCH NEWSLETTER.

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Changes Ahead By Gavin Vicary

In the last edition, Malcolm Newland announced his intention to resign as branch chairman. This was accelerated when his wife Lyndsay was suddenly taken ill. I am sure that everyone will want to join with me to wish her a very speedy recovery.

Malcolm and Lyndsay have done an enormous amount for Butterfly Conservation in recent years. They are popular figures and attend most field trips and indoor meetings as well as manning sales tables

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at shows and other events. Space would not permit me to list all that they do to help, but suffice to say their contribution will be greatly missed for the time being.

Malcolm became the inaugural Branch Chairman three years ago and has coped well with the unenviable task of keeping the rest of us in order at committee meetings! Malcolm often gives talks for the society and is a keen gardener, he has an encyclopedic knowledge of different plants, particularly those that attract butterflies and constantly has a patio full of cuttings and seedlings that he sells to raise funds for the branch.

The committee would like both Malcolm and Lyndsay to know that their efforts have been very much appreciated and hope that they will continue to support the branch when Lyndsay has finished her convalescence. They have overseen the formation of our branch of Butterfly Conservation and helped us become firmly established in the short time since we split from the old London Branch and we are now well positioned to deal with the challenges that lie ahead.

Inevitably there will be changes on the committee and these will be proposed at the AGM. We are grateful that two offers have been received from members to join the committee from Malcolm Hull and John Stevens who is prepared to act as Branch Coordinator to deal with the mountain of correspondence that comes from Dedham.

Ian Small has offered to take over as Newsletter Editor, leaving myself free to replace Malcolm as Chairman. Ian is far more computer literate than I am and I feel sure this will lead to considerable improvements in the newsletter.

A final thankyou and best wishes to Malcolm and Lyndsay Newland from all of us at Butterfly Conservation.

A Roadside Verge

By Brian Jessop

On the 4th June 1997, I was delivering a car to Leighton Buzzard, from Hemel Hempstead.

As I passed through the village of Dagnell, I noticed on the grass verge a wildflower that looked like Kidney Vetch. After delivering the car, I returned to investigate; it was Kidney Vetch and there was quite a lot of it. As I looked through the area I counted 4 Small Blues. I was surprised because with all the lorries and cars going by all day I would never have imagined Small Blue being there. I watched them feed on Common Birds Foot Trefoil and Kidney Vetch and the traffic did not seem to bother them at all.

I was off on holiday a couple of days later, so have not been able to monitor them for that period. I thought they were in Hertfordshire, but unfortunately they come under Buckinghamshire. I have informed Nick Bowles who notified Bucks Council and hopefully the verge will be cut sympathetically.

It seems that any area is worth investigating and shows how important roadside verges have become.



Small and Essex Skippers

By John Murray

How to distinguish the two species

It is a good time to remind recorders about distinguishing those two difficult species, the Small Skipper (*Thymelicus sylvestris*) and the Essex Skipper (*Thymelicus lineola*). The simplest method is to look at the undersides of the antennae, those of the Small Skipper having brown or orange undersides, and those of the Essex Skipper jet black. This difference is clearly illustrated in Brian Sawford's photographs in the centre page spread of the 1996 Butterfly and Moth Report sent out in March.

Another more subtle difference is in the small black streak on the upperside of the forewings of the males. This is very fine and parallel to the front edge of the forewing in the Essex Skipper, but in the Small Skipper it is bolder and at a slight angle to the front edge. This method can of course only be used to distinguish between males of the two species.

Recently, Nick Greatorex-Davies at Monks Wood has been looking at other distinguishing features, and has noticed a distinct difference in the underside of the forewing, which could be a much more useful method of identification. He writes: "Small and Essex Skipper adults at rest or otherwise sitting on vegetation, etc. can be identified with a high degree of certainty (with practice) without inspecting the antennae (or in the case of males - the size of the black scent line on the top side of the forewing), but by looking instead at the underside of the forewing which is often held up and away from the hindwing. In the Small Skipper the underside tip is a pale olive buff colour, whereas the rest of the underwing is orange. In the Essex Skipper the distinct olive buff tip is more or less absent, with the whole underside of the wing being fairly, uniformly orange. This

difference is clearly illustrated on page 27 of Jeremy Thomas's book the Hamlyn guide to Butterflies of the British Isles, (1989), though not mentioned in the text. The advantage of this way of separating the two species is that the butterfly does not need to be approached so closely, which unless one is very careful can alarm the butterfly into flying away before the identification has been made.

Recording Small and Essex Skippers on transects

Whatever the method you use to identify these two species, it is certain that it will not be possible to do this for most of these butterflies that you see, as they will be flying in large numbers at most sites, and it will be difficult enough to count, let alone identify them. In transect work, it is important to distinguish the two, as they have slightly different flight periods which we in Hertfordshire and Middlesex are particularly interested in.

We are therefore using a recording form slightly different from the rest of the U.K. Ours includes 3 categories for these two species: Small Skipper, Essex Skipper, and Small/Essex Skipper. It is vital that if the butterfly is not identified as definitely one or the other, it is recorded in the Small/Essex Skipper category. It is also important that on each transect, some butterflies (at least ten, but more if numbers are large) should always be identified as one or the other species. This can either be done by identifying those seen at rest only, or if there are not enough at rest, by following some butterflies until they settle, or by catching them with a net, then identifying them and releasing them. One of the best series of records in 1996 was by Charles Smith, from his transect at New House Park, near St. Albans. He found it easier to count them simply as Small/Essex Skipper on the transect walk itself. He then went back to identify a sufficient number positively as one species or the other. He would then deduct the number properly identified from the Small/Essex

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Skipper totals, since they were not seen on the transect itself. This is an ideal way to do it, but it does take up more time which not everyone will be able to afford. His records are as follows:

Week:	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Small	6	26	46	30	15	9	0	0
Essex	0	3	34	55	29	21	1	1
Sm/Es	10	206	397	481	284	22	0	0

All results should be sent in the above format, with the 3 categories Small, Essex, and Small/Essex separately listed.

Analysing members' transect results

Provided we get numbers of the above three categories, it is then possible for us to derive the percentage of each species on each day separately, so that the undistinguished ones can be assigned proportionately to one species or the other. For Charles Smith's series above, week 15 has 26 Small, 3 Essex and 206 Small/Essex Skippers. The proportion Small to Essex is therefore 26 Small to 3 Essex or 90% to 10%. Dividing up the 206 Small/Essex unknowns by these percentages gives 185 Small and 21 Essex, which added to the 26 and 3 actually observed on that day gives a total of 211 Small and 24 Essex for week 15. Following this procedure for the series above gives the following final results:

Week:	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Small	16	211	274	200	122	16	0	0
Essex	0	24	203	366	216	36	1	1

The interesting thing about these figures is that they now show clearly the difference in flight period between the two species. The Small Skipper appeared, peaked and disappeared about a week earlier than the Essex Skipper at this particular site in this particular year. As interesting is the fact that it shows Essex skipper to be slightly the

more numerous at this site, contrary to what is generally believed.

We are trying to get this kind of data for as many sites as we can in our two counties, to see if this is a general phenomenon over the entire area in every year, or whether it varies from place to place or year to year. This is important data which is not being gathered by other branches, nor by the national Butterfly Monitoring Scheme organised by the ITE at Monks Wood. It may throw light on how these two species evolved or indeed why two species which are apparently so very similar in habitat, emergence time and lifestyle should have evolved at all, and why one species (the Essex Skipper) is presently expanding its range and numbers, reaching Yorkshire for the first time in 1996.

Mapping butterflies for the Millennium Atlas

Finally, on a slightly separate subject, don't forget that we still need lots of butterfly records from poorly recorded areas, particularly northeast Hertfordshire and southwest Middlesex. I can strongly recommend butterfly mapping as a most pleasant way of spending a summer's day. Select the unrecorded or poorly recorded tetrads from the lower left map on the inside of the back cover of the 1996 report, and plan a route on an Ordnance Survey map which will take in as many as you can. Spend 10 to 30 minutes at likely-looking sites in each square and then move on to the next tetrad. It is amazing what unexpectedly beautiful rural corners of the land you will find, not to mention the idyllic country pubs for lunch. And of course these areas are so poorly recorded that there is always the chance of turning up a spectacular find. If you need more recording forms, 'phone or write to me, John Murray, at the address on the back cover. Recording instructions are on the back of each recording form.

Field Trip Reports

Blackbridge 18/5/97 - by Terry Rodbard

It was a pleasure to welcome an enthusiastic group of members to my transect walk on the 18th May. This was the first of our summer trips and it was good to see some new members. We hope to see you again.

The morning got brighter and warmer as we covered the four areas of the walk. Brown Argus and Common Blue were soon spotted as was a Mother Shipton moth. Malcolm Newland had a fleeting glimpse of a Red Admiral, but we were all later to see a fine example. Various larvae were found and amongst many wild flowers, a flowering henbane caused much speculation. The henbane with its white attractive flowers is quite poisonous, and my book describes it as "a rather evil smelling member of the potato family".

Twelve species of butterfly were observed with Small Heath and Orange Tip being most numerous. It was a most enjoyable morning and a good start to our season.

Tring Park 25/5/97 - by Brian Jessop

We all met at Hastoe Cross by the Ridgeway Path and a single Small Tortoiseshell was seen before we moved off. As we walked along the lane to Tring Park entrance, a male Common Blue was seen. Things were looking good as the weather was ideal, though there was a chilly breeze at times.

We entered the park and walked along King Charles Ride through a woodland area where the next species seen was a Speckled Wood. Plants to be seen in this area were Bluebells, Wood Anemone, Primrose, Herb Robert, Cow Parsley, Garlic Mustard, Wood Ruff, Honeysuckle, Bramble and White Dead Nettle.

As we came out of the woodland, we turned left through a swing gate on to the upper section of the escarpment. Two whites were seen and one was identified as a Green-veined White and the other possibly a Small White. As we walked down everything looked fresh and green and there were Bugle plants everywhere, plus Rock Rose, Ragwort, Birds Foot Trefoil, Common Dog Violet & Forget-me-Nots. As we came down to the woodland that splits the escarpment in two, a Large White was seen.

We walked through a narrow path on to the lower section. Here the chalk down is covered in Rock Rose, Cowslips and unfortunately most of the anthills, like everywhere else in the park, have all but been devastated by rabbits. As we approached the bottom of the escarpment a Brown Argus was identified. As this section is where the target butterfly has been seen in the past, a little time was spent looking for it. Unfortunately, the sun was not in the right position.

At this point we went through a gate in to the open grassland. As we strolled along much to our surprise, we saw our first Green Hairstreak nectaring on buttercups, we carried on and saw more Brown Argus and Common Blue. As we made our way back up the escarpment we saw our first and only Dingy Skipper. This section is the main area for Green Hairstreaks and another six were seen.

There were lots to see especially watching Green Hairstreaks flying and chasing each other and anything else that flew by the tops of the Hawthorn Bushes, where they seem to congregate. Other Butterflies seen here were, Holly Blue, Small Heath, Orange Tip, Brown Argus, Peacock and a Small Copper. One of the members found a newly hatched Brown Argus with a deformed front wing, He coaxed it on to his finger and walked around for ages with it!

Common Spotted Orchids, Wild Strawberry and a Muntjac Deer were seen before we departed. Many thanks to a friendly group, who I hope enjoyed the trip.

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Waterford Heath 8/6/97 - by Alan Downie

There was a good attendance for this trip, but with a fresh SW wind and moderate cloud cover, things didn't look too promising.

The leader, Alan Downie, expressed his doubts as to seeing the Grizzled Skippers as they had been on the wing since the 17th April, peaking at the end of April. He feared they may be over for the year. A BBC TV camera crew was present to film for Newsround, featuring Allana Shepherd a 13 year old of the steering committee for the Waterford Heath Project.

Before starting the walk it soon proved that requirements for the field trip and to satisfy a TV crew were not quite the same! After some delay Alan Downie advised those present not to walk round without their cameras as from past experience all manner of surprises may turn up.

The group were soon looking at a pleasant slope, covered in Wild Strawberry, Birds Foot Trefoil and Bramble, beneath a planted mixed deciduous plantation, with Aspen and White Poplar. It was here the first Small Heath was spotted, soon followed by a mating pair of Poplar Hawk Moths. From here the group were directed to the steep south facing slopes of the South Pit, whilst Alan Downie was detained by the film crew. Species added were Common Blue, Brown Argus, Small Tortoiseshell, Meadow Brown and Large Skipper, the first to be recorded on the site. Species tally now is 24.

Alan Downie was then able to re join the group to lead them to glades down the lower slopes of the pit. Sheltered from the fresh SW wind this area was warm and it was here the first of five Grizzled Skippers were seen, three of which appeared amazingly fresh and in good condition. The moth tally steadily increased with the experience of Vincent Judd adding records of Cinnabar, Thistle, Ermine, Common Grass Veneer, Heart and Dart, Treble Bar, Burnet

Companion and Common White Wave.

This area also satisfied those interested in the plants with many Spotted Orchids and a White Helleborine found. Speckled Wood, Green-veined White and a Small Copper were added to the tally. Soon we looked south to see a menacing black cloud heading towards us, rain was sure to come. On a different route back to the car park the best was to come. Vincent Judd spotted a Privet Hawk Moth resting on a fence post. With a 100mm wing span this magnificent moth gave some technical problems for the cameras set up in expectation of Grizzled Skipper. You couldn't fit it in the view finder! The heavy rain was almost forgotten in the flurry of photographers, as for most, this was the first time they had seen this magnificent hawk moth.

The group then broke up, some lunching in their cars, others seeking local pubs with the thoughts of returning after lunch to investigate parts of the North Pit. The rain however, washed out such ideas. The moth value of the site is virtually unknown, but certainly it is rare to see three Hawk Moths on a walk round in the middle of the day. Vincent Judd was so impressed he has sought and been given permission to take a moth trap to the site and this may be a possibility for a field trip next year.

Lee Valley Park 15/6/97 - by Gavin Vicary

Only two members, Carol Morton and Grant Thorn joined me and my wife for this visit to part of the Lee Valley Park, near Cheshunt. The sky was overcast and not ideal for observing butterflies, but we at least knew the large number of orchids that grow in the park should have been in full bloom.

The park covers a very large area around the River Lee and it is possible to walk along it from Luton all the way into central London.

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There are a large number of old gravel pits that are now flooded and the area has become particularly renowned for the birds that can be found there.

We walked for about half an hour to reach the area where the orchids grow and the sun came out just as we arrived. Thousands grow in a few small sunny glades and we spent some time admiring these rare plants before moving on. Three types of orchids are present, Early Marsh, Common Spotted and Southern Marsh Orchids although these readily hybridise. Some areas were used earlier this century for dumping rubbish and the orchids tend to grow where fly ash from local coal fired power stations was deposited as this has formed a type of soil that particularly suits them.

We then sat in one of the bird hides for a few minutes to watch a Great Crested Grebe, when a pair of Kingfishers displayed in front of us before disappearing over a reed bed and out of sight. We walked along the River Lee where we saw a Comma, several Small Tortoiseshells and Banded Demoiselle Damselflies before the sun again disappeared behind cloud.

Finally, we made our way to a small remnant of ancient meadow and looked for Bee Orchids but unfortunately these were not in flower at the time.

Thursley Common, Surrey Field Trip by Gavin Vicary

Approximately thirty people met in the main car park at Thursley Common national nature reserve in Surrey. Numbers were swelled for this trip by the R.S.P.B. south east group who came by coach and members of the Cheshunt Natural History Society.

Thursley is a vast expanse of heathland dominated by different heathers and contains many pools and boggy areas. It is home to a wide variety of wildlife some of which is nationally rare.

June had been exceptionally wet this year and there had been particularly heavy rain prior to the visit. The weather forecast for the day was for more heavy rain but in the event this held off for the time that we were there and the sun even broke through the clouds for short intervals.

We had not ventured far from the car park before we found several Silver Studded Blues. These were particularly immobile because of the dull weather and one even sat on the end of a members finger for a good five minutes allowing everyone to have a good look at the silver studs that give the butterfly its name. These studs were so small that most people agreed that a better means of identification were the broad black bands on the upper wings of the males and would not have been apparent at all without such a well behaved specimen. Silver Studded Blues encountered frequently throughout the day whereas the only other butterflies seen were Small Tortoiseshell, Large Skipper and Small Skipper.

Thursley is renowned for its dragonflies, although only a few were seen due to the lack of sunshine. The most attractive was probably a Brilliant Emerald with its vivid metallic green coloration. There was also great excitement when a possible White Faced Darter was found. This species is extremely rare in this country and recently there has been lively debate as to whether it still survived at Thursley. We await confirmation from photographs taken but it is more likely that the specimen found was a juvenile Black Darter. Other species seen were Broad-bodied Chaser and Common, Azure, Blue-tailed and Large Red Damselflies.

The site is also important for reptiles with most of the British species being present. The only ones that we saw however were Common Lizards which were often encountered on some of the boardwalks over wet areas.

Having the birders along was particularly useful as they either saw

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birds that we would otherwise have missed or gave opportunities for seeing great detail through their high magnification telescopes. Highlights included Curlew, Hobby, Stonechat, Dartford Warbler and Wood Lark.

A number of unusual plant species were observed including Sundews, Bog Asphodel, Self Heal, Southern Marsh Orchids and Bog Bean, which added to the general natural history interest and made for a very enjoyable day out.

Sharpenhoe Clappers 6/7/97 - by Michael Healy

Three new members and I met at the NT car park at Sharpenhoe Clappers, a site in Bedfordshire just north of Luton. Nobody seemed to have been appointed as leader so I took on the responsibility as best I could. Sharpenhoe Clappers is a steep-sided promontory on the chalk slope facing north with a large Iron Age fort at its extremity. The target species for the trip was Marbled White, and we were immediately faced with a profusion of this splendid butterfly, almost outnumbering the Meadow Browns.

The site is known for its Chalkhill Blues, but we were too early for these. After a circuit of the fort we returned to the car park and ran across Dave Chandler of the Bedfordshire Branch of the Society walking his regular transect. He pointed out to us a Common Blue which brought the species up to 10, not too bad considering that there were no Pierids and no Gatekeepers seen. Dave also informed us that the Bee orchid spotted by one member was the first seen on the site for three years and tantalised us with the tale of a pair of Dark Green Fritillaries seen a few days earlier.

All agreed that future visits to the Clappers and to neighbouring sites on the chalk slope would be well worth while.

Moth Night at Marshalls Heath - 1996

By John Murray

An extremely belated report, I'm afraid, but I thought an account of last year's moth trapping evening might provide some kind of a reminder that moths stay on the wing throughout the year, albeit in reduced numbers and will provide some interest in the winter months ahead.

Marshalls Heath is a tiny fragment of heathland which has now degenerated into acid grassland with large anthills, not much more than one acre in extent, surrounded by about 8 acres of secondary woodland. Our principal guide and expert was Mark Sterling, well known nationally for his work and expertise on moths, particularly the microlepidoptera.

The plan was to adopt an "overkill" policy, with as many traps and other attraction methods as possible. We deployed 5 light traps altogether, the main ones being two brilliant mercury-vapour Skinner traps operated from generators and situated at the north and south ends of the grassland. On the other side of the road we placed a battery-operated Heath trap, with the much fainter ultra-violet light from an actinic tube, and in the field edge to the west we put a home-made trap designed and built by my uncle, with a large 2ft actinic tube and a suction pump to suck the moths into the trap and keep them there. In addition, my own Heath trap was operated as usual in my garden beyond the woodland at the north end of the Heath. We also brushed some of Mark Sterling's patent sugaring mixture onto trees around the grassland.

The weather turned out to be excellent; flat calm and there had been a little rain earlier which dampened the ground and helped to

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produce on of those warm, humid, sultry nights that are ideal for moths. The temperature never dropped below 15°C and the evening was mainly cloudy. Over 20 members turned up to enjoy what turned out to be a memorable evening.

Even before it got dark, we had recorded half a dozen species: 4 grass moths, a white plume moth and *Stigmella atricapitella*, a tiny species only 5mm across. At dusk, moths began gathering at the sugar, particularly Double Square-spot and the Bird's Wing moth, an uncommon species, and also a Swallowtail moth, the first of the night's species that had not been recorded here before. As it got darker, a solitary Ghost moth hovered looking for all the world like a ghostly hand, and glow worms appeared among the anthills, giving the Heath a quite magical appearance on a perfect summer's evening.

Moths soon began gathering at the light traps, slowly at first, but then after 10.30 the rush hour began, with new species appearing at the traps at the rate of 2 or 3 per minute. There were huge numbers of the commoner species: Heart and Dart, Dark Arches, Common Footman etc and particularly the grass moth *Chrysoteuchia culmella*, but some interesting more unusual ones: Iron Prominent and Pebble Prominent (new to the Heath), and some spectacularly beautiful ones: Green Silver Lines and Beautiful Golden Y (both new), Buff Arches, Clouded Silver and several Large Elephant Hawk-moths. Mark Sterling did not entirely share the general enthusiasm for the Hawk-moths, as they were buffeting his tiny interesting-looking micro moths, and indeed by the end of the evening, no less than 76 microlepidoptera species had been identified, 15 of which had not been recorded at Marshalls Heath before.

I should mention that there was also some human interest on the Heath: a group of teenagers had chosen the same night to camp in the woodlands and consume as much lager as they possibly could and to do a bit of shouting. However, as teenagers go they were pleasant enough, and now and again came over to chat and see what we had.

Hot coffee was extremely welcome around 11 o'clock, by which time some more unusual species were arriving: the Treble Brown Spot, Brown Scallop, Heart & Club, Purple Clay, Miller moth, Lunar-spotted Pinion, Double-lobed moth, and perhaps most unusual, the Pinion-streaked Snout. Among the microlepidoptera, there were also some uncommon ones: *Monopis obviella*, *Argyresthia curvella*, the Hawthorn moth, *Metzneria lappella*, *Parachronisitis albiceps*, *Eana incanana*, *Gypsonoma sociana* & *Cryptoblabes bistriga*.

It was well after midnight when we finally packed up, with a final total of no less than 151 species of moths recorded, 26 of which had not previously been recorded at Marshalls Heath. This is a very large total for one night at one site by any standards, and is certainly partly due to the large number of traps, as no one trap recorded more than 82 species. However, the night, although good, was by no means the best of 1996, and 20 nights the same summer produced a larger total of species in the garden trap. Marshalls Heath is certainly a good site for moths, partly due to its varied character, with a remnant heathland population combined with newer arrivals breeding in the secondary woodland.

We are particularly grateful to Mark Sterling, whose instant recognition of obscure species, particularly the microlepidoptera, was very impressive, and without whom our evening's total of positive identifications would have been much lower. He also provided the two Skinner traps.



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

1. **Saturday 25th October Icknfield Way TL 104279.** Chalk downland restoration. Meet near Mortgrove Farm at 10.30am. Please bring gardening gloves.
2. **Therfield Heath TL335400.** First Sunday of each month from 10.00 a.m. - 1 p.m. Details from Vincent Thompson 01763 241443
3. **Duchies Piece (Aldbury Nowers) SP952131.** Third Sunday of each month. Meet 10.00 a.m. in the lay-by, near Tring Station.
4. **Hertford Heath TL 354111.** For details ring Anthony Oliver on 01992 583404.
5. **Fryent Country Park** - Details from Leslie Williams at the Brent Ecology Unit on 0181 206 0492.
6. **Patmore Heath TL 443257.** Meet at 10.00 am on the last Sunday of each month. Further details from the editor.

Diary

Wednesday 15th October 8p.m. Cross Street Centre, Dagnall Street, St Albans. Annual General Meeting followed by member's slides.

Saturday 15th November 2.30pm Silver Cup Pub, Harpenden "Preparing for 1998, Gardening for butterflies".

Records

If members would like their records to contribute to the 1997 Butterfly report then please send them to John Murray (address on back page) before November 9th. If records could be submitted before this date it would help in entering these records on to computer.

Chalk Downland Restoration

The branch is helping to conserve an area important for butterflies on the Icknield way. Please would as many people as possible try and support this event which mainly consists of cutting and removing vegetation in the absence of grazing. Please bring gardening gloves.

Meet near Mortgrove Farm at 10.30am on Saturday 25th October. The grid reference for the meeting place is TL 104279

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