

# Butterfly Walk on Mill Hill

**21 May 2006 (Sunday Morning)**

Organised in conjunction with the Adur Biodiversity Network, The Shoreham Society is offering a Butterfly Walk on Mill Hill, north of Old Shoreham, in May.

**Meet at 10 a.m. in the southern car park, (map reference TQ 212 067 - layby just north of the bridge)**

It will be suitable for all ages including children. If you have digital cameras, magnifying glasses or binoculars, you may want to bring them. The focus of the walk will be on butterflies and the herbs that sustain them, with the target butterfly species: Adonis Blue (pictured), Grizzled Skippers, Dingy Skippers, Small Heath plus others.



**Duration: 1 to 1½ hours** depending on the enthusiasm and fitness of the participants.

There is a gentle gradient on the shorter transect, but the optional second part requires a steeper climb.

**Leader: Andy Horton** All genuine enthusiasts welcome.

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# The Butterflies of Mill Hill

The Mill Hill Butterfly Walk led by Andy Horton will take you over the gentle slopes of Mill Hill exploring what is now a unique and valuable wildlife habitat of international importance.

An acknowledged expert, Colin R Pratt, wrote:

"The Shoreham Bank (Mill Hill) was nationally the most famous of all of the Sussex butterfly localities, yet its reputation was gained from just one phenomenon - the numbers and aberrations of the Chalkhill Blue Butterfly, the archetypal downland butterfly that has been nationally celebrated on the bank since at least the 1820's after nearly two centuries of tradition, I have seen more than one aged lepidopterist's eyes fill with tears when discussing the insect's modern demise on those hills."

*(From "A Revised History of the Butterflies and Moths of Sussex".)*

Chalkhill Blues emerge in a great profusion of thousands of butterflies at the beginning of August. Therefore the walk will concentrate on observing the half a dozen or so butterflies, including the brilliant Adonis Blue, in flight during May, and the rich authentic downland herbs that sustain them. The Horseshoe Vetch is at its outstanding brilliance during May and this is the only place in England where this prostrate herb emerges in such a spectacular fashion to support a blue butterfly population. It was always the second best in England but poor management has destroyed all the other areas, but this six acre prime area has survived by benign neglect. Most credit for this must go to the local populace, because 70 acres of Mill Hill were presented to the people of Shoreham in 1938.

Just over 30 acres still remain as public open land. This is divided into about 11 acres of grassland and meadows above the ridge; about 9 acres of scrub, the copse and glades at the northern end; and about half of the prime Chalkhill Blue Butterfly area of 6.4 acres of hermland remaining. Six acres have been lost to Sycamore woodland on the southern slopes.

Thirty different species of butterfly have been recorded on Mill Hill in this millennium. However, it is the abundance of August butterflies that makes the area exceptional.

The history of butterfly collecting on Mill Hill is well recorded. Even after World War II, the population of Chalkhill Blues was estimated at 50,000. Now for a variety of reasons the population has fallen to 3,000, which still makes it the best and most densely populated site in England.

The Butterfly and Moth Report for 2003 by K J Willmott, for the Surrey & SW London branch of Butterfly Conservation, said:

"We must base future management planning for such sites on evidence-based procedures rather than on past experiences or broad ill-defined measures, such as is often quoted - *'after the removal of all scrub, graze the remaining turf short, thus making it floristically richer and everything else will fall into place'*. It rarely happens that way, and a much more flexible and diverse planning procedure is needed."

*(Continued on page 10)*

## Grazing

Agricultural grazing has not taken place on the lower slopes of Mill Hill in the last 65 years and probably never will. This is the reason that the Horseshoe Vetch survives. This plant is the sole food plant of the caterpillars of both the Chalkhill Blue Butterfly and the rarer Adonis Blue Butterfly, and it survives only in low fertility land not suitable for pasture. On richer lands other plants grow better.

Gillian M Fearn (Dept. of Botany, University of Sheffield) wrote:

"The prostrate downland tetraploid race of Horseshoe Vetch, *Hippocrepis comosa*, is not harmed by moderately heavy sheep grazing and is resistant to moderate trampling, but doesn't persist after ploughing or disturbance of the ground, or in areas grazed by cattle."

*(Journal of Ecology Vol. 61, pp. 915-926; 1973)*

Horseshoe Vetch is a long-lived perennial with a poor record of recovery of over 60 years if destroyed. If it is destroyed by cattle grazing, it is gone for good. The awareness and involvement of local people in promoting the survival of Horseshoe Vetch on Mill Hill is important, so the walk we have organised in May is more than a pleasant day out. You could be helping to assure the survival of England's premier site for some rare butterflies.

Andy Horton



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