

Report on the 2024 Butterfly Surveys for Wadhurst Park

Paul Johnson, October 2024

1 Summary

In 2024, spring and summer butterfly surveys were completed in good weather at Chittinghurst, Pigstrood, Mayfield College and Sharnden on behalf of Wadhurst Park. This was the seventh consecutive year of surveying at the first three sites and the sixth at Sharnden. Two additional visits took place at Mayfield College during which butterflies were recorded – the first in early May as part of a Sussex Branch of Butterfly Conservation (BC) field event, the second a solo venture in late August. The 2024 visits came against a backdrop of prolonged wet weather over the previous winter and a rather cool spring that delayed the emergence of adult insects.

Twenty-five butterfly species were identified in total across all four sites over the formal and informal survey visits. These represented most of the species that would be realistically expected for this area of East Sussex, the habitats covered, the time of year, and survey methodology. By contrast, 27 species were observed in 2023. Several species that have been regularly, or at least periodically, recorded during the surveys for Wadhurst Park were not seen in 2024. These included Purple Emperor, Small Tortoiseshell and White-letter Hairstreak but, most notably, Silver-washed Fritillary, a butterfly that is ordinarily found at Chittinghurst, Mayfield College and Sharnden. The Silver-washed Fritillary's apparent absence was not perhaps entirely surprising though after a poor emergence in 2023. The Small Tortoiseshell – a once widespread and familiar insect – has now become very scarce in the wider countryside, whilst Dutch-elm Disease has badly affected White-letter Hairstreak habitat at Pigstrood. In most years, the Purple Emperor is at best an elusive butterfly, often encountered only by chance.

Although still recorded in 2024 across the surveyed sites, several species were only observed in concerningly low numbers and with a limited distribution. These most noticeably included Small White, Large White, Brimstone, Orange-tip, Small Copper, Holly Blue, Comma, Ringlet and, in a very poor year for migrant butterflies, Painted Lady and Red Admiral. Similar scarcity was though evident more widely across the East Sussex High Weald, and it was felt that the poor returns at the locations surveyed for Wadhurst Park were related to wider regional factors rather than being site specific.

The diminished numbers noted above were, however, countered by some positives. At Mayfield College, Green Hairstreaks were recorded for the third consecutive year, with four (a record total for this site) seen over two visits in May. Here, the summer survey revealed a near-doubling in Marbled White abundance from 2023, with a similar pattern evident at Pigstrood. At Sharnden, Marbled White numbers increased too (albeit from a very low base in 2023) although at Chittinghurst this species has yet to properly establish itself. Some very strong localised emergences of Gatekeeper had taken place in July at Mayfield College and Sharnden, whilst at the latter location – along with Pigstrood and Chittinghurst - there were marked improvements in the counts of 'golden' skippers (Small and/or Essex) from 2023. Anecdotal evidence from other butterfly recorders in Sussex suggested that the Meadow Brown – ordinarily a ubiquitous insect – had experienced a very poor season in 2024. This, however, wasn't evident at the sites surveyed for Wadhurst Park, with an increase in Meadow Brown abundance at Sharnden compared to 2023. At Chittinghurst, Pigstrood and Mayfield College, the Meadow Brown did return lower counts in 2024 than 2023 but by no means dramatically so.

The highest species counts in 2024 were at Mayfield College with 22 (although this included six species only seen during the informal visits) and Sharnden with 21. These totals probably reflected the size and greater diversity of habitats at these sites. At the smaller Pigstrood and Chittinghurst grassland localities, the butterfly diversity was lower, with species counts of 19 and 12 respectively. The totals at Sharnden and Pigstrood represented slight increases (of one species) from 2023's survey results. By contrast, recorded butterfly diversity at Mayfield College and Chittinghurst decreased by four and five species respectively in

comparison to 2023. Without the informal recording at Mayfield College, the reduction in species count would have been even more marked at 10.

Two Biodiversity Action Plan priority species were recorded during the surveys, namely Dingy Skipper and Grizzled Skipper. Both are high priority species in the High Weald in BC's Regional Action Plan for South East England 2016-2025. Additionally, both species are classified as Vulnerable on the latest Red List compiled by BC and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

The Dingy Skipper was recorded at all four surveyed locations, with the most notable record coming from Chittinghurst where this species hadn't been seen since 2019 and was presumed lost from the site. Although the Dingy Skipper was only found in one meadow at Pigstrood, this included a noteworthy count of five butterflies along a sunlit hedge line. This indicated a larger population here than previous surveys had suggested. At Mayfield College, there was a very strong Dingy Skipper emergence on the grassland compartments by Heronry Wood although this butterfly was not encountered on other parts of the site where it's occurred historically. The final spring survey at Sharnden indicated a modest population of Dingy Skippers, with a distribution focussed upon the site's eastern fields and meadows.

Grizzled Skippers have only been recorded since 2018 at Mayfield College and Sharnden, and this continued in 2024. Only two skippers were found at each site although these counts were broadly consistent with those in previous years, this species never having been abundant and apparently able to maintain viable colonies at very low densities. Interestingly, all four Grizzled Skippers were of the *taras* aberration in which the normally discreet white markings on the uppersides of the forewings instead form confluent bands.

2 Survey Methods, Scrub Encroachment and Species Coverage

At a pre-recording meeting in 2018, it was agreed that the survey method would follow that used by the established UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme; accordingly, the butterflies seen within five metres either side of (and above) a fixed transect route would be recorded at each site. In turn, each transect would be subdivided into different sections. The routes would be walked at a slow but steady pace, without waiting for butterflies to appear at favoured nectaring locations or, in the case of arboreal species, to fly out of the treetops. The transect routes were subsequently provided by Angela Brennan, whilst the start and end points of each section were then determined in the field by the surveyor, primarily based on changes in habitat. At the Sharnden site, the transect sections were also provided by Angela.

At the pre-recording meeting, it was agreed too that any unidentified 'golden' skippers would be recorded as Small / Essex Skipper and, similarly, that any unidentified 'small' whites would be logged as Green-veined White / Small White. Furthermore, any notable butterflies observed more than 5 metres from the transect route would be recorded separately from the main records.

In 2024, Chittinghurst, Pigstrood, Mayfield College and Sharnden were all formally surveyed twice. Additional visits were made to parts of the Mayfield College site on 5th May and 26th August – the former as a Sussex Branch of BC field trip, the latter as an informal solo walk for general interest. The butterfly records from all these visits are discussed below in Section 3.

The formal surveys took place between May 17th and June 2nd to coincide with the anticipated peak emergence of Dingy and Grizzled Skippers, and then between July 11th and July 28th to record high summer species before the sites were cut for hay. Although the surveys were timed to coincide with the peak emergence of as many butterflies as possible, some species were inevitably under-recorded. These included the Gatekeeper which wasn't fully underway at Pigstrood and Chittinghurst when the summer surveys took place there, and the Large Skipper which had probably already peaked in late June at all four sites. Similarly, the surveys didn't synchronise all that well with the two broods of the Common Blue.

Please note that in 2024 at Mayfield College, scrub encroachment affected access to Section 13 of the transect (the meadow at the eastern end of Banky Wood). Consequently, the normal transect route was only

partly accessible in spring whilst in summer the section had to be surveyed entirely from the adjacent Public Footpath. At Sharnden, it was not possible to faithfully follow the set transect route across Kiln Field (Section 5) due to Bramble growth. However, it was still possible to traverse the field, albeit on a slightly different path.

3 Site Reports

3.1 Chittinghurst

As has become customary, the formal survey season for Wadhurst Park began at Chittinghurst when the site was visited on the fine morning of 17th May. The survey returned a typically modest count of butterflies (18 being positively identified) although this was greater than 2023's return of 14. In 2023, eight species were recorded although none were grassland specialists. By contrast, whilst only five species were identified in 2024, these included three butterflies closely associated with such habitats: namely, Small Heath, Small Copper and Dingy Skipper. The discovery of a male Dingy Skipper energetically defending its territory in a sheltered corner of Six-acre Hop Garden (Section 2) was particularly pleasing as this locally scarce species had been presumed lost from Chittinghurst, having not been recorded here since 2019. It was not clear though whether Chittinghurst had been recolonised from a nearby site or if a very small population had persisted here below what might be thought of as an observation threshold. It was encouraging as well to record Small Heaths on three transect sections, with a peak count of six along the western side of Ten Acres (Section 6). In 2020, the Small Heath was well distributed and much more prevalent at Chittinghurst before entering a period of decline culminating in it not being recorded in 2023. The 2024 survey results might indicate a population beginning to recover.

Post-hibernation Peacock butterflies were observed on two sections of the Chittinghurst transect, including two along the western edge of Ten Acres (Section 6). The only other species positively identified was a Red Admiral that was observed after the survey had finished as it flew strongly into Eight Acres field, possibly on a northward migration. It was very unusual and surprising not to encounter any other generalist species at Chittinghurst, for Orange-tip and Brimstone are ordinarily seen here, with an expectation of Holly Blue and Speckled Wood too. Indeed, in 2023, Orange-tip was the most abundant species at the site.

The summer survey at Chittinghurst took place in good weather on the morning of 14th July. Although the species count had increased from spring to reach nine, this represented a low diversity of butterflies for the time of year and habitat. The Meadow Brown has proved to be a plentiful high-summer butterfly across the Chittinghurst site, and this continued in 2024 when 823 were recorded in total (although this was less than the 2023 count of 1,135). This species was most abundant in 2024 towards the eastern side of the site where counts exceeded 100 in Ten Acres (Section 7), House Field (Section 8) and Eight Acres (Section 9). Allies of the Meadow Brown, encompassing Ringlet, Small Heath and Gatekeeper, were present too but in low numbers. The Ringlet appears to be struggling in High Weald habitats that should suit it well whilst the Gatekeeper's flight period was only just beginning. In 2022 and 2023, a few Marbled Whites were found in the southern part of Chittinghurst but this species wasn't seen in 2024. Hopefully though, a population of this attractive butterfly can become fully established here in time.



Meadow Brown – a prolific butterfly at Chittinghurst

Across Chittinghurst, 'golden' skippers (Small and/or Essex) were widely distributed although in very low numbers such that the total count was only 37. By contrast, 113 were noted in 2023 although this count was down on historical levels of abundance here. Amongst the skippers recorded in 2024, five settled for long enough to allow them to be identified as Small from the buff colouration of the undersides of their antennae. The Essex Skipper wasn't positively identified although it's most likely still present here at a low population density. The same can probably be said of the Silver-washed Fritillary that is usually to be seen powering along the wooded peripheries of Chittinghurst but wasn't encountered in 2024.

3.2 Pigstrood

The warm, settled afternoon of 19th May offered good survey conditions for the spring visit to Pigstrood. Except for Great Brook (Section 3), butterflies were recorded across the whole site although both diversity and abundance varied quite considerably by transect section. In terms of diversity, Further Five Acres (Section 5) and Pigstrood Meadow (Section 9) proved to be the richest. Further Five Acres provided sightings of Small Copper, Small White (remarkably, one of only two positively identified across the four surveyed sites in 2024), an egg-laying Green-veined White, three male Orange-tips (remarkably again, the only ones recorded during the formal surveys), a fresh male Common Blue, and a Small Heath. The last two species were found too in Pigstrood Meadow where Small Heath abundance for the Pigstrood site peaked with a count of 11. The Small Heath was only similarly prolific in Great Meadow (Section 8) where 10 were seen. However, it was quite well distributed over Pigstrood, occurring on six of the nine transect sections. In all, 26 Small Heaths were recorded on and close to the transect route, with a further six encountered elsewhere on the site. This represented a marked improvement on the 2023 and 2022 counts of 11 and 16 respectively.

The Dingy Skipper has proved to be much scarcer than the Small Heath at Pigstrood. However, two were again encountered along the transect route in Pigstrood Meadow (Section 9) in 2024, this mirroring the 2023 survey results. With the hedgerow along the eastern side of Pigstrood Meadow bathed in late afternoon sunshine, some additional recording was carried out here upon completion of the formal 2024 survey. This returned five Dingy Skipper sightings by the hedge line, all believed to be different individual butterflies given the distance between each. This was an excellent count for the edge of a single meadow and indicated a population here far stronger than previous survey results have suggested. The only Holly Blue of any of the formal surveys was enjoying the warmth too, along with several post-hibernation Peacocks and the day's sole Red Admiral. This concluded a very pleasing visit in which 10 butterfly species were identified, Small Heaths had shown a recovery, and there had been an unexpected encounter with five Dingy Skippers in a single meadow.

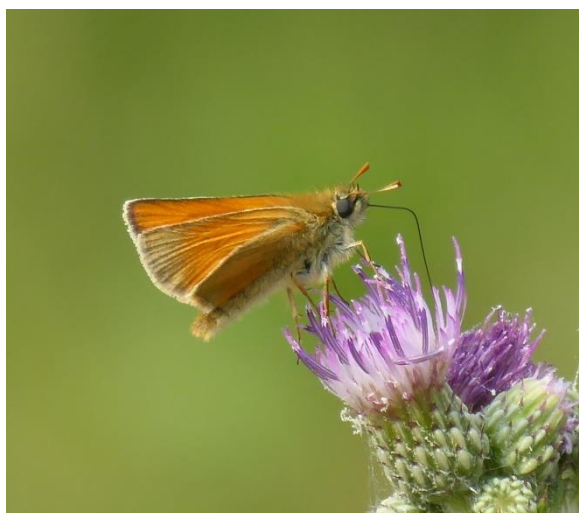
The summer visit to Pigstrood took place during the afternoon of 11th July in favourable surveying conditions. In common with Chittinghurst though, summertime butterfly diversity was low at Pigstrood such that only nine species were recorded on the transect walk. However, three additional species were noted after the formal survey had finished – Large White and Comma during an unsuccessful search for White-letter Hairstreaks amongst the remaining elm in the hedgerow separating Upper Brook and Alder Brook, and a Green-veined White by the main entrance gate on departure.

More positively, the 2024 survey showed Marbled Whites to have increased in both abundance and distribution at Pigstrood after very poor years in 2023 and 2022. In 2024, this species was encountered on five parts of the site although its distribution was very much focussed upon three meadows: Alder Field (Section 7) where three were recorded, Great Meadow (Section 8) with nine seen, and Pigstrood Meadow (Section 9) which returned the day's peak count of 11. Rather puzzlingly, it wasn't observed on either Further Five Acres (Section 5) or Lime Field (Section 6) where it's occurred historically and the habitat appeared suitable.

Of the other members of the 'brown' family, Ringlets were present at Pigstrood but in very low numbers and on only five of the site's nine transect sections. As noted in the Chittinghurst commentary, this species seems to be at a low ebb and would ordinarily be expected amongst the margins of all of Pigstrood's meadows.

Gatekeepers though were somewhat more widely distributed and returned better counts, including nine in Great Meadow (Section 8) and 11 in Pigstrood Meadow (Section 9). Unsurprisingly, Meadow Browns far eclipsed both these species and returned a total count of 733, this being broadly comparable to 2023's aggregate of 831. As in 2023, the Meadow Brown was most abundant in its Further Five Acres (Section 5) and Lime Field (Section 6) strongholds where 148 and 130 were logged respectively, although Upper Brook (Section 1), Boggy Brook (Section 4) and Pigstrood Meadow (Section 9) also returned creditable counts of at least 80.

Whilst the Meadow Brown had essentially maintained a stable population at Pigstrood between 2023 and 2024, the 'golden' skippers (Small and/or Essex) had nearly doubled in abundance over the same period.

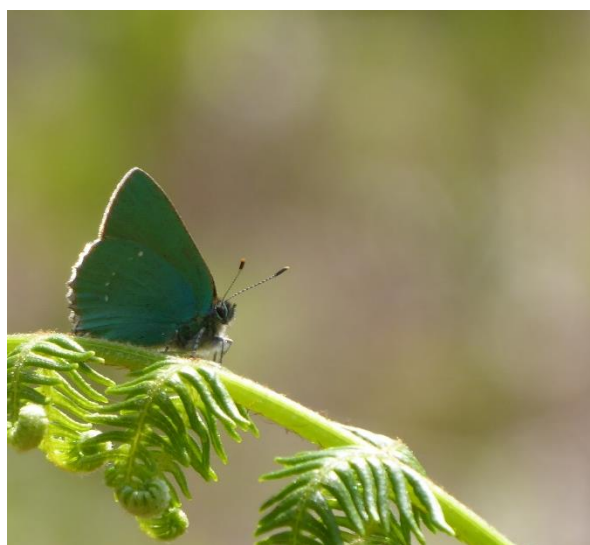


Small Skipper nectaring on Creeping Thistle

The 2024 survey returned 217 skippers (compared with 123 in 2023), with seven of these confirmed as Small and one as an Essex, this individual being identified from its glossy black antennae tips in Great Brook (Section 3). The latter species now seems uncommon locally, and the only other survey encounter with it occurred at Sharnden on 28th July when one was also seen. At Pigstrood, 'golden' skippers were found flying low over the sward on all sections of the transect although their numbers varied considerably from just seven in Alder Field (Section 7) to 54 in Great Meadow (Section 8). The trend in 'golden' skipper abundance (most probably dominated by an increasing number of Small Skippers) was encouraging, especially following a very low return in 2022 of just 53 butterflies.

3.3 Mayfield College

Although the formal surveys commenced at Chittinghurst on 17th May, butterfly recording activities began during a Sussex Branch of BC field visit to Mayfield College on 5th May. Despite taking place in rather marginal weather conditions, eight butterfly species were encountered over a relatively small part of the site. These included five generalist species – Brimstone, Orange-tip, Green-veined White, Holly Blue and Peacock – that were not subsequently recorded during the formal spring survey that took place later in the month. The 5th May field visit demonstrated that some of Mayfield College's habitat specialist species had started to emerge too after a cool late spring, with a female Small Copper and two Dingy Skippers found towards the sheltered



A territorial male Green Hairstreak

bottom of Great Forge Field. The highlight though was the discovery of two Green Hairstreaks a few metres apart by the southern edge of Furnace Wood; one nectaring discreetly on Bluebell flowers, the other a male defending a scrubby patch of territory. This was the first occasion that two Green Hairstreaks had been seen together at Mayfield College since the current survey programme started in 2018.

Further evidence of an increasing Green Hairstreak population at Mayfield College came on the morning of 25th May when the formal spring survey took place. Two female hairstreaks egg-laying on Dyer's Greenweed were recorded; one on the grassland to the east of Heronry Wood (Section 2) and the other in Great Forge Field (Section 12). Green Hairstreaks have now been recorded

annually at Mayfield College since 2022, having previously only appeared as singletons in alternate years.

Dingy and Grizzled Skippers have been a constant presence at Mayfield College since the current survey programme started in 2018, the former invariably more abundant and widespread than the latter. This dynamic was maintained in 2024, when a total of 34 Dingy Skippers was logged over six sections of the transect compared with two Grizzled Skippers (both *taras* aberrations) seen in two parts of the site.

Despite the Dingy Skipper's wider distribution, its 2024 population was concentrated on the grassland compartments to the east and north of Heronry Wood (sections 2 and 3 respectively). These two compartments returned 25 Dingy Skippers, with a count of 17 north of Heronry Wood representing a high density for this species (certainly comparable with high-quality chalk downland sites) in what is a relatively small area. Pleasingly, Dingy Skippers were found again on Great Forge Field (Section 12), having not been seen here in 2023. On the debit side, it was not encountered on other parts of the site where it's occurred historically, including most notably Banky Field Plantation (Section 7), Coleman's Croft (Section 10) and Eleven Acres (Section 11). Its apparent absence on Eleven Acres was particularly unexpected as this is a large compartment with much seemingly suitable habitat. Banky Field Plantation did though provide one of the survey's two Grizzled Skippers, the other being found on the grassland to the north of Heronry Wood. Both these locations are traditional centres for the Grizzled Skipper at Mayfield College and this species seems quite able to subsist at very low population densities here.

Another grassland specialist, the Small Heath, was recorded on 25th May and this butterfly has too been a stalwart of the Mayfield College surveys. In 2024, it was recorded on 10 sections of the transect, this representing a considerable improvement on its 2023 distribution that was limited to four areas. The Small Heath was most abundant to the east and north of Heronry Wood (sections 2 and 3 respectively), having respective counts there of 15 and 13. This area clearly provides good habitat for species – such as the Small Heath and the two spring skippers – that require a relatively short sward. Small Heaths in low numbers (along with a Dingy Skipper) were present too along the western edge of Pit Wood (Section 50), which is monitored every spring as an additional part of the transect. Although these two species have progressively become much less prevalent here, this woodland edge route did provide the survey's only examples of Red Admiral and Large White. With Speckled Woods having been found earlier on the other side of Pit Wood (sections 8 and 9), the day's confirmed species count came to a slightly subdued seven.

Mayfield College was next visited on the largely overcast but warm afternoon of 20th July to conduct the summer survey. In keeping with the formal spring visit on 25th May, the confirmed species count in July was rather low at 11 for what is a large site comprising a good mixture of habitats. In common too with 25th May, July's butterflies (counts and diversity alike) were dominated by species associated with open grassland habitats.

Of these grassland butterflies, the Meadow Brown was the most abundant and returned notable counts of 163 on Upper Old Place Farm (Section 1), 105 in the grassland compartment to the north of Heronry Wood (Section 3), and 132 on the west side of Further Longman (Section 4). Beyond Further Longman, Meadow Browns were far less in evidence, with a count of only 19 on Great Forge Field (Section 12) seemingly at odds with the habitat there. These counts contributed to a survey total of 652 Meadow Browns, only slightly down from 2023's aggregate of 694.

In 2023, in an uncommon circumstance, Meadow Browns were outnumbered to the north of Heronry Wood (Section 3) and at Banky Field Plantation (Section 7) by Gatekeepers. Although this wasn't repeated in 2024, Gatekeepers again returned a strong count to the north of Heronry Wood, with the 77 counted there making for an impressive sight in this compact compartment. On the western side of Further Longman (Section 4), 43 Gatekeepers were noted, whilst the 40 seen at Eleven Acres (Section 11) ran the Meadow Brown very close in terms of abundance. Further interest had also come back in Section 3 when the day's only Purple Hairstreak flew low across the transect line en route to Heronry Wood.

Flying alongside Gatekeepers on transect sections 2 and 3 to the east and north of Heronry Wood were several Marbled Whites, with counts of three and seven respectively. Although this area of Mayfield College has traditionally been strong for this species, the day's greatest abundance came instead on Eleven Acres (Section 11) where 25 were recorded. By contrast, just three were encountered here in 2023 and it's possible that this species is now benefitting from the extensive scrub clearance work that took place recently. A 2024 total of 51 Marbled Whites was an encouraging return and represented a near-doubling of 2023's count of 28. It was pleasing too to encounter this butterfly in better numbers in Banky Field Plantation (Section 7) where seven drifted somewhat ponderously into sight. The plantation was also noteworthy in returning the survey's peak tally of Ringlets, although the count of 14 was considerably lower than the relative abundance here of early survey years. It was only recorded in very low numbers on other parts of Mayfield College and not at all on six transect sections. This was felt though to be symptomatic of its wider struggles presently in the High Weald area.

Banky Field Plantation (Section 7) proved – as it had in 2023 – to be the 2024 headquarters of Mayfield College's 'golden' skipper (Small and/or Essex) population. Forty were recorded here, this including a pair of Small Skippers found in cop. Elsewhere, 37 'golden' skippers weaved their way over Eleven Acres (another strong locality in 2023), with one confirmed as a female Small Skipper when she paused to egg-lay. On other parts of the site, 'golden' skippers were less abundant such that the extensive open grassland habitat of Upper Old Place Farm (Section 1) and the eastern side of Further Longman (Section 5) only returned counts of nine and eight respectively. In all, 187 'golden' skippers were counted in 2024, this a little lower than a return of 220 in 2023.

Some of our larger and more eye-catching butterfly species typically found about woodland edges are usually recorded at Mayfield College, often in relatively good numbers. However, 2024 proved to be a poor year for these such that the Silver-washed Fritillary wasn't seen at all, whilst only one Comma and one Red Admiral were noted during the formal survey. This situation did though improve afterwards when a quick check along a now sunlit south-western edge of Heronry Wood revealed a further three Commas, another Red Admiral, and the day's 11th species in the form of a freshly emerged Peacock feeding avidly on Bramble blossom.

A further visit to Mayfield College took place on 25th August for an informal afternoon walk around some parts of the site. With overcast skies and a blustery wind for much of the visit, butterfly activity was rather limited. However, Speckled Wood made its first appearance since the formal spring survey on 25th May, with three being recorded. Similarly, sightings of a Green-veined White and a female Holly Blue represented the first encounters with these species since the Sussex Branch field visit on 5th May; rather extraordinarily, the former butterfly was only the third positively identified common or 'cabbage' white butterfly at Mayfield College over four visits in what was a poor season for them in 2024.

Two Common Blues were seen during the 25th August walk, bringing the 2024 species count for Mayfield College to a relatively modest total for this site of 22. A search was also conducted along the bottom of Eleven Acres for Chalk Hill Blues following the unexpected discovery of two males here in 2022. However, this butterfly has not been encountered again and its presence at Mayfield College appears to have been short-lived.

3.4 Sharnden

The spring surveys concluded with a visit to Sharnden on the somewhat breezy but sunny morning of 2nd June. With this survey taking place a little later than usual, two essentially summer species – Meadow Brown and Large Skipper – had started to emerge. The former was seen on seven of the transect's 14 sections (including a notable count so early in its flight season of 15 in the field north of Devil's Gill, Section 7), whilst the latter was encountered as singletons in two areas.

Returning to the focus of the visit, spring butterfly species were found all along the transect route except in Moat Hop Field (Section 9). The eastern part of the site proved quite fruitful for Dingy Skippers, with this species being recorded consecutively in Long Field (Section 2), Prison Field (Section 3), Flat Field (Section 4), Kiln Field (Section 5), Grubby Field (Section 6) and to the north of Devil's Gill (Section 7). Kiln Field returned the survey's peak count of three whilst only one seen in Prison Field where it's traditionally been stronger. The Grizzled Skipper has only ever been recorded at Sharnden in Prison Field and this was maintained in 2024 when two were found here on a second sweep of the west-facing bank that they favour. Interestingly, both Grizzled Skippers were *taras* aberrations and this variation seems to occur in the Mayfield area at least as frequently as the standard form of this butterfly. On the west side of Sharnden, a further Dingy Skipper was intercepted in Hop Field (Section 13), but this species was not seen in either Hollow Field (Section 11) or Six Acres (Section 12) where it had occurred in 2023. Hop Field provided the visit's only Small Copper too.

Small Heaths were well distributed at Sharnden and accordingly found on eight sections of the transect. Counts were generally low although notably 13 were recorded on Flat Field (Section 4) before peaking at 15 in the field to the north of Devil's Gill (Section 7). Flying alongside the Small Heaths were bright male Common Blues; again, their numbers were modest, peaking in Grubby Field (Section 6) where five were observed. A comparison of grassland butterfly numbers in 2024 to those in 2023 at Sharnden is difficult as much of last year's survey was affected by poor weather.



One of several male Common Blues found at Sharnden in early June

The sunny, settled late July morning of the 28th provided an opportunity to visit Sharnden again and to thereby complete the formal surveys for Wadhurst Park in 2024. This proved to be a productive visit during which 17 butterfly species were recorded – the richest diversity by some margin of any of the year's surveys. Butterflies of note included all three species of summertime High Weald skipper (Small, Essex and Large), four newly emerged Brimstones in the south-eastern part of the site, and four species from a group that are sometimes called the aristocrats. Into this last category came 10 Peacocks (mostly engorged in feeding-up for hibernation), a Comma, two Red Admirals and, in what was a very poor year for migrant butterflies, the only Painted Lady of any of the 2024 visits. On the debit side, the Silver-washed Fritillary wasn't recorded at Sharnden for the second consecutive year although it was absent too in 2024 at the other three surveyed sites.

In terms of abundance, the Meadow Brown was the most prolific species at Sharnden and was recorded along all of the grassland sections of the transect. Peak counts occurred towards the north of the site where 79 were counted on Grubby Field (Section 6) whilst the compartments to the north of Devil's Gill (Section 7) returned 62. A total for the 2024 survey of 489 Meadow Browns represented an improvement on 2023's aggregate of 395, but was some way down on the 867 seen in 2022.

In both Grubby Field (Section 6) and to the north of Devil's Gill (Section 7), counts of Gatekeeper were comparable to those of Meadow Brown. In an impressive showing, 74 Gatekeepers were observed on Grubby Field whilst 59 flew over the grassland to the north of Devil's Gill. Another strong emergence was evident on Flat Field (Section 4) where 51 were seen. Elsewhere, in an unusual occurrence for open grassland settings, Gatekeepers outnumbered Meadow Browns on some southern sections of the transect. These included Long Field, Section 2 (40 versus 35), Prison Field, Section 3 (36 versus 34), and Pig Field, Section 14 (36 versus 27). However, on the westerly parts of the transect route, the Meadow Brown was strongly in the ascendancy again.

Whilst the Gatekeeper was clearly having a strong season at Sharnden, this unfortunately wasn't the case for the Marbled White. Only six Marbled Whites were recorded in total along the part of the survey route encompassing Long Field (Section 2), Prison Field (Section 3), Flat Field (Section 4) and Kiln Field (Section 5) in the south-eastern quarter of Sharnden. This species suffered a poor season here in 2023 (just three distributed over Long Field and Kiln Field) and the repercussions of this were evident in 2024, although there was a slight improvement in abundance and distribution. More encouragingly, Sharnden's 'golden' skippers (Small and/or Essex) exhibited much clearer signs of recovery such that 136 were seen in 2024 compared with 2023's very low total of 38. In 2024, Six Acres (Section 12) returned a relatively good count of 23 'golden' skippers although this was eclipsed by the 27 found on Grubby Field (Section 6), this tally including two Small Skippers and the day's only confirmed Essex Skipper. Away from the open grassland favoured by Marbled Whites and skippers, a Purple Hairstreak flying about sunlit oaks at the southern end of Hollow Field brought the survey to a satisfactory conclusion.
