

# THE BUTTERFLIES OF THE LONDON BOROUGH OF BEXLEY: A CHECKLIST OF SPECIES, STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION REPORT

Chris Rose BSc.(Hons), MSc. Version 4. May 2016.

Includes details of the conservation status, a guide to the habitats in which they are most likely to be found, named locations at which the less frequent ones may be seen and photographs of selected species.

## References:

- My own personal records, plus others made by John Archer, Joe Johnson, Mike Robinson, Purnendu Roy, Ian Stewart, Karen Sutton and Ralph Todd
- GiGL data
- Journal of the London Natural History Society No. 91 (2012), No. 92 (2013) and 94 (2015)
- [www.butterfly-conservation.org/](http://www.butterfly-conservation.org/)
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_butterflies\\_of\\_Great\\_Britain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_butterflies_of_Great_Britain)
- [www.britishbutterflies.co.uk/](http://www.britishbutterflies.co.uk/)
- [www.ukbutterflies.co.uk/](http://www.ukbutterflies.co.uk/)
- Marriott, St. J. 'British Woodlands as illustrated by Lesnes Abbey Woods'. George Routledge and Sons. 1925.

## BEXLEY BUTTERFLIES IN NUMBERS

**UK total** of regular breeding species (excluding vagrants and accidental introductions): **59**

Known **Bexley total of species: 28**, of which one is a migrant only very occasionally seen in Bexley, or London as a whole and another looks to be a potential new coloniser. This is an increase of two (Silver-washed Fritillary, Marbled White) over the first version of this document written in April 2014. A further species, the White Admiral, occurs very close to the Bexley border and may well come into the Borough.

Known **Bexley extinctions** since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century: **1**. The Wall butterfly probably disappeared from the Borough in the early 1990s in line with a significant contraction UK-wide, and there are no recent records. It is possible that Bexley once hosted Black-veined White, extinct in the UK since the 1920s, and Large Tortoiseshell, which was extinct but may be making a slow comeback in this country. There is also a suggestion that the Grayling, a species of the coast and heaths, occurred in Greenwich in the late 1940s, so could conceivably have been present in Bexley at one time. Research into old documents may provide more information in due course. All the species listed in the 1925 treatise cited above as having been recorded at Lesnes in 1919-24 are all still present somewhere in the Borough.

**Species at risk of being lost from Bexley: 2 to 4**. The Green Hairstreak is very localised, but is gradually being found at more sites. Known occurrences are within designated Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation and thus enjoy a measure of protection from 'development'. Succession beyond scrub to denser tree cover is a medium-term issue. White-letter Hairstreak is confined to a handful of stands of remnant Elm, and populations could be lost through indiscriminate 'tidying' operations because someone decides the dead stems resulting from Dutch Elm disease are 'unsightly' or a danger to the public, or through over-zealous cutting of tall Elm hedges. The Small Heath seems to be restricted to a very few sites in the Borough, of the kind that would be vulnerable to fire, but may have been overlooked, and more research is needed on local distribution. It is thought to be in decline in southern Britain. The presence of White Admiral in Bexley has not yet been unequivocally confirmed, but it seems likely it has a small foothold in the Joydens Wood area. After a decline in the early 1900s has been expanding its range northwards again in recent years.

## RESIDENT, OR MIGRATORY SPECIES FOUND IN BEXLEY AND THEIR STATUS

### Hesperiidae - Skippers

**Essex Skipper (*Thymelicus lineola*)**- Reasonably frequent in Bexley at open, sunny sites with a semi-natural mix of grass species, such as the margins of Barnehurst Golf Course and at East Wickham Open Space. Most easily told from the similar Small Skipper by the black (as opposed to orangey) tip to the undersides of the antennae. Monitoring data from elsewhere in London since 1978 suggests a long-term decline in numbers.



Essex Skipper, Barnehurst Golf Course, July 2015 (Mike Robinson)

**Small Skipper (*Thymelicus sylvestris*)** - As Essex Skipper.

**Large Skipper (*Ochlodes venatus*)** - Habitat as the other Skippers, but more likely to turn up in scrubbiest and cultivated areas such as gardens and allotment sites. Danson Park and Crossness Southern Marsh proved good places to see this species in 2015.

### Lycaenidae - Hairstreaks, Coppers & Blues

**Green Hairstreak (*Callophrys rubi*)** - Has a wide range of food plants, but tends to occur in small colonies and is prone to localised extinction. Unimproved grassland with scrub is the prime habitat. Uncommon in London and only occasional records in Bexley, with the 'hotspot' appearing to be either side of the Bexley-Crayford railway line at Crayford Rough (1 seen by me in 2010), Braeburn Park (2 seen on the same day in 2012 at a LNHS meeting) and Crossness. A single caterpillar was found by me on Gorse at Barnehurst Golf Course in 2010. A single adult was seen by John Archer in 2013 along the Thames path just west of Crossness. A number of sightings of the species in 2014 and 2015 along the Thames path and on Crossness Nature reserve have since confirmed it is well-established here.

It was also found at Erith Quarry in 2014 by surveyors in the pay of the 'developer'. Since Bexley Council's Planning Committee voted unanimously to trash 70% of the site and leave only a fragment of suitable habitat, it may now be lost from this area.

On May 9<sup>th</sup> 2016 it was reported from East Wickham open Space by Purnendu Roy who said 'the butterflies were observed settling on Maple/Sycamore and Oak trees, between 3-4 metres in full sun (between 1pm and 2.30pm) ..... [in] very sheltered locations with trees and bushes surrounding [them and] acting as wind break.' I saw my first ever individual of this species at Thames Road Wetland on 20<sup>th</sup> May, and possibly two on the 21<sup>st</sup>.

It is too early to tell whether there is a real expansion in the range of this species in the Borough or whether there is simply a greater, and better-informed observer effort.



Green Hairstreak on Erith Southern Marsh.  
13<sup>th</sup> May 2016. (Mike Robinson)

**Purple Hairstreak (*Quercusia quercus*)** – Probably overlooked because adults fly and chase each other around the canopies of Oak trees, usually late on sunny afternoons. It had long been known they were at Bursted Woods and Lesnes Abbey Woods, but a targeted check of other sites with mature Oaks has shown they can be found almost anywhere where a few such trees occur. My recent records include Franks Park, Barnehurst Golf Course, Grasmere Road allotment site, Hall Place North, by the Shuttle at Beth's bridge, Bexley Park Wood and Danson Park. The best places to see them in numbers are the eastern section of Martens Grove, and the north end of the glade at The Warren where they come fairly close to the ground late on sunny afternoons.

**White-letter Hairstreak (*Satyrrium w-album*)** – A UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority species. Few London records. Caterpillars feed on Elm, so the species was hit by the effects of Dutch Elm disease. Adults fly around the tops of Elms so are difficult to spot, though in Bexley they use regrowing suckers which rarely get beyond about 30 feet tall before starting to die back, which makes the job slightly easier. Adults occasionally come down to feed at flowers, especially privet and bramble.

The species was a Bexley Council BAP species until this part of the plan was deleted due to resource constraints. At that time it was only recorded from woodland at Footscray Meadows. Again, targeted recording has found more populations – I have discovered it at Moat Lane in Slade Green, on Barnehurst Golf course and by Bursted Woods. It is likely that more can be located with the required effort, as there are a number of other areas with decent amounts of suckering Elm. Franks Park and Burnt Oak Lane by Sidcup Golf course look promising, but I have yet to find any at these sites. For advice on surveying for this species see:

[http://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/w-album/w-album\\_tips.php](http://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk/w-album/w-album_tips.php)



White-letter Hairstreak at Foots Cray Meadows. July 2015. (Mike Robinson)

**Small Copper (*Lycaena phlaeas*)** – My favourite butterfly. Small, colourful, almost always seen only in ones or twos, and then only occasionally. Not something you can really set out to look for, though acid grassland sites offer the best prospect as Common Sorrel and Sheep's Sorrel are the favoured caterpillar food plants. Sometimes appears in gardens.

**Brown Argus (*Aricia agestis*)** - Calcareous grassland is the typical habitat, but it can be found elsewhere. Not particularly common in London as whole. Two were identified at East Wickham Open Space in July 2011 by an expert Lepidopterist at a Friends Group butterfly recording meeting, who noted this was the first time he had seen them here. In the last couple of years it has been recorded again at EWOS, also Crossness, in the Joydens Wood area and there were two possibles at Thames Road Wetland in 2015. Mike Robinson saw a male at Crayford Rough in July 2015. May be under-recorded due to similarity to female Common Blues.



Brown Argus, Crossness . June 2015. Picture to left shows diagnostic 'colon' spot pattern in middle of the leading edge of the hindwing. (Mike Robinson)



**Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*)** – The most widespread of the Blue butterflies, but not as common as one might imagine, usually only seen in modest numbers at any one time. London-wide data since 1989 indicates a decline in numbers. Most likely to be found in open unimproved grassland sites, but will wander into gardens some distance from these, where it flies much closer to the ground than the Holly Blue. Preferred caterpillar foodplant is Common Bird's-foot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) but some other legumes will be used.

**Holly Blue (*Celastrina argiolus*)** – The most frequent Blue in gardens, though usually flying singly. More of a 'powder blue' colour than the Common Blue, with only a few small spots on the undersides of the wings. It tends to fly above 6 feet from the ground, round the tops of bushes, making circuits of a particular area. The spring generation of caterpillars feed mainly on Holly, and the summer generation Ivy, though other species are used.

## Nymphalidae - Fritillaries, Nymphalids & Browns

**Comma Butterfly (*Polyommatus c-album*)** – Frequent and widely distributed in Bexley. Likely to be encountered along hedgerows and woodland edges, and will launch attacks on other passing insects from its favoured perch. Will come to gardens to feed on plants such as Buddleia.

**Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*)** – A long-distance migrant that each year spreads north, through successive generations, from the desert fringes of North Africa, the Middle East, and central Asia, recolonising continental Europe, Britain and Ireland. Recent radar studies have shown that many start heading south again in autumn, but out of sight at high altitude. They cannot (as yet) survive our winters. There was a big influx in 2009, but even then numbers, certainly in the north-east of Bexley, were not that great. Since then I have seen only a very few around the Borough. Another major arrival was predicted for 2015, but appears to have passed Bexley by, with only occasional individuals being seen, including at Crossness and Thames Road Wetland.





Painted Lady. Crossness, July 2015. (Mike Robinson)

**Peacock Butterfly (*Inachis io*)** – A familiar and widespread species whose caterpillars feed on Nettles. Now the Borough's most common 'coloured' (not brown or white) butterfly early in the year, when adults emerge from hibernation. Crossness and Braeburn Park are good places to see numbers of these insects early in the year, as opposed to occasional specimens in gardens at that time.

**Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*)** – A distinctive black, red and white butterfly. Primarily a migrant from North Africa and continental Europe, it now appears to be over-wintering in southern England. Often the earliest and latest butterfly species to be seen in the year. A strong flier, it will turn up anywhere, including in gardens.



Red Admiral. Crossness, July 2015. (Ursula Keene)

**Small Tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*)** - Back in the 1970s and 1980s by far the commonest 'coloured' garden butterfly in the Borough, it has declined significantly since, with part of the explanation probably being the effects of a parasite that does best in warmer parts of the country. There may be a modest recovery underway (supported from London-wide monitoring), as I saw the odd specimen at a number of sites across the Borough in spring 2014. The most reliable area to see them over the last couple of years has been Crossness and along the lower Cray and out onto Crayford Marshes.



Small Tortoiseshell. Thames Road Wetland. (Chris Rose)

**Silver-washed Fritillary (*Argynnis paphia*)** – A butterfly of broad-leaved woodland. The caterpillar foodplant is the Common Dog Violet. The species is considered to be extending its range again after a decline during the twentieth century, but has only been recorded from a handful of sites in London. During 2015 there were sightings from Joydens Wood, but with the Borough boundary passing through woodland, observers were not one hundred percent certain they had seen it on the London side of the line. Its presence in Bexley was, however, later confirmed by Joe Johnson, who saw one on Cocksure Lane in August 2015.



Silver-washed Fritillary in Joydens Wood, 2015. (Ralph Todd)

**White Admiral (*Limenitis camilla*)** – GiGL has a record of this woodland species from Gatton's plantation in 2003, but the status of that record is 'unverified'. The species increased dramatically in the 1920s, but has declined significantly in the UK in the last 20 years for unknown reasons. The London Natural History Society received sightings of this species from only three sites within the capital for 2014. The larval foodplant is Honeysuckle, which is prevalent in the woodland at Lesnes Abbey. On June 24<sup>th</sup> 2015 Ralph Todd and Ian Stewart spotted a White Admiral on the woodland edge of a ride bordering Chalk Wood, which strongly suggests that it occurs inside the Bexley border, but much of the boundary with Dartford (Kent) in this area falls within woodland so it can be difficult to be sure which side of the line one is on. It is hoped that the White Admiral can be unequivocally confirmed as a Bexley butterfly during 2016.

## Sub-family Satyridae

**Gatekeeper (*Pyronia tithonus*)** – A delightful medium-sized brown butterfly with orange patches on the wings. Caterpillars feed on grasses and in suitable habitat the adults can occur in large numbers in summer. Widespread in Bexley. Adults love the Marjoram in my Barnehurst garden and allotment.

**Marbled White (*Melanargia galathea*)** - The strongest populations are found on chalk or limestone grasslands, but other habitats including railway embankments and coastal grassland are used. Caterpillars feed on various grasses. The species appears to be spreading in the UK. Most records from within London were in the west of the capital, but it is now turning up in a variety of other locations. No twentieth century records have been found for Bexley, so when Mike Robinson found and photographed one at Hollyhill Open Space on 24th June 2015 this appeared to be the first ever (modern) sighting. I managed to see it there the next day. However, he was quickly 'trumped' twice. It soon transpired that Ralph Todd had seen one at Crayford Marshes on 4th June 2015 but had only got a fuzzy photograph and had not kept it. Then Mike was discussing the matter with John Archer who, it turned out, had seen one at Erith Marshes, on the Thames path near the original Crossness sewage works, on 7th July 2010. He thought he'd written it in the Crossness Nature Reserve logbook, but seems not to have done so. The latest LNHS butterfly count data for London (2014) says the Marbled White figure was the highest since reliable information for the species first became available in 1997.

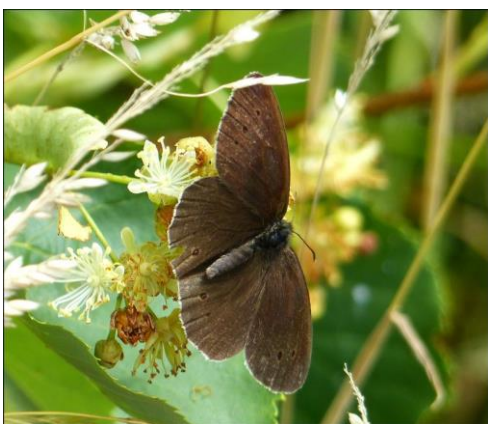
In respect of south-east London, a report on the butterflies of Blackheath/Greenwich Park states that it was seen there in 2012 and then 2014, whereas a previous study published in 2009 did not mention the species, and that it was also seen at Greenwich Ecology Park in 2014. The author took the view that it could become established in the area. In 2014 it was also recorded in Jubilee Country Park, Bromley. If either of the individuals seen in Bexley in 2015 was a pregnant female, perhaps it can start to get a permanent foothold here. It is certainly worth looking out for again at the two sites where it was seen in 2014, and elsewhere, in 2016. The distinctive black and white check wing pattern means it is unlikely to be mistaken for anything else.



This Marbled White, pictured at Hollyhill on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2015, turned out to be the third one recorded in Bexley. (Mike Robinson)

**Meadow Brown (*Maniola jurtina*)** – Larger than the Gatekeeper and brown with less prominent orange areas. Tends to land on the ground amongst herbage and shut its wings, so easily lost sight of. Adults have seemed less numerous in recent years, but are still likely to be encountered in any open area with long mixed grasses, on which the caterpillars feed, and can be found in gardens.

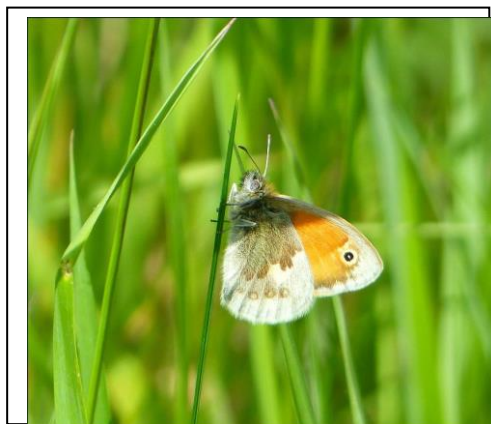
**Ringlet (*Aphantopus hyperantus*)** – A more chocolatey-brown than the Meadow Brown, and will fly in overcast weather. Has a row of dark, pale-ringed spots on the undersides of the wings, hence the name. Infrequent across London, records suggest that it is a relative newcomer locally that is now spreading rapidly in Bexley. The earliest record I am aware of is from East Wickham Open Space. In 2011 I found it on the old allotment site on the west side of Bexley Park Woods, on grassland between the school and woodland at the east end of Lamorbey Lake and in 2012 as a single individual in The Dell, Slade Green, by the former Larnier Road estate. In 2014 I found it at a number of additional sites, these being Lesnes Abbey Woods meadows, Thames Road Wetland, Footscray Meadows, Barnehurst Golf Course and Streamway. Karen Sutton says her sighting at Crossness in April 2014 is the first record there that she can recall. In 2015 it was recorded for the first time in the Chalk / Joydens Wood area and at Danson Park, Grasmere Road allotment site, Hollyhill Open Space and Martens Grove and by Mike Robinson at Crayford Rough. It now seems likely to turn up anywhere that matches its favoured habitat of long grass and scattered shrubs near woodland margins, but don't expect to find more than a few flying together.



Ringlet.  
Barnehurst Golf  
Course, July 2015.  
(Mike Robinson)



**Small Heath (*Coenonympha pamphilus*)** – With its wings shut, which they are when at rest, it looks similar to the Gatekeeper, but is smaller and looks paler in flight. Although widespread nationally, with a broadly stable total range, many colonies have disappeared in recent years and it is listed as a BAP priority for research purposes. There are not many colonies in London. In Bexley I have only seen it at Barnehurst Golf Course on the ‘wildlife area’ on the north side, one individual at the bottom of Perry Street, which may have been blown there from the golf course and on Crayford Marshes. Mike Robinson saw the species at Upper College Farm on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2016, with Ian Stewart, and took several photographs. It now transpires that Ian first saw it here about 3 years ago.



The Small Heath at Upper College Farm.  
26<sup>th</sup> May 2016. (Mike Robinson)

Other dry grassy areas should be checked for the species to get a better idea of its status in Bexley. East Wickham Open Space, for example, looks suitable for it. Marriott (1925) has it at Lesnes sometime during 1919-24.

**Speckled Wood (*Pararge aegeria*)** – This species has significantly increased in numbers and local range in Bexley, apparently since the late 1980's, since when it has become a frequent denizen of parks, allotment sites and gardens, as well as woodland.

## Family Pieridae Whites and Yellows

**Brimstone (*Gonepteryx rhamni*)** – The adult male, with its sulphur-yellow wings is distinctive, whilst the female is pale green to near-white. The caterpillars feed on leaves of Buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*) and Alder Buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*), and the species has probably benefitted from the widespread planting of these for native hedges.

The adults range widely, but I only occasionally see them in the Borough, and have only ever seen a few in the Barnehurst area. It was seen for the first time at Thames Road Wetland in May 2016 by both Joe Johnson initially, then Chris Rose on a later date, and one was photographed at Hall Place by Alan Jeffries that month.

**Large White (*Pieris brassicae*)** - Frequently encountered in gardens and on allotment sites. Eggs are often laid on cultivated Brassicas.

**Small White (*Pieris (Artogeia) rapae*)** – Frequently encountered in gardens and on allotment sites. Eggs are often laid on cultivated Brassicas.





Small White. Barnehurst Golf Course, July 2015. (Mike Robinson).

**Green-veined White (*Pieris (Artogeia) napi*)** - Frequently encountered in gardens, on allotment sites and other kinds of fairly open spaces. Eggs tend to be laid on wild foodplants that prefer damper ground, and not cultivated Brassicas. Mike Robinson saw the first Green-veined White reported from anywhere in the UK in 2015, with his record on 30<sup>th</sup> March at Crossness.



Green-veined White. Barnehurst Golf Course, July 2015. (Mike Robinson).

**Orange Tip (*Anthocharis cardamines*)** – A widespread species of damper semi-natural open spaces and sometimes gardens across the Borough, with adults on the wing in early spring. Caterpillars feed on various wild Crucifers and, in gardens, can be found on Honesty. Joe Johnson sightings during 2016 included Thames Road Wetland, Lower Cray, Crayford Rough, Hall Place, Love Lane allotments, along the River Shuttle on Riverdale Road at Bursted Woods.

**Clouded Yellow (*Colias crocea*)** – A migratory European butterfly that often visits the UK and Ireland, but individuals are often few and far between. The most recent Bexley records are of a single specimen seen by myself and others by the Thames whilst we were on a LNHS botanical field trip at Crayford Marshes on August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013, then Mike Robinson seeing the species at Crossness in 2015, where there was a single record from both July and August .

## **SOME OTHERS TO LOOK OUT FOR - THOUGH THERE ARE NO RECENT (KNOWN) RECORDS FROM BEXLEY**

**Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megera*)** - Populations in London declined rapidly from the 1990s. This is a Section 41 species of principal importance under the NERC Act in England (widespread but rapidly declining). It used to be fairly frequent in my Barnehurst garden north of the railway station in the 1980s, at which time there was no sign of the Speckled Wood. Now the opposite is true. One was seen at Rainham in 2011, and there is a report that 2 were seen on May 8th 2016 at Swanscombe marshes. The Thames-side fringes of the Borough offer the best, if very slim, prospects of finding one.



Wall Brown – sadly no longer seen in Bexley, but might a wandering individual turn up sometime? (Richard Winston)

**Chalkhill Blue (*Polyommatus coridon*)** a single insect was seen and photographed at Hyde Vale in Greenwich in 2013, far from its natural habitat of chalk downland.

**Long-tailed Blue (*Lampides boeticus*)**. A migrant from the Mediterranean with a handful typically reaching UK shores each year. There was a considerable influx into the UK in both 2013 and 2015, with evidence of breeding. One was spotted at East India Dock Basin in 2012 by regular Crossness birdwatcher John Archer, who is currently the Tower Hamlets Council Biodiversity Officer.

## VAGRANTS

**Large Tortoiseshell (*Nymphalis polychloros*)** - Once a UK resident , now vagrant only, though sightings in southern England since 2007 suggest recolonisation may be occurring.

**Scarce or Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell (*Nymphalis xanthomelas*)**. In July 2014 sightings of this predominantly central and eastern European species were reported from a number of counties in south-east England, following an influx in the Netherlands. Some over-wintered into 2015, so may have subsequently bred.

Various other species turn up in the UK very occasionally, such as the **Camberwell Beauty (*Nymphalis antiopa*)**.

The **Geranium Bronze (*Cacyreus marshalli*)** is an accidental import on ornamental plants from southern Africa, but hasn't yet been reported from Bexley.

More exotic species can crop up as escapes from breeders .

---

ENDS