

Sussex: The Photographic Atlas

The Butterflies of Sussex

Butterfly distribution recording in Sussex and the 1990–1994 atlas

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Michael Blencowe

On 22 May 1770, William Markwick, a 31-year-old country gentleman from Caxton in East Sussex, swung his net and caught a butterfly. His diary for that Tuesday almost 120 years ago notes his capture of "the Royal William or Swallowtail if it be a butterfly". Markwick's report of a Swallowtail, with details of date, species, location and observer, was the first complete butterfly record for Sussex. A report of a Swallowtail a year earlier in Ringmer does not contain an exact date, so although the observer, a certain Reverend Gilbert White of Silchester, may be celebrated as the "father of modern ecology", he missed out on the coveted title of "first butterfly recorder in Sussex".

Back to Markwick's day it wasn't just data that was being collected. Throughout the following two centuries the butterflies themselves were collected for science and study, pleasure and profit. It was James Jenner of Lewes who is credited with undertaking the first large-scale survey of our country's butterflies. Jenner's *List of the Macro Lepidoptera of East Sussex* was published in 1886 and remains a milestone in our understanding of the county's butterflies and moths. To complement Jenner's work, William Fletcher of Worthing collated a similar list for West Sussex during the same year. By the end of the 1800s, Sussex was nationally renowned as one of Britain's top butterfly-hunting destinations and both resident and visiting Victorians roamed our Downs and woodlands, looking for specimens to complete and enhance their collections. It wasn't until well into the 20th century that the butterfly collectors themselves became a vanishing species, and those enthusiasts who were content to simply capture what they observed in pocket notebooks and on camera film became increasingly widespread and common.

These butterfly records, amassed through the centuries by both observers and collectors, languished in private and public pinned collections, aging notebooks and local natural history society reports. The herculean task of unearthing and verifying these records has been undertaken by Colin Pratt, County Recorder of Butterflies and Moths for East and West Sussex. Over many years Colin has hunted out these scattered records, collated them and transformed them into an incredible resource. The results of Colin's research were published in a book in 1981, electronically on

Sussex Branch started to take shape and other enthusiasts joined him, including Dennis Dey who became the Branch's first recording officer. Butterfly sightings (some including hand-drawn maps) were posted to Dennis in Hassocks and he extracted dates and localities, keeping a card filing system for each species. From this paper database Dennis could compile his butterfly reports for the Branch's newsletters. Dennis recalls that, "When the Branch started, people just didn't have access to computers". Three decades later, Dennis feels a certain pride in still never having owned one.

A technological leap forward occurred when Jim Steedman, who with his wife Judith was an early supporter of the Branch, read a Sussex diageny survey report, which also included hand-drawn distribution maps. "The maps looked absolutely dreadful! They certainly didn't appeal to

my desire for neatness!" recalls Jim, who at the time was a consultant structural engineer. "I thought surely I can do better than that; so I did!" Jim put his computer knowledge and Apple II to work. He wrote a program to convert the dragonfly records into electronic data and revamped their maps.

Happy with the result, Jim then easily adapted his program to receive inputted butterfly data. For the first time the Branch could store its butterfly data electronically and quickly generate important information, such as annual 'first and last' dates and current distribution maps.

By the end of the 1980s, these maps were highlighting that large areas of Sussex had not been adequately surveyed for quite some time. Some members of the Branch became interested in undertaking a systematic survey of butterflies throughout the entire county, with the intention



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