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 Photographs and other material kindly supplied by John Harding (including the front cover photo), Mark Eccleston, Danny Beath, Roger West, Philip Ede, Toby Neal, Squadron Leader Ray Glass, John Baker, Richard Watson, Reg Moreland, Eleanor Cooke, Lucy Lewis, Stephen Lewis, Janet Vernon, John Davis and Shropshire Wildlife Trust. Attempts to trace the owner of the old painting for permission to reproduce it were unsuccessful - apologies to whoever is concerned.  
 Butterfly Conservation  
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**Why are butterflies important?**  
 Butterflies are amongst the most beautiful and popular groups of our wildlife. They respond rapidly to change and are good indicators of the health of the environment. They are also an important food source for many animals such as birds. In recent years the numbers of butterflies in the UK have significantly declined. We need your help recording butterflies so we have up-to-date information on the locations of butterfly colonies to help us direct conservation priorities and action. If you would like to get involved then please contact us.  
**Join Butterfly Conservation**  
 Butterfly Conservation is the UK charity taking action to save butterflies, moths and their habitats. We work with a wide range of partners to carry out this important work. You can directly support us in this vital work by joining Butterfly Conservation. With an annual membership you will receive an interesting and informative welcome pack, a colourful magazine *Butterfly* three times a year and membership of your local branch of Butterfly Conservation. The West Midlands Branch carries out practical conservation work, runs public butterfly and moth events and members receive a lively newsletter entitled *The Comma* three times a year. For a membership form or for further information, please contact us or visit our website.



**A Butterfly Conservation Reserve**

Butterfly Conservation is conserving the last sanctuary in the Midlands for the threatened Silver-studded Blue butterfly, restoring the land to heathland and grassland to the benefit of wildlife, the holders of common rights and visitors.

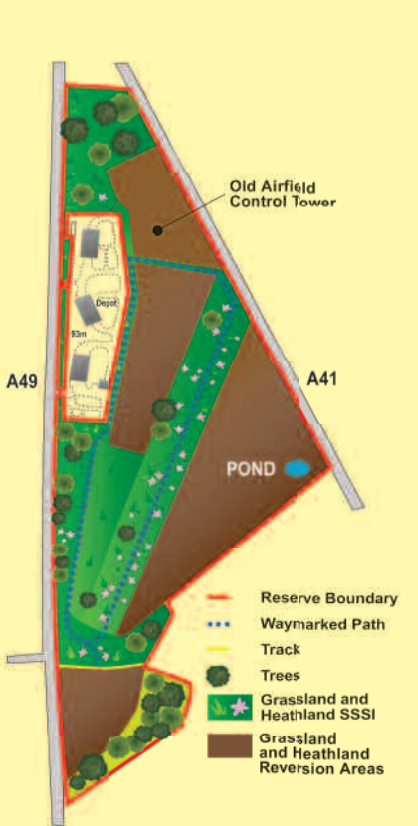
**Prees Heath Common Reserve**



Butterfly Conservation's reserve comprises just under half of Prees Heath Common, covering the 60 hectares (148 acres) that lie between the A49 and the A41, two miles south of Whitchurch in North Shropshire.



The Silver-studded Blue butterflies fly in the second half of June and throughout July. It can be seen on the heathland and grassland parts of the reserve, especially the old airfield runway and perimeter road.



Rights of Common to graze animals, and in some cases to remove dead wood and sand, are registered with nine local properties. For many years however commoners had found it difficult to exercise their grazing rights because of the busy roads, the arable cultivations and the overall neglect of the Common. Since Butterfly Conservation purchased the reserve in 2006 this situation has already improved significantly on this half of the Common.

The Common is also Open Access land under the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000. All parts of it, not just designated footpaths, are open to walkers for enjoyment and quiet recreation. Unauthorised vehicles, including motorbikes and caravans, unauthorised shooting, camping and fires are not permitted. Dogs should be kept under control, especially from 1st March until 31st July to protect ground nesting birds.

The map shows the reserve boundary, the Site of Special Scientific Interest, the heathland/grassland reversion areas and the locations of the former RAF control tower and pond. The broken blue line shows a waymarked path (2.5km) offering the best opportunities to see the Silver-studded Blues in the season. Attached to the outside of the restored control tower are seven information panels detailing various aspects of the history of the Common.

Certain parts of the reserve, principally those areas which escaped the cultivations which started in the 1960s, provide heathland and acidic grassland habitat for the Silver-studded Blue. These areas are legally protected as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

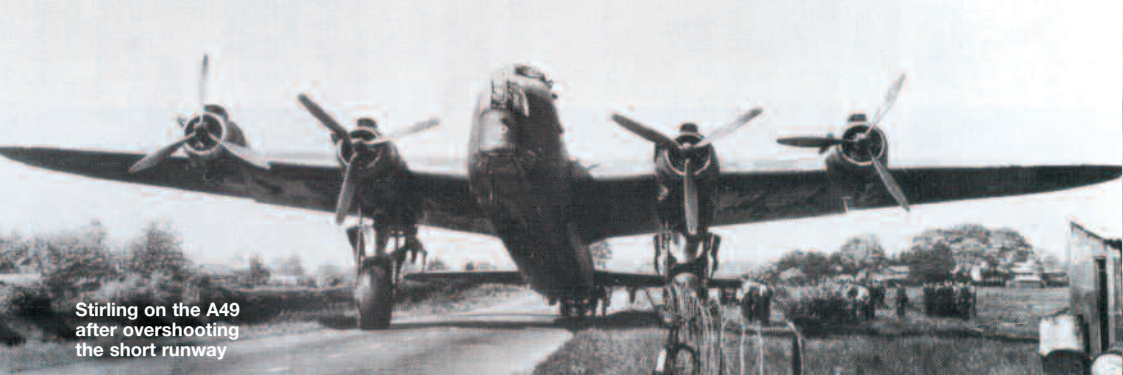


Each adult butterfly lives for just a few days, and they rarely venture very far from where they emerged, spending time mating and taking nectar from flowers. In the evenings and during cooler weather they gather in communal roosts on shrubs.

After mating the females lay eggs singly on heather, or sometimes bird's-foot trefoil or gorse, close to the ground. The egg remains in place throughout the winter with a tiny caterpillar already formed inside it. These hatch the following spring, and the caterpillars feed on the plant's new growth through April and May. The caterpillars produce sugary secretions which attract Black Ants, and these protect the caterpillars from predation by spiders and being parasitized by small wasps which would inject their eggs into the caterpillar. The caterpillars and ants have a symbiotic (mutually beneficial) relationship.

The caterpillars pupate under the ground in the ants' nests for about 6 weeks until mid June/early July, when they emerge as a butterfly early in the morning. The butterfly climbs a stem of vegetation and, still protected by the ants which continue to feed on fluids produced by the butterfly, spends about an hour pumping up its wings before it is ready to fly (see front cover photo). As the Black Ant is crucial to the survival of the butterfly, the habitat management on Prees Heath must also cater for the ants' needs.

The Silver-studded Blue is so-called because of the tiny silvery 'studs' in the middle of the black spots near the edge of the undersides of the hindwings. The uppersides of the wings of the males are darker blue in colour than those of the Common Blue, which is also present on the reserve, and have a thicker black band near the edges. The uppersides of the wings of the females are mainly brown with some blue scales and small orange markings.



Stirling on the A49 after overshooting the short runway



## Heritage of Prees Heath

The Common has been used for many years as a public space for people to enjoy the open air, and as a cross-roads it has been a meeting-place for people for centuries.

## History of the Common

Also known at times as Whitchurch Heath Common, Prees Heath Common has a fascinating past. Over three thousand years ago Bronze Age people chose this place for the burial of cremated human remains. Later the Romans built roads over it that eventually became the A41 and A49.

**The common was a muster point for King John's army in the thirteenth century for his invasion of Wales to fight Llewellyn and his rebels, and also for Royalist troops under Prince Rupert in the Civil War.**

In World War One the Common was used as a trench warfare training camp for infantry soldiers, with huts covering much of the site, accommodating around 30,000 people. Many went from here to fight and die in the trenches on the frontlines. Amongst those stationed at the camp was the father of reggae singer Bob Marley, Captain Norval Sinclair Marley. The camp was also used as a huge army 'demob' centre at the end of the war.

World War Two saw the Common become a tented internment camp for over 1,000 foreign nationals, and then a camp for Italian Prisoners of War, before the bomber training airfield opened in 1942, called RAF Tilstock. Stirlings, Whitleys, Wellingtons and Halifaxes were all based here, and Horsa gliders used in the D-day landings. Several servicemen stationed here were killed in airplane crashes in the area and further afield.



Former RAF control tower



Postcard from 1916

After the war the airfield was decommissioned, although the concrete runways remained in place until the 1970s when they were broken up to prevent illegal motor vehicle use. Not all the pieces of concrete were removed, however, and this prevented the runway and the perimeter road from being ploughed up in the same way as much of the rest of the site. This luckily preserved some heathland habitat for the Silver-studded Blue.



Mr Reg Moreland, (right) one of the Prees Heath commoners



**Gypsies with horse-drawn wagons used to be a regular feature of the Common, always leaving the site in good condition. In the early 20th century horse races and family picnics took place on the Common, which would have been much more peaceful before heavy traffic began to use the A49 and A41. It was reinstated after WW1 but not after WW2, and the Prees Heath commoners found it increasingly difficult to exercise their grazing rights as much of the land was let for intensive farming. The old painting (above) pre-dates WW1 and shows how it was closely grazed open heathland.**

When a planning application for the extraction of sand and gravel from the Common was submitted in the early 1990s, local people, conservation organisations and the Prees Heath commoners established a 'Save Prees Heath Common' campaign that achieved national publicity. A book entitled 'Who Killed Prees Heath?' by Eleanor Cooke was published, poetically describing the place and ways of life that had all but vanished.

A public appeal to purchase part of the Common as a reserve was launched by Butterfly Conservation, Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Cheshire Wildlife Trust in 1995, with the support of the Prees Heath commoners and local residents. After many setbacks and frustrations, however, it was not until 2006, with vital Landfill Tax Credit Scheme funding through GrantScape, that the reserve was finally purchased by Butterfly Conservation. The restored reserve area will enable people to enjoy the open heathland that Prees Heath once was, and allow common grazing rights to be exercised again.



Small Copper



Small Heath



A former arable field restored to heathland since 2006

## The Natural History of the Common

The foundations of the heath were laid down around 16,000 years ago when sand and gravel was deposited at the end of the last ice age.

**As a result of these extensive glacial deposits, with gravels formed from stone from all over the north of Britain, lowland sandy heaths were once numerous and extensive in North-east Shropshire. Prees Heath is one of the few surviving remnants, with most of the others having been converted to agriculture, forestry, developed or simply left to become woodland.**

As well as the Silver-studded Blue the reserve is rich in other wildlife. Uncommon plants such as Pyramidal Orchid, Slender St John's Wort and Heath Dog-violet can be found. Two species of heather are present - Bell Heather, which flowers in midsummer when the Silver-studded Blue can often be seen sipping nectar from its pink flowers, and Ling or Common Heather, whose purple flowers can be seen in late summer and autumn. Small Copper and Small Heath butterflies and a number of day-flying moths are present. Clouded Yellow butterflies, migrants from the continent, are seen in good summers.

A great variety of birds use the Common. You can see Buzzards, Kestrels, Hobbies and Sparrowhawks overhead, and, from spring through summer, hear Skylarks as they rise. Declining farmland birds such as Yellowhammers rely on these habitats, as do Curlew which nest nearby. In winter, flocks of Lapwings, Starlings, Redwings and Fieldfares use the Common. Green and Great-spotted Woodpeckers are also present, and we hope one day to see a Nightjar on the heath.

Foxes use the site, and rabbits are in abundance, grazing the grassy areas and curbing scrub invasion, but in places also preventing heather from regenerating. polecats, stoats and common lizards are all present.



Heath Dog-violet



Pyramidal Orchid



Yellowhammer

## Restoring the Heath

Large parts of the reserve, and the rest of the Common, lost its heathland through cultivation over 50 years ago.

**For several years before the purchase of the reserve large quantities of chicken manure were spread over parts of the common. This greatly enriched the soil, thereby making reversion to heathland and acid grassland, which need nutrient poor soils, a very challenging project.**

**Common Ragwort and thistles, both valuable nectar sources and foodplants for many insects, thrive on these enriched soils, but they are 'notifiable agricultural weeds' and have to be controlled.**

With expert guidance and thanks to funding from GrantScape and Natural England, Butterfly Conservation embarked on a long-term project to revert the former cultivated areas to heathland and acidic grassland as they were before conversion to arable land. The aim is also to improve and extend existing habitats for the Silver-studded Blue and for wildlife in general. A crucial first step has been to invert the soil profile to effectively bury the enriched topsoil and bring the sand and gravel subsoil to the surface.

This surface will provide much more suitable conditions for heathland plants and grasses. Common Heather brash containing seed from Cannock Chase and the Long Mynd has been applied, as well as wildflower and grass seed of local provenance. Bell Heather seed has been sown, and plugs have been planted by volunteers. In 2014 we found evidence that the Silver-studded Blue is using one of the restored areas for breeding. A pond has been excavated in an area known to have been marshy prior to the construction of the airfield.

Existing remnants of heathland and the reversion areas are affected by birch and bramble scrub, and other invasive plants have become established in places. The restoration work therefore also involves gradually clearing away what is not wanted or needed, and a Reserve Support Group comprising Butterfly Conservation West Midlands Branch members, Prees Heath commoners, local residents and volunteers helps in this vital work. New volunteers are always welcome. Impressive progress has been made, but a lot more remains to be done and to maintain what has been achieved. Thanks to your help, this part of Prees Heath Common is being renewed.



Volunteers harvesting Bell Heather seed on the reserve for sowing on the reversion areas