

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 16-May-17 03:59 AM GMT

A trawl through old family picture found this (school photo).

Me in 1947 😊



Well, it amused me. It was about that time I got my copy of "South" . (The Butterflies of the British Isles).

Jack

Re: Jack Harrison

by MikeOxon, 16-May-17 11:16 AM GMT

Good to see you've emerged from under the ice-cap at last, Jack 😊

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 16-May-17 05:28 PM GMT

It's not that cold an area despite being 57.5 degs north where I live. Local micro climate is good for arable farming. Certainly a very sunny area and too dry at times. For example a mere 2.00 mms rain so far this month. Today reached 20C.

But I do admit, this area is not especially good for butterflies. At the moment, lots of Green-veined Whites, a scattering of Orange Tips plus a few - very few - Speckled Woods. A good birding area though. In the past week I have watched Slavonian Grebes and Black-throated Divers on their breeding lochs. A little adventurous tomorrow when i am going to visit familiar territory on the east Aberdeenshire coast; hopefully fours species of Tern, Guillemots, Razorbills and Puffins and maybe, the Ythan Estuary's resident King Eider mixing it with the commoners.

Jack

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 21-Jun-17 02:24 PM GMT

Bird i/d help please. LBJ size of Chaffinch. Melodic three note song.
Jack





Re: Jack Harrison

by bugboy, 21-Jun-17 03:02 PM GMT

Whitethroat 😊

Re: Jack Harrison

by Padfield, 21-Jun-17 03:12 PM GMT

That's what I thought, but what about the melodic, three-note song? Whitethroats can hardly be described as melodious. Is this a young bird?

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 21-Jun-17 03:53 PM GMT

My first thought at the time was Whitethroat. But when I checked on bird sings/calls, it was nothing like it. I have to wear hearing aids these days and one of the many drawbacks is great difficulty in determining where the sound is coming from. So maybe another hidden bird was doing the calling.

It's very difficult to remember sounds but as best I can recall, two shorter notes followed by a slightly longer one. Pitch lower than say Blackbird. Very persistent and musical.

Just had a Red Admiral in the garden watching me cut the grass. While not as hot as in the south (here 21C), I had to give up only halfway through due to the humidity (dewpoint 17C).

Jack

Re: Jack Harrison

by bugboy, 21-Jun-17 04:08 PM GMT

I guess it's not particularly melodic when compared to some of the other Warblers, but it's not unpleasant (also maybe Jack's version of 'melodic' has been altered from listening to too many bagpipes! 😊😄)

Doesn't look like a young bird, can't see any sign of a gape.

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/bird-and-wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/w/whitethroat/>

Re: Jack Harrison

by Sonam Dorji, 22-Jun-17 09:30 AM GMT

Hi Jack, Nice to hear from you after a long time. It is nice to have you back!!!

rgds,
Sonam

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 22-Jun-17 09:53 AM GMT

I never really disappeared. But I am not as mobile as I was (now 78) so can't walk long distances in search of butterflies. In any case – and I knew this before moving here – this part of Scotland isn't noted for a huge range of species. Our commonest species are Green-veined White, Scotch Argus, Ringlet and Peacock. Apparently Ringlet and Peacock are relatively recent colonists to the north of Scotland.

As the south of England becomes almost too hot, I would expect more butterflies to find our area with its cooler but sunny climate more to their liking. I anticipate the arrival of Commas before too long. Birds are already showing the trend of finding happy homes in the north. House Martins and Swifts are in far great numbers this year. And – not entirely welcomed by everybody – far more Magpies this year having been surprisingly scarce over previous two years.

Jack

Re: Jack Harrison

by MikeOxon, 22-Jun-17 10:30 AM GMT

Very interesting to follow the trends as our climate changes, Jack. It would also be interesting to try and determine the routes that the various species follow as they move Northwards. I'd guess that they tend to use coastal routes rather than crossing the Grampian mountains.

Mike

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 22-Jun-17 12:15 PM GMT

Mike: [quote] I'd guess that they tend to use coastal routes rather than crossing the Grampian mountains. I had presumed exactly the same.

35 years ago I lived in the Aberdeen area. Peacock was an extreme rarity then. Ringlets were very localised and I knew of just three colonies, all quite near the River Don. Ringlet was far better established south of the Grampians, eg Perthshire,

So yes, the coastal route to colonisation is the most likely but the Great Glen offers another possibility. However, there are many locks on the Caledonian Canal [in the Great Glen] that could pose a barrier 🚧 I've observed *Homo so-called sapiens* attempting to negotiate the locks at Fort Augustus....as entertaining as butterfly watching. Maybe butterflies will find things easier 😊

Jack

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 09-Jul-17 06:49 PM GMT

70 years on

It is 70 years since my first real butterfly season, the fine summer of 1947. I was eight years old. Interest had begun two years earlier. However by 1947, I had a couple of "proper" books (Ford and South*). 1947 became a "big year".

**Blowing my own trumpet here. I won "South" as a school prize. I've still got it.*

Home was the outskirts of Great Yarmouth, Norfolk and within easy walking distance of the countryside. Dad was a newspaper reporter; Mum stayed at home and looked after my sister Jennifer (born in early 1947) and me. We would go out every fine afternoon – and there were many fine days that summer – to look for butterflies.

In those carefree days, I was frequently allowed out on my own provided I stayed close to home. Traffic was minimal and harmful grown-ups were still in the future. (But see later comments with reference to Clouded Yellows!) Building along the ribbon estate where I lived had been halted by World War 2 and there were a few gaps – excellent waste ground for finding butterflies. A two-house gap, perhaps 120 metres from home, was excellent. It even had a small bomb crater where the exposed sub-soil allowed different vegetation to thrive.

I have vague recollections of that bomb: it was probably the occasion when a house window was blown in. A line of small craters was visible long after the war, including the one in the "gap". Great Yarmouth was a naval base so a target for German bombers. However, I don't think the Luftwaffe particularly targeted 121 Burgh Road where I lived – more likely just poor aim when they were trying to hit the Royal Navy.

"The Gap" as we called it, was excellent. It was rough and full of wild flowers. A neighbouring garden even had a buddleia hanging over into the "Gap". I would spend hours here and although memories have naturally become coloured over the years, my "Gap" butterfly list ran something like this:

Large Skipper, Small Skipper

Small White, Large White, Green-veined White, Orange Tip

Small Tortoiseshell, Red Admiral, Peacock (on that buddleia)

*Meadow Brown, Ringlet, Hedge Brown (as I called it then and still prefer the name), Wall Brown (common in those days) and once or twice, Small Heath
Common Blue, Brown Argus (yes, I am sure of the identity), Small Copper*

I remember the first time I saw the underside of a Common Blue. As I didn't have a decent illustrated guide in 1946, I had no idea what a blue might be like underneath. I was entranced when I first saw it.

An elderly widow/spinster lived in the adjacent house. Mrs. Cobby's garden rivalled the Gap – never cultivated. It was a paradise. Moreover, the old lady

had terrible eyesight so I could sneak in unnoticed and chase Browns, Skippers and other regular species. Early one morning I caught a sparkling male Common Blue. I proudly took it to school in a jam jar to show the headmaster. To my great annoyance, he declared quite firmly that it was a moth. As an eight year old, I probably realised at that moment that adults weren't always right!

Along the roadsides and hedges near home, more in the nature of lanes in those days, Holly Blues (never common) were always exciting. Painted Ladies were occasional, although one dusty lane seemed to attract them – we called it "Painted Lady Lane". Graylings were scarce but regular near where a railway line crossed the track. It was only later that I realised the significance of the railway linear habitat. Many years later I found out that Graylings occurred in good numbers on the dunes at the north end of Great Yarmouth (known as North Denes) and also on some inland heathland, long since destroyed by a caravan camp, golf course and agricultural "improvement". (Belton Common)

In spite of suggestions that Commas did not occur in East Anglia in the 1940s, I found one or two as early as 1947. A real excitement was a Silver Washed Fritillary in the garden, no doubt a stray from woodland a few miles away (probably Fritton Woods, sadly private then and it still is to this day). Opposite the house on a tall privet hedge, I caught a tatty Purple Hairstreak, so tatty that it took a while to confirm that it wasn't a White-letter. Brimstones were to be found along the lanes but especially in the damper areas near the marshes. In fact although Green-veined Whites occurred in many locations, damp lanes near the marshes were the most reliable habitat

A Small Skipper in the garden annoyed my dad, a moderately keen gardener. I quoted from some source or other that they liked overgrown tall rough grass. Dad was proud of his lawn.

My first encounter with Ringlets had been the previous year August 1946 but by then they were very worn. I couldn't wait for 1947. I had first seen Orange Tips also in 1946 and caught what mum and I called a "freak": it had no orange. My only identification guide then was a few pages in Children's Encyclopaedia that showed only male Orange Tips. Mum was very enthusiastic but had no more knowledge than I had so it was a wonderful upbringing learning together.

Mum was patient and long suffering. During our afternoon butterfly walks we would often meet the "Butterfly Postman" who was making his afternoon rounds on his bike (yes, two deliveries in those days). I suspect – although of course only with hindsight – that he had a bit of a soft spot for my 32 year old mother; maybe the appeal was mutual? I liked the "Butterfly Postman": he was rather like an extra uncle who took a kindly interest in my butterflies. One exciting afternoon: "Look at this!" he said. Resting on his post bag was a Clouded Yellow. I had never seen one before but knew immediately what it was. He had caught it near a gate into a field. Next day of course, Mum and I had to return to that lane and the gateway. And there they were: dozens of Clouded Yellows dancing over a Lucerne field. I bravely trespassed (I knew I wasn't supposed to) and caught a couple. Joy.

It was by now time to return to school after the long summer holiday. Next weekend I saw Clouded Yellows again. One exciting day in the garden next to my Grandmother's was a Comma on Michaelmas daisies. I was scared to trespass this time so that Comma lived another day.

Spring 1948 gave me my first and only Large Tortoiseshell on "Painted Lady Lane". I know the exact date: it was Cup final Day and records show it to be 24 April. Over the next few years, Dad learnt to drive (after several failed tests!) so we could explore further afield. I can still "see" my first Swallowtail at Catfield Fen. Near Sheringham, Pretty Corner Woods had Pearl-bordered Fritillaries – hardly a surprise but a pleasure nonetheless – and Green Hairstreaks (Greenies have remained firm favourites ever since). In July, again no great surprise for that era, I found High Brown Fritillary there. Around 1952 I caught a White Admiral near some Broadland woods (they didn't apparently occur in that part of East Anglia then: wrong. Compare Comma).

When we went south to the Suffolk coastal heathlands (Sandlings) Silver-studded Blues were so abundant as not to be worth a mention. They must have occurred on some Norfolk heaths much closer to home but I never saw them there. Similarly, Small Blue probably occurred somewhere (I heard mention of a quarry at Aldeby in south-east Norfolk)

There were some surprising absences. I didn't discover the dune habitat of north east Norfolk (eg Horsey, Winterton) so Dark Green Fritillary had to wait many years: it had simply not occurred to me that butterflies might thrive very close to the sea. I never saw Speckled Woods and can only presume they were genuinely absent in those days. The first time I met Speckled Woods in East Anglia was Thetford Forest in the early 1980s. Of course they are now widespread. White-letter Hairstreak eluded me then and has in truth never been easy over the past 60 years.

So how have things changed in the past 70 years? Marbled White is moving fast so must be getting close. Essex Skipper has probably been present all along but was missed (although I was aware of the difference compared to Small). Chalkhill Blue seems to have gained a foothold in the north of the county (and I am far from convinced it isn't a perfectly natural arrival). Purple Emperor remains an enigma and I wouldn't be surprised if it doesn't occur in low numbers, for example the Holt / Sheringham area. When I was young I never went to West Norfolk where I might have found Grizzled and Dingy Skippers. But long gone are Pearl-bordered and High Brown Fritillaries. Wall Brown is presumably scarce or even absent now although ten years ago I could still find it in small numbers on the North Norfolk coast.

I am getting on in years and no-one lasts forever. I have had a full and varied life: a career as a professional pilot for over 40 years, photographer, butterfly and bird enthusiast together with the enjoyment of many other interests. I am in adequate health at the moment and have no plans to depart just yet! But when I do go, please no "Sorry to announce" or "RIPs" etc. It happens to us all eventually. I have no religious beliefs and when my time is up, then all that will be left is memories and my four children. I trust that you will all understand and respect. I might be less active nowadays but am still here! You'll have to put up with me for a little longer.

Jack

Re: Jack Harrison

by Pauline, 09-Jul-17 08:43 PM GMT

An interesting and nostalgic account Jack which I have enjoyed reading although it made me reflect on my own childhood which was very different.

Re: Jack Harrison

by Wurzel, 09-Jul-17 11:07 PM GMT

I shall have a drink to your health directly Jack 😊

I too prefer the 'Hedge Brown' even though you have a decade or three on me 😊 It made sense to call it a Hedge Brown as if there was a hedge and there was a brown Butterfly it was 8 times out of a ten a Hedge Brown, just like if there was a brown on a Wall it was a Wall Brown but alas it seems that everyone has gone with Gatekeeper 😞 .

Have a goodun

Wurzel

Re: Jack Harrison

by MikeOxon, 09-Jul-17 11:24 PM GMT

A splendid account Jack, starting around the time when I was born! Your mention of 'The Gap' reminded me of the classic book 'The Otterbury Incident', set in those immediate post-war years, where bomb sites were favourite playgrounds. May your "adequate health" continue for a good while 😊

Re: Jack Harrison

by Sonam Dorji, 10-Jul-17 07:49 AM GMT

Hi Jack,

Got a brief but eventful account of your life especially with the Butterflies. Great to know about the species you mentioned.

with love and rgds,
Sonam

Re: Jack Harrison

by Neil Freeman, 14-Jul-17 09:06 PM GMT

Hi Jack,

I really enjoyed reading your account of 70 years of butterflying and found your comments really interesting. In my case I started a mere 45 years ago when I was about 11 back in the 1970s although I did have a hiatus when work and family took up most of my time. Wall Browns disappeared some time back around my part of the midlands but we have gained Speckled Wood which was very rarely seen back then. Marbled Whites are a recent arrival to my patch, turning up about five years ago and increasing in numbers year on year ever since.

Good to read that you have had a fulfilling life and may your 'adequate' health last a while longer yet.

Cheers,

Neil.

Re: Jack Harrison

by essexbuzzard, 14-Jul-17 10:00 PM GMT

A most interesting and thought provoking read, Jack. I live at the other end of East Anglia from where you come from, and being born in the 1970's, I can't remember the glory days of High Browns, Pearls or Graylings. But Walls (Browns) have virtually gone in my lifetime, while Commas, Speckled Woods and Silver-washed Fritillaries have appeared and increased.

Presumably you have noticed big changes in Anglian avifauna in your time, too. Gone are breeding red-backed shrikes, short-eared owls wrynecks and hawfinches, while little egrets, avocets, marsh harriers and Mediterranean gulls have colonised or increased.

May you continue to grace these forums with your humour for some time to come.

Re: Jack Harrison

by bugboy, 14-Jul-17 10:35 PM GMT

A lovely if rather poignant wander down memory lane. In my youth in the late 70's and early 80's I had to just walk across my local play fields in North West London to a nearby stables to find Walls all over the paddocks, now I have to hop on a train to the south coast!

Re: Jack Harrison

by David M, 16-Jul-17 11:42 PM GMT

That's a highly evocative account of your butterflying days of youth, Jack, and many thanks for posting it. Whilst statistics are always useful, it is altogether far more delightful to read personalised histories such as these.

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 26-Jul-17 07:12 PM GMT

Off topic but topical.



Electric Woodpecker.

Jack

Re: Jack Harrison

by NickMorgan, 28-Jul-17 01:47 PM GMT

Jack,

Interesting to read about the butterflies you saw in '47. Quite similar to the species that occur in East Lothian now. I have been doing a bit of research into when particular butterflies arrived here. All very interesting stuff, and I discovered that many of the species were previously here up until the mid 1800s when there was a series of cold winters.

Certainly most species make their way around the east coast into East Lothian, but we have the Lammermuir Hills to the south, so there is little alternative. The exception is the Small Skipper which made an appearance at Aberlady and has spread out from there. It seems to take big jumps in its distribution.

Re: Jack Harrison

by dave brown, 29-Jul-17 09:12 PM GMT

A most enjoyable read, and I for one am very happy to appreciate your sense of humour and nostalgia for many more years.

Re: Jack Harrison

by millerd, 29-Jul-17 09:45 PM GMT

Your autobiographical account was fascinating, Jack. I too remember when Walls were taken for granted and Speckled Woods and Commas were unusual sightings. I also remember the excitement of my first Clouded Yellow from the north Kent coast (a memory recently jogged by Goldie visiting Reculver). A lovely read, Jack – thank you for that , and like Wurzel I will raise a glass to you. Do please carry on entertaining us.

Dave

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 15-Aug-17 05:46 PM GMT

Under-rated undersides



The detailed patterning is fantastic.

Also in garden, two Peacocks, circa 10 Tortoiseshells, Small White, GV White (GVWs are abundant in local lanes).

Although that Red Admiral is on buddleia, Bowles Mauve (wallflower) cannot be recommended too much. With dead heading, it can be in flower for more than nine months of the year. Butterflies love it. Very easy to grow from cuttings which I take every year as the plant is relatively short lived (two or three years) and becomes leggy.

Tomorrow (with a cloudy forecast) *gonna do a a bit o' the old culture, like – know what I mean?* Culloden Battlefield exhibition centre (last mainland battle in UK). I need to do a bit of homework beforehand to find out who were the good guys and who were the baddies 😊

Jack

Re: Jack Harrison

by David M, 15-Aug-17 07:14 PM GMT

Agree about the cryptic markings on the Red Admiral, Jack. I simply love that bluish sheen to them.

Interesting too that Green Veined Whites are common in the lanes up there. Near me, they've been distinctly inconspicuous during their supposed summer brood. Maybe the dry conditions in late June & early July didn't help.

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 15-Aug-17 07:27 PM GMT

GV Whites are strongly double brooded here with the summer brood seemingly far larger. (But just three summer's observations).

Jack

Re: Jack Harrison

by Wurzel, 16-Aug-17 08:11 AM GMT

You're right Jack, there is an intricacy and subtlety in a lot of the 'unappreciated' under wings – things like the yellow banding along the edge of the wing on a Peacock or familiar shapes like numbers or 'hearts' etc 😊

Have a goodun

Wurzel

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 16-Aug-17 02:17 PM GMT

I wrote yesterday:~~[quote]~~Tomorrow (with a cloudy forecast) gonna do a a bit o' the old culture, like – know what I mean? Culloden Battlefield exhibition centre Just back from my history/culture outing to Culloden.

I learnt from a sign in the cafe that Charles Edward Stuart (aka Bonnie Prince Charlie) *"ate his first pineapple in Scotland"*. Not many people know that.

Jack

Re: Jack Harrison

by MikeOxon, 16-Aug-17 05:33 PM GMT

Jack Harrison wrote:

....."ate his first pineapple in Scotland".....

Wow! Thanks for sharing that, Jack 😊

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 26-Aug-17 04:28 PM GMT

This Peacock recently showed more interest in the nest box than have any birds.



Still plenty of Peacocks and Red Admirals, a few Tortoiseshells (which have to be discouraged from coming indoors to hibernate into what will be a heated house over the winter), Small White fluttering over Nasturtiums but haven't been able to find any eggs.

A different garden tick today – Common Lizard.



They were only about 7 to 8 cms long so presumably youngsters. (Adults apparently 10 to 15 cms)

Jack

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 07-Sep-17 11:41 AM GMT

I am sorting through old photos and came across this taken some ten years ago.



It is from a collection I made as a child, late 1940s perhaps early 1950s. East Norfolk.

That Tortoiseshell looks a bit peculiar. Seems to have fewer dark markings on forewings but more extensive dark areas on hind. My imagination no doubt but is it just possible that there has been subtle evolution over the past 70 years?

Jack

Re: Jack Harrison

by David M, 07-Sep-17 03:43 PM GMT

That Tortoiseshell **does** look to have more extensive black markings on the hindwings than usual, Jack. Have you got any more from that era to compare against?

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 07-Sep-17 05:58 PM GMT

I don't think I have any more specimens, but I have found these old photos from that period.



Kodak folding camera with meniscus lens stuck on front with (I think) Plasticine. Correct distance to subject was achieved by means of L-shaped wire frame attached to the tripod bush.

The frame was decidedly 'gash' (my DIY skills have always been minimal) but I could make the calculations as to correct distance and frame size at quite an early age. I suspect DIY talent might have turned out more useful in life than mathematical ability - I still can't even knock a picture hook into a wall.

Excellent example of evolution from these photos. Small Tortoiseshells were black and white 65-70 years ago 🙄.

Jack

Re: Jack Harrison

by Jack Harrison, 19-Dec-17 10:00 AM GMT

Diary (!) from 250 years ago. (A bit lengthy!)

John Harryman*

Loosely autobiographical based on my love for butterflies which began around 1945 when I lived in Gorleston near Great Yarmouth, east Norfolk. The butterflies mentioned almost certainly all occurred in the area in the past but some (such as the Pearl-bordered Fritillaries) are long gone. Today we find Speckled Woods, a relatively recent arrival (and Marbled Whites won't be long). Commas are now one of the more abundant species. Red Admirals survive our milder winters.

**Transcribed in 2017 by Jack Harrison into 21st century English including the replacement of some older names of butterflies with their modern equivalent. The places mentioned are/were real.*

Butterfly Diary East Suffolk 1767

The Lily Pit, near Yarmouth in Norfolk, has a sinister reputation. It is said that many years ago a coachman lost his way in fog and stumbled into the water-filled pit. Horses, driver and all passengers drowned. That part of the story may well be true. But inevitably it led to wild rumours of "terrible screaming of the dying" being heard on many a cold foggy night. These ghost stories were probably started by townfolk who didn't know a Barn Owl from a Cuckoo. Certainly in all my years living near the Lily Pit, I never heard anything that could not be explained as being a perfectly natural noise.

I drive passenger coaches in East of England, my regular run being between Yarmouth and Norwich. It passes close to the Lily Pit.

Let me first of all acknowledge the help given by my friend, the Rev. Bryan Briggs. He is educated and can read and write far better than I can so he turned my jottings into English. I am not a regular at his church going only for weddings and funerals. That doesn't bother Bryan. We chat when I take him to Norwich.

"Just off to speak to the Bishop. More accurately, the Bishop wants a word with me."

Bryan is openly envious of my job:

"You are so lucky being out in the open and able to enjoy - as I'm supposed to call them - God's creatures. There am I inside my gloomy church reciting the same old story week in, week out."

A coachman's job is not what a lot of people imagine it to be. Certainly it is far preferable to unloading cargoes from ships or grave digging. Although the pay is quite good, the work is not without challenges. Perhaps the biggest irritation is when passengers "go missing" and we have to wait for them. Someone might say: "I'll only be a moment while I go back for my papers."

There are hazards to the work. People always wonder if an East Anglian "Dick Turpin" might be waiting in the shadows to rob us. To date, that hasn't happened to me. The greatest problems are the natural ones: fog, wind, thunderstorms, rain and snow. The state of the roads is often dreadful with huge holes that are seldom repaired - and damage my coach or injure my horses.

Lord Beccles will say: "Not my problem, speak to the local village".

The villagers say: "Why should we pay for repairs? It's not called the King's Highway for nothing." So we give up and don't bother to waste time sending a request to the Monarch. Meanwhile, another horse has gone lame after stepping into a particularly nasty hole: the vet's bill falls to my boss.

I usually walk from home just outside Gorleston to and from the coaching terminus in Yarmouth. A little ferry crosses the river. I don't envy that boatman who rows back and forth all day long. It would be easier if I could take my horse Billy via the bridge but he can't be left for many hours while I go to Norwich and back; after all, delays do sometimes occur such as when that coach-horse went lame or when a wheel fell off!

My work keeps me in close contact with the countryside and the natural world so I can watch the season go by from my high perch. I am beginning to understand - and with guidance from my friend Peter Short who works at nearby Otter's Farm - how the seasons progress.

20th March 1767

It was the spring equinox and I wasn't required to work today. So on this fine morning, I set off on Billy towards Bradwell. Robins were singing noisily, Sparrows chattering. Gulls swooping down to the newly ploughed fields searching for worms and other delicacies. But I was looking for butterflies. I soon spotted a Peacock. I jumped down off Billy and took the Peacock for a little "walk" along the track. It flew on ahead, landed with wings open to feel the warmth of the sun and then when I got near, off it went again. Eventually it reached the end of its "patch", flew back over my head and repeated the entire process. Then I saw a Small Tortoiseshell which showed much more interest on the early-flowering dandelions and blackthorn blossom. Sadly my "prize" was not to be found. Ragged brown Commas do occur here but are quite scarce and some years go by with me seeing a mere two or three.

I rode over Bradwell Heath and down towards the River Waveney. The land near the river is very different being marshy and in places impenetrable. But many birds are happy here. Huge flocks of Geese swirl overhead. Next month, they will disappear but where to? I've heard said that they go to Iceland but that seems a huge distance. One of my townie friends from Yarmouth - and he wasn't being funny - claimed that the Geese vanished in April because they turned into Swallows! The land near the river is home to Brimstone butterflies. You see these in late summer then they disappear. My assumption is that - like Peacocks - they sleep through the coldest months (I often wish I too could do that). I did see a few Brimstones today but this doesn't seem to be a good year for them.

I returned home via the edge of The Heath. More Small Tortoiseshells and another Peacock and then a huge brown butterfly attracted my attention as it flew up into an elm tree: Large Tortoiseshell. Large Torties are quite common in East Suffolk and I'm fairly sure their caterpillars must feed on elm leaves. I'll have to try to confirm that later in the year.

24th April 1767 - perfect weather

Billy was ready early and keen to chase butterflies with me. Today we took the lanes to Burgh Castle village and its old Roman Fort. We used to climb on the walls as youngsters but a local self-styled "important person" said we were doing damage. The walls have been there for 1,500 years (although one section does lean at an alarming angle) so what harm could a few children do?

We paused near "squire's" house, a pompous little man who seems to think he is still in the army and insists on being called "Major Ansole". He seems to have a paranoid hatred for children - was he ever young himself? He is - inevitably - chairman of the parish council (population of the village just 67), deputy captain of the bowls team: anything that can give him the semblance of importance. He breeds dogs, not fierce guard dogs as might be expected, but yappy little pugs. But there is something about the Major that concerns me. He never had children of his own and lost his wife a few years ago. Is this overbearing attitude a front to hide loneliness I wonder?

The Major claimed he saw a ghostly apparition one evening and was quoted:

"I met this phantom when I was on my way home from the Queens's Head!"

His villagers just sniggered:

"Not enough water with his whisky."

The Major's house is hidden behind a hedge and on that hedge you could sometimes see Holly Blues butterflies. These blues can fly high up and be

difficult to look at closely. Being on Billy's back helps but how I wish I could have one of those new "magnifying oculars" that had been invented by a scientist in Italy. We did find a couple of Holly Blues but were not able to get a really close look. "The Grange" has extensive grounds and we wondered what butterfly riches might be beyond that hedge.

Just after The Grange, we turned off and went along the splendidly named "Back Lane" (it has a rather crude nickname relating to the Major!) which runs along the edge of the marshes. This is a good spot for Brimstones and this time we weren't disappointed. There were plenty of white butterflies but when flying, "whites" are difficult to identify with certainty. When they landed we were able to confirm that most were common Green-veined Whites (which prefer damper localities) but there were also a few Small Cabbage Whites. But best of all were my favourites - Orange Tips. When you first see these each year, you know that winter is behind you.

We had a quick look in the churchyard but found only a few Small Tortoiseshells.

So on to the castle itself. And there sunning itself on the Roman Wall was a Comma!

On the way home via the hamlet of Belton we found another couple of Large Tortoiseshells and a distant "large" white. We couldn't be sure if this was a genuine Large Cabbage or female Brimstone. But of course, chasing butterflies wouldn't be as much fun if it was too easy.

I was required at work again early next the morning. Not my usual run but instead to Ipswich where I would be staying the night in the "Travelling Coachman". Good beer in that part of Suffolk. Unfortunately, there would be another early start the following day.

Mid May 1767

This is my favourite month except for the fact that we get less time off from coaching duties. The wealthy want to dip their feet in the sea (why???) so we get extra duties. By and large, these rich people pay well and sometimes give very generous bonuses - and not just carrots for the horses! The owner of Ardnams Brewery presented me with a voucher for five pints of its finest beer. Sadly, even though it was signed by James Ardnam himself, not one of the taverns in Yarmouth or Gorleston was prepared to honour it. Next time Mr. Ardnam travels with me, I'll politely say that cash in hand is more useful.

Even though we are busier throughout the summer, our manager wants his drivers on top form and ensures that we get adequate rest and free time. Thank you Mr. Duckins. So on one of those free days - by good fortune fine and warm - Billy and I went looking for some of the May specialities.

Sir Horace Fritton (KG plus lots of other letters after his name - you can bet Major Ansole is jealous) owns the estate that is named after his family. There is some splendid woodland. Florence, Lady Fritton, is well known and prominent (in many senses of the word) and rides with the Waveney Hunt; it is difficult not to feel a little sorry for the diminutive Sir Horace. It is said that after a celebratory tippie or two (or three), her Ladyship once slid slowly off her mount. True or not, the vision is priceless. The Frittons (or one of them) are not very keen on intruders and there are numerous foreboding "Keep Out" signs. Nobody knows much about Sir Horace although those villagers who have met him say he's a kindly fellow. It is presumed that he married Florence to secure the unification of two wealthy families; it is difficult to see any other reason for his marriage.

We knew a way into the Woods away from the watchful eyes of the gamekeepers. Apparently - as we were to learn later - we didn't need to be over-cautious. It seems that Sir Horace too has a love for the natural world and knows about our clandestine trespassing but keeps that knowledge from his wife. A clearing near the lake is home to Fritillaries. In May it is Large Pearl-bordered, June Small Pearl-bordered and July/August, the Silver-washed and High Brown. We found plenty of Large Pearls but beat a hasty retreat when we heard dogs barking - they might have belonged to her Ladyship!

After leaving the Woods we made our way to the nearby heaths: The Warren, Belton Common and Bradwell Heath. The target was the two skippers, the Grizzled and the Dingy, tiny butterflies that skip about and can be very hard to follow. Grizzlies were quite numerous on the rabbit runs and scrapes, but no Dingies (too early perhaps?) Amazingly, it had slipped our minds that this was the season for Small Copper butterflies, but there they were. As we were just about to leave and go home, a solitary Dingy was seen.

A Large Cabbage White greeted us at The Cottage - but do we really want their caterpillars ruining our cabbages? But all in all, not a bad day - except for those dogs at Fritton that cut short our time there.

Early June

We wanted to follow up some information from one of my passengers. Apparently she had seen some tiny green butterflies (or moths) near the sea at Corton. It was difficult above the din of hoofs and clattering wheels to hear exactly what she said. (Retired coachmen are all deaf!) This rumour had to be investigated: they might be the mythical Green Hairstreaks.

An unexpected day off from coaching provided the opportunity. Billy and I set off, initially to Hopton and then along the cliff top towards Corton. These are not impressive cliffs like those I have heard about in the southeast of England and to call them cliffs is slightly imaginative. On the slope and top is some scrubby vegetation, rather different from other places in the area. It took a lot of searching but then we found them: Greenstreaks superbly camouflaged as they perched on fresh bright green hawthorn leaves. Lovely little butterflies about the size of a Holly Blue. Greenstreaks never open their wings - except of course when flying - and then can look quite dull until the angle of the sun makes the underside flash. A Greenstreak and a Small Copper had a bit of an argument and the combination of green and red was memorable. Common Blues were also found here. But why called common? We didn't see many. They are almost purple rather than true blue. It is the undersides that are more remarkable - a silver background with dots and circles. We also found what clearly had to be "blues" as the undersides showed that same pattern. Some were the size of Common Blues but dark brown above with orange half-moons near the wing edges. A smaller version was also seen but neither type could be identified with confidence. A few rather boring Small Heaths were also present.

Mid-June saw us repeat the Fritton/Heathland trip. The same butterflies although of course, the Tortoiseshells and Peacocks were almost over now. A few worn Large Pearls were joined by their cousins, the so-called Small Pearl-bordered (but they look the same size to us!) Dingy Skippers were now in reasonable numbers but the Grizzlies had all but gone. However another skipper, the Large Skipper was flying, it favouring areas where there were nearby bushes or trees. Many skippers seem to be a cross between butterflies and moths. The way they hold their wings when resting is unusual.

June is often not the best month for butterflies and the so-called "June Gap" is certainly not a misnomer. Next June I'm going to track down the Swallowtails that live in the marshy areas to the northwest of Yarmouth. A trip to this area will require some planning. I will need at least two consecutive free days.

Early July - another visit to Fritton Woods. We crept in via our secret route but there in the corner of the clearing was a small man. He had obviously seen us so we could hardly escape unnoticed. Billy is a quite distinctive brown and white so would soon be traced. We trotted across to the man; he greeted us in friendly fashion.

"So what are you two up to on Her Ladyship's land?" hardly hiding a grin - clearly he knew who we were. It was Sir Horace.

"Oh we're so sorry Sir, we'll leave."

"Don't worry. Butterflies I presume? Follow me."

I tied Billy to a tree and followed Sir Horace along some forest tracks and then into a wonderful clearing that I hadn't seen before. It was truly alive with large Silver-washed Fritillaries, High Browns and White Admiral not to mention the inevitable Meadow and Hedge Browns and Ringlets and Large Skippers.

"Good isn't it?"

"Won't Lady Fritton get cross if she knows we've been here?"

"Between you and me, I couldn't care less if she is annoyed. She is so obsessed with that ghastly Percival de Chasseur, master of the Waveney Hunt, that I doubt she'd even notice you've been here. Funny how so often the name is appropriate? We need a word to describe somebody with a name that fits his work or interests: Like Jim Smith the smithy, or Peter Fisher the trawlerman or Johnnie Carpenter the woodworker. It seems to happen more often than just by chance."

"Or Robin Bird?"

"Oh shut up!" Sir Horace said with a laugh.

"Anyway, and this is even more hush-hush! Eastwood Farm has a new resident, a baby boy. His mother Emma is a dairymaid – lovely girl. If you ever go there, I'm sure you'll notice that young Harold bears quite a resemblance to me!"

Oh dear. And I thought I had come to watch butterflies and now this!

Horace – and he asked to be called just plain Horace – said: "watch the top of that tall oak tree". Some very big butterflies charged around but could only be seen in silhouette.

"Large Tortoiseshells?"

"No John. Purple Emperors. I found them for the first time only last summer. For such big butterflies, they are amazingly elusive. They sometimes come down onto the ground and then you can see the purple on their wings. Look! There's one. They are often quite tame so we should be able to creep up on it."

"It's beautiful."

"Yes but look what it's feeding on! Emperors have some disgusting habits. Are you able to stay until about six o'clock? At that time we will see the Emperors little attendants – as I call them – Purple Hairstreaks"

What a day it had been. And a new friend in Horace.

The next day was also free so this time it was the heaths and commons. Smallish blues were everywhere and close examination showed a row of silver buttons on the underwings. These were Silver-studded Blues. The blues were chasing some similar size brown butterflies so all became clear. The brown ones – which also had the silver buttons – were the females. So this cleared up the mystery of the "brown blues" I had seen on the cliffs – female Common Blues. Some big butterflies flew in floppy, lazy flight, always keeping wings closed when on the ground. Sometimes, one would land on my shoe and then I could examine it closely: the Grayling butterfly. Small Skippers, almost like miniature Large Skippers, were everywhere. Hedge Browns were numerous even well away from any hedges. Near Howard's Common – who was Howard I wondered? – some deep digging (building material for the Roman Fort perhaps?) had left very different soil exposed. Even tinier blues were found here but nowhere else. They were the unimaginatively-named Little Blues.

One week later, I decided to try something very different. There are extensive sand dunes at the north end of Yarmouth although these seemed hardly the place to find butterflies. But you never know. I took the ferry and walked into the middle of town. This was still some distance from the North Denes (local name for dunes). However I had just been promoted to senior coachman, so had a little extra money. I used a horse-drawn cab to take me to the Denes. I knew the cabbie and he offered a decent price and refused a tip. We stopped and tied up at the coastguard lookout.

"Are you going to wait here for me Mick or come back in an hour and a half's time?"

"Would you mind if I joined your butterflying? I have never done that sort of thing before." We soon found many Graylings and then some very fast orange butterflies. These took a lot of chasing down but eventually we got a good look: fritillaries – Dark Greens. Another orange type caught our eyes. It settled on a wall by the coastguard hut. It was the suitably named Wall Brown.

I asked Mick if we could return via the cemetery where I knew there would be plenty of flowers on the graves. And we were not to be disappointed (although I doubt that the permanent residents of the churchyard were all that bothered one way or the other!) Stunning Red Admirals and a few Painted Ladies.

The season was drawing to a close but had a few more twists. It wasn't particularly a butterfly hunt but in early August, I took Billy for some exercise to Burgh Castle. We waved in the direction of the Major as we passed his mansion. I wondered how easy Richard Ansole would be to get to know. I am sure he isn't quite the demon he is made out to be.

We stopped off by the church so Billy could have lunch in a rough field full of tall flowering thistles (Billy knew to avoid those). Nearby was a small copse. But I was more interested in the thistles. White-letter Hairstreaks were in good numbers feeding on the flowers.

September brought a surprise. Clover fields were alive with Clouded Yellows. These are said to arrive from the south in May (although I hadn't seen any this May) and then breed and multiply. They don't seem to be able to survive our winters.

And so ended a marvellous butterfly year.

Just before Christmas, a letter arrived from Horace. He asked me to be godfather to young Harold. Although not a godly person myself, how could I possibly refuse?

John

The real Major Castle once claimed he saw a UFO. My father, a newspaper reporter went to interview him.

"As I was going home from the Queen's Head...."

Dad tried unsuccessfully to persuade him that the reference to the pub hardly lent credence to the sighting but Major Castle was not to be deterred.

I used to climb Burgh Castle walls with my uncle Ted.

Fritton Woods were and still are very private. But there were ways in. I never saw fritillaries there but Sir Peter Scott in an early autobiography mentions Pearl-bordered Fritillaries.

Clouded Yellows abounded in August/September 1947 on Lucerne fields.

The heathland (an extension of the Suffolk Sandlings) is now largely destroyed by forestry (Fritton Warren), caravan parks/holiday homes (Belton), housing (Bradwell). In places it was alive with Graylings up to the early 1950s. Although I never saw Silver studded Blues there, they must have been present.

DG Frits were somehow overlooked as coastal dunes didn't seem good places for butterflies.

Lord Fritton and Emma are pure figments of the imagination (I think!)

Name fitting the job – "Nominative determinism"

And finally – in case you hadn't guessed – for "coachman" read "airline pilot" (me), a job with finest view out the office window of any occupation. And we all go deaf in old age!

Jack Harrison December 2017

Re: Jack Harrison

by Tony Moore, 19-Dec-17 01:30 PM GMT

Nice one, Jack – an excellent read. Took me back to the bumper Clouded Yellow year of 1947...

The mortal remains of Antony Moore.

Re: Jack Harrison

by David M, 21-Dec-17 09:58 PM GMT

Jack, what can I say? Loved every word of that. I reckon within a few weeks you could put together a book of such short stories.

Might be a 'niche' market but it would be very much enjoyed.