

GRASSINGTON
North Yorkshire

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Limestone terraces (in the distance) and woodland on hills in the Upper Wharfedale valley

Grassington is in Wharfedale, one of the most attractive of the Yorkshire Dales. It is 8 miles north of Skipton and 20 miles west of Harrogate. There are many excellent walks and butterfly viewing possibilities in the area.

The wide flat river valley of Upper Wharfedale, between Grassington and Kettlewell, is surrounded by high hills. It is in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Its limestone grassland, scrub, woodland and disused quarries offer a wide range of habitats. There is a Yorkshire Wildlife Trust reserve of 90 ha (220 acres) at Grass Wood, a mile north of Grassington.

TARGET SPECIES

Northern Brown Argus (June and early July). Also in and around Grass Wood: Meadow Brown, Ringlet, Small Heath, Comma, Wall (possibly), Common and Holly Blues, Green and Purple Hairstreaks, Small Copper (rarer here) and Gatekeeper (also still rare here), and other commoner species, all depending on the season and the weather.

The Yorkshire Dales National Park was formed in 1954. It straddles the Pennines in North Yorkshire and Cumbria and includes Wharfedale, Wensleydale, Swaledale, Ribblesdale and Malhamdale. In total the Park covers 680 square miles. Wharfedale stretches from the village of Buckden, in the north, to Ilkley and Otley in the south. The river Wharfe flows through the wide valley of Kettlewell and Conistone, to Grassington, and then on to become the Strid near Bolton

Abbey. It flows into the river Aire in the Vale of York and eventually reaches the sea at Spurn Head (see the separate entry).

Around Grassington, Wharfedale has some of the best limestone scenery in the country, with wet meadows and pastures, limestone pavement and limestone woodland and scrub. There is an extensive network of footpaths, bridleways and tracks, meandering valley roads, dry stone walls, flower-rich verges and open fells and valleys with expansive views.

Although limestone and chalk are both sedimentary rocks with the same chemical composition (calcium carbonate), limestone is harder and more weather resistant as a result of being subjected to higher pressure and temperature during its formation. Limestone pavement is thought to have been formed by glaciers scraping away topsoil and then, when the ice retreated, exposing horizontal beds of limestone. Tiny cracks in the limestone have been gradually opened by the prolonged action of rain water which has dissolved some of the stone. The appearance may then resemble that of artificially-laid paving stones.

The main industry is livestock farming, mostly sheep, but the dales traditionally had two manufacturing industries: lead smelting and lime production. There was a lead mine at Kettlewell and a smelter in the village which generated hideous emissions, polluting the neighbourhood. Slag heaps from old mine workings remain on the hills. Not far away there were lime kilns. One has been preserved at Knipe Scar, just south of Kettlewell on the B6160. This burnt limestone to make quicklime for agriculture and to make mortar. It was another hot, dirty and polluting process. These old, inefficient processes are long gone, although the extraction of limestone has continued. Provided access is possible safely, the old limestone quarries now offer a good chance of finding Northern Brown Argus (preferably in the third and fourth weeks of June). Good places to look are the old quarries west of Threshfield, near Skirethorns and Long Ashes. But probably the best and most reliable site is at Lea Green, east of Bastow Wood. This is next to the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's Grass Wood reserve.

Grass Wood is a mile north of Grassington, on the east side of the minor road from Grassington to Conistone. You can park along the road or at the old quarry car park at SD982652. From here there are many paths into Grass Wood and you can work your way up through Grass Wood into Bastow Wood to come out onto Lea Green. Alternatively you can park at the National Park information centre in Grassington and walk north along the Dales Way. After about a mile from the information centre, the path divides. Take the left-hand fork towards Conistone and you will soon be walking along the side of Bastow Wood and onto Lea Green. This is thought to have been the site of an ancient Roman settlement. The remains of shallow pits are a relic of where lead was once mined from two lead veins in the limestone.

The Northern Brown Argus is one of four butterflies that occur only in the north of England and Scotland (the others are the Chequered Skipper, Mountain Ringlet and Scotch Argus). It is at the southern edge of its range in the Dales and is the subject of a local species action plan. The key requirement is common rock rose growing on sheltered, unimproved limestone grassland. The grass must not be too long, or too short, 6 to 10 cm thought to be being ideal.

The Northern Brown Argus butterflies found at Grassington are similar to the sub-species *Aricia artaxerxes salmacis* found at Bishop Middleham Quarry and elsewhere in the north of England (see the separate entry for Bishop Middleham Quarry). These lack the white spots which Northern Brown Argus *Aricia artaxerxes artaxerxes* found in Scotland and St Abb's Head have (see the entry for St Abb's Head). I don't think you can distinguish Northern Brown Argus found at Grassington from those found at Bishop Middleham Common and elsewhere in the north of England by their appearance or from commoner Brown Argus found further south. They all look the same. However, recent research on their genetic make-up has suggested that the Northern

Brown Argus found in the Peak District have some of the genetic characteristics of Brown Argus *Aricia agestis*. This suggests that the Peak District butterflies may be a hybrid between two different species. I had always thought that different species did not inter-breed, but it is now known that Northern Brown Argus and Brown Argus can cross-breed. So the butterflies you find near Grassington may well be a hybrid butterfly which is only found here.

Many good circular walks can be made from Grassington. Instead of going directly to Grass Wood, you can begin by walking from the National Park's information centre towards Grassington bridge on the B6265 road to Kettlewell. Turn right before the bridge to take the riverside walk and pass the river Wharfe's rapids at Ghaistrill's Strid. Follow the path to cross over Grass Wood Lane and enter the woods. You can now work your way round and upwards to Bastow Wood and Lea Green. Depending on your detours, the round trip will be about 5 miles. You can make it longer by continuing past Grass Wood on the old road to Conistone (Grass Wood Lane), following the river valley, before turning sharp back at Scargill House (before you enter Conistone) to take the Dales Way footpath route back to Lea Green and Grassington. This would be a total of about 7½ miles.



Corner of Grassington's cobbled square



River Wharfe at Kettlewell Bridge, looking north



Limestone hills in the Upper Wharfedale valley



Grassington village square



View NW from Conistone bridge



View towards Grassington from Conistone



Information board for Knipe Scar lime kiln



Northern Brown Argus at Bishop Middleham Quarry



Northern Brown Argus at Bishop Middleham Quarry



Approach to Grassington from Pateley Bridge



View across the valley from near Kettlewell



Dry stone walls near Kettlewell



Dry stone walls near Kettlewell



View across Kettlewell

LOCATION

Explorer Map OL2 Yorkshire Dales Southern &
Western Areas
Landranger (pink) Map 98 Wensleydale and Upper
Wharfedale

Grid references:

Grassington village square SE003639
Bastow Wood (Lea Green) SD996658
Threshfield quarries SD980638

Grassington is in Wharfedale in the Yorkshire Dales. It is about 8 miles north of Skipton and 20 miles west of Harrogate. It marks the dividing point between Upper and Lower Wharfedale. There is a Yorkshire Dales National Park information centre and car park just off the B6265 at entry to Grassington from the south at SE003638. The Northern Brown Argus site at Lea Green can be reached by walking about a mile on footpaths from Grassington or by parking at the roadside on the old road to Conistone at the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's reserve at Grass Wood, and walking up through the woods (see the directions given above). The old Threshfield quarries are about a mile west of Grassington at Skirethorns Lane. There is a network of footpaths here.

Refreshments and facilities are available in Grassington. The topography prevents disabled access to Lea Green, but the old road from Grassington to Conistone has good views and there are many roadside parking spots with good scenic vistas.

Access by public transport is possible by train to Skipton and then bus to Grassington