

PRESTBURY HILL
Gloucestershire

for www.discoverbutterflies.com the website
for the book *Discover Butterflies in Britain*
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Cheltenham Racecourse from Butterfly Conservation's Prestbury Hill reserve

<p>The west-facing slope of Prestbury Hill, in the Cotswolds, overlooks Cheltenham Racecourse. It adjoins Cleeve Common. Its limestone grassland has a great variety of flowering plants and grasses and plays host to many grassland butterflies. Care is needed on the steep, grassy slopes.</p>	<p>This is one of the first Butterfly Conservation reserves. Although managed by Butterfly Conservation, its maintenance relies heavily on willing volunteers. Part of the reserve is within the Cleeve Common SSSI and all of it is in the Cotswolds AONB.</p>	<p>TARGET SPECIES Dark Green Fritillary, Grayling, Duke of Burgundy, Chalkhill Blue, Small Blue, Green Hairstreak, Marbled White and many commoner species.</p>
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You might not associate butterflies with racehorses, but racehorses like good, springy turf to run on and that is found on the heaths and downs favoured by butterflies. Devil's Dyke, an outstanding place for Chalkhill Blues, runs through Newmarket Heath and has racecourses on both sides of it. Green Down, the well-known Large Blue site, has a racehorse gallop right through its middle. And this site, Prestbury Hill, is next to Cheltenham racecourse, the home of jump racing in Britain. You can see Prestbury Hill from the racecourse. It is part of the natural Cotswold amphitheatre that forms the

backdrop to racing and makes Cheltenham one of the most attractive racecourses in the country.

Although it may look flat, Cheltenham is not a flat racecourse. There is a pronounced hill in the corner of the track opposite Prestbury Hill. As horses approach this corner, they run uphill before rounding the bend and beginning their fierce gallop downhill. Races are won and lost in those twenty seconds. So you will find that all racegoers know where Prestbury Hill is. However the hill we want is not on the racecourse, it is immediately to its east. And when I went there first in May, hoping to have fine views over the racecourse, I was disappointed because Cheltenham was shrouded in mist. But I could still see enough to appreciate what a fine site for butterflies this must be. Later I returned in the autumn and although the weather was not perfect there were splendid views across the racecourse and over the Vale of Gloucester.

Some years ago, generous benefactors bought part of Prestbury Hill and gave it to Butterfly Conservation. It is a large area of west-facing unimproved limestone grassland with two small beech woods and enough scrub to provide shelter. Its steep slopes have never been ploughed and their thin soil warms quickly in sunshine to give good conditions for many plants and insects. There must be enough scrub to provide shelter from winds and to provide roosting for perching butterflies and birds, but not too much or flowery grasses will soon be overwhelmed. So, although it may not look necessary, maintenance has to be carried out round the year to keep the site in good condition. This is largely done by volunteers who work to keep the scrub in check and by allowing cattle to graze on the hill for part of the year.

The Prestbury Hill reserve has two parts, the main Bill Smyllie reserve and, separated from it by a small beech wood, the smaller Masts Field. This is named because of the huge telecommunication masts which tower above this part of Cleeve Hill. Fortunately these do not seem to affect the heathland habitat below, but I cannot say that I like the look of them. The masts are within the Cleeve Common SSSI, which includes Masts Field, and of course they are within the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Cleeve Common is an SSSI of almost 2 square miles and one of the most extensive areas of limestone grassland in the Cotswolds. Several rights of way run across the Common including the Cotswold Way and it is a good place to roam although its open aspect makes it not so good for butterflies as the more sheltered Prestbury Hill reserve. At the right time of year, look for bee orchids (June/early July), frog orchids (late June/August) and musk orchids (mid-June/July).

There is a great range of butterflies to see on Prestbury Hill. It includes Dark Green Fritillaries in June and July. These are the racehorses of the butterfly world. Particularly the males fly at great speed searching incessantly for females. They only stop occasionally to refuel, often on brambles or thistles, before streaking off on their next reconnaissance. Females are more circumspect, searching for violets and suitable places near them to lay their eggs. But photographing Dark Greens can be difficult. Watch where they nectar and wait for them to come to you is probably the best strategy. In contrast, the Duke of Burgundy is an easy butterfly to photograph because, once found, it will soon take up a perch to bask in the sun and often remain still with its wings open for minutes on end. You will have fun looking for all the species that occur here, but take

care on the sloping ground. Butterfly photography can become a dangerous activity in the excitement of locating a rare species at last.

Prestbury Hill was one of the first reserves to be bought by Butterfly Conservation and this was possible through the generosity of Dr Bill Smyllie, a leading butterfly expert, and the Esmée Fairbairn Charitable Trust. This Trust is a major supporter of Butterfly Conservation. Esmée Fairbairn was one of the founders of the Women's Royal Voluntary Service and the Citizens Advice Bureaux before she was killed in an air raid near the end of the Second World War. The foundation that bears her name was set up by her husband and sons and it has become one of the largest independent grant-making foundations in Britain. It has made many grants to Butterfly Conservation over the years.

If, like my wife and me, you find that it is not butterfly weather at Prestbury, try visiting Cheltenham or Tewkesbury. In any case, there are no facilities or refreshments on the hill, so you will need to look further afield for these. The magnificence of Tewkesbury Abbey will make you forget the cloudy weather. It is a pleasing blend of old and new with some magnificent new stained glass and works of sculpture to see.



Entrance to the Bill Smyllie reserve on a misty morning in May



Edge of the beech copse in the Bill Smyllie reserve



Cheltenham Racecourse from Prestbury Hill on a misty day in May



Mature beech trees



Autumn view of Bill Smyllie reserve looking north



Masts field (left) and Bill Smyllie reserve (right) from Cheltenham grandstand in October



Cowslips in May



Cowslip carpet in the Bill Smyllie reserve



Lambs on Cleeve Common in May



Gorse in Masts Field



Autumn sunshine on Prestbury Hill



Horse riding along Prestbury Hill



Telecommunication masts above Masts Field



Tom Denny's windows commemorate the 900th anniversary of Tewkesbury Abbey in 2002



View across Cleeve Common



N elevation of Tewkesbury Abbey



Tewkesbury Abbey interior



Tewkesbury Abbey west gate



Beech copse on Prestbury Hill

LOCATION

Explorer Map 45: The Cotswolds
Landranger (pink) Map 163: Cheltenham and
Cirencester
Parking (Entrance) SO993244 and SO994247

The Prestbury Hill reserve is east of Cheltenham. It can be reached by car either by a minor road from Cheltenham starting at Battledown (signposted for Cleeve Common) or from the village of Whittington on the A40. Turn N off the A40 into the village of Whittington (caution: the turning is on a dangerous bend). Then turn left at a T-junction and head NW past Whalley Farm on your right. Again follow signposts to Cleeve Common. Both routes meet at a crossroads where you have to take the minor no-through road that leads to the telecommunication masts on the edge of Cleeve Common. It is sign-posted Cleeve Common only. There is parking in a lay-by at the entrance to the Bill Smyllie reserve, or, further north, next to the masts.

Alternatively, it is about a mile-and-a-half's walk from Prestbury village, which can be reached by public transport from Cheltenham.

There are no disabled facilities at Prestbury Hill, but there are good views from a car. Also mobility scooters can be taken along the hard-surfaced road between the two car parks and the road has views of the reserve and over the Severn valley.

Take care if it is wet underfoot, because the slopes are steep and can be slippery.