

**TOTTERNHOE KNOLLS AND OLD QUARRY**  
Bedfordshire

from [www.discoverbutterflies.com](http://www.discoverbutterflies.com)  
the website for the book *Discover Butterflies in Britain*  
© D E Newland 2009



Totternhoe Knolls from the summit

Totternhoe Knolls and Old Quarry and the nearby Sewell Railway Cutting (now disused) provide chalky grassland and steep flower-covered banks.	Owned by Bedfordshire County Council, Totternhoe Knolls is managed by the National Trust in partnership with the local Wildlife Trust; the old quarry and the railway cutting are managed by the Wildlife Trust. Quarrying has taken place here since medieval times.	<b>TARGET SPECIES</b> Duke of Burgundy, Dingy Skipper, Small, Chalkhill and Common Blues, Green Hairstreak, Marbled White.
---	---	---

From the top of Castle Knoll at Totternhoe, there are commanding views in all directions. Wide chalky ditches surround you because this was the site of a medieval fortified castle. It is the most northerly of the Chiltern butterfly sites and well worth visiting.

The rocky chalk outcrop on which the castle was built is the largest of many smaller knolls in an undulating area of chalky downland, near the village of Totternhoe, just west

of Dunstable and slightly north of the main Dunstable Downs site (see Bison Hill). There is a working quarry next to the Knolls with an old, disused chalk quarry nearby. Totternhoe Knolls and the Old Quarry and their surroundings provide many good sites for butterflies that like chalky grassland. Provided that scrub invasion is kept under control, conditions are ideal for many species, particularly Skippers and Blues, and the increasingly rare Duke of Burgundy.

There is also a disused railway track through Sewell Cutting which provides easy access to its steep banks where many different species of flowers and grasses flourish and the same range of butterflies has been recorded. The old London and North Western Railway's Dunstable to Leighton Buzzard line was opened here in 1848 and eventually closed 120 years later, when the cutting and embankment became a wildlife site.

Totternhoe Knolls is part of the Chiltern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There are three separate SSSIs: the Knolls, the Stonepit and the old Chalk Quarry. Within Totternhoe Knolls SSSI, the Castle Knoll is something of a mystery. Not much is known except that it was an 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century motte and bailey castle. The motte (or mound) is on a raised outcrop of chalk and built to guard the bailey (or courtyard) that surrounded it. Why it was built and by whom has not been discovered. Current archeological thinking is that an earlier pre-historic enclosure existed here. Now it is a scheduled Ancient Monument, managed to provide flowery grassland for wildlife and as a place for recreation. The Knolls cover about 13 ha (32 acres) with uneven chalkland supporting many interesting plants including common spotted and bee orchids, twablade, autumn gentian and clustered bellflowers. The Stonepit SSSI immediately east of the Knolls (2 ha, 5 acres) is important for its geology and the fossils found there. East of the Stonepit is the former Chalk Quarry, also of 13 ha, where there has been much quarrying in the past and which now consists of uneven chalk hills of flowery grassland and scrub.

There is, and I hope will remain, a strong population of Duke of Burgundy in the Old Quarry, and Small and Chalkhill Blues and Dingy Skippers should also be found here. Be aware that there are some very steep slopes in the former quarry areas and great care is needed should you decide to go down to search at their floor. I have slipped a couple of times, fortunately without injury! You should also find Dukes and both Blues in the Knolls area, particularly in south-facing valley areas, and you may find Small Blues around the edges of the open area near the entrance to the Quarry (as you leave the path from the car park). They have been seen to mud-puddle here in their hundreds when the right conditions occur, which are a hot, sunny day while still damp underfoot. Another reliable place for them, where a colony has been found for many years, is at the foot of the escarpment that runs east-west just north of the car park, although I think that there is no easy public access to this point without walking along the edge of a cultivated field.

The Totternhoe area has been quarried for centuries, and the working quarry continues to provide raw materials for cement manufacture. Totternhoe clunch, which is a hard chalky stone that is good for stone carving, has been used for many important buildings, including Westminster Abbey and Windsor Castle. It is generally used for indoor construction because it does not have good weather resistance when outside.



The white face of Totternhoe Old Quarry from Castle Knoll. The old quarry is in the middle distance; the white building on the left is part of the working quarry. The summit is marked by a concrete Ordnance Survey triangulation marker.



Castle Knoll from the north



The rock of the Castle Motte surrounded by man-made ditches



Entrance sign in the car park



Looking down into the Old Quarry from the north



Footpath from the NT car park

*Be my strong rock,  
A tower of strength.*

Psalm 31



Chalk escarpment at Totternhoe



Byway and footpath direction marker



Cowslips growing at the side of Totternhoe Old Quarry in May



Orange Tip (f) at the edge of the Old Quarry



Duke of Burgundy basking at the Old Quarry floor



Duke of Burgundy in the Old Quarry



Dingy Skippers near the Old Quarry entrance



Site for Small Blues under the east-west escarpment



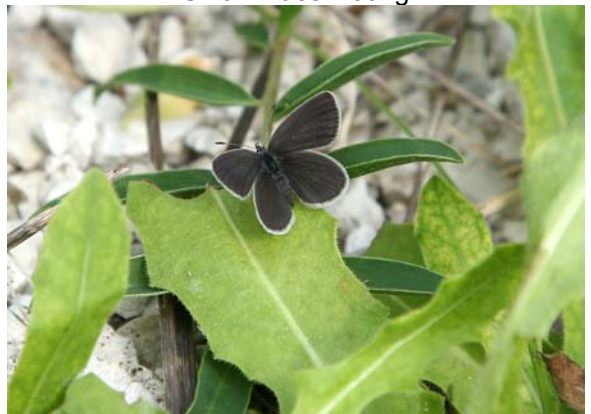
Photographing a Small Blue on kidney vetch



Small Blues mating



Small Blues



Basking Small Blue



Scrubby entrance to the Old Quarry where Small Blues are found



Part of the Old Quarry SSSI to the west of the main quarry entrance



Sewell Cutting



Paths converge at the end of Sewell Cutting



Kidney vetch in the cutting



Cowslips still flowering in the Old Quarry at the end of May

## LOCATION

Parking: SP986215 (Knolls' Entrance) TP005226 (Sewell Cutting)  
OS Maps 165 and 166

There is a small NT car park and picnic area for Totternhoe Knolls reached from the minor road through Totternhoe village. Look out for a sign to Totternhoe Knolls and go up the narrow road for about  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile to reach the car park. There is a walk of about  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile from the car park to the Knolls and, by a different path,  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile from the car park to the Quarry entrance. You can make a circular walk of about 4 miles to include the Knolls, the Quarry and Sewell Cutting. Alternatively, you can reach the Sewell Cutting from the Dunstable side and park there. Only the Sewell Railway Cutting is currently accessible for wheelchairs (from the Dunstable end); unfortunately the Knoll and Quarry are not. There are plans, coordinated by Sustrans, to improve the surfaces of some of the bridleways connecting with the old railway cutting which I hope will make these suitable for wheelchairs. Please remember that great care is necessary on some of the steep slopes in Totternhoe Quarry and on Castle Knoll.