In 2011 I had been looking around for a new project following the conclusion of my Brown Hairstreak early-stages odyssey, but had failed spectacularly to attract even a female Large White to the garden. Then, on 1st August, I saw a small dark butterfly on the front lawn, which turned out to be a female Common Blue, looking to lay eggs. Sure enough she found a Black Medick plant and popped a bright egg on the upper surface of a leaf. The plant was immediately taken into care, but the leaflet supporting the egg became blighted by a leaf-miner which made it very un-photogenic. The egg, however, remained undisturbed and hatched 10 days later on 11th August.

The larva, at one day old, is approximately 1mm in length and soon found a healthy adjoining leaflet to inhabit.

Having munched through its eggshell it then scraped its second meal from the surface of the top leaflet.

In the time it took me to re-position the leaf for another series of images, the larva attracted the attention of a type of mite.
Thankfully, the mite seemed to pose no danger to the larva. The only observation I had made so far (which differs from the books) is that the larva has been feeding on the upper surface of the leaflet rather than the underside.

Several days later the larva (now labelled W1 and assumed to be a "he") went missing. I was hoping that it had just changed leaves and had reverted to normal behaviour by staying on the underside of the leaf. However after 13 days I could find no trace, so feared the worse. Then, on the morning of 28th August I saw some typical feeding damage on a leaf and checked the underside and found him! The feeding damage was quite extensive and I don't know how I managed to miss it.

He is now 17 days old and looks to have moulted into his second-instar. Length has increased to 3mm, but I do not expect W1 to complete his development this year. This generation of the Common Blue will usually over-winter as a larva amongst a clump of vegetation.
On 1st September, W1 was 21 days old and had now darkened and coloured-up since the previous photo. I assume that the previous pale colouration was due to a recent moult. W1 is still in his second instar and is now feeding on top of the leaf again. The photo below also shows what appear to be minute eggs on the surface of the leaf and I have also seen several of the mites that investigated the larva in its early days. They still continue to take an interest, but I have ceased to be concerned about this behaviour.

Common Blue larva (21-day old second-instar) 1-Sept-2011
Photo © Vince Massimo

Common Blue larva developing at this time of the year will typically overwinter in clumps of vegetation and given the recent spell of hot weather I would have expected it to still be active. However I had not seen it anywhere since 14th September which is when I took my most recent photos. At that time it was still only about 5mm long and I noticed an odd feature on the front right quarter when I enlarged the images. It was a cylindrical swelling which looked as if there was a parasitic larva under the skin. This feature did not exist on the left side.

Common Blue larva (with swelling on right side) 14-Sept-11
Photo © Vince Massimo
Common Blue larva (left side) 14-Sept-11
Photo © Vince Massimo

I have to say that this is pure speculation on my part and I don't even know whether they are prone to such attacks.

On 4th April 2012 it had been over five and a half months since I last saw the larva and it looked like it has just emerged from hibernation. This seemed to be its first meal, since there was no other evidence of feeding damage on the plant. It was feeding on top of a leaf and was approximately the same size as when last seen on 14th September 2011.
Common Blue Larva emerged from hibernation 4-April-2012  
Photo © Vince Massimo

The strange cylindrical swelling was still there on the front right quarter, but it seemed to come and go.

To summarise the progress at this point:

- The egg was laid on 1st August 2011.
- The larva hatched on 11th August 2011.
- On 12th August the larva was investigated by a type of mite and my initial concerns turned out to be unfounded.
- Larva entered hibernation on approximately 15th September 2011 and re-awakened on 4th April 2012.

Then, on 24th May 2012, it stopped feeding and became restless. This signaled that it was ready to pupate.

Common Blue Larva (final instar) 24-May-12  
Photo © Vince Massimo

Within a day it began to construct a fragile structure around itself on the surface of the ground. This comprised a loose cell of silken strands, leaf fragments and soil. It then positioned itself horizontally under the roof this structure. Pupation took place on 27th or 28th May, resulting in a pale green pupa which was just visible through small gaps in the side of the shelter.

Common Blue pupal cell 29-May-12  
Photo © Vince Massimo

Common Blue pupal cell 29-May-12  
Photo © Vince Massimo

The pupa was smaller than I was expecting, having a length of just 11mm. It went through a wide range of colour changes in the days prior to hatching, starting off pale green, then fading to white and yellow, partially darkening to brown, before turning blue/black.
The use of flash accentuated the blueness of the wing case. It actually appeared blue/black to the naked eye in natural daylight.

The dorsal view revealed a number of interesting features, particularly in the abdominal area. There appears to be a slight deformity in the pupal case here in that two of the segments are triangular rather than curved. This is best seen in the final image in the following sequence. The developing abdomen does not appear straight either.
The pupal stage lasted approximately 18 days and the emerging male was healthy, albeit slightly undersized. Rather than releasing him in my garden (where the egg was laid), I took him to my local Common Blue hot-spot to give it a better chance of finding a mate.

Just to raise an additional point, I noted that there has been much comment on the colour of the Common Blue females in 2012. Certainly, in my case, the blue ones have outnumbered the brown ones. One individual was particularly striking.

Compare this with a brown female and a normal male.

There was also another male with slightly unusual spotting on the underside of the forewing:
Common Blue male (wing spot variation) - Addington, Surrey 30-May-12
Photo © Vince Massimo