



# Ver Valley Society

## NEWSLETTER

*Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society*

Number 137 - June 2018

[www.riverver.co.uk](http://www.riverver.co.uk)

President: Peter Fox, MBE

## OPEN MEETING

**TUESDAY, June 5th, 2018**  
7.30 pm

**ST STEPHENS PARISH CENTRE**  
Station Road, Bricket Wood, AL2 3PJ

## ***'Flowers of the Chilterns'***

*Dr Brenda Harold our speaker is an expert botanist who lives locally. She will tell us about the flora of these beautiful hills, beech woods and chalk downs with many special plants including orchids.*



*Left to Right:  
Bee, Common Spotted and  
Monkey orchids*

*Photos: Dr Brenda Harold*

There have been quite a few significant things happening since our last Open Meeting. Firstly we again took part in SustainableStAlbans week from April 21st. Our Action Group was working that day near New Barnes Mill and it was pleasing how many members of the public joined in. It was good to see that EA have removed a weir and done some clearance work on the channel upstream from there. We also had a stall at the final event on Sunday 29th at Fleetville School, with excellent displays and a competition for children, which again went very well with many people showing interest – special thanks to Richard Wallis and John Pritchard for coordinating our efforts.

I'm sure most of you are aware that the proposals for Revitalising the Ver and Verulamium Lakes have been published. Several of the Committee attended a briefing at the Council Offices before these were published. While in general supportive of the plans, we did raise some issues on that occasion and will be writing in with our considered view shortly; please see Martin Frearson's piece on this later in the newsletter.

We have also been considering Affinity Water's proposed Water Resources Management Plan for 2020 to 2025 and beyond. We will be responding to this officially as it is so vital for the Ver and have asked those members on email to respond as well before the deadline, which is probably before you will receive this Newsletter; for details on this please see John Pritchard's piece.

Committee members have also attended various other external meeting including: the Dacorum Water Forum; the Environment Agency Stakeholders meeting; the Waterwise Conference in London; Radio Verulam for an interview and podcast; a walk along the Ver with Tom White who is the new contact for ColneCAN; SADC Planning Policy Committee meeting regarding the rail freight depot.



I met Julian Thornton, HCC Footpaths Officer, and Adam Buckland, EA, at the end of January to see what needed to be done to clear the outlet channel from the back ford at Redbournbury, where the footpath was under water; I am pleased to say that EA contractors have now done the necessary work and the area considerably improved. While there we also saw the damaged sluice and bank behind the Mill and both officers said they would encourage Crown Estates to have the repairs done promptly.

"Following a substantial breach in the bank of the River Ver next to the Mill sluice, the Crown Estates have funded major repair works which was carried out by civil engineers, Mott Macdonald, using of eight tonnes of gabian stone, 10 tonnes puddling clay, plus two and a half cubic metres of concrete.

The bank is now fully repaired and a new bridge is being built off-site and will be delivered to the Mill soon. The Mill owners, Mandy and Justin James are delighted with the result as the waterwheel can turn again (rainfall permitting!)"

*Mill Leat Repair [Mandy James]*

Welcome aboard to a host of new members who have joined us in 2018:

Mavis Ambrose, Brian and Gill Emerton, Fayne Tuffnell, Keith Reynolds, Alan Winn, Lisa Andrew and Alan & Alison Turner. We hope that you enjoy the variety of events and activities on offer but if you have any hidden talents and would like to assist with anything from bird-watching walks to environmental campaigning, please let me know.

Never fear, if your membership is due for renewal, we will be in touch via email or letter with a gentle reminder!

The welcome snow and rain from January to April have meant that some Bailiffs now have increasing flows to measure and enabled a proper channel to be established. The snow in early March was especially helpful as it soaks slowly into the ground as it thaws and was also followed by some generally wet weather in March and April, although for brief spell we had some unusually hot days. However there is very little if any flow from Redbourn northwards and it seems May is going to be fairly dry so the river is unlikely to do well this summer.

The aquifer would generally increase from December and it has gone up steadily from January to May but it remains at four meters below the May average. I have included the overall rainfall for last year provided by Rothamstead which, at 6½ % below average was similar to 2016 (also nearly 7% below average) goes some way to explaining why the groundwater was so very low at the start of this year.

<b>Month 2018</b>	<b>Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres</b> <i>[Long-term average]</i> (figures from EA)	<b>Rainfall in millimetres</b> <i>[± average]</i> (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamsted)
<b>Year 2017</b>		<b>691.4 [-41.6 = -6.5%]</b>
January	125.45 [131.36]	76.1 [+6.15]
February	125.84 [132.38]	48.4 [-1.74]
March	126.80 [132.79]	78.5 [+27.7]
April	128.63 [133.6]	74.8 [+19.77]
May	130.05[134.1]	<i>Not yet available</i>

Despite the changeable spring weather bird life continues to thrive in the valley. The first swallows were seen in mid April and there have been a few reports of sand martins in suitable areas. Some notable additions to the list I provided in the last newsletter are a sedge and a cetti's warbler, a yellow wagtail joining the resident grey wagtails and missed from the previous list were ravens and jackdaws.



*Stitchwort. [Jane Gardiner]*



*Blackthorn. [Jane Gardiner]*

Most winter visitors are long since departed but some teal and gadwall remain, with two Egyptian geese in Verulamium Park. Chiffchaffs, blackcaps and reed buntings returned some while ago and cuckoos have been heard in the Frogmore area recently. *[See John Fisher's Bird Notes for more]*

The spring blossom seems to have been particularly lovely this year. Blackthorn and lesser celandine are now over to be replaced by hawthorn, marsh marigolds, butterbur, lady's smock (cuckoo flower), bluebells, stitchwort, comfrey and white dead nettle among many others.



*Comfrey. [Jane Gardiner]*

A few muntjac have been seen and some hares have been reported. A rainbow trout has been added to the brown trout seen fairly regularly and also chub, stickleback, minnows and bull-heads.

Various bumble bees have been active on sunny days as have several butterflies like orange tips, brimstones, and occasionally tortoiseshells, peacocks and a comma.

## List of Bailiffs

I have been asked who are on our Bailiff team and where are their stretches, so that members can look out for them or perhaps alert them to any issues they notice. This is the list of their names and email addresses; \* indicates those who are also river-fly monitors.

- |                                                                       |                               |                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. R Colne to Moor Mill                                               | Sue and Martin Frearson*      | <a href="mailto:sue.frearson@virginmedia.com">sue.frearson@virginmedia.com</a>         |
| 2. Moor Mill to Burydell Lane                                         | Dick Downs*                   | <a href="mailto:d.downs2@toilets.org.uk">d.downs2@toilets.org.uk</a>                   |
| 3. Burydell Lane to New Barnes Mill                                   | Bruce Banfield-Taylor*        | <a href="mailto:generosumfluminis@btinternet.com">generosumfluminis@btinternet.com</a> |
| 4. New Barnes Mill to Sopwell Mill                                    | Giles Harrison                | <a href="mailto:gpharrison13@gmail.com">gpharrison13@gmail.com</a>                     |
| 5. Sopwell Mill to Holywell Hill                                      | Catherine and Derrick Davies* | <a href="mailto:catmacdee@yahoo.co.uk">catmacdee@yahoo.co.uk</a>                       |
| 6. Holywell Hill to Bluehouse Hill                                    | Vivien Gates                  | <a href="mailto:vggates@hotmail.com">vggates@hotmail.com</a>                           |
| 7. Bluehouse Hill to Bow Bridge                                       | Roger Hall                    | <a href="mailto:rogerphall@hotmail.com">rogerphall@hotmail.com</a>                     |
| 8. Bow Bridge to Redbournbury                                         | John Pritchard                | <a href="mailto:members@riverver.co.uk">members@riverver.co.uk</a>                     |
| 9. Redbournbury to Dolittle                                           | Jane Gardiner                 | <a href="mailto:janegardiner@madasafish.com">janegardiner@madasafish.com</a>           |
| 10. Dolittle to Redbourn Bypass                                       | Ernie Leahy                   | <a href="mailto:ernest.leahy@ntlworld.com">ernest.leahy@ntlworld.com</a>               |
| 11. Chequers to Porridge Pot (and Redbourn golf course to Luton Lane) | John Fisher                   | <a href="mailto:secretary@riverver.co.uk">secretary@riverver.co.uk</a>                 |
| 12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)          | VACANCY                       |                                                                                        |

## Beningfield's Birds Walk

John Fisher

Gordon Beningfield lived in Redbourn for many years before moving to his beloved cottage at Water End in the mid seventies. A number of events are being organised this year as it is now twenty years since he died. Pauline Ridgwell of Redbourn Museum set up a "Beningfield's Birds" walk last month and asked me to lead the walk. 25 walkers turned up on the day.

At the time of his death Gordon was working on a book entitled "Vanishing Songbirds" which his wife, Betty, completed and published. Apart from being a brilliant artist Gordon was a committed conservationist. One his main concerns was the decline of our farmland birds, such as skylarks and yellowhammers, due to the intensive farming of cereal crops which had led to hedges being dug out to make even bigger fields with practically no weedy strips. Thankfully if Gordon was still alive today he would give a wry smile and be pleased that these birds have been brought back from the brink. Following the various Stewardship schemes taken up by our farmers we now have new hedge planting and headland strips left with rough grass and weeds so essential for the winter feeding of our farmland birds. Around here things have improved so much since 1998. Thank you Ver Valley farmers! Still a long way to go before we get breeding grey partridge and corncrakes.

For our walk we were blessed with a brilliant sunny morning as we left Redbourn Common to walk towards Redbournbury. This was probably the first day when the early butterflies were flying and we saw several brilliant yellow brimstones, peacocks, small tortoiseshells, large whites, a comma and a couple of orange tips. I think the orange tip was a favourite of Gordon's and he included it when he was commissioned by the Royal Mail to produce a set of butterfly stamps.

At Redbournbury a pair of grey wagtails were feeding along the edges of the Ver and most of the party got at least a glimpse of these smart and lively birds which nest most years by the Mill Bridge. From Redbournbury we walked up Beesonend Lane towards Hammondsend Farm which is particularly good for skylarks. Sure enough with the sun rising so did the skylarks, singing their flight song before descending on raised wings to the ground. We must have seen a dozen or more. As the temperature rose we began to see more birds of prey with about 4 red kites and at least 6 buzzards circling over the field edge woods. We also saw a kestrel, a sparrow hawk and a distant raven. Of these, only the kestrel would have been seen by Gordon in the 70's as red kites have been reintroduced to the Chilterns following the release of young Spanish birds. Buzzards and ravens have extended their range from the west naturally, mainly due to the reduction in persecution by game keepers.



Photo: Luke Massey

Other interesting birds we saw were a mistle thrush, reed buntings, a yellowhammer and a few chiffchaffs which we heard but did not see.

The Ver Valley Society Barn Owl Project, which has provided and monitored nest boxes since 2006, has now firmly re-established barn owls as a successful breeding bird in the Ver Valley with typically three or four pairs nesting most years. They were just an occasional vagrant before. Gordon would have been delighted to have witnessed the return of this most charismatic of birds.

Finally I would just like to thank all the people who came along on that wonderful spring morning and particularly for their generosity as the collection for RSPB funds was an amazing £75.

**You may also be interested - Saturday July 7<sup>th</sup> and Sunday July 8<sup>th</sup>** – Gordon Beningfield Art Exhibition at the Natural History Museum in Tring.

## Riverfly Monitoring

Sue Frearson

Despite the variable weather since February, most of our monitors have been able to send in their results which have steadily improved as the river flow increased. However there are some worryingly low scores from the sites in Verulamium Park, at the bottom of Holywell Hill, and Sopwell Nunnery Green, which have suffered in the past from misconnected drains. We are investigating a report of pollution in the river in Verulamium Park (May 4th) and will report back to the EA.

Our thanks to Ernie Leahy, a founding member of the VVS Riverfly Group, has decided to resign due to ill health. So we are looking for a new monitor to sample at Shafford (Bow Bridge) and Luton Lane (Redbourn).

Please contact me [sdfrearson@virginmedia.com](mailto:sdfrearson@virginmedia.com) if you would like to help ideally on a monthly basis. I can arrange Riverfly training for you to monitor, at these sites or possibly others along the Ver.

*Ernie Leahy  
[Sue Frearson]*

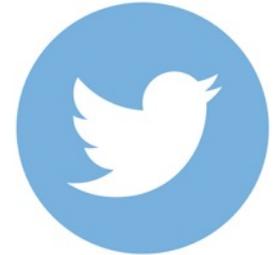


## Social Media @VerValleySoc

John Pritchard



We are past the 400 mark of regular followers across Facebook and twitter. You don't have to have a Facebook or twitter account to look in and see what the VVS is posting. Search for @VerValleySoc to discover our mix of up-to-the-minute-river reports, nature notes and observations on the Ver Valley. Two of our most recent posts, where the most popular are seen by over 8,000 people, featured the fate of our chalk streams and the return of a trickle of water to 200m of the Ver south of Redbourn.



## John Trew - The Last Time

John Fisher

John Trew indicated to us a few months ago that he would be cutting back on his services to various societies like us so this newsletter is the last John will be involved with. Arrangements are in place for our next edition. John Cadisch made a brilliant move in 2006 when he recruited John T. and his contribution has been immense to the VVS as we are very proud of our newsletter.

We will be presenting John with a memento in recognition of his 12 years of service and now he can spend more time fishing and bird watching in Suffolk. Thanks so much John.

Despite wind, rain, snow and ice the Action Group has met every month this winter with 10 plus members attending. February 2018 – Frogmore Pits. From the permissive path you can see the river at the bottom of the valley and several sites where the river has been invaded by willow trees. Our task was to tackle the first willow thicket. Teamwork was needed to clear the debris from the cutting party in the water and on the bankside up the steep bank, to those at the top building brush heaps. Everything had to work in sequence and it did! There was a great sense of elation at the end of the morning when we had a clear stretch of free flowing water.

March 2018 - The Chequers Inn. It was a bitter day with snow and ice but the gang turned up! After a long walk through the woods we found our problem - 20 meters of willow thicket to be cleared. Branches and roots were criss-crossed in, over and under the river. It was heavy, dirty work cutting and pulling the branches and roots out. But we succeeded. It was marvellous to see how quickly the river responded. Another huge team effort especially given the weather.

April 2018 - On the 21st of April the sun shone on New Barnes Mill as we tackled the Mill Leat as part of Sustainable St Albans week. We expected 2 or 3 newcomers to join us but when 8 turned up it was a pleasant and challenging surprise. We cleared the brush in the river, on the bank, and raked out invasive plants to reveal a tiny flow of clear water from the springs. It was an enjoyable morning meeting new people and seeing how enthusiastic they were about our river. There is a great time lapse video on Facebook which shows "work in progress".

## **Ver Valley Action Group - Summer Programme 2018**

- **Saturday 16th June 2018**

1000-1200 Park Street – Sycamore Close.

We will be pulling Himalayan Balsam north and south of Sycamore Close.

- **Saturday 21st July 2018**

1000-1200 Moor Mill and Riverside Way.

Working in two groups, one clearing Himalayan Balsam at the rear of Moor Mill and the other working down Riverside Way again clearing balsam.

- **Saturday 18th August 2018**

1000-1200. Frogmore

We will clear the Permissive and the adopted footpath plus attend to overhanging trees north of the ford.

## **Bird Notes**

**John Fisher**

This spring we have three birds that as far as I know are new to the Ver Valley. In early January there was an invasion of hawfinches from Europe because of a shortage of the berries and nuts that they feed on. Most English churchyards have yew trees and the hawfinches headed for these in huge numbers not seen for years. I saw some early in the New Year at Great Gaddesden but I am reliably informed that a couple were seen in St Michael's churchyard later in January.

Cetti's warblers were named after the 18th century [Italian zoologist, Francesco Cetti](#) and were previously a mainland European species but with climate change they were first found on the south coast. More recently they have moved up into the Home Counties with several pairs now resident at sites in Hertfordshire. However in April this year one was heard singing from deep inside a bramble bush near Shafford. They are unusual for a warbler species in that they do not migrate annually and they sing low down in bushes where it is really difficult to see them. However their song is so loud and raucous that they are unmistakable. Eventually after several attempts VVS man John Pritchard did get a sighting of this elusive but loud creature.

Another unusual report on the Herts Bird Club site was of a grey plover flying over Markyate. This is mainly just a winter visitor to our coasts so this one probably got windblown inland after a storm.

If you have any interesting bird sightings I would be pleased to hear from you on 01582 792843 or email [john.fisher@btclick.com](mailto:john.fisher@btclick.com).

Every five years Affinity Water has to produce a Water Resources Management Plan. Their latest draft for 2020-2025 was released for public consultation in March with the deadline for responses 23rd May 2018.  
<https://stakeholder.affinitywater.co.uk/dwrmp-consultation.aspx>

The VVS committee considers that the future health of the River Ver requires more than Affinity offered, indeed was probably able to offer. Faced with a rising population in the South East and with substantial housing development looming, we believe more significant changes are needed and sooner rather than later.

To put the Society's view, we not only met with Affinity last year but also responded to the 2017 draft Plan. This year, we have attended another stakeholders meeting with Affinity for the Colne catchment, and have responded to their second draft Plan. We have written to Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Environment to ask for change and have encouraged our members to do likewise.

There were three key aspects to our standpoint:

**1. End the over-reliance on groundwater**

Affinity's plans suggest that in the next 5 years, and for the foreseeable future, abstraction of groundwater remains the cornerstone of their water supply. Should a drought be declared, the solution to the problem is the issue of permits that will allow even more groundwater to be taken from the chalk.

We consider that the magnitude of the challenge in the South East requires a co-ordinated regional approach to water, including investment in significant infrastructure projects.

**2. Keep Affinity on target and hold them to account**

Affinity has bold plans to balance supply and demand which include optimistic targets. The company is projecting a fall in demand for water over the next 5 years. It feels consumer education, an ambitious leak reduction programme and the roll out of water meters - will deliver the significant savings required to balance supply and demand.

It is difficult to have complete confidence in these assertions. We called upon government and its regulators to scrutinise Affinity's projections in detail, rigorously police them and impose suitable penalties should they prove wide of the mark.

**3. Ensure Abingdon Reservoir is built**

Looking further ahead, Thames Water is considering building a reservoir near Abingdon. This would mean 100 million litres of water being available daily to Affinity, whose future plans hinge on it. We have asked that Michael Gove brings all pressure to bear to remove any uncertainty and guarantee that the Abingdon Reservoir is built with work starting as soon as possible.



**In Summary**

We are suggesting that the chalk aquifer and the River Ver will only see improvement if a regional approach to water (including infrastructure projects) is introduced; Affinity hit their ambitious leaks and consumer water saving targets; and the injection of a substantial amount of water to Affinity's network from Abingdon Reservoir materialises.

## Future Open Meetings

John Fisher

- |                                                |                                                               |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Tuesday, June 5th, 2018</b> at 7.30 pm:     | At Bricket Wood - Dr Brenda Harold – Flowers of the Chilterns |
| <b>Tuesday, October 23rd, 2018</b> at 7.30 pm: | At Michaels Parish Centre – Our AGM - Rob Rees of the EA      |
| <b>February 2019</b> – Redbourn                | Date and speaker to be arranged                               |

**Very Important**

All meetings are free entrance to members and non members - If you are coming to one of our meetings please check our newsletter or the web page a few days prior to the meeting in case of any late changes. If you require directions to any of the venues please contact a committee member. (See contacts page). Although our meetings are free entry to members and non members we welcome donations towards the cost of refreshments, hall hire etc. Suggested £2 pp

The Ver Valley Society is delighted with the ambitious proposals announced in March to improve 2.8 km of the Ver – one of the globally rare chalk streams – from St Michaels to Sopwell Mill. We believe that these plans will help towards our society achieving its long term aims for the river. They are on the St Albans website, [www.stalbans.gov.uk](http://www.stalbans.gov.uk), go to Your Say, then Consultations. The latter is open until 27 May and we urge members to make comments.

As far as Verulamium Park and the lakes are concerned, the plans are very similar to the Halcrow Option 7a solution of 2004, but involve less engineering to the lakes (costed at £2M at the time!). They represent a once in a generation chance to create a lake and river area the people of St Albans and our thousands of annual visitors can appreciate for years to come.

Reach 2 from the Causeway to Holywell Hill proposes two boardwalk sections for the Ver Valley Trail, one of which is almost identical to our proposal of 2014, plus a shorter section closer to Holywell Hill. We might well be able to support these financially with the remaining Friends of Ver Park funds.

Reach 3 from Holywell Hill to the Prospect Rd allotments proposes channel improvements but little real change. We think the narrow footbridge should be replaced with a ramped structure like the bridge at Hyde Lane in Frogmore but oddly this is not mentioned.

Reach 4 to Cottonmill Lane proposes moving the existing river alignment to the lowest point of the valley (necessitating relocation of some of the existing allotments). It makes eminent environmental sense to create a wetland here through which the Ver Valley Trail will wind, and avoid flooding of the remaining allotments as the water table rises following reduced abstraction at Mud Lane and Holywell Hill pumping stations from the 2020's.

Reaches 5 and 6 have various small changes to narrow and improve the channel, and the Ver Valley trail, and they have taken on board VVS efforts to create a wildflower meadow south of the Alban Way bridge - by lowering the banks here this would become a water meadow.

Encouragingly, these proposals can be implemented independently as funding becomes available, providing opportunities for us to get involved both practically and financially as they come to fruition, along with our old friends at Countryside Management Service.

**Chairman,  
Bailiff Co-ordinator**

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**Newsletter Group**

John Cadisch, John Fisher, Sue  
Frearson, Martin Frearson and Jane  
Gardiner

**HOTLINES**

EA Incident Hotline: 0800 807060  
("Report all environmental incidents")  
EA Floodline: 0845 988 1188  
Cleaner St Albans/Fly tipping reports:  
01727 809019 (Veolia)  
[email:  
a.cleanerdistrict@stalbans.gov.uk](mailto:a.cleanerdistrict@stalbans.gov.uk)  
Water Leaks (Affinity):  
0800 376 5325