



# Ver Valley Newsletter



Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society

www.riverver.co.uk

## January 2009 - Our 100th Edition !

### Chairman:

(also News & Publicity)

Andy Webb, 30 Queens Court, Hatfield Road, St Albans, AL1 4TG.  
Tel: (01727) 839573.

### Deputy Chairman:

(also Bailiff co-ordinator)

Mrs Jane Gardiner, 18 Claudian Place, St Albans, AL3 4JE.  
Tel: (01727) 866331.

Email: janegardiner@madasafish.com

### Hon Secretary:

Peter Fox, MBE, 23 Fish Street, Redbourn, AL3 7LP.  
Tel: (01582) 793303.

Email: fox@fishstreet23.freerve.co.uk

### Hon Treasurer:

(also Membership Secretary,  
"Newsletter" Editor)

John Cadisch, 14 Prae Close, St Albans, AL3 4SF.

Tel: (01727) 862843.

Email: john.cadisch@ntlworld.com

### Minutes Secretary:

(also Bird Note Co-ordinator,  
Webmaster)

John Fisher, 92 High Street, Redbourn, AL3 7BD.

Tel: (01582) 792843.

Email: john.fisher@btclick.com

### Newsletter Layout:

John Trew  
(Verulam Angling Club)

### Hotlines

"Cleaner, Greener St. Albans"  
0845 125 8000

EA "Incident Hotline": 0800 807060

EA "Floodline": 0845 988 1188

EA Customer Service: 0870 850 6506

## January Open Meeting

A Happy New Year to everyone ! We meet next on:

**Monday, January 26th, 2009, 7.30 pm**

at Transept Hall, St Mary's Church, Redbourn. The attractive, modern hall adjoins the Church. Please note the place and date! Plenty of parking in Old Hemel Hempstead Road.

After usual updates, it is hoped to provide refreshments. (Volunteers always welcome for this important work.)

Following the interval, Tim Hill and Ali Hauser from Grebe House (H&MWT) will talk on "Action for Wetland Wildlife in Herts and Middlesex".

## Future Open Meetings

**John Fisher**

### Monday 20th April - Bricket Wood

Isabel Crozier CMS - "CMS Activities in the Ver Valley"

### Tuesday 28th July - Markyate

Dr John Catt - "Geology of the Ver Valley"

### Tuesday 20th October, AGM - St Michael's

Kim Morgan - "Water Aid"

If anyone has ideas for speakers, or a neglected subject that needs to be covered perhaps, mention it to one of the committee.

## A New Committee Member

We are very pleased to welcome a new member to the committee, Ernie Leahy of Redbourn, the well-known wildlife artist.

## Subscriptions John Cadisch (Treasurer/Membership)

Subs came up for renewal on 1 September and more members than usual have renewed by this time of the year. Those still outstanding will receive a reminder shortly. The rates are unchanged: £20 Five Years, £5 One year. (Receipt normally sent unless not required.)

*River Ver Archive: St Albans Central Library (Local History Reference Section)  
Over 1,000 pages of information*

## **River Ver Walks ("River Ver Access & Interpretation Project")**

**Andy Webb**

At the beginning of December we heard that our JOINT project - the Society and the CMS working together - had been awarded a Heritage Lottery Fund grant of £49,500 via the "Your Heritage" fund.

Although the grant is definitely ours (and in our name), we cannot begin detailed planning and implementation of the various items involved (including the production of new Walk leaflets) until we have secured all the match-funding.

We will not know whether our application to the Veolia Trust has been successful until March/April, only when this is in place will we get "permission to start" from HLF. (Funds are unlikely to be released until then.)

This is very exciting news and rewards all our patience and hard work over the last three years and, in particular the hard work of Ian Gibbon and Isabel Crozier at CMS - especial thanks to them both.

I hope to give you a more detailed account and timetable in our April Newsletter and at our Bricket Wood open meeting when Isabel will be guest speaker.

Walks: **Tuesday 20th January**, "The Confluence Walk", 10 am to 12 noon, meet Moor Mill car park.  
**Sunday 15th February**, "St Albans & Park Street", 10.30 - 12.30, meet Clock Tower, St Albans,  
then taking the Abbey Flyer to Park Street station.  
(Walk is entitled "Fly Along the Ver") (Both CMS + leader, Andy Webb)

## **Bird Notes**

**John Fisher**

Often people ask me somewhat accusingly if I am a "twitcher". The easiest way to explain this is that for every "twitcher" there are probably a 1,000 birdwatchers and I certainly fall into the latter category. "Twitchers" have mobile pagers and dash all over the UK to add rare species to their life list, which are often vagrants who have crossed the Atlantic or the entire European mainland in misguided migrations caused by strong winds.

Having said all this I must admit it was a real joy to find a rare bird in the Ver Valley in November when a merlin turned up near Redbournbury. A merlin is not a real UK rarity but it is restricted to our northern heather moors in the summer, spending the winter mainly in coastal areas so in Hertfordshire it is very rare. For Ernie Leahy, my companion that day, and me it was our first for the county. A merlin is the smallest of the European falcons and is very much like a small peregrine. In flight they are often confused with sparrow hawks but this bird was perched on a fence post so we had a really good view and we were sure it was a female merlin. As with most birds of prey the female is larger but with a dull brown plumage compared to the slate grey of the smaller male. On the moors they capture their usual prey of meadow pipits in a fast low level flight without the spectacular stoops of the peregrine. I think this was one was probably preying on the starlings.

In mid December I was lucky enough to see a 2000 strong flock of golden plovers in the fields off of Punch Bowl Lane, which runs to west of the A5183 midway between Redbourn and St Albans. In previous years these same fields have played host to golden plovers and it is a bit of mystery why they favour these fields. It could be lack of disturbance, good sight lines to see predators or an abundance of grubs for feeding. They usually only stay a day or two before moving further south probably to the south coast estuaries or mainland Europe. As usual there were a smaller number of lapwings with them, probably 250, but it is when both species take off and fly in formation that they become a true spectacle. The same day we saw four buzzards and a sparrow hawk either on or over the same fields

The little egrets have turned up even earlier than normal in the Ver Valley this year with up to four being present from mid October and it cannot be long before they breed locally. Kites and buzzards must have had a good breeding season as more and more are being seen, with family groups of four now not uncommon.

On the downside small birds seem to have had a poor year and many people have remarked to me that they are not seeing tits and finches in anything like their normal numbers. We have been checking the 40 nest boxes along the Ver Valley just recently and results have been particularly disappointing with many nests built but not used or containing dead fledglings. It was a very wet and cold spring and maybe our boxes were put up a bit late but I think the conditions meant that many youngsters just did not get fed. We have just put up a further 20 and as these are all in position before winter they will hopefully be used for winter roosting and then for successful breeding in 2009. A warm and dry spring is needed in 2009 to allow the numbers to recover.

Up to three barn owls have been using the kestrel box and a big hollow oak for day roosting along the Ver Valley Walk near Redbourn so we are going to put up another barn owl box nearby in the hope that another pair will be encouraged to breed.

If you read this and have any interesting bird sightings in or around the Ver Valley I would be more than pleased to hear from you on 01582 792843 or email [john.fisher@btclick.com](mailto:john.fisher@btclick.com).

## Bailiff Notes

Jane Gardiner

After the wet summer, the Autumn has been about average as regards rainfall, with sunshine considerably up but temperatures somewhat below average with snow an unusual feature in October. November was cloudy and fairly wet but December has been mainly dry and frosty, with plenty of sun. The aquifer level and flows have remained above average. The head of the river has stayed north of Redbourn with a steady trickle maintained at River Hill, Flamstead. The little tributary Hanstead Brook, near the southern end of the river, has some flow in it, as it has had for much of this year. Overall this year rainfall has been about 25% above average, but there has been more sun with slightly higher temperatures than average. [Thanks to Chris Hall at Rothampstead for providing weather records over the year and EA for aquifer figures]

2008	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters and [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothampstead)
August	133.07 [132.56]	107.8 [+54.1]
September	132.29 [130.87]	66.2 [+5.2]
October	131.61 [130.93]	74.3 [-0.4]
November	131.40 [130.91]	91.1 [+24.9]
December	131.62 [130.56]	42.0 [-28.1]

At least growth of cress, weeds etc has now died down so some good winter rains in the New Year should enable a clear channel to be re-established unless of course high winds blow down trees and branches into the river causing blockages!!

Two unusual sightings reported to me are of a perched female merlin and a hen harrier in early November. Little grebes have been seen once or twice. Several sightings have been made of up to 5 red kites and 6 buzzards at once; these can now be considered regulars in our valley. I have received quite a few reports of kingfishers being seen and there are abundant mixed flocks of tits including long-tailed which seem to have become more common of recent years. The usual winter visitors are now here; flocks of fieldfares, redwings, golden plover, and several little egrets. Gadwall are collecting on the 'lake' below Redbournbury Farm, where sometimes other interesting water fowl come in winter. Tufted duck have come into other lake areas recently.

In late November a badger was seen south of Redbourn and a muntjack near Frogmore Pits. I have had no reports of mink (and the number of moorhens would suggest the absence of mink) but neither have I had confirmed of water vole sightings reported. Moles have been very busy recently.

Fish reports include chubb, trout, roach and lots of signal crayfish! SADC are intending to try a trap and remove some of these in Verulamium Park area.

BAILIFFS remember our get-together on Sat 31st Jan, 12.30 at Redbournbury Mill, and please, if you haven't already, let me know if you can come.

## Our Web Site [www.riverver.co.uk](http://www.riverver.co.uk)

John Fisher

I have at last managed to add the Geology page under "Information". I have met with Dr John Catt of the Herts Geology Society recently and he has kindly agreed to allow me to use front page of their web site as our Geology page. Ideally this needs to be edited so it centres on the Ver Valley rather than the whole of Hertfordshire and I will try and do this sometime. John has also agreed to speak to us Markyate in July.

I have also added my December bird notes and on the web site you can see Ernie Leahy's wonderful picture of the merlin at Redbournbury. He certainly captured the moment - I know I was there!

I have also added some links:- Dacorum Environmental Forum Water Group; Herts Geology Society; Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust. Ernie Leahy - our "brand new" committee member - both his email and his new web site where you can see his artwork including many Ver Valley scenes and birds.

Now that the "River Ver Access and Interpretation Project" (see Andy's piece on the project) is going ahead next year we will need more photos for the leaflets and the web pages. So if you have digital pictures of the river, its buildings, plants, birds, etc please send them to me. No fees but you will be acknowledged! We particularly need photos of the lower Ver. i.e. south of St Albans.

*Continued overleaf . . .*

. . . *Continued*

Our web site will be the main source of information for the walks and pages will be added with an interactive map where you download walk leaflets and information about natural and built features along each walk. CMS are actively involved with us in selecting a suitable web site designer to add these features. The web address [www.riverver.co.uk](http://www.riverver.co.uk) will be retained as this goes well.

If you would like to be included on our email circulation list just send me an email at [john.fisher@btclick.com](mailto:john.fisher@btclick.com). I would be interested to know if many members would prefer to receive their newsletters electronically. I could either send the newsletter to you as an email attachment or advise you by email when newsletter downloads become available on the website. Three Valleys generously print and post our newsletters but we should not take this for granted.

If you are on my list and want to be deleted just let me know, my telephone number is 01582 792843

## **John Cadisch - "A Ver Valley Veteran"**

**John Fisher**

This is our 100th VVS Quarterly Newsletter and what is really remarkable is that John C has edited and produced every single one. John was born and raised in North London, his grandfather having arrived in England from Switzerland in the 1880's. After national service John joined the family business which was initially involved with the wholesale motor trade. Later they concentrated on wire mesh and filter materials, which although initially a side line became very successful and in fact Cadisch Wire is still around to this day. John was the Accounts Manager until he retired.

1977 was a very significant year for John; he married Rita, moved to Prae Close and, as a natural extension to restoring canals, joined the newly born VVS, becoming treasurer very soon afterwards. In 1983 he identified the need for a members' newsletter and produced the first one on the Cadisch Wire Co. office typewriter and Roneo duplicator. Now, 25 years later, he is still putting it all together each quarter with his usual dependable efficiency (is there a moral somewhere here about volunteering !)

In 2002 Three Valleys generously agreed to print and distribute our newsletters which saved us a lot of envelope licking and postage; the estimated saving in postage alone is £200 per annum.

In 2003 when he was in his seventies John abandoned his word processor, got his first computer and he soon mastered the new technology. A couple of years ago John Trew, who had a background in the newspaper business, offered to assist John with layout work. This meant John C now compiles the contents, emails to John T who then usually sets it out and emails it back within a day or two. John T now lives in Beccles but it matters little in these days of electronic mail as the drafts fly back and forth through cyberspace. John then emails it to Three Valleys to post to members and we add the PDF as download on the website



John is still our treasurer and membership secretary. He is also involved in several other organisations such as the Light Rail Transit Association, Abbey Flyer Users Group, the Society of St Michaels and Kingsbury, St Albans Architectural and Archaeological Society and Friends of Verulamium Park.

The VVS is very fortunate to have the services of the ever willing and reliable John Cadisch.

## **Duncan Gardiner - 1936-2008**

We report with great sadness the passing in early October of Jane Gardiner's husband, Duncan, suddenly, after many years with Parkinson's Disease. The funeral service was held at St Michael's Church, St Albans, with good VVS representation. The church was well attended by the many who knew him as well as the family.

Duncan will be particularly remembered for his gentle manner, his excellent work as an enthusiastic wildlife and river photographer, his unstinting support for Jane in her rôle as Bailiff Co-ordinator, and his three years on the Society's committee (1997 - 2000). He did also do quite a bit of research into the different names the Ver has had over the centuries. We have extended our sympathy to Jane and her family at this difficult time.

## **Flooding at Cottonmill Allotments**

Allotment holders continue to suffer flooding problems at this site. The EA refuse to raise the river bank so as to avoid disturbing water vole habitats – although no one has seen any.

## "Time Team" at Friars Wash

Andy Webb

On Sunday 5th January Channel 4 broadcast the first programme in the new series of this long-running archaeology documentary series. This edition featured the programme's considerable resources focussed on a wheatfield abutting the east bank of the Ver, mid-way between Luton Lane and the M1 Motorway at Friars Wash.

Crop marks on an aerial photo taken 30 years ago seemed to support the remains of two small Roman temples beneath the surface. I first saw the photo in Ros Niblett's book "Verulamium" which was published a few years ago, and we were informed at our meeting last July by a member and local resident that Time Team had been filming in the area; unfortunately I was unable to discover precisely when the programme would be broadcast. Anyway, some of you may have seen it or seen the follow-up report in the "Herts Advertiser" the next week.

Over the course of three days they uncovered not two but four Roman temples (three square ones and one very rare circular structure), offerings, lead "curses" and what appeared to be the ritual stone head of the water-god being venerated at the site. Writing as someone who has never missed an episode of Time Team and one who pays homage to the river Ver at each sunrise and sunset, naturally I was in Seventh Heaven!

Although the Ver was never actually mentioned by name (very disappointing), it was made clear that the river and valley landscape were of critical importance to the site. Some core-sample work, and wider landscape mapping was undertaken and this suggested, not surprisingly, a much more imposing river than the usually dry or damp ditch which exists nowadays.

One expert even went as far as saying that the site there "was of national importance". As we know, special things happen next to special rivers! I will try to ascertain what the status of the site is now, and what further investigations might be carried out in the future.

## Photo Finish



*The Ver near Sopwell House [Liz Delaney]*

*The weir in Park Street near the old watercress beds [Liz Delaney]*





# Ver Valley Society

