

Memories of the River Ver – Flamstead

David Scott (writing in 1987) “From Markyate the river bed continues on the West side of the A5 to a sewage works; presently there is no flow above or below the works but there are signs of recent flow and on the upstream side indications of road-surface water flow. 4km downstream a full bore flow from a 7” outlet takes over – no spring water this, it comes from the sewage works complete with condoms. Officials hope that works in hand will rectify this. (In mid/late 1990’s Thames Water rebuilt Markyate STW and, consequently, the river here is far healthier).

“Between here and River Hill the owners of Flamstead House Farm are doing battle over the pollution, complaining that they cannot keep cattle in their meadows because of the pollution”.

Roy Cutler “Phillip Jordan’s cattle were watered in Archie Skegg’s meadow about 1947-50. Water seemed to flow in 7 year cycles. 1935 was a dry year”.



[Above River Hill Ford, Flamstead.](#)

Eric Edwards, Flamstead “Hollybush Lane is one of the principal access roads to the village, notorious for its propensity to flood at the lowest point where the River Ver has been diverted to become little more than ditch to the A5”.

Mr Timberlake “Nowadays (writing in 1987) there is a lot of pollution from Markyate STW (formerly Molespitte Meadow); on misty mornings the smell along the river is terrible and the banks are white with deposit. I walk this stretch every day and no longer see the voles, water-rats or moorhens and kingfishers that I used to see”.

(Markyate Sewage Treatment Works updated in the late 1990’s by Thames Water and the pollution is now much diminished).

Mr Timberlake “River Hill ford used to be up to 4ft deep”.



Above: Clearing the river, c1913, Flamstead.

Mr Fensome recalls watering traction-engines at the ford and seeing the river over 30ft wide across the road.

Eric Edwards, 'Flamstead' "At the bottom of the hill used to be a ford on the River Ver with a footbridge at the side. This has long since been replaced by a proper road bridge. The road here is still liable to flood after heavy rain and the last time this happened was in 1962.

Hilda Flitton "We used to go and paddle in the river where it crossed the road at the bottom of River Hill; some boys used to swim in the pool that widened out in the meadow".

Mr Fensome "The Ver would be 4ft deep north of River Hill, and between there and the Chequers Inn (Chequers Hill) there were dozens of nesting moorhens. Three watercress beds were formed in this stretch by the Ashby's and Pug Cooke. The 'cress was picked and carted away by lorry, and sold locally too. Snipe, wild duck and kingfishers were around until after the 1939-45 war. There was 4ft of water at the Chequers. Kingcups were picked here too. Newts, sticklebacks and minnows abounded.

"There were 'cress beds where the pumping station (Friars Wash) now stands and I remember rowing boats behind the Chequers. Marsh-marigolds grew by Chequer Hill".



Eric Edwards, '**Flamstead**', the Chequers Inn. "When the Manor of Flamstead was broken up and sold off in 1880 the agents, Messrs Edwin Fox and Bowsfield described the property thus:-

Lot 8 valuable freehold property situated at Fly's Wash comprising an old established tavern known as the Chequers and about 12 acres of meadow land intersected by a running stream in which are thriving watercress beds.



"Wilf Papworth mentions that the pub was closed in the 1950's because the water was declared unfit for human consumption. At times the river used to flood across the road at this point".

Herbert W Tompkins, 'Highways and Byeways in Hertfordshire', published 1913. "The word Flamstead is a corruption of Verlamstead, the river Ver flowing through the

neighbouring valley. I say the river, for as such I have known it for many a year, but so great has been the recent drought that today the Ver is not even a Brooklet bubbling down the plain. Its bed is utterly dry – a long, twisting, brown line running through the meadows towards Redbourn. So I cannot watch it stealing past the sedges as I have done so oft nor listen to that ripple and swirl of waters which I love so well, but continue on my way somewhat discontentedly until I come out into the main road from St Albans to Dunstable”.

David Scott "From Friars Wash the side valley extends westwards quite noticeably for 3 miles to Ballingdon Bottom without a stream, occasionally there is flooding of the lane by Valley Bottom Farm and at Trowley Bottom there has been quite serious flooding of the bottom lane filling the cellars of Pieghtley Cottages, but not often”.



“To the East another side valley reaches 3½ miles almost parallel to the Ver as far as

the West side of Caddington. Here a ditch passes South under the road (B4540),



West of Pepperstock. Only on some occasions is there much water here as it quickly goes to ground but I do remember seeing running water in the valley between River Hall and Hill and Coles Farm; that must have been about 1950“.

Mr Timberlake remembers the gravel pits worked by Rice's to the west of the valley to Jack's Dell and Trowley Bottom “always full of water, pumped away when they were working, 10-15ft deep; afterwards gypsies would come and cut willows for peg making and they used the clear water for drinking etc, later these pits were filled in”.

The following items of Ver Valley information were taken from 'A New History of Flamstead' by Eric Edwards (Flamstead Society, 1999):-

Early History and Origins of Names River Ver and Flamstead



“There are plenty of writers about place names, eminent people, people whom I would not dream of contradicting, but every one of them has had to make an informed guess, to plump, as it were, for the likely origin for Ver/Verlam/Verulamium. I submit they were hasty about it, that all three have a common origin, and that name is Verlam, a Celtic word, which could well make it over two thousand years old. There is also the point that although all sorts of place names changed a number of times over the centuries, rivers for some reason acquired their names very early on and those names endured down the years better than most, albeit with considerable variations in spellings as time progressed.

“Thus we have the River Verlam, our little River Ver as it is known today, named at the dawn of time by early settlers.

“They had another word, stead, or stede or stedt which meant a place, site of a building or settlement. Stead was a very common word not only here but all over Europe, notably in the Saxon tongue though the Saxons were very late arrivals in Flamstead, probably not penetrating this far until after the Battle of Bedford in 571 AD.

“It seems likely, indeed logical, that Verulamium was named after the River Verlam. It is also entirely logical that the names Verulamium and Verlamstead have a common origin, but one modern historian, Omer Roucoux, is adamant that Verulamium did not get its name from the River Ver, rather the other way round and the whole question is still very much in the melting pot. To add weight to this theory some early maps, notably the Drury and Andrews’ map of 1766, call the Ver the River Verlam or Muse, but these early maps are not very reliable and the name Muse

could have been short-lived or could even have been an error.



“It is significant that the Celts had a word ‘hamps’, which has been translated to ‘summer dry’. Now, the flow of the River Ver has always been precarious in drought years, even before the Friars Wash Pumping Station was built; it seems logical, therefore, that this aspect of the neighbourhood could have been incorporated into the name of a settlement adjacent to the river to produce Verlam-hamps-stead.



“So, the most likely source of the name of the village is a corruption of Verlamstead, a settlement by the river Verlam



“Another of Mr Bullard’s theories is that the name could have originally been Fleamsted, Old English for a house of fugitives. This origin seems a trifle fanciful, although the ‘Oxford Dictionary of English Place Names’ by Ekert Ekwall tends to support him, explaining that fleam is old English for flight, thus Fleomstede becomes a place of refuge, a sanctuary ...



“Interestingly, there is a little place in Normandy called Ver and a little River Ver that flows through it on its way to the Seine. It is tempting to speculate that when the Norman conquerors saw Flamstead’s little river it reminded them of home and they named it accordingly, but our name goes back a few hundred years before that. Possibly both Vers have the same earlier and Celtic origin”. (p 5/7/8)

Early History and Origins of Names



"Friars Wash" is a poetic name, a romantic name, and there are many references to tired monks on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St Albans, resting there and washing themselves and their clothes by the roadside in the infant River Ver. There is even said to be a painting showing the ablutions in progress. Sorry, but it has to be said that all this is nonsense and a lot of worthy souls, who have written imaginative things about it, ought to have known better No, this washing business is a modern obsession and the average friar had little time for it.

"The proper name for the place where the River Ver crosses Watling Street in Flamstead Parish is Fly's Wash. It had been so from way back until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Certainly it is Fly's Wash in Bryant's map of 1822, in the 1833 Poll Book and in the 1838 Tithing Map and Grant and is mentioned as such by I.D. Morgary in his 'Roman Roads of Britain' of 1955.

"It is tempting to think that the name derives from the fast, light one horse covered carts called Flys going through the ford at speed and creating considerable spray or wash, but even this is romantic speculation because the 'fly' did not appear on our roads until early in the nineteenth century and the name for the spot is considerably older than that.

"Pickfords, the carriers, who had a staging post at Markyate Street, put on a 'flying wagon' at about this time which ran from Manchester to London in four and a half days and cost a penny a mile to travel on. It became very popular.....

"As to the timing of the change of name, it may be fanciful thinking, but is it rather

more than a coincidence that the name of 'Fly's Wash' seems to have become 'Friar's Wash' at a time when the Lords of the Manor of Flamstead briefly became the Fryes family? Interestingly, 'Fly's Wash' is invariably shown in the possessive on official documents; seldom Flys Wash and never Flies Wash, whereas Friars Wash is generally plural though occasionally possessive". (p 194/5)

Crime and Punishment

"There was another nasty case in January 1885. Thomas Birdsey, a Grocer and Straw Dealer from Markyate Street instructed William Parkins to take thirteen horses from his house to Mr Queensborough's house, Pit Field, which was close by the junction of Hollybush Lane with London Road. All the horses were weak and they were neither fed nor watered for a week. The River Ver ran through the field, but that year it was a dry ditch and the meadow was described as impoverished. One horse got into the ditch and could not get out so it was pole-axed by Birdsey and left there. The RSPCA brought the case. Birdsey was found guilty and fined £5 with £4.95 costs. (p 59)

Water Supply

"Flamstead has always been a dry place and providing sufficient water was often a problem, though in winter Trowley Bottom had too much of it and was often flooded. Even the ponds dried out in drought years".

"Many properties had their own well and there were public pumps at:

The top of River Hill
At Pie Corner
At Slate Corner
Opposite the Three Blackbirds
At the bottom of White Hill

There were also communal wells at:

Hill House, Trowley
By the side of the Rose and Crown, Trowley
Well House Cottage, Trowley
By Blacksmiths Cottage
At Church Farm
At the spot where the war memorial now stands which was operated by two blind men.

"An improved water supply was provided by the Rural Sanitary Authority of the Hemel Hempstead Union in 1876 by way of a covered pump house in Hollybush Lane. The square brick and slate building may still be seen, though nowadays it is used as a private garage".

"... but it was not until the latter part of 1933 that serious discussions started about laying on a pipe water supply to the village".

“... some doubt was also expressed as to whether Markyate Waterworks had the capacity to supply Flamstead. The pumps had already been lowered at the waterworks following a succession of drought years.

“There was particular alarm in January 1934 when the surveyor reported to Hemel Hempstead Rural District Council that the water level had dropped by four feet eight inches in three weeks and a similar situation applied to all the wells in the District. He said that the River Ver was completely dry as far down as Redbourn and it had been ninety years since things were so bad”.

“To cap it all 1935 turned out to be a drought year; the matter came to crisis point that July when the surveyor reported that water levels in Flamstead wells were still dropping. He was authorised to drop the main well another ten feet if necessary. By that time the new bore at Markyate Waterworks, intended to cater for Flamstead, was nearly complete, but it was feared that because of the droughts it would be necessary to install a new pump, which would cost another £800 piped water eventually arrived in Flamstead in 1937, which was a great relief all round”. (p 183/4)

Flamstead and Markyate are now supplied with water from Kensworth PS (6MI/D) at the head of the Ver Valley.

“Friars Wash Pumping Station was opened by the then Housing Minister, Enoch Powell in September 1956. Two electrically driven pumps working round the clock drew water from 150 feet deep wells in the chalk aquifer to supply Luton and the surrounding area. It was highly successful and the water was of excellent quality, but the rate of abstraction eventually reached 15 million litres a day and in a few years the River Ver had permanently dried up for its first few miles”.

“The Ver Valley Society had foreseen that unless something was done quickly, the River Ver could disappear completely and forever, and it set about looking for solutions and campaigning for remedies. Fortunately, at about the same time the National Rivers Authority (now the Environment Agency) was created, with a mandate to consider environmental issues related to extraction of water, and thus it came about that a new pipeline was laid from Grafham Water, near Huntingdon, to Luton Waterworks. The whole pumping exercise had been an ecological disaster from its inception and nobody had cared. It seems almost incredible that anyone could consider pumping such vast quantities of water from so near the source of a river and then, after passing it through the pipes of Luton, return it to the River Lea via East Hyde STW”. (p 197/8)

(Note: Friars Wash PS was downgraded to ‘standby’ status at an official ‘switch-off’ ceremony held there on 26 May 1993. It is currently operated at full capacity in emergency situations only, otherwise, 1 MI/D is abstracted to ‘keep the pipes sweet’).

Chad Lane “Further on, the lane is crossed by a winterbourne, an intermittent stream that flows for a couple of months each winter from Broomhill Leys to Friars Wash. Seldom very impressive, but once in a while it becomes a raging torrent for a few

days. The road has been built up above the valley floor at this point and a pipe has been laid to take the flow. (p 186)

“The Moor was the name of the large pond that used to exist behind the Chequers public house. Horses and carts would pull in here for the horses to take a drink and for them and their carts to be washed down. Gypsies would gather willow from the Moor to make clothes pegs which they sold at cottage doors in the neighbourhood. (p 198)



Trowley Bottom (Trowley, rhymes with ‘holy) “..... Wellhouse Cottages are Victorian and there must, at one time, have been a prominent well at this point. Indeed it is known that it ran dry in 1965 for the first time in living memory. 1965 was not a particularly dry year and the cause was considered to be the deep boreholes at the new Friars Wash PS”.

“Then comes First Thatched cottage, the only thatched building left in the Parish ... From here to Trowley Bottom Farm has been prone to flooding for a century and probably longer, for which prosperity it is sometimes referred to by locals as ‘Trowley Docks’”. (p 235)

“High summer 1879 was marked by violent thunderstorms in the area. Early on Sunday morning, 3rd August, a storm produced such heavy rain that the level of water at Trowley Bottom reached five feet in places; a shed at Grove Farm was washed down the hillside and seven pigs were drowned”. (p 176)



Old Watling Street ascends steeply and narrowly, to the North of the Ver from Friars Wash towards River Hall, and on to Markyate. For approximately 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ miles we follow the two thousand year old route of the original Roman road, which traversed the new Principality of Britannia between the Kent coast at Richborough, via London and Verulamium, to Chester and Holyhead.





by the Dunstable to Shafford House Turnpike Trust, created by an Act of Parliament in 1723.

Granite milestones were erected on the road, one of which still exists on top of River Hill, it reads:

London 27 St Albans 6¹/₂
Markyate 1¹/₂

Early in the nineteenth century Thomas Telford was commissioned to survey the whole route and recommend improvement. One report of July 1817 records the huge volume of traffic that was using this stretch of Watling Street each year and paying tolls:

2 horse chaises	2,600
1 horse chaises	2,600
Stages and other coaches	7,072
Broad wheel wagons	2,444
Narrow wheel wagons	1,100
3 horse carts	416
2 horse carts	3,123
1 horse carts	1,100
Beasts	30,000
Saddled horses	12,500
Sheep	78,000
Hogs	10,000

In the Medieval period maintenance of the highway passed to the Lords of the Manor and his tenants, but as trade and traffic increased this was inadequate. By the seventeenth century Acts of Parliament were brought in to establish Trusts for each section of main road; tolls were collected from users, which were in turn used for the highways' upkeep. This section of Watling Street was maintained



On 13th May 1824 came the first report of the commissioners which recommended that a new stretch of road should be built to avoid River Hill. It included the comment: "At Flywash more culverts are wanting across the road to carry off the floodwaters".

The new, and current, deviation of the main road was opened in 1838.

Friars Wash gained further importance within the trunk-road network with the construction of the M1, and the siting of Junction 9 at the intersection with Watling Street here.

