

From Three Valleys Water to Veolia Water Central Limited: what's in a name?

On the face of it, this change in the name of the water company which covers the Ver looks like a meaningless international corporate identity usurping an historical name which means something locally. That it were so simple!

Three Valleys Water shouldn't be confused with Three Rivers District Council in south-west Hertfordshire, although both are relatively recent creations. The Council's name dates from the 1974 local government re-organisation. It refers to the three chalk rivers which converge in Rickmansworth: the Chess, the Gade (which incorporates the Bulbourne from Hemel) and the Colne (which incorporates our own Ver from Bricket Wood). Now if these three (plus two!) rivers' valleys also explained definitively the water company's name, then we might well have something to mourn. As Dr Catt expertly explained at the July VVS open meeting, these ancient chalk streams, excepting the Colne, used to flow from the Chilterns into the Thames which, until the last Ice Age about 400,000 years ago, flowed through the Vale of St Albans towards East Anglia. (The Colne is post-Ice Age and no chalk stream.)

However, Three Valleys Water only dates properly from 1994, when the Lee Valley, Colne Valley and Rickmansworth & Uxbridge Valley water companies merged to form Three Valleys Water plc (although a Three Valleys Committee had been formed in 1970 to share some planning and resources). Yes, the Lee (later Lea) is also a fine chalk stream, rising by Luton and flowing through Wheathampstead before being joined by the Mimram, Rib and Beane in Hertford to become a serious river. But the Colne Valley and the Rickmansworth & Uxbridge Valley Company names refer mainly to the same stretch of water: the post-glacial Colne running by the M25 through gravel pits from Watford to where it joins the current Thames beyond Heathrow. Certainly, between them, these two West Hertfordshire companies did cover the areas drained by the Gade and the Chess. But Three Valleys Water, especially since incorporating the North Surrey Water Company in 2000, is not really coterminous with the area of our chalk streams.

Veolia is an artificial name but one with a rich water heritage – and this is not just being kind because Veolia pays for the printing and despatch of this society's newsletter! The company's origins are in the 1853 formation in France of the Compagnie Générale des Eaux (CGE) by imperial decree to irrigate the countryside and supply water to towns and cities. Its first contract was to supply water to Lyon and seven years later, it was awarded a 50-year concession to supply water to Paris. Other French companies which were formed in the 19th century to deal in horse-drawn trams, sewage and refuse merged with CGE in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1989 GCE became Vivendi, and by now also embraced media businesses. The four businesses of Vivendi Environment (water, waste, transport and energy) became independent in 2002 and engaged a consultant to come up with a new name!

The brief was that the name should:

- Be internationally acceptable. Business was increasingly international: the company is big in Gulf desalination plants
- Be identifiable with environmental services
- Still start with V to provide continuity of initials from Vivendi Environment– and ideally also have classical roots!
- Have meaning – so people remember it
- Be simple and short

The result is described in the company's own words: "VEOLIA ENVIRONNEMENT is derived from Aeolus, the keeper of the winds in Greek mythology. It evokes the company's fresh impetus and its commitment to the sustainable development of the planet....The reference to air is heightened by the first letter of the name, "V", which is the first letter of the French word for the wind ("vent"). The wind, which is always on the move, clean, transparent and rapid, is also a force symbolizing all our activities..... while the consonant patterns of the word VEOLIA evoke fluidity".

- Which neatly brings us back to the geology of the Ver. After all the millions of years of chalk formation and uplifting, and the weathering of sea-born, alluvial and glacial deposits, what comprises most of the area's topsoil is loess, an **aeolian** sediment, deposited here almost yesterday in geological terms. In Dr Catt's words "During the later cold stages of the Quaternary, silt known as loess was deposited by the wind, forming thin layers (usually 1-3 ft) over the Thames terraces, Anglian glacial deposits and Clay-with-flints....The surface horizons of soils almost throughout the county are formed from this layer. It makes them fertile and very suitable for agriculture because the loess is easier to cultivate and retains more plant-available water than the underlying gravels or stony clays."

So maybe we can get used to the name Veolia!

Cycling to my brother's family in Chorleywood has helped me appreciate these three river valley systems. Rising from the Ver in St Albans is a doddle compared to the steep descents and ascents at Kings Langley (the Gade) and Sarrat Mill (the Chess) - with a couple of minor dry valleys to negotiate en route as well!

Not without a report from the Competition Commission in 1990 weighing up the merger's pros and cons. In reality, it was a take-over by the predecessor of Veolia, the French Compagnie Générale des Eaux which then owned the Lee Valley Company. Watford, Harlow and Dacorum Councils all opposed the merger.

<http://www.veolia-transport.com/en/medias/press-releases/vivendi-environnement.htm>

<http://www.hertsgeolsoc.org.uk/IntroToHertsGeology.htm>

Researched and written by VVS Member, Charles Edwards and not necessarily the views of the the Society or the committee.