



Ver Valley Newsletter



Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society

Number 93

www.riverver.co.uk

April 2007

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April Open Meeting

Our April Open Meeting will be held at . . .

ST. STEPHEN PARISH CENTRE, STATION ROAD, BRICKET WOOD

(Adjoining "Gate" pub) (Upstairs room)

on **TUESDAY 24th APRIL 2007 (7.30 pm)** All are welcome

Normal business will be kept quite brief. After tea/coffee break, Rob Sage, Asset Strategy Manager, Three Valleys Water, will talk on a subject of great concern to many members:

*"Water Supply Issues - Future Three Valleys Strategy
and how it might affect the Ver Valley".*

Rob will highlight the water requirements of future housing stock in general, and particularly highlight the East of England Regional Assembly's approach with so much expected of Hertfordshire. (More information on our website.)

Notes from the Chairman

Andy Webb

Firstly, two brief news items. Work started in Park Street Gravel Pits at the end of March to pollard the older poplars and willows along the river bank, between the pits and Minster Court (site of former Rover garage). This work programme, due to last several weeks, was carried out on behalf of landowners Lafarge following consultation with Verulam Angling Club and others. The purpose is to prevent larger trees falling and thus causing bankside erosion, and to minimise health and safety risk. I was contacted by a distraught resident of Minster Court, anxious that nesting birds would be disturbed and that her view over the area would be adversely affected, "what could be done to stop the work?" Naturally, bearing in mind it is private land, work programmes had been agreed and implemented, there was nothing the VVS could do. After liaison with Verulam AC Fisheries Manager, Paul Hill, I passed on these details to the local resident.

The other news item concerns Bow Bridge Pumping Station which remains out of service following Buncefield. This has dividends for our river as it means the 6 Ml/d licensed to be abstracted here will remain in the aquifer. We may have more details at the April meeting and/or the July "Newsletter". You will have read elsewhere in this "Newsletter" of the substantial bequest given to the VVS recently. On the face of it, this would appear to be a thoroughly exciting development, the most thoroughly exciting development in the history of the Society; but it begs the question, what does such a small group like ours do with such a bequest? We, the (currently) five Committee members, do not want the task of how best to use the money, and how to fulfil the wishes of Miss Hammon, to become an onerous one when there are so many other things for us to do: RSA and CAMS work, new River Walks and associated works (CMS), Ver Action Plan (EA & CMS), organising "Newsletters" and Open Meetings etc. etc. Please, if you have any constructive ideas as to how best to use the bequest for the benefit of the Ver, and the Society, contact myself or any other Ctte member for a chat. There will certainly be a lot more news on this topic in the forthcoming months. A long-held ambition I have quietly maintained over the period of my involvement (20 years) - and I stress this is my own view, not necessarily shared by my four esteemed colleagues - is to see the foundation of a Registered Charity or some sort of Trust; this would perhaps enable us to propose, prepare and implement work on or around our River rather than lobbying others endlessly.

Miss Hammon's generous bequest may reveal entirely new paths for us to follow. Should we propose big ideas, or continue working quietly in the background knowing our meagre manpower resources? What do you think?

Our Web Site (www.riverver.co.uk)

John Fisher

Since the January Newsletter there have been several changes and I hope improvements to the website.

The wildlife page has been rewritten and we have added lists of the birds and mammals of the valley. Later there will be butterfly, dragonfly and flower lists. If you have any comments on the list, especially any exclusions, please let me know. The Mills page is also being rewritten but is still "work in progress".

The rainfall and aquifer charts have been revised to completely different formats which we hope presents the data in a more easily understood manner. In time I want to show how the rainfall and aquifer interact.

The Walks page was poor but we have now added a downloadable version of the "Views of the Ver Valley" walk leaflet. The "Alban Trail" should be available in a similar way by the time you receive this newsletter. The Ver Valley Walk leaflet is being replaced (see separate article) so I will not put the old one on the web site.

You can now read the January Newsletter on line and hopefully you will also be able to do the same with this newsletter shortly.

A new page, "Memories of the Ver", has been added and to start with Duncan Gardiner has allowed us to use his poem "To the Ver, Verlam or Muse". Over the next few months I want to add contributions of personal memories from other VVS members – prose is OK - it does not have to be poetry! So get writing.

There now two picture gallery pages; one for "Wildlife and Plants" and one for "Landscapes and Buildings". If you have any digital photos relevant to any aspect of the Ver please send them to me. No fees but you will be acknowledged on the website. The aim with the galleries is to have a range of pictures which I will change every few months.

I also want to add "A Geology of the Ver Valley" page as I think this is a fascinating aspect of the Ver catchment.

If you would like to be included on our email circulation list just send me an email at john.fisher@btclick.com. Please advise me of any errors you find on the site. My telephone number is 01582 792843

The Return of Brown Trout to the Ver

John Fisher

Redbourn Fisheries occupies the site of Bobby Vises's water cress beds which has been developed over the last 20 years mainly as a fishery for rainbow trout. However working with English Nature and the Environment Agency John Dunkley and his merry men have successfully reintroduced native brown trout to the stretch of the Ver which runs through the Fishery.

They have achieved this by narrowing the channel with willow staves and hurdles to increase the rate of flow. The space behind the hurdles quickly fills with natural vegetation which forms another important habitat. Then the improved flow moves the sediment from the river bed and leaves the bare gravel bed essential for the spawning of the trout. It also improves the biodiversity of the river and in particular it allows the freshwater shrimps to thrive. They in turn support not only fish but birds like snipe and green sandpipers.

John tells me it is three years since 50 brown trout were released and they are now breeding naturally. Whilst the rainbow caught can be taken away any brown trout caught are returned to the river so that the numbers can be sustained.

In the 1970's this was one of the best stretches of the Ver for water vole and maybe one day we will have them back again. Like the trout they may need to be reintroduced using captive breeding stock. Trout and water voles on the Ver – now that's a real chalk stream!

Redbourn Fishery has a web site where you can read more and see details about the rainbow trout and coarse fishing lakes. www.redbournbury-fishery.co.uk



Speciality Breads

Mandy James and Justin will be bringing some of the speciality breads from their recently-opened bakery to the April Open Meeting. These can be bought beforehand or during the interval.

The bread baked at Redbournbury is made from flour milled on site from grain grown at Hammonds End Farm, which is only about a mile from the Mill - how about that for low "food miles". White, wholemeal, spelt and granary loaves will all be available for you buy before the meeting or in the interval.

Bailiff Notes

Jane Gardiner

Although the winter has been relatively mild, the rainfall has been well above average (see figures below) so our Bailiffs have all been cheered to be able to report much healthier flows than there have been for a long time and ground water figures also show good recovery in Feb and March now being a little above average (see table). Indeed after one heavy storm there was, for a short time at the end of February, flow in the culvert outside Corner Farm, past Kensworth Lynch and into Markyate Cell. Following several months of above average rainfall the aquifer level in March was above average for the first time in over three years."

There was still a little water in the lake in the Cell in mid March and across Porridge Pot north of Redbourn, although real flow does not start until Redbourn itself where the Red is also looking healthy. Despite the storms there are not too many fallen trees or branches in the river but the earlier growth of reeds and weeds does mean there are places where the channel is rather blocked. There is still some standing water in the adjacent meadows and fields.

Bow Bridge pumping station was due to come into operation again from early March having been out of action since the Buncefield fire. This means Friar's Wash should return to stand-by status.

We still need a volunteer bailiff for the stretch of the River from Moor Mill to the confluence off Drop Lane although one of our existing Bailiffs is kindly helping out there for the time being. If you might be interested please email or do phone me [01727 866331] for more information.

2007	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters and [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [\pm average] (figures from Dave Yeoman at Rothampstead)
January	128.94 [131.36]	91.6 [+21.9]
February	132.60 [132.38]	97.44 [+48.84]
March	135.67 [132.79]	57.4 [+3.70]

Turning to wildlife matters the blackthorn, gorse and celandine have been making quite a display in the valley in early spring, with coltsfoot and butterbur also flowering well. Some early bumble bees have been reported and one red admiral butterfly. There have still been hardly any reports of hares and I have received fewer fish reports although chubb, roach and brown trout have been seen. There are large quantities of frogspawn in some places.

As far as birds are concerned there do seem to have been far fewer snipe than usual but fieldfares and redwings did come to over-winter and groups of gadwall, shovelers and golden plover have been seen. I have spotted as many as five red kites displaying over Gorhambury and one over Verulamium Park lakes.

Some repair works to the islands in the large lake are being undertaken to protect the heronry, although a few nests were disturbed in the storms. [For further information about birds see John Fisher's Bird Notes]

Ver Valley Walks

John Fisher

The original Ver Valley Walk, which runs from the confluence with the Colne just south of Bricket Wood to the M1 at Friars Wash, was one of the primary aims of the Society when it was formed over 30 years ago.

Rather than just update the current leaflet the committee of the Society is working with the Countryside Management Services (CMS) and the County Council Rights of Way Unit on a series of circular linked walks along the valley. We have got to the stage where we have drafted 7 circular walks and will be making an initial assessment of these in the first half of April. There will still be a linear walk which will now extend from the source at Kensworth Church to the Colne confluence. Walkers tend to prefer circular walks of around 5 miles and these are looked at more favourably when it comes to seeking funding. At least one walk will be aimed at providing disabled access.

The objective apart from the circular walks will be to provide new standard signage, way marking and interpretation boards and a suite of leaflets in a pack. It may also involve further development of the web site as this will be seen as the hub of all information about the River Ver and it will provide downloadable versions of all published materials. Other feature may be educational leaflets and mobile display material.

This is an ambitious project that will hopefully raise the profile of Society, increase our membership and increase the public awareness of the ecology, landscape and history of our precious valley. A project like this will involve the CMS applying for funding from a variety of sources. We have agreed a programme with CMS which should lead to a launch in 2009.

The CMS lead officer Ian Gibbon will be at our Annual General Meeting at St Michaels on Tuesday 23 October to give a presentation on the project. By that time we will have much more information on the extent and funding for the project.

The Phyllis Hammon Bequest

John Cadisch

Miss Phyllis Hammon of Chiswell Green, who died about a year ago after some 10 years as a VVS member (she was introduced by Peggy Pollok), surprised us last autumn when her solicitor revealed a substantial legacy in our favour. This has recently come through (following the sale of her house), and the Society is now better off to the extent of £35,213 - an amazing figure.

We have some ideas ourselves but over the coming months will also be considering any constructive views put forward by members. (See also Andy Webb's comments under "Notes from the Chairman".) One thing is certain - Phyllis Hammon's name will not be forgotten.

Park Street Watercress Beds

The old watercress beds off Burydell Lane, Park Street, once managed by Claude Pinnock, have recently been cleared out and generally tidied by arborist Ross Parker who farms a smallholding there. The beds are now open water again, sure to attract birds. May the water levels hold up into the summer, they are partly fed by a spring. (From "Park Street & Frogmore Society Newsletter".)

Bird Notes

John Fisher

This winter has not been a particularly good one. I think the milder winters on mainland Europe have meant that we are getting less winter visitors. Siskins and redpolls have been few and far between and waxwings, which we have come to expect in recent years, have only been seen near the East Coast.

My favourite visitors this winter have been a delightful pair of stonechats which have been along the Ver just south of Redbournbury all through January. Stonechats are always very conspicuous as they tend to perch on fence rails or on the top of bushes waiting to drop down to feed on the ground. There is a photograph on the web site of the male stonechat taken by Ernie Leahy. We often get stonechats passing along the valley but they seldom stay very long.

The wet meadows are an ideal habitat for wintering snipe and very few have been seen this winter. I have seen two green sandpipers, one in the flooded meadows to the south of Prae Mill and one near Redbournbury Farm.

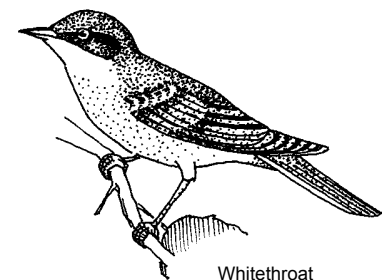
Buzzards are now really common and provided the conditions are right I expect to see at least four on Ver walk these days. Buzzards prefer sunny dry days so they get good thermals on which to soar from mid morning onwards. If it is wet you are unlikely to see a buzzard.

The kestrels which have nested in the big oak on the green lane on the way to Porridge Pot Meadow for the last two years, raising 5 young, lost their nest to the winter gales. However recently I have seen a pair building a nest right at the top of the tree so hopefully they will have another successful breeding season.

Following the successful barn owl breeding last year when five young were fledged the Society has taken delivery of 3 more boxes. These have been made by members of the Watford RSPB Group and they have received a donation of £250 which will be channelled straight back into conservation. One of the boxes has been sponsored by a long term VVS member, Ron Such, as a memorial to his son Phil who died of Motor Neurone Disease five years ago. Phil who was only 38 was a sports journalist specialising in his major interest Rugby Union.

Two of the boxes will be sited near Shafford Mill and the third in a tree close to Kettlewell's Farm. Kettlewell's Farm are also making a nesting platform for barn owls in one of their barns. This will mean we will have six nesting sites along the valley. Not all of these will be used for nesting but barn owls like alternative roosting spots. We hope to have another successful brood this year in at least one box.

There is now a list of birds seen along the Ver Valley on our web site. If you have any comments on the status or notice any omissions please let me know. Also if you have any interesting bird sightings I would be pleased to hear from you on 01582 792843 or email john.fisher@btclick.com.



Picture Page



Redbournbury Mill (*John Woodworth*)



Shovelers on Verulam lake
(*Duncan Gardiner*)

Chequer Lane Water Meadow

Stonechat (*Ernie Leahy*)

