



# Ver Valley Newsletter

*Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society*



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EA Customer Service: 0870 850 6506

## **April Open Meeting**

Our next Open Meeting is in Bricket Wood, all members, especially local, and friends welcome:

**TUESDAY 27th APRIL 2010, 7.30 pm**

at St. Stephen Parish Centre (upstairs room),  
Station Road, Bricket Wood (next door to the "Gate")

Ample parking. Only 3 mins walk from Bricket Wood station.

Reports from up and down the Ver, chaired by Andy Webb, occupy the first part of the evening with plenty of opportunity to ask questions. After the refreshment break, Liz Goodyear will be helping us to identify Butterflies that can be found in Hertfordshire. Liz is a member of Herts & Middx branch of Butterfly Conservation. She has been involved with several recording projects at local and national level and received a special butterfly conservation volunteer award in 2006. [She will undoubtedly be asked to say something about the "Butterfly World Project", currently being set up off Noke Lane, Chiswell Green.]

Future Open Meetings: The following dates have been booked, starting at 7.30 pm in each case:

**Tuesday 27th July:** Markyate Village Hall.

Speaker: Jim Hill on "Orchids of the Chilterns"

**Tuesday 26th October:** AGM at St. Michael's Parish Centre, St. Albans.

Speaker: Rob Sage of Veolia Water (Three Valleys Water)

## **A New Mill on the Ver?**

**Andy Webb**

If newspaper reports at the beginning of February are to be believed, we can add another watermill to the list of those already known on our river: Dolittle, Redbournbury, Shafford, Pré, Kingsbury, Abbey - Westminster Lodge - Cottonmill, Sopwell, New Barnes, Parke and Moor mills.

As part of the planning procedure regarding the proposed new swimming pool and leisure complex at Westminster Lodge, a geophysical survey was undertaken of the site (the car park to one side of the Abbey theatre, in front of the current building). Archaeological evaluation trenches were then dug to investigate certain survey anomalies.

The main features found in the trenches include a two-phase Roman building with a preliminary dating of 2nd/3rd century A.D. Simon West, District Chief Archaeologist, said that one possible interpretation of the remains was that of a Roman watermill; this was because a mill "leat" (channel or ditch) was also found. However the building has been thoroughly robbed of stone many centuries ago and any surviving remains were superficial, so we will probably never know the real purpose of the structure. The archaeology was recorded in detail, and then, like so much of the main Verulamium site, the trenches were infilled.

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

## Ver Valley Walks Project

Andy Webb

This mammoth Project continues, albeit slowly. We have given the HLF a provisional completion date for all infrastructure (waymarking etc.) and leaflets to be completed by July - we shall see. We remain concerned that the timescale keeps slipping; we are particularly concerned that Isabel Crozier at CMS (our "partners") has so much other work, even without managing "our" project.

Notices have been placed at Redbournbury fords and Hyde Lane footbridge explaining the bridge replacements and temporary footpath closures. This work is due to be carried out by June.

I have undertaken to complete all relevant text and picture material by the beginning of April. A professional designer will be appointed to complete the leaflets and associated website in the spring.

Progress has been painfully slow at times and, I admit, this is partially my fault - there has been a lot of work to do and I have found it difficult to fit "Ver time" together with "Andy time". Changes to and lack of manpower at CMS has also played its part, but acting manager Isabel Crozier could have done no more in the last 18 months to push the project forward. I thank her for the continued commitment.

I expect to be able to give more details in the July Ver Valley Newsletter.

## Japanese Knotweed - A Solution?

Ernest Leahy

Following on from the note in the last Ver Valley Newsletter (January) concerning Japanese Knotweed in the Ver, I see Defra has given the go-ahead for the introduction of a foreign insect called "jumping plant lice", or to use its correct name Psyllid. The reason for this is to predate and control the non-native invasive plant Japanese Knotweed which is estimated to cost £150m per annum to clear in the UK.

There will be controlled trial releases of the bugs to hopefully ensure it will not attack crops and native plants so it may be some time before it turns up to munch its way through the plants along the Ver.

## A Wildlife Artist in our Midst - Ernie Leahy

John Cadisch

We are extremely fortunate in having a talented wildlife artist in Redbourn particularly as he is on our Committee. The name is Ernie Leahy and we wholeheartedly commend his work.

His subjects are mainly birds but smaller animals found in the countryside feature regularly in his work. "All my paintings are original works of art, not prints...."

Whilst a selection of pictures can be offered "off the shelf", commissions are also undertaken. Contact details - see front of this Newsletter, or else go to [www.wildlifewatercolours.co.uk](http://www.wildlifewatercolours.co.uk).

## Ver Valley Events at "Redbourn 900"

Ernest Leahy

Redbourn 900 Rural Day Celebrations on Sunday 23rd May will include TWO events involving the Ver Valley Society - note the date NOW!

There will be a display of information boards showing various aspects of the river and its valley - to be held in barns at Redbournbury Farm (signposted), Redbournbury Lane, off St. Albans - Redbourn road A5183.

Also, starting from there will be four one-hour nature walks, with check lists for children to tick off on route. The walks will start at 10 am, 12 noon, 2 pm and 4 pm, limited to a maximum of 20 persons on each. Leaders will be Peter Fox or Ernie Leahy. Potential participants could sign up for the walks and many of the other exciting events of the 900 "Rural Day" at Redbourn Common on the day.

There is a good possibility of seeing Red Kites or Banded Demoiselles in the area. We would be grateful for VVS members' offers of help with the Display and Walks. (Please contact a committee member in the first instance.)

Also on the day Redbourn Museum will have a display of "Paintings of Redbourn's Wildlife" by Ernie Leahy (VVS member). Other crafts will also be demonstrated there and on the Common. We have asked for a fine day..

There have been quite a few changes to our Bailiffing team recently. Liz Delaney has stepped down due to failing health after many years of sterling service to the Ver Valley Society for which we thank her most sincerely. Ian Jinks, who has recently moved to Park Street, has taken over Liz's section north from Park Street. We welcome Janet Southwood as a new bailiff to take over Ian's section through Gorhambury. Another new bailiff is John Griggs who has taken over section from Holywell Hill to Alban Way and he's been very active collecting black bags of litter and arranging for John O'Connors to collect them, as well as cutting back some branches overhanging the path. Trevor Church who is the next bailiff downstream from John is also keen to reduce litter beside and in the river on these well used stretches. He has suggested getting a working party together perhaps to go out on some Sundays in the better months: however as the VVS has at present no insurance to cover such activity the Committee are looking into the situation before this could go ahead.

As you would expect flows are now good. Although January was surprisingly drier than average, February made up for it and both months were colder than average. The first half of March was very dry and cold but sunny, the second half seems warmer and damper. As you can see from the table, the groundwater level continues to be below average as it has been for many months which is disappointing - it actually dropped slightly between February and March. The head of the river is between Flamstead and Markyate, however the Cell there has not had water in the lake this winter reflecting the relatively low aquifer. The small tributary Hanstead Brook, which joins the Ver just above the confluence, is running.

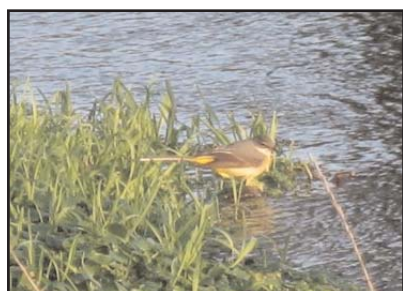
2010	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters and [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [ $\pm$ average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamstead)
December 2009	128.49 [130.92]	105.2 [+35.08]
January	129.04 [131.36]	47.3 [-22.37]
February	131.94 [132.38]	77.2 [+28.4]
March	131.84 [132.79]	Not yet available

The trees overhanging the river in Verulamium Park have at last been cut back due to the good offices of Jim Bennie getting all necessary permissions and arranging for the work to be done. It has been done sympathetically and the river channel is now much clearer but some overhanging branches have been left to soften the appearance, although this may mean the work will need repeating in a few years. I've also passed on to Jim some litter problems reported by our bailiff in the Park.

The silted-up and rotten sluice above Kingsbury Mill has now been examined by Tim Cheshire (EA Technical Assessor) and Simon Downs (Gorhambury Estates). A suitable structural engineer is to be commissioned by Gorhambury Estates to assess the sluice and report back, the findings are likely to necessitate temporary or structural works and the sluice to be monitored in the interim by Gorhambury Estates.



Finally to wildlife - Mole activity is always very obvious at this time of year and, a first for some time recently, some hares have been seen; several muntjack have been reported as well as the more usual squirrels, rabbits and occasional fox or rat. There seem to be plenty of chubb and brown trout. Among the bird sightings a peregrine and woodcock were most notable but snipe and egrets are still being reported. Among the usual water fowl, great-crested grebes, shovellers, tufted duck and cormorants are on Verulamium lakes and Frogmore Pits.



Other reports include herons, kingfishers, various tits, a treecreeper, nuthatches, reed buntings, yellow hammers, a stonechat, goldfinches, buzzards, red kites, greater-spotted woodpeckers and grey wagtails. Our winter visitors, fieldfares, redwings, and golden plovers have now mainly departed but hopefully some lapwings will stay on to breed. Some skylarks have already been heard and I have had quite a few reported sightings of barn owls which just emphasises the success of our barn-owl boxes.

The cold winter does seem to have held back the spread of the invasive weed 'fairy water-fern' [Azolla filiculoides] and vegetation generally but some stretches south of Redbournbury are still very congested. Other water plants have been slow to get going although butter-burr flower spikes were showing in early March, celandine are just appearing in mid-month and coltsfoot should soon appear. The hazel catkins are almost over but pussy-willow are just starting and the alder catkins are making a fine show.



We have probably just had our hardest winter for a couple of decades and it has certainly had a big effect on our local wildlife. Small birds have suffered the worst but hopefully a warm dry spring will bring with it a successful breeding season and a recovery in numbers.

The Ver and its banks which always remain unfrozen throughout the winter provided a valuable refuge for many species such as snipe, lapwings and little egrets. On one walk along the river in the depth of the big freeze we counted over 30 snipe and we even saw a woodcock which was my first for the valley. They are like a larger fat snipe and are mainly a nocturnal and a woodland bird but obviously this woodcock had to resort to daylight feeding along the river where its long beak could probe the unfrozen ground.

The freeze meant that many people had some rare visitors in their gardens such as yellowhammers, redwings and fieldfares. I even had two reports of snipe taking refuge in gardens but sadly one of these flew into a patio window and perished. I had an over wintering female blackcap for several weeks in my garden and these have become a relatively common garden bird in recent years.

In February Peter Wilkinson and I put up three more barn owl boxes which will hopefully help to accommodate some of the youngsters that have fledged from our other boxes over the last few years. Barn owls have been seen in the valley by a few more people this year partly due to the fact that there are more about now, but also because the long winter freezing nights forced them to hunt in daylight. I saw one about 4 o'clock one January afternoon as I drove along a snow covered lane. It flew low in front of my car (lucky I was only doing 10 mph) and perched on a roadside fence post. It stayed there for about 2 minutes before flying off down a hedge pursued by one angry magpie. This harassment is one reason why owls are usually nocturnal. It was a wonderful sighting and to think it was probably a "VVS Owl" was really great.

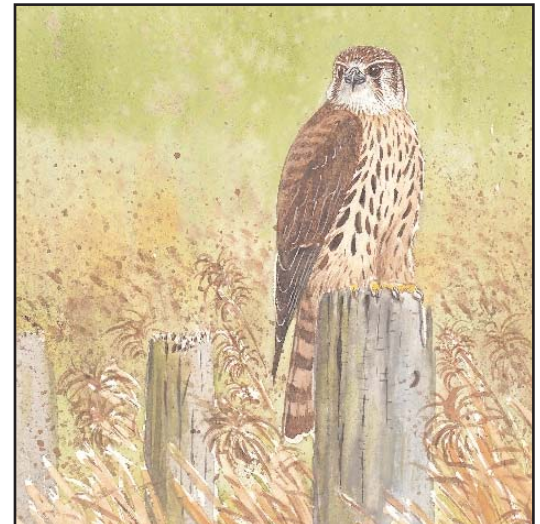
By the time you read this many of our summer migrants will be with us but as I write this in late March I have just heard and seen my first chiffchaff where the Ver passes under the Nickey Line. I really enjoy this time of the year when you seem to see a new arrival every day. I had a great walk the other day up the river as far as the M1 as this part of the valley is a great area for wildlife. That morning I saw a fox, a pair of buzzards, about 6 snipe, a female stonechat, several yellow hammers, a reed bunting, 4 pairs of singing skylarks, 3 pairs of lapwings displaying with their tumbling flight and "peewit" calls, mallards and moorhens. But the best sighting was a pair of "Mad March Hares" who were so intent on their chasing that at one point they charged across within 20 metres of where I was standing. The local hare population has been decimated in recent years due to illegal coursing with dogs and it is a great shame that we are denied the pleasure of seeing these fantastic animals as often as we used to.

Butterflies are also appearing about now and as usual my first was the wonderful lemon yellow brimstone. Elizabeth Goodyear, our speaker in April, will be telling you all there is to know about Herefordshire butterflies - not to be missed!

Sue Freason and I have been helping with the RSPB Heron Watch on Verulam Lake which has proved a great success with families out for a walk around the lake. There are about 12 nests this year and the RSPB provide telescopes, so really good views can be had of the huge herons perched somewhat precariously on their nests in the island trees. There is also pair of great crested grebes and a pair of little grebes as well as lots of moorhens and coots. The lake is a great place for children to see birds up close and personal.

This morning, March 24th, I had an early morning walk from Redbournbury to Shafford. The highlight was seeing my first swallows of 2010 as two were flying low over the water meadows near Shafford and then on my return they were perched characteristically on the overhead wires near the Irish Weir. Another unusual sighting this morning was a pair of mandarin ducks by Shafford Mill. Although they appear from time to time on Verulam Lake these were my first for this part of the Ver. I also saw a little owl, a male kestrel, two little egrets, redwings, yellowhammer and reed bunting. Spring is here but I will only be convinced when I hear my first willow warbler. For me they are the sound of summer.

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).



*The Female Merlin that visited Redbournbury briefly in October 2008 - An example of Ernie Leahy's skill.*

## **Waitrose supporting the Ver Valley Society!**

**Jane Gardiner**

"Stop Press": Waitrose St Albans have selected the Ver Valley Society as one of the three local groups meriting their support in April so if visiting the store make sure the green token goes into the VVS box to show your support.

## Butterflies in the Ver Valley

Ernest Leahy

There are about 40 species of butterfly found in and around the Ver Valley corridor .  
Brimstones, Commas and post hibernating Small Tortoiseshells start to appear in early March and a variety of species can be seen through Spring , Summer and Autumn with Red Admirals being one of the last species to be seen in early November .

Many of the species found in the Ver Valley would be common to much of the surrounding area but there are several "hotspots" with notable areas and species being:

Markyate on the VV footpath .....	Small Tortoiseshells etc.
Verlam End .....	Marbled Whites....June/July
Bylands Paddock , Redbourn.....	Small Coppers....August
Redbourn Road , Redbourn .....	Common Blues & Marbled Whites
Nicky Line.....	Orange Tips.....May /June Speckled Woods ...July/Oct
Redbournbury Farm at Beesonend Lane.....	Good variety on Burdocks including Green-veined White
Park Street Pits.....	Many Butterflies & Dragonflies
Drop Lane at Bricket Wood.....	White Letter Hairstreaks June /July
Bricket Wood Common.....	White Admiral & Purple Hairstreak and many varieties all season

If you would like to find out more about butterflies in Hertfordshire and submit your records preferable with O/S map reference location with date seen go to :- [www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk](http://www.hertsmiddx-butterflies.org.uk).



*Purple Hairstreak.*



*Peacock butterfly commas.*



*Painted lady.*



*Common Blue male.*

All photos: Ernie Leahy.

Some notes on Verulamium Park may be of interest.

We have only just learnt that that Jim Bennie, Parks and Green Spaces Manager, SADC, has just retired after many years in post. The vacancy is not being filled, his work is being shared around the newly re-organised Leisure and Parks section.

Jim was always approachable and available to discuss the green spaces of St Albans, especially Verulamium Park. Every 4 - 6 weeks he would walk round the Park with representatives of the "Friends" and address any problems that had arisen.

One vacancy that is to be filled is that of Regional Manager of John O'Conner, the Park maintenance organisation. One problem the new person will have to grapple with straight away is the removal of the current O'Conner depot (near Westminster Court) to a new location (so far unspecified), the site will be wanted when work on the new Leisure Centre gets under way. (No action to report at time of going to press.)

The RSPB is back in the Park this spring - a year ago an amazing 11,000 people registered their visit to the caravan (near the "Fighting Cocks"). Telescopes and binoculars are available, especially to observe the mating rituals of the herons.

Whilst mentioning the "Friends of Verulamium Park", whose aims are very similar to our own, a note of their future meetings is below. St. Michael's Parish Centre is the usual venue:

#### **PROGRAMME - April to October 2010**

##### **Thursday April 15th :**

Landscaping Westminster Lodge. Julie Simpson (SACDC project manager) and a representative from CBA Landscape Architects will talk about their proposals, the reasons for their choices, and its impact on trees and replanting schemes. St Michael's Parish Centre, 8pm.

##### **Thursday May 20th :**

Annual General Meeting. St Michael's Parish Centre, 8pm. Countryside Management Service (CMS) who are responsible for the forthcoming work on the lake have been invited to talk about their plans. If some outstanding matters have been resolved before the AGM, Tony Bradford of CMS will come to brief us.

##### **Saturday June 26th :**

Cleaning the Roman wall. Meet on the Causeway by the London Gate, 10am to 12.30pm. Wear gloves and bring a small soft brush.

##### **Saturday and Sunday July 17th and 18th :**

The Verulamium Museum are planning events to mark the departure of the Romans from Verulamium in AD410. This is part of the British Festival of Archaeology. More details from the museum.

##### **Advance notice :**

In October John Neale of English Heritage will talk to the Friends about English Heritage and Verulamium Park. Mr Neale is team leader of the historic building inspectors for our region. This will be an important meeting – more details to come.

## **Subscription Notes**

**John Cadisch**

There has been a good response to the reminders sent out on 30 January to everyone in arrears as from 1 September last. We are pleased to report that around 80% have come up to date and stayed with us for another year (or often five years). Much information is available "on-line" these days but it is always more satisfying to have the "hard copy" through the letterbox every three months!

This will have to be the last Newsletter for those who have not renewed so subscriptions need to be brought up-to-date before the July Newsletter is due to go out (late June/early July). If anyone is uncertain about their membership, please contact John Cadisch (01727 862843).

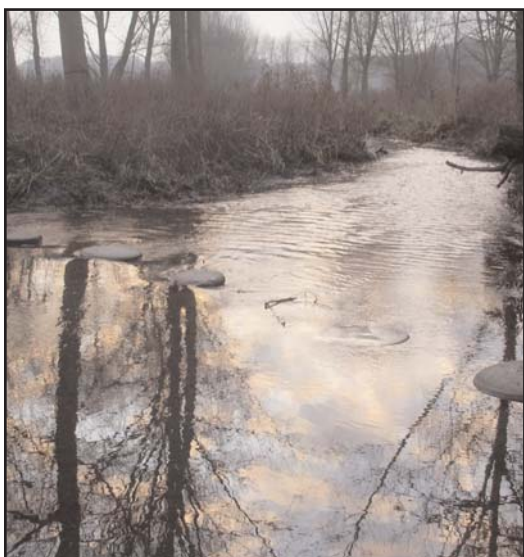
If anyone has another member of the family or a friend who wishes to join the VVS, a membership form is on our website or one will be posted on receipt of a call.



## Picture Page



*Floods at Luton Lane 2001 - so you think this has been a wet winter !  
- Alan Bull*



*Moor Mill, December 2009.*



*Moor Mill, December 2009.*



*Brown Trout caught and released near Redbournbury Fishery - Allen Beechey, the Chilterns Chalk Stream Officer (no less!).*