



# Ver Valley Society

## NEWSLETTER

*Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society*

Number 117 - April 2013

[www.riverver.co.uk](http://www.riverver.co.uk)

President: Peter Fox, MBE



*Swollen river at Drop Lane ford in mid-March with one of the high-quality bench seats in the foreground.*

*This is where the Ver joins the Colne.*

*Notice that the stepping stones are covered !*

*[Giles Harrison]*

## APRIL OPEN MEETING

This is the month when we look after our "southern" members and friends by holding the Open Meeting in Bricket Wood on

**Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> April at 7.30 pm**

**at St Stephen Parish Centre (Tennyson room, downstairs), near "The Gate" P.H.**

*All welcome.*

From St Albans, approach via Chiswell Green, Tippendell Lane and Park Street Lane, ample parking at rear.

There will be two speakers, both are authors of recently-published definitive works, which will be on sale.

Sandy Norman is a chartered librarian who has brought out "Sopwell, a History and Collection of Memories", covering industries, early roads, the war years and recreational activities.

Christine Aitken, living on the estate since 1948, has written "Childwickbury". She has extensively researched Childwickbury, the community and its owners whilst studying for a BA (Hons) degree.

During the evening there will be a short "business session" and usual refreshments.

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

### Thursday 25 July at 7.30 pm

Markyate Village hall – speaker Charlie Bell – Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust - “Living Rivers”. Charlie will have been in post for just over one year and will be telling us about her work with the rivers of Hertfordshire.

### Tuesday 22 October at 7.30 pm

St Michael's Parish Centre – AGM followed by Rob Sage of Affinity Water – Rob Sage will be explaining the future policies of our local water supplier and how it will affect the River Ver. Hopefully there will good news about reduced abstraction.

#### Very Important

All meetings are free entrance to members and non members - If you are coming to one of our meetings please check our newsletter or the web page a few days prior to the meeting in case of any late changes. If you require directions to any of the venues please contact a committee member. (see contacts page)

## Verulamium Park Notes

John Cadisch

**Litter pick:** We have recently had an enquiry from some volunteer Park “litter pickers” who are ready to resume in 2013. Would anyone like to join them? “Pickers” and other equipment from the former “FVP” organisation has been saved, and funds are available for anything extra needed. The Riverside path between Holywell Hill and The Causeway reportedly needs a good “pick”.

**Heron Watch (RSPB):** The usual binoculars and volunteer-manned caravan has been in the Park, it is due to leave at the end of April. The nesting herons (slow off the mark this year due to indifferent weather) are under constant watch with CCTV beamed onto one nest! Experts have been on hand to answer questions.

**Inn on the Park:** This award-winning café, open daily and particularly popular with young families, is now available for parties and evening functions. (Details from Wendy Hooper, S/A 838246.) The organisation is definitely “on side”, they have recently joined the VVS and taken a pack of our membership forms for the counter.

**Flooding, Bell Meadow:** With the adjoining river bank weak, high water in the Ver caused flooding in Bell Meadow (off St Michael's Street) in February.

**Planting:** Some tree cutting has been carried out recently, and new trees planted. Beside Bell Meadow a long length of hedge has been put in, organised as part of Inter-faith Week.

**Westminster Lodge Leisure Centre:** Now in full operation and attracting around 50,000 visits per month. A completely new feature inside is a “climbing wall”. Café open to outsiders. The old site has been completely cleared and landscaped to provide more parking.

**Cycle Routes:** Notices appeared mid-March advising that the St Michael's – Westminster Lodge cycle path was about to be upgraded so as to match the one following the Roman Wall, with work expected to take a month. Widening has been ruled out.

## Ver Poets

Ver Poets is a group of St Albans based poets who meet regularly to discuss poetry and to share their poems. They were founded in 1966 by May Badman, and the group has a local, national and international membership.

You can visit their website to find out about their programme of local meetings, poetry events, poetry competitions and benefits of membership on [www.verpoets.org.uk](http://www.verpoets.org.uk).

Contact them to find out how to obtain their new anthology published in memory of their founder. Costing just £7.50, it includes poems by John Mole, Carole Satyamurti, Alan Brownjohn, Katherine Gallagher, Roger Garfitt, Lott Kramer and many more published and unpublished poets.

I am sure you are all aware that 2012 was one of the wettest years on record. The Rothamsted figures show that here we had almost 45% more rain than average, the last three months of the year being exceptionally wet. We are now seeing the result in the aquifer level which continues to go up although January was only slightly more wet than average, February slightly less and March is likely to be above as well as exceptionally cold! The groundwater is now over 5 metres above the average for this time of year (see table below).



Consequently the Bailiffs have been measuring some unusually high flows although these are now beginning to fall back. Both the Ver's tributaries, the Red in Redbourn and Hanstead Brook near the Colne confluence, are flowing well. There is water in the lakes at Markyate Cell and the head of the river is now south of Markyate, although there has occasionally been some ephemeral flows in Markyate and even Kensworth.



Month 2013	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres <i>[Long-term average]</i> (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres <i>[± average]</i> (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamsted)
December	131.52 [130.56]	114.20 [+44.67]
January	134.66 [125.66]	62.8 [+7.17]
February	137.20 [132.38]	43.5 [-6.64]
March	137.97 [132.79]	[Not yet available]

As there have been quite a few changes to our excellent bailiffing team in the last couple of years, here as I promised in the last newsletter, is the up-to-date list:

1. R Colne to Moor Mill - Sue and Martin Frearson;
2. Moor Mill to Burydell Lane - John Bell;
3. Burydell Lane to New Barnes Mill - Bruce Banfield-Taylor;
4. New Barnes Mill to Sopwell Mill - Giles Harrison;
5. Sopwell Mill to Holywell Hill - Paul Foster;
6. Holywell Hill to Bluehouse Hill - Vivien Gates;
7. Bluehouse Hill to Bow Bridge - Janet Southwood;
8. Bow Bridge to Redbournbury - John Pritchard;
9. Redbournbury to Dolittle - Jane Gardiner;
10. Dolittle to Redbourn Bypass - Ernie Leahy;
11. Chequers to Porridge Pot (and Redbourn golf course to Luton Lane) - John Fisher;
12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally) - Bob Norrish.

*(I am not able to give their contact details because of data protection but if you had a particular query or comment about their patch you could contact them through me.)*

There have been some nice bird sightings reported recently including while the Action Group were working near New Barnes Mill of a goldcrest, little egret, kingfisher, grey wagtail, wrens and ring-necked parakeet. Others have been of siskins, redpolls, a green sandpiper, some of egrets and kingfishers. As well as the common water fowl there have been



tufted ducks and teal with flocks of lapwing and some fieldfares still around. The first returning chiffchaff was reported on 12<sup>th</sup> March.

Despite the chilly weather some early spring flowers have been struggling out with blackthorn, celandine and coltsfoot [below right] being reported as well as hazel and alder catkins shedding pollen with pussy willow beginning to show.



Less pleasing is the appearance just south of Dolittle Mill of spreading areas of fairy water-fern (*Azolla filiculoides*) [left] which forms dense mats preventing other water plants growing. I have reported this to EA who say weevils which have been introduced to control it should begin to have an effect as their numbers increase but if you notice other patches elsewhere please let me know.

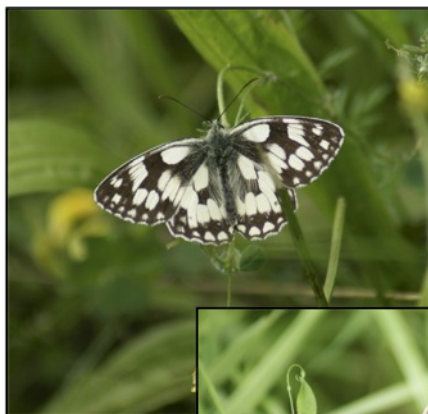


There has been plenty of evidence of the activity of moles and a dead shrew was found. Rabbits and squirrels are seen out and about despite the cold weather. Brown trout are being regularly reported which is encouraging for the Riverside Way Project (see more about this elsewhere in this Newsletter). In that area there has been more clearance of overhanging ash trees, and the removal of a large fallen crack-willow by the stepping stones is to be welcomed.

## Harpenden Hill Embankment

John Fisher

When the Redbourn by-pass was opened in 1984 a chalk cutting was formed and initially this led to an area of chalk grassland which soon became an ideal habitat for a good variety of plants and associated insects, including butterflies. Over the years the embankment had become overgrown with scrub and saplings and this was crowding out all the chalkland plants. In mid January a Countryside Management Services Work Party aided by members of the Ver Valley Society and Friends of the Nickey Line cleared a section of the south facing embankment of Harpenden Hill. The birch, bramble and hawthorn were cut back and a contractor chipped and removed the wood. Later he will return to treat the stumps to prevent re-growth. As the bulk of the work has been carried out by volunteers the cost will be less than £500.



Common spotted, bee and pyramidal orchids (right) have been recorded in this area, as well as a range of chalkland plants. Butterflies including marbled whites (left) and ringlets (below) are abundant. A glade at the top of the embankment has also been cleared and it is hoped that in time a linking track to the Nickey Line can be created which in turn will link to Ver Valley Walk 3.



This is the first of what your committee hope will be series of projects which we want to proceed with over the next few years. After our £10,000 contribution towards the Walk Project we will still have nearly £30,000 in our coffers. You will remember we had a generous legacy from Phyllis Hammon, a founder member, a few years back and we think that investment in these projects is really appropriate.

In the next newsletter we give you details of at least two other projects:-

1. Riverside Way habitat improvement for the benefit of wildlife and people.
2. Re-grading of the river channel to improve the flow between Redbourn by-pass and Harpenden Lane.

These projects will be managed by the Countryside Management Services and the Environment Agency, but the Society will contribute towards the cost.

## Hertfordshire Water Summit

Sue and Martin Frearson

This conference was hosted by Herts County Council on March 14th to provide information to all the key Hertfordshire stakeholders about the shortage of water resources within the county, exacerbated by the county having one of the highest water usage rates in the UK – about 170 litres per person per day.

HCC wants to encourage all interested parties to contribute to the next national Water Resource Planning Round in 2015, which will agree investment in water resources and pricing structure between the water companies and Ofwat, against the difficult background of balancing supply and demand. Despite measures such as water meters, water usage remains persistently high with a lack of awareness of the environmental consequences among the general public.

It was surprising how many of the delegates seemed unaware that 60% of the water in Hertfordshire came from the aquifers, or even what a chalk aquifer was, and consequently they were very surprised to hear from Charles Walker MP for Broxbourne, that the chalk streams in England account for 85% of the world's chalk stream habitats. He said 'The demand for water will not decrease, if anything it will increase. This is why we need to build more reservoirs to capture water when it is readily available'. So it was even more a shock to the audience when they were told about the environmental damage over-abstraction from the aquifer did to these internationally important habitats.

The Water Summit write up is now available on the Hertsdirect website. Although this is still a draft, it shows how concerned HCC is to balance the need for more economic growth with ensuring our natural resources are not squandered on the altars of commercial and business expansion.

Here is the link: <http://www.hertsdirect.org/services/envplan/floodwatermgt/hertswatersummit/>

The key speakers' contributions are summarised, plus many suggestions from the participants. For example Andrew Westcott of the Institution of Civil Engineers suggested water must be valued more highly as an asset and not as a commodity, and consumption should be reduced by 30% by 2025 to prevent damage to the economy.

VVS was mentioned for our participation in the project run by the Countryside Management Service to 'demonstrate exemplary river corridor management on HCC land covering chalk stream habitats beside the river Ver' This project at Riverside is being delivered with the help of the Environmental Agency, Chilterns AONB, the Wild Trout Trust as well as the VVS Action Group.

## Friends of the Nickey Line

John Fisher

***Approximately 7 miles long, the Nickey Line footpath and cycle way is a former railway line (the Harpenden to Hemel Hempstead Railway). The Nickey Line still links Harpenden, Redbourn and Hemel Hempstead but is used now by railway history enthusiasts, walkers and cyclists from many parts of the country. It was opened as a footpath /cycleway in 1985.***

Like us they organise work parties to maintain and improve the habitat along the line and you will see elsewhere in the newsletter that they joined us to work on the Harpenden Hill Embankment. You can find out more about them at <http://www.nickeyline.org/>

*Their AGM is on Thursday 16 May at Park Hall, Harpenden, at 7.30pm. I mention this because the speaker after the formal business is Chris Shortall of Rothamsted Research who will be reviewing the history of species monitoring on the Estate over the past century, and placing the changes recorded in the national context He will also touch on farming and conservation issues in relation to the Nickey Line. This should be a fascinating talk with great relevance to the Nickey Line and the Ver which both run through the Estate. All are welcome.*

## Subscriptions - Last call

John Cadisch

Almost all members have renewed their subscriptions but for those who haven't, this will have to be the last Newsletter. If in doubt, please check with me.

## Maple School

John Cadisch

Apologies to this school, the last words of our report in January went missing. It should have ended: "We were very impressed with the enthusiasm and knowledge with which the school had primed the pupils. It would be good if other local schools could have an appreciation of the very special chalk stream in our Ver Valley".



## The Miller's Thumb or Bullhead in the Ver

Ernest Leahy

We are fortunate to have a variety of fish in the Ver and the bullhead occurs in the river just south of Redbourn downstream to the confluence and beyond. The bullhead (*cottus gobio*) also named miller's thumb is the only species of its group found in freshwater in the UK preferring fast moving streams and rivers such as the Ver.

They are a solitary fish hiding by day under stones or weeds then feeding from dusk on invertebrates and larvae. Bullheads have a disproportionally large head and mouth with eyes set on their forehead. A long dorsal fin helps them swim against the strong currents. The mottled grey brown lateral banding gives camouflage particularly against the gravelly bottom of the chalk stream. Most fish netted by children are around 8mm long but an 18mm long specimen would be the maximum length.

From February to June females lay a cluster of up to 400 amber coloured eggs on the underside of stones which are guarded by the male for around three weeks until hatching. The fry will take two years to reach maturity but will have to survive their predators like herons, egrets, kingfishers, trout and perch all of which patrol the Ver. They are also susceptible to pollution and face competition from signal crayfish.

They are not a fish targeted by anglers although they will happily take maggots and worms on the hook but they often end up in a children's bucket when netting for sticklebacks. It should be emphasised that they should be released back into the the running water as they will not survive for long in a tank or pond.



*Bullhead guarding eggs (Watercolour by Ernest Leahy)*

For a more comprehensive appreciation of the species see ECOLOGY OF THE BULLHEAD by English Nature

## Masterclass in River Habitat Enhancement

Sue Frearson

### Practical Masterclass in River Habitat Enhancement on the Ver at Riverside 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2013

Over forty volunteers, from Angling Associations and Conservation Groups, met at Riverside (HCC site, Bricket Wood) to learn how to improve the flow and enhance the habitats along a three quarter mile stretch of the Ver. The course was run by the Wild Trout Trust and helped by the Environment Agency and the Countryside Management Service, and lasted over two days.

The aim was to let in more light to the river by removing some of the bankside trees. The wood was then used to construct several types of river current deflectors. These, by altering the course and speed of the river, change the depth profile and grade the gravel particles, so that a diversity of habitats, from silty areas to fast flowing gravel banks, to pools are produced. This in turn improves the biodiversity of the river, increasing aquatic vegetation for invertebrates and providing gravel banks for spawning fish.

This HCC project is a flagship event to improve one of Hertfordshire's iconic chalk streams and so enhance the environment for brown trout and the aquatic food web. The VVS Action Group hope to continue working on this project with the CMS, monitoring the state of the river, by identifying the aquatic invertebrates, using the Riverfly sampling system.

The next date to note is **Wednesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> July**, when we will work with the CMS to remove invasive Himalayan Balsam from Riverside.



*One of the deflectors being installed.  
[Sue Frearson]*

Members of the VVS committee, have, this quarter, attended numerous meetings, summits and forums with Affinity and the EA, and have been encouraged to hear that Affinity will be proposing a significant reduction in abstraction from the Ver Valley aquifer. We anticipate an announcement will be made public fairly soon.

These developments follow a general increase in the profile of chalk streams in recent months.

On Feb 1<sup>st</sup> 2013, in a Commons debate on Chalk Stream Abstraction, Charles Walker MP (Broxbourne), colourfully compared Britain's chalk streams to India's Himalayas, Brazil's rain forest and South Africa's savannah and passionately asserted that chalk streams were one of the World's most precious ecosystems. He posed a number of questions about over abstraction to the Minister.

And then, later that month, we heard that The Environment Agency had changed two of Thames Water's abstraction licences, legally reducing the amount of water it can take from boreholes next to the river Darent in Kent.

This change is the final step of the Darent Action Plan, started 20 years ago by the Darent River Preservation Society (DRiPS), a community group formed in 1985 when there were often dry river beds along the Darent, and this now returns the equivalent of eight Olympic swimming pools per day to the river – a record for a UK chalk stream.

Interestingly for the future of the Ver, perhaps, the point was made that the country's abstraction licensing system was designed more than 50 years ago and is not suitable to meet the challenges of the future.



*The Ver with, on this occasion, a good head of water. [Ernie Leahy]*

We understand, that the Environment Agency is working with Defra, Ofwat and other organisations to design a range of options for managing water abstraction. We'll be watching progress carefully and will let you know when Affinity's plans have been finalised.

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### HOTLINES

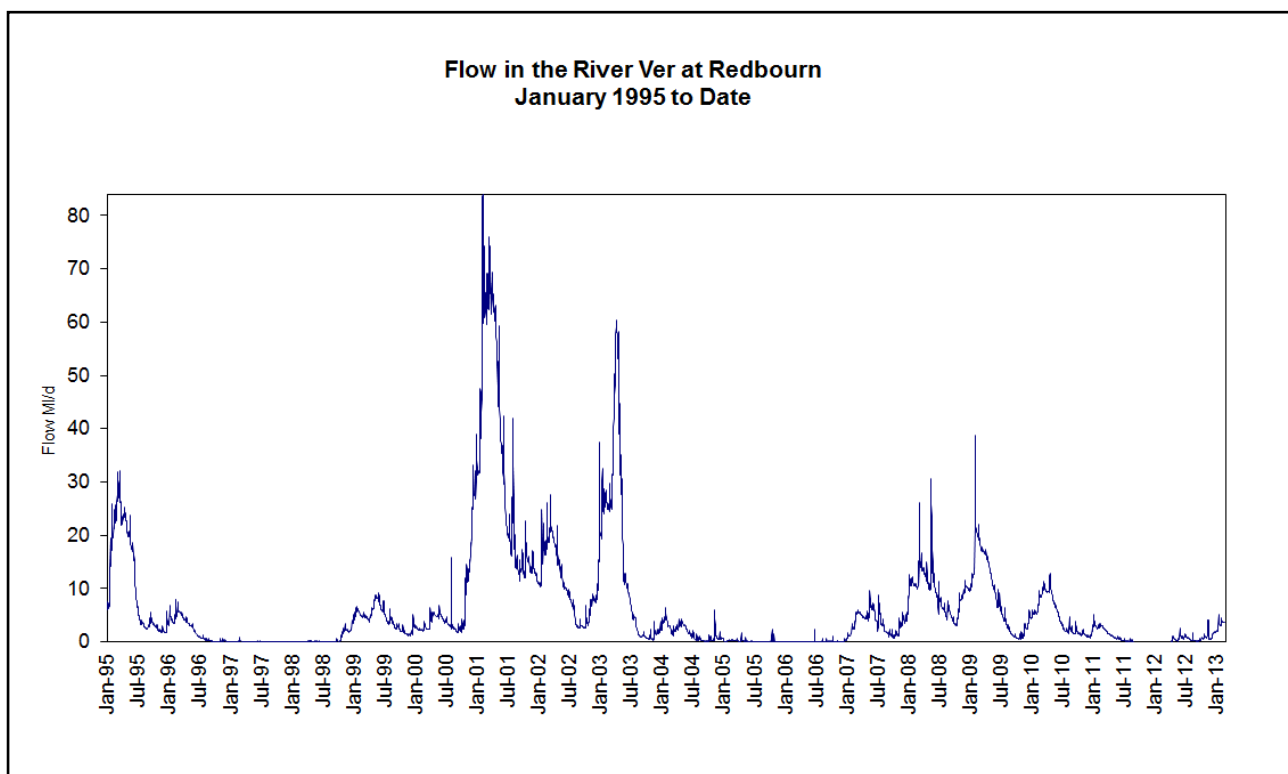
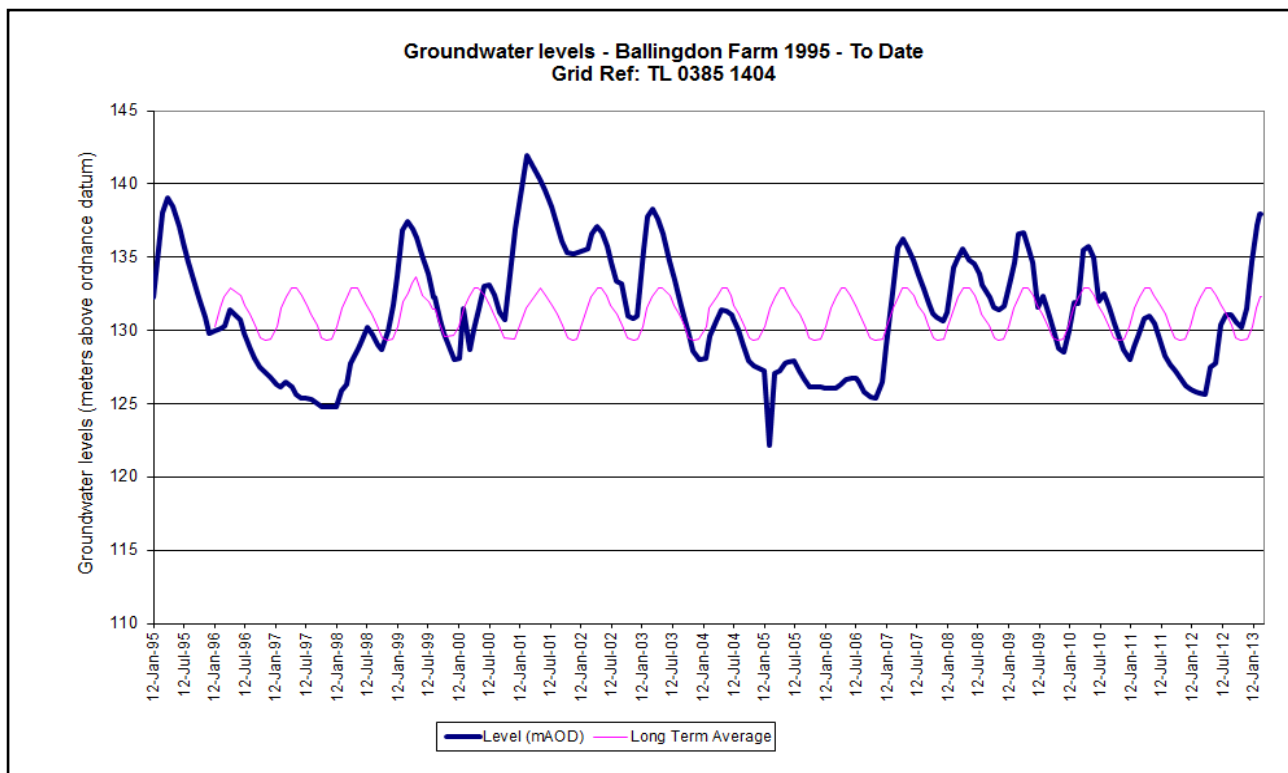
EA Incident Hotline: 0800 807060  
("Report all environmental incidents")

EA Floodline:  
0845 988 1188

"Cleaner District" (SADC):  
0845 125 8000

Water Leaks (Affinity):  
0800 376 5325





The graph above does not show the current river status, we are pleased to report that there has been improved flow since January of this year.

We gratefully acknowledge **Affinity Water** for supplying the ground water and flow charts,  
and **Veolia Environmental** for printing and distributing our newsletters.