



Ver Valley Society

NEWSLETTER

Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society

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President: Peter Fox, MBE



*Female Kingfisher - with the red lower mandible -
one of a pair that fished every day in the early
months of the year from the riverside
bushes in Verulamium Park.
A great photograph by VVS member Paul Foster.*

April Open Meeting

This is the time of year when we meet in Bricket Wood, please note date/time:

Thursday 24th April - 7.30 pm
St Stephen Parish Centre

The Parish Centre will be found in Station Road, Bricket Wood, close to the "Gate" P.H. We have booked the large room downstairs. Plenty of off-road parking.

After getting through regular business quite speedily, there will be a refreshment break. Following on, we have arranged for Charlie Bell, Living Rivers Officer, H&MWT, to pay us a return visit. She will not be repeating her Markyate talk but as team leader will be giving us an update on the important "Restoring Hertfordshire's Rivers" project.

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

Chairman's Report

Jane Gardiner

At the end of my Chairman's report in December I wished for plenty of rain for the Ver in the new year and certainly that seems to have come true with a vengeance! My apologies and sympathy for those who've been flooded. More details on the water situation in my Bailiffs' report.

VVS has been getting some good publicity recently with Martin Frearson's excellent interview on Radio Verulam in February, an article about us in the April edition in Herfordshire Life as a result of an interview I had with Elizabeth Harrington, Chairman of CPRE Herts and another article which I have written for the CMS newsletter is due to appear soon.

In a photographic competition "Water The Bigger Picture" organised by local authorities 'Green our Herts' group, the winner and third place were VVS committee members Ernie Leahy and Sue Frearson respectively. Both also had other pictures shown at the exhibition in the Trestle Arts Base in St Albans and Paul Foster, one of our Bailiffs, had several of his photos exhibited also. Paul has a background in hydrogeology and represented us at a meeting in London on proposals to change the abstraction regulations – more on this important subject elsewhere in this newsletter.

The January Open Meeting with two farmers speaking in Redbourn was particularly successful with a very full hall but we have been made aware that some people cannot always hear the speakers very well. We have started to investigate the possibility of getting a microphone but would ask those likely to experience difficulty to sit near the front where we will keep some seats free for them.

Many of the Committee have been very active in various ways, some of which they report on in this Newsletter and I thank them for all their efforts on behalf of the Ver and its valley.

Verulamium Park

John Cadisch

Flooding in the Park has been a problem in the Park early this year, especially in Bell Meadow where the "mill leat" banks have over-topped. The river banks there are not SADC responsibility as it runs through private land, i.e. the bottom of several Fishpool Street gardens.

There has been a delay in installing the 18 new signboards around the Park, we are in touch with Daniel Flitton, Green Spaces Officer, SADC, over this. The intention is that they will replace the current lectern-style boards, and the finger-posts.

A limited amount of tree-planting is currently taking place, these are very small trees or whips, work is taking place in the Dell. Offers of assistance to Madeleine Sansom (S/A 846761).

We have not so far found anyone to litter-pick (or organise litter-picking) in the Park on a regular basis, tongs and other necessary equipment available for whenever a small team can be assembled.

Future Open Meetings

Ernie Leahy

Please note the following dates (7.30 pm start in each case):

22nd July: Markyate Village Hall - Ian Gamble, local author and naturalist giving his talk on "Calcarious Grasslands", illustrated with special birds, flowers and butterflies found in chalk downlands.

28th October: Annual General Meeting, St Michael's Parish Centre (*to be confirmed*)

28th January 2015: Redbourn Village Hall (*to be confirmed*)

Membership Matters

John Cadisch, Rachel Young

Rachel Young has sent out reminders to those people whose subscriptions expired on 1st September, and also to ex-Friends of the Park who had claimed a "free year" with us. *Please note that this will have to be the last Newsletter for those in arrears..*

When I last wrote in mid December it was about low ground water, low flows and a drier than average year. Shortly after that the heavens opened so 2013 as a whole had slightly above average rainfall, but was very slightly sunnier and warmer than average. As we now know this has been the wettest winter on record. The rains from mid-December to late February caused considerable flooding and greatly increased flows; the rainfall totals for both January and February were the highest since records began in 1854. The aquifer responded quickly rising nearly two metres from Dec to Jan, five metres from Jan to Feb and another 3.5 metres from Feb to March so the aquifer is now almost seven metres above average.

Month 2013/14	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamsted)
December	129.18 [130.56]	123.1 [+56.1]
January	131.16 [131.36]	176.2 [+106.25]
February	136.17 [132.38]	141.9 [+91.8]
March	139.70 [132.79]	[Not yet available]

In dry March weather the river is looking great with clear, sparkling, fast-flowing water and the gravel bed having been scoured out. Both the Red and Hanstead Brook have been flowing well. There has been some water near the source at Kensworth from time to time and in the lakes at Markyate Cell with flow from the outfall in early March which continued into Markyate itself with a trickle past the 'Silverbrook' development.

Some Bailiffs were unable to take flow measurements where the areas beside the river were still flooded but the measurements we have now are still very high.

Because the winter has been relatively mild many plants have started growing early. Pussy willow has been flowering well, blackthorn bushes have been frothy white, lesser celandine has brightened the banks on sunny days, and butterbur is beginning to show.

Many birds are already well into the breeding season. Many people have been delighted to see kingfishers along the river in Verulamium Park [photos elsewhere] and the heronry there has 13 nests with RSPB telescopes lined up to help with viewing; 60 different species have been

recorded there already.

Our Bailiffs have reported there have been cormorants, shovellers, tufted duck, pochard, teal, and gadwall, some of these using new lakes formed on flooded fields joining the more usual wildfowl. It is great to have reports of green sandpipers being seen north of Redbourn, of chiffchaffs having returned, and also of grey wagtails, yellowhammers, reed buntings, meadow pipits, stonechats, redpoll, little egrets and lapwings. In the fine



Butterburr coming into flower.

weather many of these birds are getting ready to breed.

Mole activity has been very evident – coming up for air? – and hares have been about. I have not received many reports of fish, possibly because fast, deep water makes them difficult to see, but a recent sighting of a stony loach was unusual. The warm sunny weather in the first half of March brought out over-wintering butterflies; brimstones, small tortoiseshells and peacocks have all been reported.

Grey Heron in blackthorn.



Markyate Silver Brook Culvert.



Many of you will have seen the unusually bold kingfishers in Verulamium Park, as for the last two months a pair has been seen practically every day from the pathway between the Ver and the lake at a range of just three metres. Paul Foster's front page picture is of the female which has a red lower mandible, while the picture on this page is of the male with its all black bill. One day I saw him catch three small fish in about five minutes and all from the same overhanging branch. He stunned each fish by banging it on the branch before swallowing it head first.

About 20 people watched this performance before it flew to another branch further upstream. It would be great if they stayed on to breed in the park but I not sure they have the right sort of river bank available for their long burrowed nest.



Little owl at Verulam End. [John Fisher]

Most times you get a sight of a kingfisher you just see just a an electric blue flash as they fly away over the river, so it's great that so many people have managed to get really good views of what is arguably the UK's most spectacular bird.

They have proved a popular attraction in the Park, vying with the RSPB's heron watch. I understand that there are about a dozen occupied nests this year and that for the first time little egrets have been seen on the nest colony island. It must only be a matter of time before they breed, as they are now so regular along the Ver. There have been two around Redbournbury throughout the winter and I saw four together in Porridge Pot one early morning.

Green sandpipers have been seen feeding on their staple diet of shrimps along the Ver anywhere

between Verlam End and Shafford, usually single birds but occasionally I have seen a pair. Most winters we get good numbers of snipe along the Ver where they benefit from the frost free margins of the river.

This winter in February the temperature never once went down to zero and with the absence of hard ground the snipe have been very few and far between. Golden plovers have also been largely absent this winter and I have really missed seeing the huge flocks in flight over the valley but there is still the chance that they might pay us a visit on their return migration.

Last year was a poor one for the Ver Valley barn owls, mainly because the vole population crashed and they were deprived of their main prey, but I am optimistic that 2014 will see a recovery as we already have two pairs established in boxes and another barn owl box is occupied by a pair of little owls.



Kingfisher (male).

If you have any interesting bird sightings I would be pleased to hear from you on 01582 792843 or email john.fisher@btclick.com.

New Members

We are pleased to welcome the following new members of the Society:

Mr & Mrs D Byers
Mr & Mrs I Caldwell
Miss A Chant
Mrs A Cotter
Ms E Cutforth
Mr R Downs
Mr & Mrs D Forbes

St Albans
Redbourn
St Albans
Harpenden
St Albans
Park Street
Redbourn

Mrs M Gray
Mr S Hayes
Mrs S King
Mr K Miller
Mrs E Nejad
Mr T Pearce

St Albans
St Albans
Harpenden
Bushey
Redbourn
Redbourn

We welcome two new members Marion Shattock and Tony Pearce to the Action Group volunteers, and hope that they will be able to continue helping with our conservation work.

The very wet weather directly affected our winter programme, with the February activity in Sopwell Nunnery Green being cancelled due to flooding and a swap from willow coppicing in Verulamium Park to hedge planting in March because of the river flow.

In January eight of our volunteers joined members of the Nickey Line Footpath Group in clearing along the top of Harpenden Hill, Redbourn, which has enabled this path to be connected to the Nickey Line. In March eleven volunteers helped clear some of the smaller scrub, left by the tree contractors along Riverside Way, Bricket Wood. The brash and small trunks will be used to build future deflectors along Riverside. Many of the people by the Ver, walking on a lovely

sunny day were very complimentary about the treework at Riverside, as it has enabled much more light to reach the river, and already more vegetation is growing in the river.

Once a month on Fridays, a small group of our volunteers have joined the St Albans School Conservation Group working in Verulamium Park, where we have been filling in gaps along the hedges planted originally by the Friends of Verulamium Park. It is hoped that wood chippings will be used in April to mulch these hedges, to deter weeds. Some very useful litter picking was also done by the boys along the edge of King Harry Lane.

Our Action Group improving Riverside Way recently. [Sue Frearson]



Spring and Summer Programme

If you are available on Monday 26th May, Redbournbury Mill would be grateful for help to repair holes in the river bank and remove some trees. Please contact Justin@redbournburymill.co.uk if you want to volunteer.

Workplan

Saturday 12th April 10.00-12.00 Riverside Way, Bricket Wood- Install deflectors

Saturday 21st June 10.00-12.00 Verulamium Park or Riverside Way - Install deflectors (depending on progress)

Saturday 19th July 10.00-12.00 Riverside Way, Bricket Wood - Install deflectors (or remove Himalayan Balsam at Riverside and Moor Mill)

Please contact me sue.frearson@which.net if you would like to help, so that I can borrow the correct number of tools from the CMS and be able to inform you of any changes of plan.

Orchid Walk - Sunday June 15

The Ver Valley Society and the Friends of the Nickey Line are holding a joint walk to view the orchids blooming at two sites. Starting at the car park on Redbourn Common at 10.00 am, this five-mile circular walk will visit a bee orchid site on the Nickey Line near the M1 Bridge, walk to Redbournbury, Hammondsend Farm and then use the new link path to the Nickey Line.

This path follows the original route of Harpenden Lane before the Redbourn by-pass was built in 1984 and has been cleared this winter in a joint effort by the working parties of the VVS and FNL. The St Albans Footpath Society are now hoping to get the path adopted as an official footpath as it will be a useful variation on VVS Walks 3 and 4, linking them to the Nickey Line.. You should note that the crossing of Harpenden Hill to or from the link path requires great care as the sight lines are not good and the traffic is often fast moving.

From the new link path we the hope to see pyramidal and common spotted orchids either on the glade at the top or on the chalk embankment

Contact John Fisher 01582 792843 or Roger (01582 763560) for further details.

Our committee member Ernie Leahy entered this competition and came away with first prize, well done!

Here is part of the submission accompanying the entry:

"The photo is of a BANDED DEMOISELLE on a stinging nettle taken locally on a Panasonic TZ30 – a basic camera. My entry was titled 'Don't get stung with high bills - jump on the water saving bandwagon.'"

The organisers (SADC) reacted well to the above and several more lines on the need to be careful with water, resulting in Ernie being declared the winner.



Making the Most of Every Drop

Paul Foster & Martin Frearson

In December 2013 Defra published 'Making the Most of Every Drop' a consultation on reforming the water abstraction management system. This will take effect in the early 2020's and will be the first major reform of water management in England and Wales since the Water Act of 1963. The aim is to ensure that we have a sustainable and resilient water management system that protects the environment and conforms to the standards set in the EU Water Directives.

Defra propose two options: 'Current System Plus' (based on what happens now with better links to water availability, improved environmental protection and easier water trading arrangements) and 'Water Shares' (abstractors have a share of available water, rather than a fixed annual volume, encouraging abstractors to take a shared responsibility for water resources in catchments).

A number of well-known conservation charities such as RSBP, WWF, with the Wildlife, Freshwater Habitats, Angling, Salmon and Trout, Wildlife and Wetlands Trusts have formed a lobby group called Blueprint for Water (www.blueprintforwater.org.uk) and urged VVS and like-minded groups to comment on these proposals. Paul Foster went to a meeting convened by WWF in London last month where Defra officials were available to answer questions from delegates from environmental organisations on the ideas set out in Making the Most of Every Drop.

It was clear that the civil servants were mostly concerned with surface water abstraction and showed little concern for groundwater supplies. In particular they had scant knowledge of the rarity and particular problems of chalk aquifers and their rivers and were surprised to be told that it was not feasible to recycle treated water back to a chalk aquifer. Nor did they appreciate that abstraction is already at an unsustainable level. It was disturbing to learn that in the longer term the 'Water Shares' option could turn into a commodity trading system for water, as gas and electricity have been traded since denationalisation.

The deadline for the consultation was 28 March, so your committee asked Paul Foster and Martin Frearson to respond to the 18 questions Defra posed, and put the special case to reduce abstraction from the chalk aquifers to more sustainable levels to enhance their unique fauna and flora.

We will report our responses in a future Newsletter, but it will be some years before we will know the final shape of the 'new' Water Act, as there is no time for legislation until the 2015-20 Parliament. That it itself is a matter for regret.

Ver Floods after record January rainfall



*Flooded water meadow from Redbournbury mill.
[Mandy James]*



*9th green at Redbourn golf club
[Christine Aitken]*



The confluence, Bricket Wood, 4th January - "Take a seat but wear your boots !" [Bruce Banfield-Taylor]

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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

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