



# Ver Valley Society

## NEWSLETTER

*Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society*

Number 125 - April 2015

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

President: Peter Fox, MBE



*Banded demoiselle -  
a typical quality picture  
from Andy Sands' collection.*

### April Open Meeting

All welcome to our Bricket Wood meeting.

**Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2015 (7.30)**  
**St Stephen Parish Centre,**  
**Bricket Wood**

In Station Road, Bricket Wood, near the "Gate" pub and Bricket Wood station. Car park at rear of building.

After VVS business and refreshments, successful wildlife photographer **Andy Sands** will show us his work, including some pictures taken in the Ver valley.

Andy lives in Bricket Wood and has work published regularly in books and magazines, marketed by the Nature Picture Library. He now owns Chiswick Camera Centre.  
See also [www.art.co.uk](http://www.art.co.uk).

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

## Chairman's Report

Jane Gardiner

In the last newsletter we reported about improvements we are hoping to make near the Ver at the Holywell Hill end of Verulamium Park and CMS are now putting together plans which we hope to help implement. In fact in February the Action Group undertook some clearance work and rubbish collection there (see Sue's report) and the need for some access to the river in places and a more definite, all-weather path was very evident. This could have considerable cost implications but we still have some monies left over from the Friends of Verulamium Park and could also consider using some money from VVS account for such a worthwhile project. At the time of writing Affinity and SADC are still trying to sort out the water leak in Romeland which has also been happening for very many months.

The Committee feels that the funds we have from the Phyllis Hammon bequest should only be used for significant improvements to the river environment and not for general running expenses of the Society. That is why we have increased the annual subscription this year and are now asking those attending Open Meetings to contribute at least £2 towards the cost of hall hire, speaker expenses and refreshments.

We are pleased that WWF has now taken up the cause of protecting the precious chalk rivers of which the Ver is one. In February they ran an excellent one day conference in Woking which I attended with Sue and Martin Frearson. The idea of a national Chalk Streams Forum has been put forward to increase Government awareness and all delegates were encouraged to respond to the **Water Framework Directive Consultations** with our views on our own river's condition, to be completed by 10th April 2015. Any members who receive this Newsletter by or soon after that date can also respond either on the EA website or more easily on WWF link <http://saveourwaters.org.uk>

**I am again asking if anyone reading this might be prepared to take the minutes at some of our four Full-Committee meetings a year and at the AGM.** Our Secretary John Fisher deals with this as well as many other things and any help would be very gratefully received. If you could help in this way, please phone or email John or myself to find out more what might be involved.

We have received prior notice of two events this year with which we hope to be involved. Firstly 27<sup>th</sup> September is designated as World Rivers Day and 22<sup>nd</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> November is going to be Sustainable St Albans Week.

## Rail Freight Terminal - Dismal News

Jane Gardiner

I am very sorry to have to report that as you may be aware St Albans Council has lost its court case against Eric Pickles's decision to approve the Park Street lorry terminal. All the judge could do was determine whether the Secretary of State had exercised his powers lawfully and sadly it seems that Mr Pickles did.

If the scheme now goes ahead there will be considerable impact on the Ver Valley particularly Park Street, and the south of St Albans. Increased traffic congestion will affect the whole area and run-off pollution from roads into the Ver will inevitably occur. It would impact on the attractiveness of our area as well as affecting many organisations and rail commuters. The setting of the city and Abbey will be irrevocably damaged.

Many local Councillors, politicians, STRIFE and other organisations will be pressing Hertfordshire County Council not to sell its land unless it is forced to do so. Some mitigation of the whole scheme might be possible if it does go ahead and as the original proposals included mention of a Country Park near the Ver in the area (as a sweetener?) we would have to make sure we were consulted over and involved with any such plans.

## The Ver at Frogmore Gravel Pits

John Bell

Visitors following the course of the Ver through the gravel pits at Frogmore will have been dismayed to find the footpath in a very sorry state. The sight that greets the eye is one of devastation with felled trees and churned up mud along the route.

But there is a bright side to this apparent disaster! Lafarge Aggregates, the owners of the land, are in the process of dedicating the route as a public right of way and have had to remove a lot of the older trees for safety reasons.

Unfortunately some very large equipment was needed for the job resulting in the present situation. However, weather permitting Lafarge will be returning in the near future to restore the path to a good standard, but we will have to be patient just a little longer!





This winter has been unexceptional, with rainfall not very different from the long-term average and although there has been more slightly sun than usual, temperatures overall have been slightly down. Most of March has been fairly dry. The groundwater level has gone up only very slightly in February and March and is still considerably below average for this time of year, although usually the level does continue to rise in April and May.

Month 2014/15	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamsted)
December 2014	129.88 [130.56]	14.8 [-42 .81]
January	129.12 [132.36]	81.9 [+11.93]
February	129.4 [132.38]	54.6 [+4.48]
March	129.96 [132.79]	Not yet available

The Bailiffs are recording reasonable flows and the head of the river is south of Markyate. The tributary River Red in Redbourn is flowing well at present but Hanstead Brook in Bricket Wood has only been flowing intermittently. The footpaths are quite clear at this time of year though muddy of course after it rains. Hazel and alder catkins have almost finished producing pollen and pussy willow is beginning to flower. Lesser celandines, blackthorn and butterbur and even some kingcups are showing now in a few warm spots.



*Blackthorn.*

The birds are busy building nests, with a few young appearing. The bailiffs are reporting many sightings of egrets, quite a few kingfishers and some grey wagtails all of which we can hope may breed. Some winter visitors, redwing and fieldfares, are still being reported in early March as are teal, gadwall and greylag geese among the water fowl.



*Lesser celandine.*

Other sightings include a few snipe, some red-legged partridges, a goldcrest, chiffchaffs, stonechats, skylarks and a barn owl near Shafford. John Fisher has reported more in his Bird Notes and Martin Frearson about the Heron Watch in Verulamium Park.

Although there is much evidence of mole activity I have only received one or two reports of hares being seen. Muntjac are

sometimes seen as are foxes, even a mating pair was spotted! A few early butterflies such as brimstones, peacocks and tortoiseshells have been out on warmer sunny days and some frogspawn has been spotted.

Fish are difficult too see in the winter but some trout have been reported and bull-heads are noted by those doing river-fly monitoring, which generally indicates healthy water quality for the Ver. Several of our Bailiffs now undertake this important method of measuring water quality and Sue Frearson co-ordinates the results to be sent to EA (see her report). Other fish reported recently are some gudgeon and minnows.

**I am still hoping to find someone to act as an occasional bailiff in Markyate area** to replace Bob Norrish who has now stepped down. There is of course only rarely any water in that area but if anyone living near there could in send in reports occasionally I'd be very pleased to hear from them and discuss what is needed.



*Grey wagtail.*



On a dull cold mid March morning Ernie Leahy and I led a Ver Valley Bird Walk for the Chesham Natural History Society. It was not at all promising with the threat of rain as we walked up the Gorhambury drive but several red kites drifted over and then a noisy flock of fieldfares took flight to lighten the spirits.



*Lapwing. [John Fisher]*

The prime bird watching site along the Ver these last 12 months has been the large pool on the flood plain just south of the Pre Sawmill. Last year a pair of little ringed plovers raised young here but we were just a week or two too early for one of our earliest spring migrants. It was a real surprise when one of the walkers spotted a redshank on the fringes of the pool. Last year a pair of these rare Hertfordshire breeders was seen for much of the spring and it is possible that they attempted to breed here although there were no reports of juveniles.

We also saw at least four pairs of lapwings flying up on their broad wings and calling out their plaintive "peewit" flight song; a real harbinger of spring. Last year several pairs raised young and many chicks were seen. Also present on the pond were three pairs of gadwall, a pair of teal and a little grebe along with numerous coots and moorhens. I saw a pair of gadwall with 13 newly hatched last year and the little grebes also bred. Later on the pool will be good for feeding swallows and I saw my first swifts of 2014 here in early May.

Walking on we saw buzzard and kestrel but although we failed to find one of the Shafford little owls we did find one of the over wintering stonechats. These have been seen usually far out on the meadows between the Ver and the A5183 but today the female was on a newly replaced fence near Shafford Mill and we all got really good views. Stonechat tend to perch up on posts, usually returning to the same spot over and over again. Further along the track we found a couple of yellowhammers on the overhead wires.

The weather was closing in by now but we had a brief stop near the Veolia plant where a little owl had been seen regularly on a large hole in an oak tree however it seems to have now found an alternative nest site – maybe one of the VVS nest boxes!

By the time we finished off at Redbournbury the drizzle had started and after a brief look at the little egret we were fortunate to have a car to shuttle the walkers back to St Albans. Our Shafford bailiff, John Pritchard, had been out a couple of hours before us that morning and he saw the little owl and a fly over raven.

A few days later on a sunny Friday afternoon I walked to the



*Little owl tree hole. [John Fisher]*



*Female stonechat. [John Fisher]*

pool and I heard the deep "cronking" of a raven and a minute or so later it flew over the pool, circling and calling before flying off towards Pre

Wood where it could well have young in a nest already. Ravens, a new breeding bird in Hertfordshire, are very early nesters. That afternoon I also saw my first wheatear of the year and the redshank, lapwings, little grebes and gadwall were still around looking so much better in the bright spring sunshine.

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).

## Heron Watch 2015

Martin Frearson

The Ver Valley Society is working with the RSPB local voluntary groups to continue the HeronWatch in Verulamium Park opposite the Heron Island (the large island) this spring, until May Bank Holiday Monday. RSPB have run this event Wednesdays to Sundays mid-February – first May Bank Holiday every year since 2008 with paid support, and VVS members such as John Fisher and Sue and Martin Frearson have always been involved as 'watchers', showing the heronry and the wildlife in Verulamium to the thousands of weekend visitors using telescopes loaned by RSPB. Up to twenty three pairs of herons have nested annually on the island since 1993, and last year for the first time in the Ver Valley a pair of little egrets joined them.

Owing to reduced funding RSPB cancelled the event for 2015, but Martin decided to contact the previous volunteers and local groups to run it on Saturdays and Sundays from 10.30 to 16.30, and the Bank Holidays at Easter and May Day.



VVS has applied to our local county councillor to fund a portable weather shelter, which you should see there from now on till 4 May, along with the telescopes loaned by RSPB as their part in this project. Martin would welcome extra 'watchers', especially on Sunday April 5, 12, 19, 26 and 3 May.

The days are divided into three two hour slots from 10.30 am onwards. All it involves is inviting visitors to use the scopes to see the herons and their chicks close up and explaining a bit about them – full notes are available plus RSPB leaflets. We will hand out VVS recruiting leaflets too!

Contact Martin Frearson [mfrearson@ntlworld.com](mailto:mfrearson@ntlworld.com) phone 01727 761878 if you can help.

## Membership

Rachel Young

A warm welcome to new members Mr A Mason and Mr N Hopkinson, and a big thank you to all our existing members who embraced the new rates and the introduction of Standing Orders. To simplify memberships and renewals, we will now accept annual SO's occurring in any month of the year. For memberships due to lapse in Sept. 2015, you can set up an SO starting 01/09/2015, we will send out reminders in the summer.

Please see our updated form to join or renew. <http://www.riverver.co.uk/pages/membership.html>.

N.B. For those members who have not renewed from Sept. 2014 despite 2 reminders, regretfully this will have to be the last Newsletter they receive.

### *Friends of the Nicky Line and the Ver Valley Society*

***"Come and see the Orchids"- Sunday 14 June 2015 - 10.00 am***

*Friends of the Nicky Line and the Ver Valley Society are holding a joint walk for the second year to view orchids at two sites.*

*Starting at the car park on Redbourn Common, this 5 mile circular walk will visit a bee orchid site on the Nicky Line near the M1 Bridge, and also visit the chalk slopes on the side of Harpenden Hill where we hope to see pyramidal orchids as well as bee orchids.*

***For more information contact Roger on 01582 763560 or  
John Fisher on 01582 792843***



The turnout for our Christmas get together at the Chequers, in Redbourn was very good and with a great deal of hard work, the Red confluence was cleared of some fallen willows. More of the overhanging vegetation along the Ver was also removed, improving the flow of the river.

In January, despite the snow, eight intrepid volunteers worked at Riverside, Bricketwood on the willows, under the leadership of our newly qualified Team Leaders Sue Featherstone and Bruce Banfield Taylor. There was a also a very good turnout in February to help clear vegetation along the path along the Ver in Verulamium Park, and remove rubbish trapped against a fallen willow.(2 photos) Ten black bags of assorted litter were collected to be removed by the Park Ranger.

In March, Bruce and Paul Foster led the further clearance of overhanging willows at Sopwell Manor meadows and the litter pick near New Barns Mill, which seems to attract all sorts of rubbish, including dumped garden waste in the millstream.

Overall, this was a good winter's effort. Many thanks to all those volunteers who have participated in these activities.



Volunteers getting down to basics, near former Duke of Marlborough pub.  
[Sue Frearson]



## Spring Programme 2015

- **Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> April 10.00-12.00** **Chequers Redbourn**, for a litter pick and to remove more of the overhanging willows at the confluence with the Red. *(This is subject weather and to a further safety check, nearer the time)*
- **Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> May 10.00 - 12.00** **Riverside Way, Drop Lane, Bricket Wood**, to repair some of the deflectors, remove some of the ash saplings and do another litter pick.
- **Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> June 10.00 – 12.00** **Verulamium Park**. You can park at Westminster Lodge for two free hours (plus 10 minutes, under new legislation). Meet at the Holywell Hill end, near the walks sign. *(Leader to be confirmed)*. We will be removing a metre strip of nettles on either side of the path (VVS Walk 6) and doing a litter pick.

If you would like to help on any of these activities, please let me know by email [sue.frearson@which.net](mailto:sue.frearson@which.net) or phone 01727 761878 so that I can contact you if there is a change of plan. I also need to know numbers, so that I can borrow the right number of tools from CMS. You will need to wear suitable clothing, wellingtons, stout boots or waders, and please bring your own gardening gloves.

The Riverfly sampling along the river appears to be showing a healthy population of invertebrates, apparently coinciding with the improved flow of the Ver. Our monthly surveys of the numbers of mayfly larvae, caddis fly larvae and freshwater shrimps are reported back to the Environment Agency and so far we have had no major pollution incidents showing up.

Last December Clive Pickering, from Redbourn Fisheries attended a meeting in London for the VVS, organised by the Riverfly Partnership at which he heard about the development of a national database called the Anglers Riverfly Monitoring Initiative, ARMI. In future each monitor will be able to register their monthly survey data and this should enable a rapid response from the EA, if the trigger level is reached at a particular river. Across the country there are over 750 monitoring sites with over 1200 volunteers and the numbers are growing rapidly.



Clive's report encouraged some of our VVS monitors to attend a very useful Riverfly Day (organised by Allen Beechey, Chilterns Chalk Stream Project Officer) at Latimer Park in February, where we revised our monitoring skills and techniques, as well as learnt about Riverfly Plus.

In the future this could provide information on invasive species, other indicator species and water quality such as phosphate and nitrate levels. Ultimately the information on the ARMI Database could be used to provide data to measure the health of the water environment and set goals for healthier rivers, as required under the EU's Water Framework Directive.

Along the Ver there are still several sites where we would like monitors. If you would like to help with this project we can arrange for you to attend a free training course. Please contact me for further information at [sue.frearson@which.net](mailto:sue.frearson@which.net)

*Martin Frearson examining a river water sample using the specialist equipment that we have acquired. [Sue Frearson]*

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**HOTLINES**  
EA Incident Hotline: 0800 807060  
("Report all environmental incidents")  
EA Floodline: 0845 988 1188  
"Cleaner District" (SADC):  
01727 819598  
Water Leaks (Affinity):  
0800 376 5325

*We are grateful to Affinity Water for supplying periodic ground water and flow charts and to Veolia Environmental Services for printing and distributing these Newsletters.*