



Ver Valley Society

NEWSLETTER

Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society

Number 129 - April 2016

www.riverver.co.uk

President: Peter Fox, MBE

VER VALLEY SOCIETY

Present a combined talk by

NANCY YOUNG of the Environment Agency
and **DI HAMMOND** of Affinity Water

Restoring River Habitats on the Ver for Wildlife



Ver at Pre Mill. [N Young]

FRIDAY 22 APRIL 7:30 pm

ST STEPHENS PARISH CENTRE

Station Road, Bricketwood, St Albans AL2 3PJ

Non Members Welcome

Free Entry - Donations Appreciated

Adequate parking

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

Chairman's Report

Jane Gardiner

It is encouraging to know that Affinity Water is due to stop pumping from the Bow Bridge borehole in April. This means there should be more water in the river system in southern part of the Ver. Unfortunately we have to expect poor flows this summer as the ground water is still low as you can see from the details in my Bailiffs' report.

A very popular area to walk along the Ver is from Redbournbury Mill where there are two bridges over the fords and one of the well loved VVS Walks seats on a little rise behind the south ford. While the wooden bridges are in a good state of repair the access to them has become increasingly difficult as the approaches have been eroded by water as tractors etc use the fords. Julian Thornton the HCC Footpaths Officer kindly came out with me in February and together we decided on a series of suitable remedial works which he hopes can be put in place shortly.

You will have hopefully have seen the press reports of the clearance work by our Action Group volunteers on the permissive path from Frogmore Pits towards Moor Mill. This work will be continuing (see Sue Frearson's report) to allow the public to access views of an unspoilt stretch of the Ver. You may also have seen about much good work done in Sopwell Nunnery meadows past the Alban Way viaduct towards Sopwell Mill; Martin Frearson reports fully elsewhere in this Newsletter.

There appears to have been a spate of fly-tipping recently spoiling many of the VVS walks. Please can I encourage anyone noticing this to report it to the SADC Cleaner District on 01727 819598 or a.cleanerdistrict@stalbans.gov.uk

Verulamium Park

Jane Gardiner

From the Verulamium Park Forum, which I attended in March, it appears that following extensive consultations and discussions with many bodies (EA, Affinity Water, etc), SADC will soon be ready to publish its plans for the lakes and dealing with the problem of pollution. These lake plans may be linked to providing a better path (with possibly a stretch of boardwalk) from Holywell Hill to the Causeway. You are probably aware that VVS have been very keen for some time that the public should have better access to see a more natural part of our chalk stream and that we and other organisations have funds and man-power we are willing to contribute to such a project.

You may have seen that English Heritage are having repairs carried out to the Roman Walls and soon it is hoped to have some notices put up asking people not to climb on the walls. These could be similar to those now around the lakes discouraging the feeding of bread to the ducks. Leaflets explaining why it is bad to feed bread to ducks are shortly being distributed in the park and possibly in schools etc. You may be interested to have a look at the RSPB Heron Watch which is running until May at the end of the larger lake in Verulamium Park.

The Council hope that these and other measures will ensure that Green Flag status will be achieved for the Park again this year.

Ver Valley Walks

Jane Gardiner

The Ver Valley Walks leaflets have now run out for general distribution and the VVS Committee have decided it is much too expensive for us to reproduce them for a third time. I'm holding plenty in reserve for new and existing members for the time being and of course they can all be downloaded from our website. CMS have also run out and don't intend to produce more at present. We are however in the process of creating an A5 sized summary sheet which can be distributed to various outlets and will be available at the next Open Meeting on April 22nd.

Membership

Rachel Young

The newest members we would like to welcome, and thank for joining the Ver Valley Society, are Mr & Mrs Walker, C Hieatt, Mr & Mrs Hill, the Del Aguila-Joneses, Mr Pigott (Thrales End Farmschool), R Trent, C Davies, Dr Warren and Prof Barrett.

Thank you to all of you who continue to support us, current paid-up membership stands at over 200.

Our membership form, for new joiners and renewals, is available on request via a committee member, or downloadable from <http://www.riverver.co.uk/pages/membership.html>, or email members@riverver.co.uk.

I'm glad to welcome Catherine and Derrick Davies to our Bailiffing team; they are going to monitor the stretch of the Ver from Holywell Hill to just past the Alban Way viaduct. This is a very well used section where considerable improvements by CMS and VVS Action Group have been taking place (see elsewhere). We now have a full team of excellent and committed Bailiffs.

2015 as a whole was slightly wetter than average but that was largely due to the months of May and August having higher than average rainfall when there is no recharge of the aquifer. The whole year was also warmer than average so the year ended with the aquifer being well over four meters below average and since then it has shown only slight recovery. Although January was 30% wetter than average, February was 6% drier and so far March seems to have been quite dry also. The aquifer at the start of March was still nearly four metres below average although some recharge usually takes place up to May and we must hope for some decent rainfall during April if this summer is not to see very low flows.

Month 2016	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamsted)
December 2015	126.27 [130.56]	81.8 [+12.29]
January	126.50 [131.36]	92.3 [+22.3]
February	127.81 [132.38]	46.9 [-3.27]
March	128.82 [132.79]	Not yet available

The mild winter has meant many plants have had a head start this spring, with lesser celandines decorating the riversides, some coltsfoot is beginning to show as is butterbur. Hazel catkins and blackthorn are almost over in many places.

The reappearance of fairy water-fern (*Azolla filiculidies*) just south of Dolittle Mill is disappointing. It forms spreading areas of dense reddish mats in winter, turning green in summer, which prevent other water plants growing. In 2009 I reported it to EA who said that frost should control it but this appeared not to be happening so they introduced weevils, which seems to have to controlled it for a few years until now. We have been asked by ColneCAN to report and identify the sites of any Himalayan balsam or Japanese knotweed so can I urge all Bailiffs to do so on their reports in the coming months so I can pass them on.



Blackthorn in flower. [Jane Gardiner]



Azolla filiculidies. [Jane Gardiner]

Many birds seem to have done well in the relatively mild winter; I have had recent reports of flocks of mixed fieldfares and redwings, of golden plovers, yellowhammers, lapwings, siskins, and some sightings of skylarks, king-fishers, mistle thrushes, cormorants, egrets, herons, gadwall, teal, and tufted duck as well as the more common waterfowl. Wrens are often noted skulking along the riverside as are all the

usual tits in the hedges; a few grey wagtails are about and a bullfinch and another peregrine have been seen.

Apart from the usual rabbits, squirrels and foxes few other animals have been seen apart from the very occasional hare. Recent fish reports include brown trout, bullheads and minnows and the river-fly monitors are finding good populations of invertebrates on most stretches.

Most winters, pools have formed on the west side of the Ver just downstream from Pre Mill and previously these have been mostly spring fed with just occasional overflow from the Ver. However in January and February of 2014 we had the two highest monthly rainfalls for over 100 years resulting in extremely high flow levels all along the Ver. There is a cattle drinking access point to the river just downstream from Pre Mill which is much used by the Estate's wonderful herd of long horned cattle. The west bank of the river was severely eroded by a combination of the trampling of the cattle and the high water level. As a result the pool has become river fed rather than just spring fed, meaning that invertebrates and fish from the river have made their way into and become established in the pool. This in turn has led to far more bird life being attracted to the pool, not just breeding species but also passage migrants. (See the front page picture of the Pre Mill Pool).

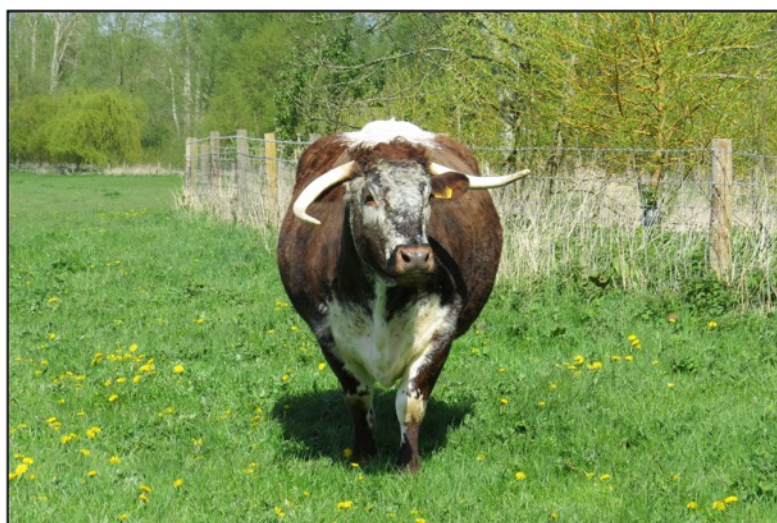
In 2014 the flood water washed away the soil from the pool fringes exposing bare gravel which is so much favoured by little ringed plovers. A pair turned up in late March and stayed on to breed successfully. Young were seen scuttling along the edge of the pool feeding and as with most wader chicks they feed for themselves. However the parent birds keep a watchful eye over them and distract any predators, often by pretending they have an injured wing to lure the potential killers away from their young. Little ringed plovers are summer visitors to the UK and they have bred before alongside the Ver when the really wet winters in 2001 and 2009 resulted in their ideal gravel bed breeding sites. In 2015 a pair showed up in March but soon left, presumably as the pool fringes were muddy not gravelly.



Shoveler on Pre Mill Pool. [John Fisher]

However in 2015 a few pairs of lapwings did breed and youngsters were seen in June. One day I saw a female gadwall on the pool with no less than 13 young and at least two pairs of mallard bred. Little grebes (dabchicks) were seen throughout the year and I am fairly sure they bred but they are so very secretive hiding in the big clumps of tufted grass. It is also possible that redshanks bred near the pool as two were seen on and off through the summer but no juveniles were reported.

The pools are also an ideal stopping off point for the herons and little egrets, both of which are now breeding on the Verulamium Lake islands.



Gorhambury Longhorn. [John Fisher]

The Gorhambury Estate is now farmed almost entirely for sheep and cattle and it is what they leave on the grass that is so important for birds and insects. The paddocks by the pool are great for residents like mistle thrushes and green woodpeckers, and winter visitors like fieldfares and redwings who feed up on the abundant insects and worms.

Other interesting sightings along the Ver this winter have been a drake pintail and two pairs of shoveler on the Pre Mill Pool, several stonechats, a flock of up to 200 golden plovers with an occasional hunting peregrine showing an interest. A pair of oystercatchers was seen near Shafford in March probably the same pair seen regularly at Tyttenhanger Pits.

A short-eared owl has been reported from the Frogmore Pits area where the rough grassland over

the old landfill site is ideal for hunting owls. I have been over to this site a couple of times but failed to connect with the bird. As far as I know this a first for the Ver Valley.

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

Tuesday 19th July at 7.30 pm

Markyate Village hall – speaker Mike Heylin – Colne Can Catchment

Tuesday 25th October at 7.30 pm

St Michaels Parish Centre – AGM followed - speaker Ian Piggott Ver Valley Farmer t.b.c

Thursday 26th January 2017 at 7.30 pm

Redbourn Village Hall Centenary Suite – Speaker t.b.a

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). Although our meetings are free entry to members and non members we welcome donations towards the cost of refreshments, hall hire etc. Suggested £2 pp

Moves to establish a new nature reserve in Sopwell Martin Frearson

The Society has been helping to create a local nature reserve by the River Ver just south of the Alban Way in Sopwell. Until recently this area of about a hectare was dominated by crack willows and choked with brambles and nettles. In January, as part of the Sopwell Nunnery Open Space Management Plan, district council contractors coppiced the willows on both sides of the Ver and felled other old trees along an ancient hedgerow bordering the Sopwell recreation ground in. Local volunteers working with the Countryside Management Service and the Ver Valley Society Action Group spent two weeks laying the hedgerow. We planted two dozen hazels to fill the gaps left in the hedgerow when the old trees were removed, cleared rubbish from the site and river, and cut back overhanging branches and scrub from the riverside path. The whole area is now more open to walkers and visitors now get much better views of the river and Sopwell Mill from the Alban Way.

Sue Frearson, VVS Action Group leader explains “ For a chalk stream to be healthy, there should be no more than 30% shading along the banks so that the water plants and water animals get enough light to flourish. This stretch was very overshadowed and muddy. There were only a few patches of starwort to be seen. We did a standard Riverfly invertebrate survey which was really quite good, but found no mayflies. We now have a new bailiff who will sample the riverfly larvae monthly to monitor what happens. We should see a gradual improvement in the score and the starwort spreading. We might even find water crowfoot appearing, all of which will be good for the fish population, especially trout which we know are present here in small numbers.”

“It was encouraging to get a really positive response from the many local residents who use the rec and the riverside walk. They would like a bench installed, and it would be good to seed the newly-cleared area with a specialist watermeadow flower mix, as it looks a bit devastated at the moment. If anyone would like to sponsor a seat, or the seed which costs £150 per hectare they should get in touch with me”.



New Hedge at Sopwell – Martin Frearson

Later this summer the present phase of the Nunnery Open Space Management Plan concludes with CMS volunteers installing dog steps into the river at three strategic points, to allow owners get their pets in and out of the river without eroding the banks and undercutting the riverside path. Walkers passing the Sopwell Nunnery ruins may notice specialist builders re-pointing and capping the walls, part of which collapsed recently, ironically while the annual Green Flag inspection party was on the site! St Albans District officers were unusually quick to apply to Heritage England for a grant and were awarded £20,000 for these emergency repairs.

The new nature reserve is on our Walk 7, the Watermeadow Walk, and of course the River Ver Trail. If you are quiet, it is a good place to see kingfishers, which have nested for the past couple of years in the freshly eroded bank opposite St Peter's JMI school.

Recent Projects:

Opening up the permissive footpath along the Ver in Frogmore Pits on a lovely sunny but frosty morning in January, was successful in removing some of the bramble and overhanging willow along the path and banks. This gives some lovely views of the river. In the spring, with the advice and help from Rob Pearson EA, we will be working here in the river and along the banks of the Ver, improving the flow. Thank you to our many volunteers. With their help it is hoped that we will be able to keep this path open in the future.

In February, a few volunteers helped at Sopwell Nunnery Green, reinforcing the laid hedge and removing over growth along the footpath and river. In March eight volunteers cleared woody debris and litter from the Red and its banks, to improve the flow.

If you are not already on my contact list, but would like to join us please email me sue.frearson@which.net

Spring Programme 2016

- **Saturday April 16th 10.00-12.00**
Frogmore Pits (meet at Hyde Lane car park) to survey the river for silt and build natural deflectors, using fallen trees. For those without waders, new bramble growth along the path and banks will need to be removed. I hope to borrow some waders and tools from the CMS
- **Saturday May 21st 10.00 -12.00 (Provisional activity: I will email you if this changes)**
Frogmore Pits (meet at Hyde Lane car park) Removal of litter from the river and of early growth of Himalayan Balsam along the new permissive footpath by the river.
- **Saturday June 18th 10.00-12.00 (meet at Moor Mill car park)** Removal of early growth of Himalayan Balsam at Moor Mill and downstream to Riverside and the confluence.



*David, Jane and Martin working on the Red.
[Sue Frearson]*

This spring and summer, working with the advice of Sandy Belloni South Groundwork Trust, it is hoped that we can continue the fight against the invasive weeds along the Ver. Please report in to me sightings of *Himalayan Balsam*, *Japanese Knotweed* and *Giant Hogweed*.

St Albans Strategic Local Plan 2011-2031

Martin Frearson

In January St Albans Council published their vision and policies for the development of the area for the next 15 years in draft form and invited comments. The Society was keen to read their proposals for creating a healthy and sustainable environment, so turned to Section 10 of the draft with bated breath. We did not expect to see much beyond the usual banal platitudes about safeguarding the environment and our duty to pass on a sustainable world to future generations, while building as many houses as possible with all that implies for loss of green fields and more pressure on natural resources such as water and clean air. Instead, we found a forward-looking review acknowledging the current unsustainable extraction of water from the aquifer and policies to protect and enhance the unique chalk stream ecosystem for future generations of residents to enjoy. Our message has got through!

We responded to the consultation congratulating the planners and supporting the four policies in Section 10 on Natural Environment, Green Infrastructure, Renewable and Low Carbon Energy, and Environmental Performance of New Development. The later proposes that in view of the fact that we live in an area subject to water supply stress and constraint – yes, they have accepted this! – ALL new housing will have to meet the optional national water efficiency standard. The more usual policy only imposes this on major developments of 50 or more homes.

However, we took issue with Policy 26 on the Natural Environment which addresses back garden and flood plain developments. The council proposes to refuse development of residential garden land which would cause significant harm to environmental quality, character or residential amenity, but will only seek to avoid developments in areas at risk from flooding. We thought this was too weak and put forward amended wording to make clear the council would refuse flood plain development unless water and flood risk were fully addressed.

The council's officers will now prepare responses to the points raised in the consultation, and recommendations of amendments for members to consider before the final SLP goes before an inspector at an examination in public later this year.

As I provide the Affinity Water graphs for the quarterly Ver Valley Society Newsletter I thought it would be useful to give a description of how the data is collected.

Flow data from the Ver comes from the Environment Agency's gauging station at Redbourn (see photo). The station measures depth over an artificial flat v-shaped weir every 15 minutes. Historic spot flow measurements collected at the station have been correlated with water level depth measurements taken at the time. This allows a flow measurement to be calculated for a given depth, with the data for each 24 hour period averaged to give a daily value.

Groundwater level data from the observation borehole at Ballingdon Farm requires more regular visits to the field, as the depth to the water table is measured by Environment Agency staff on a monthly basis. A probe is lowered, which indicates contact with water with a loud beep. The depth of this can then be read off a measuring tape attached to the probe. This is then converted to metres above mean sea level (metres above ordnance datum) by subtracting the depth to water values from a known datum point (usually the top of the borehole).

As you can see from the graph on the final page of this newsletter, the Ver is now flowing again over the gauging station at Redbourn, following a period of intermittent dry spells since October 2015. This coincided with heavy rainfall at the end of December 2015 and through January 2016. The much needed heavy rain through January in particular, helped groundwater levels in the Ver catchment to stop falling and start to increase. Groundwater levels reached the height of the river bed at Redbourn gauging station and started to contribute consistent flow to the river at this point.



*The Ver Measuring Point at Redbourn.
[John Fisher]*

Although the January rainfall was good for groundwater levels in the River Ver catchment, the water table is still some way below the average expected for this time of year, as it has been since January 2015. It just goes to show how quickly water from the chalk aquifer drained after the high groundwater levels we experienced in 2014 and how important regular winter rainfall is for flow in the river.

So what's next for the Ver? With the impending reduction of abstraction in the catchment, it is hoped that there will be more water in the river. My colleague Ilias Karapanos will be giving a talk on Water Resources in the Ver Catchment for the Hertfordshire Geological Society on Saturday 16th July and he will touch on any early benefits that we have seen to the river. In partnership with the Environment Agency, we will also be undertaking a series of morphological improvements so that the Ver may once again flow as a natural Chalk Stream. Di Hammond of Affinity Water and Nancy Young from the Environment Agency will present on some of the planned projects at the next VVS meeting on 22nd April.- (see the front page).

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Martin Frearson and Jane Gardiner

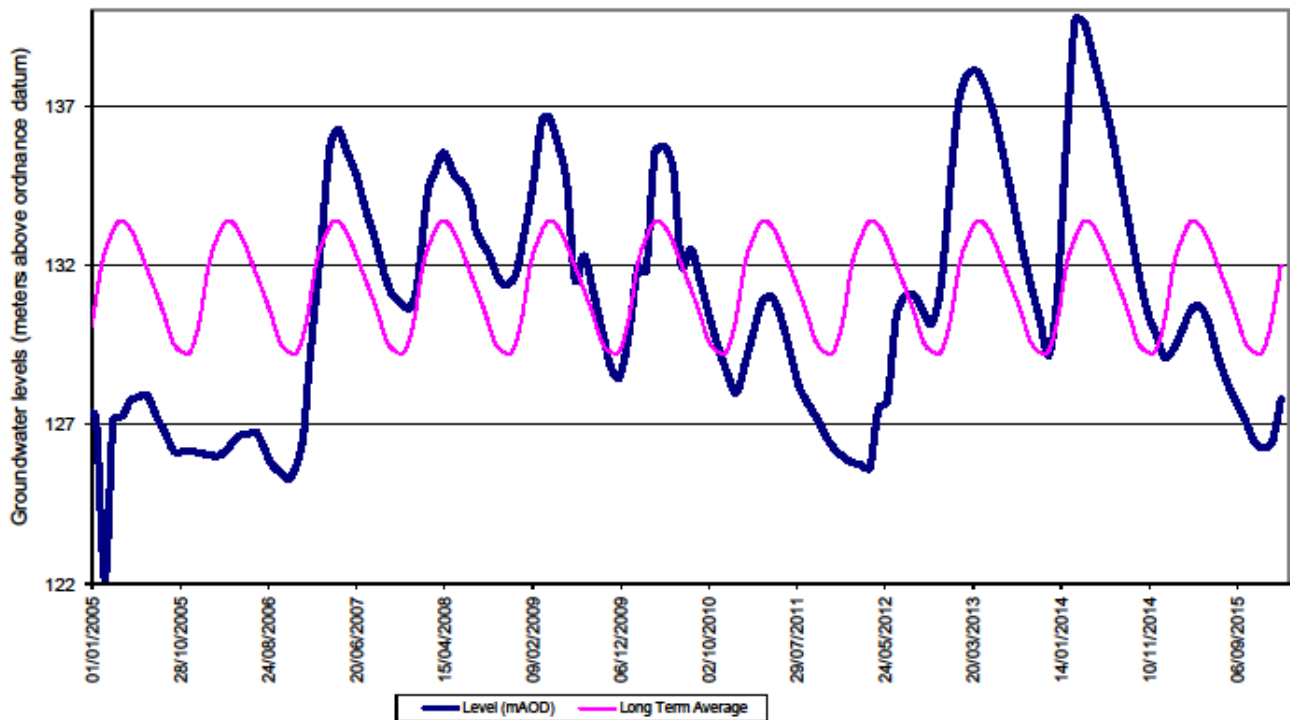
Newsletter Layout

John Trew (Verulam Angling Club)

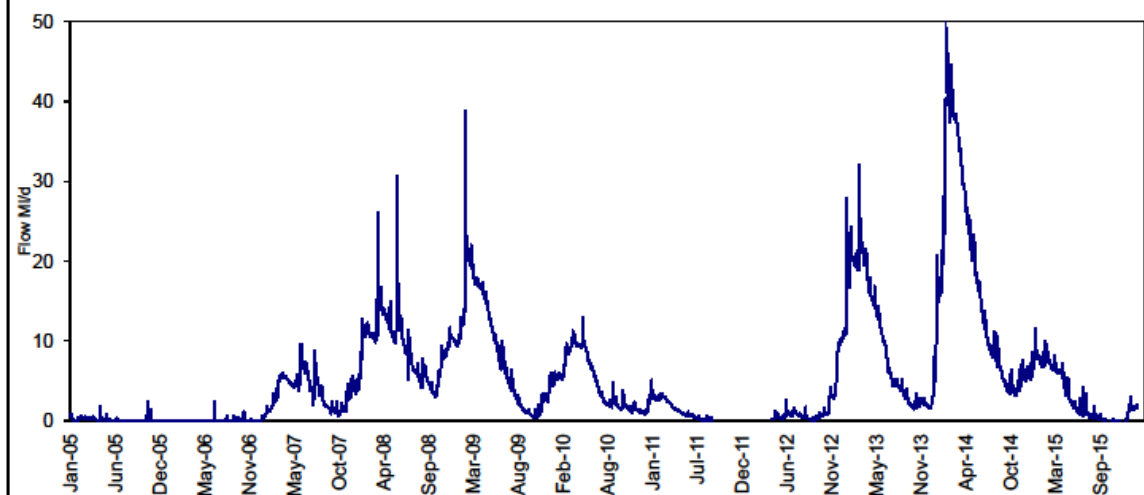
HOTLINES

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

Groundwater levels - Ballingdon Farm 2005 - To Date
Grid Ref: TL 0385 1404



Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn
January 2005 to Date



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.