



# Ver Valley Newsletter



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## January Open Meeting

January is the month we visit Redbourn so please join us, details below:

**MONDAY 29th JANUARY 2007 (7.30 pm)**  
**at TRANSEPT HALL, ST. MARY'S CHURCH, REDBOURN**

Parking is in old Hemel Hempstead Road, the hall is adjoining the church.

There will be the customary reports and updates on the river and its valley, then tea/coffee time for general discussions on anything and everything!

Following the success with the Ver Valley Society barn owl box, Peter Wilkinson has accepted an invitation from the Society to be our guest speaker this evening.

Peter monitors barn owls throughout the country and has an unmatched passion and knowledge regarding these mysterious birds. His talk will be mainly about owls but we are sure he will feature other birds as well.

Free admission to members and non-members of the society. Hope to see you there!

## Restoring Sustainable Abstraction Programme -- The Ver

**Andy Webb**

At our '06 AGM on October 24th, Vicky Kidney and Lisa Pinney confirmed that the Environment Agency (EA) now believe that the ALF (Alleviation of Low Flows) scheme of May 1993, whereby Friars Wash PS (15 Ml/d) was switched to standby basis only, had brought only limited benefits to the flow of our river.

Drought and continued abstraction elsewhere in the valley being the two main reasons for this - and they now recognised that more action may need to be taken in the medium to long term in order to safeguard (and indeed, enhance) the most interesting chalk stream in the Home Counties (in my view!).

The following notes (*continued overleaf*) are from Vicky herself:

## Allen Springett

Very sadly we have to report that one of our bailiffs, Allen Springett died suddenly just before Christmas.

Allen had been active for VVS in many ways apart from his regular, detailed and knowledgeable bailiff reports on the river and its wildlife south from Moor Mill to the confluence with the Colne.

He ensured that the Drop Lane car park was kept clear of dumped rubbish by regularly contacting the District Council and himself helped with litter picks.

He kept a watch on planning matters in the Park Street area and acted on behalf of the Society at County Hall enquiries.

Allen will be sorely missed and we send our sincere condolences to his wife Kathy and the rest of the family.

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

## **Restoring Sustainable Abstraction Programme -- The Ver *Continued***

Assessment of water resources in the area is continuing, the "Vale of St. Albans Conceptual Model" will be complete and ready for use next year and this will aid this work. Additional groundwater and ecological monitoring of the Ver is ongoing.

Options and appraisals to improve river flow will be complete by the end of 2007. This official recognition of our river's problems is significant, even if it has been long overdue. The RSA programme has now been established for some time, and its effects can be seen in the recent change of attitude to the Ver.

However, this comes at a time when there seems to be a distinct possibility that central government housing targets will not just be agreed for Hertfordshire, but increased. Urban sprawl will continue, as will an insatiable demand for more water supply.

(N.B. Individual water use has increased vastly in recent years.) The planning regime for the East of England (see separate report) has been too weak. Pressure on local water resources, and thus on the river Ver and other rivers like it, will become acute in the long term.

### **Blueprint for Water**

Subtitled "10 Steps to Sustainable Water by 2015", we recommend this booklet (and accompanying website [www.blueprintforwater.org.uk](http://www.blueprintforwater.org.uk)) which sets out clearly the need to be economical with tapwater.

A variety of organisations have come together to back the campaign, such as RSPB, WWF, ACA (fishing interests) and the National Trust.

People are invited to write to their MP, asking them to sign up to "Blueprint for Water", in particular saying "why water is important to you".

### **Bird Notes**

**John Fisher**

In the last few months I have had many reports of little egrets along the Ver including one of three egrets together. As far as I know in previous years only single birds have been seen. This is certainly an indicator of how this continental species is gaining an ever strengthening foothold in the UK.

From their initial break through on the south coast, notably on Brownsea Island, they have spread further northwards each year. This is probably a delightful side effect of global warming. To my mind with their brilliant white plumage, slim elegant shape and distinctive head plumes they are a great addition to our local bird life.

On mainland Europe there are two other white egrets, the larger great egret and the smaller cattle egret. These are now often seen in the UK but are still relatively rare. Little egrets are the only species with black legs and yellow feet so if you see a white egret with yellow legs it could be one of the rarer species. I wonder how long it will be before we get a great or a cattle egret or even a spoonbill along the Ver.

2006 has seen red kites establish themselves as a regular bird of our valley. It has taken a long time for them to break-out from the original release area in the Chilterns but reported sightings have risen dramatically this year suggesting that they may be breeding close by.

If you read this and have any interesting bird sightings in or around Redbourn I would be pleased to hear from you on 01582 792843 or email [john.fisher@btclick.com](mailto:john.fisher@btclick.com).

Everyone will have noticed that we have had quite a wet autumn and early winter and the figures in the table below show that the last 3 months were about 40% wetter than average. This has resulted in a slight but none-the-less pleasing improvement in groundwater level by December, which is on average the lowest month, but of course the present level is still over 4 meters below that average.

There is some flow in both the Ver and the Red in Redbourn but nothing north of there in early Jan. South of Redbourn the bailiffs are beginning to measure some improvements in flow, especially after heavy rains, but still disappointing for the time of year.

This may partly be due to the river channel being largely overgrown and/or blocked by debris and rubbish over very many stretches, so that large pools of standing water have formed in meadows beside the River in several places with the water not getting into the River.

The Environment Agency has done a little clearance work at the back of Prae Close but we encourage them and the St Albans District Council to do more. It is possible that the channel may be able to re-establish itself to some extent in some places if we do get plenty more rain resulting in improvement in flows. The renewal of the compensation water pipe from Bow Bridge to St Michaels' end of Verulamium Park has been completed.

2006	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters and [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [ $\pm$ average] (figures from Dave Yeoman at Rothampstead)
September	125.81 [130.87]	54.2 [-6.8]
October	125.49 [130.93]	105.0 [+30.3]
November	125.34 [130.91]	104.4 [+38.2]
December	126.47 [130.56]	95.0 [+20.9]

While on the subject of blockages I would like to mention the M1 widening near Junction 9 which goes across the River Ver. Spoil heaps have appeared adjacent to the channel with much debris, plastic pipes, wooden planks and railway sleepers, beside and in the channel itself.

Although it is dry up there at present the dip slope of the channel also appears to need correction once water returns to flow there. Peter Fox has been assured by the Environment Officer of the works that all will be put right before they move on but we shall keep a close eye on the situation.

One of our very long-serving bailiffs, Jack Knight, has decided the time has come for him to step down and we owe him a considerable debt of gratitude for all his commitment to looking after the river over many years. His 'patch' is through the Gorhambury estate which he has known and been connected with for over 80 years since a small boy.

He has a wealth of knowledge about the estate past and present and we are pleased to know he will continue his interest and contact with us. However this does mean we are looking for a couple of volunteer bailiffs for the Gorhambury and Drop Lane stretches of the River [see elsewhere for a piece about the late Allen Springett]. If you might be interested please do phone me [01727 866331] or email.

Now to wildlife matters. The relatively mild weather so far has some interesting effects. A ruddy darter dragonfly was recorded on 19th November, a kingcup is in flower already at the Wildlife Watercress Association and hazel catkins are well advanced.

Only a few redwings and fieldfares have come this far as yet and very few snipe seem to be about. However there are regular sightings of little egrets [see John Fisher's bird notes] as well as the more usual reports of kingfishers, grey wagtails, buzzards, mixed tit flocks, common water-fowl including tufted ducks and pochard.

I have not received any reports of hares being seen so far this winter but a muntjack deer was seen near Sopwell Mill and rabbits remain very numerous. Moles have been very active in some areas.

One or two of our Bailiffs are also fishermen and they have reported good sized perch and roach as well as small chubb, mirror-carp and minnows south from New Barns Mill at Sopwell. This shows that where a reasonable amount of water can be maintained the River can support a healthy and varied fish population.

Finally on drawing back the bedroom curtains on New Year's Day before sunrise to a clear azure sky I watched for five minutes as a red kite glided effortlessly along the skyline from Gorhambury over Verulamium, house tops, fields and woods towards the motorway - an uplifting start to 2007!

## **Compensation Water**

Some 15 years ago a pipeline was installed so that, when river flows fell below a certain level, the SADC could demand Compensation Water (untreated water) direct from the Bow Bridge (Shafford) borehole to top up Verulamium Lakes. (These should really be called "ponds".)

However, this line was found to be leaking badly so a new pipe is currently being installed. The Prae Close section was drilled using a laser-guided "mole", with the connection to Bluehouse Hill actually driven UNDER the river.

## **Redbournbury Mill -- Latest News**

The programme for 2007 was announced as the New Year opened. The Mill, such a key feature of the Ver Valley, is continuing to welcome visitors on the following basis:

- " Open every Sunday afternoon 15th April to 7th October (2.00 - 5.30)
- " 28th January - "Residents First"
- " 8th & 9th April (Easter)
- " 13th May - "National Mills Weekend"
- N.B. Other dates later in the year.

Redbournbury Bakery: Open Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday mornings for sales of various breads etc. between 8.30 and approx. 11.30, also when mill is open (as above).

"Job vacancy": Justin James is actively seeking an "Assistant Miller/Baker", "a few hours each week of paid employment". More details from Justin on 01582 792874.

## **M1 Widening -- Friars Wash (Junc 9)**

Although currently "a dreadful mess", the contractors on-site have assured Peter Fox and John Fisher that the rebuilt pipeline conveying the Ver has been correctly aligned and all will be well on completion when it is re-connected to the river system. "Watch this space".

(Walkers will be glad to know that the pedestrian footpath under the motorway will be reinstated, there are several designated footpaths in this area.)

## **East of England Plan -- as it affects US !**

**Peter Fox**

The "EERA", with which we have to live, is an un-elected body administering a very wide area, it is now starting to "flex its muscles". Your VVS committee has been trying to raise awareness of the dire consequences to our area regarding the proposed changes to the "East of England Plan" which would allow 79,000 plus additional homes in Hertfordshire by 2021. (See our letter on the campaigning page of the VVS website.)

We are now faced with the "Proposed Changes to the Draft Revision" document issued by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and requiring a response by 9th March next. St Albans and Dacorum Councils want a response even earlier, by 19th January, so time is of the essence.

Briefly, the proposed changes most directly affecting our locality, in particular the Ver catchment, are for some 12,000 additional houses to be accommodated, mainly in the Green Belt surrounding Hemel Hempstead, and extending into St. Albans district, by 2021. This is to be achieved by a series of some 17 development sites known as "Neighbourhood Concepts" - typically each containing about 2,500 people in 1,000 to 1,100 houses, plus primary school, local shop/s, community hall, access to health and secondary schooling, public open space, new highways and links, access to public transport, and much more.

Amongst many concerns is getting over the message that we are already abstracting and using more water than is provided by natural annual recharge of the aquifer. This means the slow death of all our precious Chiltern chalk streams including the Ver!

There are alarming signs that we are not getting this over to even our own elected Councillors, let alone a remote unelected body such as the East of England Regional Assembly. However, we are constantly trying, but need the full support of all our members and all friends of the VVS.

Find out more by logging on to these addresses: [www.dacorum.gov.uk](http://www.dacorum.gov.uk), the St. Albans District Council website, the GO-East website at [www.goeast.gov.uk](http://www.goeast.gov.uk) and our own VVS website ([www.riverver.co.uk](http://www.riverver.co.uk)).

More information will be given at our Open Meeting in Redbourn.