



# Ver Valley Newsletter



*Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society*

Number 96

www.riverver.co.uk

January 2008

**Chairman:**

(also News & Publicity)

Andy Webb, 30 Queens Court, Hatfield Road, St Albans, AL1 4TG.  
Tel: (01727) 839573.

**Deputy Chairman:**

(also Bailiff co-ordinator)

Mrs Jane Gardiner, 18 Claudian Place, St Albans, AL3 4JE.  
Tel: (01727) 866331.  
Email: jane@gardiner33.fsnet.co.uk

**Hon Secretary:**

Peter Fox, 23 Fish Street, Redbourn, AL3 7LP.  
Tel: (01582) 793303.

Email: fox@fishstreet23.freeserve.co.uk

**Hon Treasurer:**

(also Membership Secretary, "Newsletter" Editor)

John Cadisch, 14 Prae Close, St Albans, AL3 4SF.  
Tel: (01727) 862843.  
Email: john.cadisch@ntlworld.com

**Minutes Secretary:**

(also Bird Note Co-ordinator, Webmaster)

John Fisher, 92 High Street, Redbourn, AL3 7BD.  
Tel: (01582) 792843.  
Email: john.fisher@btclick.com

**Newsletter Layout:**

John Trew  
(Verulam Angling Club)

"Cleaner, Greener St Albans" Hotline: 0845 125 8000  
EA "Pollution Hotline": 0800 807060.  
EA "Floodline": 0845 9878 1188

**President & First Chairman:**  
**Richard Thrale**

## January Open Meeting

We return to Redbourn this month so members and friends are invited to join us, details below:

**TUESDAY 22nd JANUARY 2008** (7.30 pm)  
at TRANSEPT HALL, St. MARY'S CHURCH, REDBOURN

Plenty of parking in old Hemel Hempstead Road, the attractive, modern hall adjoins the Church.

There will be the customary reports and updates on the river and its valley, after which we are doing our best to arrange tea/coffee ("refreshment helpers" currently in very short supply).

After the interval we have invited Vicky Fry, an Environment Agency hydrogeologist, to talk to us about Geology of the Ver Valley.

## Richard Thrale 1931-2007

Members and friends will have been saddened to read of Richard Thrale's passing. His enthusiasm was the touchstone that started off the Society in 1976, when prospects for the river were increasingly grim.

He became the first Chairman, called the crucial Town Hall meeting, and despite handing on the chairman's baton to others, continued throughout his life to support and encourage those who were looking after the river's interests on a day-to-day basis. Seldom did Richard miss an AGM, and he was often at quarterly meetings as well, regularly expressing pleasure that the Society he set up was in such good hands.

Richard was particularly proud of his "yeoman" ancestry, stretching back to the 15th century, about which he gave occasional lectures, and the part played by the Thrale's in St Albans' history.

His charity work was extensive, involving St Albans Rotary Club, Glenalmond care home, and for a time he was Chairman of the governors of St Albans School, where he had been educated.

Unfortunately news that he had died only reached us the day after the St Albans Abbey funeral. ["Herts Advertiser" and John Cadisch]

## St. Michael's Bridge Damaged

**John Cadisch**

Part of the parapet wall of this historic bridge was knocked into the river over the New Year holiday, following a traffic accident. The damage has been reported to Herts. Highways through the good offices of Bob Clarkson, County Councillor.

Fortunately, the timber railings, put in as part of the "ford" enhancement scheme, seem to be unaffected. Some 20 years ago the bridge was extensively repaired involving new brickwork, re-pointing etc.

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

We luckily chose a fine dry sunny autumn day for a walk from Park Street back to Redbourn and it started off really well when we saw three kingfishers along the river where it flows through the water meadows behind Park Street village. In fact we spent so long watching these kingfishers that it took us over an hour to cover the first mile but it was a good day for hanging around and not route marching on.

One kingfisher was particularly unconcerned by our close presence and as it perched on several overhanging branches and fished it moved ever closer and closer to us. We just stood still amazed that this kingfisher, a species which is notoriously skittish, seemed completely comfortable with us so close. The bright electric blue and the rusty orange of the breast are I think are one the best "colour schemes" of the English countryside. Have you ever noticed the blue T on the back of the kingfisher which stretches right down its back or how the bright blue changes to green in different light? We watched so long that my attention drifted further upstream where the river was shallower as it raced over a pebbly bed strewn with water crowfoot and I was really surprised to see a water rail wading through the fast moving water. I am sure water rails are regular along the river but I seldom see them as they are even shyer than kingfishers. The water rail is similar in habits to the moorhen but tends to feed in reed beds rather than in open water. It has a red dagger of a bill and subtle brown and grey barring. They have an amazing call which is like a pig squealing and you are more likely to hear this than see one. Eventually we walked on seeing a soaring sparrow hawk and a few kestrels along with the usual winter flocks of noisy chattering fieldfares and the quieter redwings.

Another surprise was when we reached Verulam Lake where we found an unusual goose amongst the motley crew of greylags and Canada's. It was an Egyptian Goose which is a species now well established as a breeding population in the UK after numerous escapes from wildfowl collections. They are an African species but seem to cope well in our climate and are now seen all over the south east. But this was the first one for me in the Ver Valley.

Little Egrets have moved into the UK of their own accord and as many as four have been seen this winter along the Ver. Still waiting for a Great White or a Cattle Egret to show up on the Ver.

Perhaps the best news this winter is that it seems likely that water voles have returned to the Ver after an absence of probably 20 years. Now mink are being caught and disposed of throughout Hertfordshire there is a good chance that they will reestablish themselves. They are a great sight and I am really looking forward to seeing my first Ver water vole since about 1980. That distinctive plop as they enter the water and the struggling swimming style is so characteristic of "Ratty" of Wind in the Willows.

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

## **M1 Junction 9 Surface Water Pools**

**John Fisher**

With the widening of the M1 there was bound to be some impact on the Ver but last autumn I was impressed with the work carried out which seemed to be of benefit to the river. A new culvert had been installed through the now enlarged embankment and this coincided with a rise in aquifer levels which meant that the Ver was flowing this far up the valley for the first time for several years. Also a large pond had been formed just south of the M1 and to the east of the Ver to collect the run off water from the motorway.

This water would be contaminated with oil but the pond would include filtration so that clean water could be fed into the river some way south of junction 9 and this would give a periodical boost to the flow. The actual pond seemed promising as a wildlife area as it was tiered and included three or four deeper areas which would remain wet in drier periods and it looked as though reed beds would be planted around the edges. I daydreamed of visiting the area after a year or so when it would have blended into the surrounding countryside and seeing snipe around the margins and maybe reed and sedge warblers in the reed beds.

However when I was back in the area in mid December I was horrified to find that the pond area had been surrounded by an 80 metre by 80 metre chain link fence mounted on 2 metre high concrete posts and topped with three strands of barbed wire. It resembled Guantanamo Bay more than rural Hertfordshire. I realise that the water held in these tanks is toxic to some extent and that any stored water represents a drowning hazard but I am appalled that health and safety rules everywhere these days.

Of course I understand the rationale behind this really, but I feel they have gone over the top in this case.

They have also provided about 30 metres of ugly concrete road into the field from a point where the Ver Walk joins the A5183. (Not very scenic and I thought farm vehicles were made for going over muddy fields).

I make no apology for this rant from a grumpy old man and I would stress that these views are mine and not necessarily those of the your committee or the Ver Valley Society.

## Bailiff Notes

Jane Gardiner

On the whole 2007 has been a good year for the River with more rainfall than average, up about 20% including the last 3 months (see table below), so the flows reported by our Bailiffs have been healthier than in the last few years. Groundwater figures also show some recovery although they always fall back during the autumn (see table below).

There are signs of the river recovering well north of Redbourn now. Verdant growth this year has resulted in the river channel becoming quite blocked in many places but the autumn produced magnificent displays of berries on holly, hawthorn, spindle etc.

2007	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters and [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Dave Yeoman at Rothampstead)
September	131.82 [130.87]	29.2 [-33.8]
October	131.14 [130.87]	57.1 [-17.6]
November	130.90 [130.91]	80.0 [+13.8]
December	130.66 [130.56]	Not yet available

I am hoping to have some Bailiffs reporting sightings of hares soon as they are usually seen in the early months of the year in areas north of St Albans. I am pleased to say there have been a few signs of water voles in the Redbournbury area. There are plenty of signs that moles are active at present.

Winter visitors among the birds have been reported: some pochards, gadwall and tufted ducks have come in to join the more common water fowl, flocks of redwing, fieldfare and golden plover have been seen and up to 4 little egrets. One or two snipe and a few cormorants have been reported, and two stonechats seem to have taken up residence near Shafford. Buzzards and red kites now join kingfishers, grey wagtails and of course herons as regulars in the valley as well as kestrels and sparrow-hawks [see John Fisher's Bird Notes for more on birds].

Fish reports recently have been limited to chubb but I'm expecting to receive several Bailiff reports shortly now the holiday period is behind us. I wish all our Bailiffs and members a happy and successful 2008 and hope for another good year for the Ver.

## Oil Tanker in the Ver

John Fisher

All right it is not one of those juggernauts but it is quite big to find its way to the centre of our river. I first noticed it a couple of months ago and reported it to the local police but when nothing happened I decided to contact the plant hire company it belonged to see if we could get it removed.

The tanker is a two wheeled trailer complete with a 1000 gallon diesel cylinder tank with a bright green metal enclosure. This one had gone missing from a building site where it was on hire to supply fuel to site vehicles. The red diesel had been drained off and then the trailer was dumped in the field between the Redbourn Bypass / Nicky Line and Ver Road in Redbourn. This area which is in the green belt is none the less under threat from a proposed housing development. It is only every few years that the Ver actually flows through this area but this year the flow is the best since 2001 and the oil tanker is standing in about 300mm of steady flowing water. The surrounding area is very wet and soggy so getting it away will be not be easy.

They want to build houses here! Will they ever get insurance cover against flood damage? That's another debate for the future. I can't help thinking what a great local nature reserve it would make.

Anyway I arranged to meet Jason from the plant company just before Christmas and he was very grateful as it had been missing since June 2007 when it was brand new and worth a reasonable sum even without the fuel. He would need to get a tractor along the Nicky Line to carry out the recovery and I hope this can be arranged later this month.

## Ver Valley Walks and the RSA

Andy Webb

Having established such good working relationships with Vicki Kidney (Restoring Sustainable Abstractions, EA) and Ian Gibbon (Countryside Management Service) on these respective issues, it was with much sadness that we learnt that both were moving to pastures new, we wish them both well. For two-and-a-half years Vicki has been ever diligent and approachable, for example, three of the four guest speakers in 2007 were found with her direct assistance. Vicki will now be based in London, and will work on a new Thames Tideway strategy for the EA. Her post at Hatfield will be filled, after some internal reorganisation, in the next few months. Ian has done a lot of the groundwork for production of the new Ver Valley Walks leaflets in the past 18 months. He is now Area Manager for a company carrying out large fencing and grounds maintenance contracts in the Home Counties.