



# Ver Valley Newsletter



*Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society*

President: Peter Fox

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

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## **January Open Meeting**

Members and friends are invited to our January meeting on:

**MONDAY 30<sup>th</sup> JANUARY 2012**

**at St Mary's Church, Redbourn,  
7.30 pm in the Transept Hall**

Plenty of parking in Old Hemel Hempstead Road

Our guest this time is Kate Bretherton, a Redbourn resident, who will be speaking about "Remarkable Trees of St Albans", the title of a book she published about a year ago.

Before Kate comes on, there will be the customary Chairman's report with question-and answer session, followed by refreshments.

## **2012 Open Meetings**

**John Fisher**

### **Monday, 30 January at 7.30 pm**

Redbourn St Mary's Transept Hall - speaker will be Kate Bretherton. Kate, a Redbourn resident who will be speaking about "Remarkable Trees of St Albans" which is a book she published about a year ago.

### **Tuesday, 1 May at 7.30 pm**

St Stephens Parish Centre - speaker Tom Day – Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust

### **Monday, 30 July at 7.30 pm**

Markyate Village hall – speaker Allen Beechey – Chilterns Conservation Board Chalk Stream Officer

### **Tuesday, 23 October at 7.30 pm**

St Michaels Parish Centre – AGM followed by a speaker from the Thames Trust (to be confirmed).

## **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)

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

## Chairman's Report

Andy Webb

Please note my new address, details elsewhere in this Newsletter.

I am leading three more walks in the first half of 2012 in association with Herts. CMS (Countryside Management Service), promoting the River Ver Trail and also Ver Valley Walks. They are:

- **Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> March:**

Ver Valley Walk 4 ("The Redbournbury Walk"). Meet 10.30 am, Redbourn Common Car Park.

- **Monday 30<sup>th</sup> April:**

Ver Valley Walk 5 ("The Three Burys Walk"). Meet 11.00 am on steps of Verulamium Museum.

- **Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> June:**

For seasoned walkers only!! The River Ver Trail (all 18 miles). Meet 9.00 am at the confluence, Drop Lane, Bricket Wood. *[Transport back to the starting point can possibly be arranged.]*

If interested in any of these walks please call me for further information.

- **Other Walks:** There are many other excellent walks in Hertfordshire and adjoining counties, often close to or beside rivers such as the Colne, Lee, Misbourne and Chess. These are often guided but not always. A good starting point would be your local tourist information centre, civic centre or library, useful sources of walks folders and booklets.

## Annual General Meeting Report

John Cadisch

Around 30 members attended the October AGM at St Michael's, prior to Stuart Hayes' talk about the clean-up of the heavily polluted Olympic site at Stratford.

All VVS officers were re-elected at the AGM. However at the following committee meeting some important changes were made. Our President is now Peter Fox, MBE, of Redbourn, a key member of the society from the early days and Hon. Secretary for the last 13 years. This post has been unfilled since Peter Smith died over three years ago. "Podge" (as Peter prefers to be known) will be continuing on the Committee.

At the same time John Fisher, our keen Bird Note co-ordinator is now promoted to become VVS Secretary.

## The Scarecrows of Flamstead

John Cadisch

Apologies are due to recent member **Tom Savory** who wrote up this annual event in the last Newsletter, last-minute adjustments meant that his name, as contributor (and photographer) never appeared on the title line.

Be sure to note this year's Flamstead dates, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> August - the 2011 event raised an amazing £11,000, various charities benefitting.

## Redbournbury Mill

Please note that they have a new website: [www.redbournburymill.co.uk](http://www.redbournburymill.co.uk).

If more information needed, it is possible to contact the James family on [enquiries@redbournburymill.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@redbournburymill.co.uk).

## "Discover the River Ver" Walk Packs

These continue to receive favourable comment. They are still available, **£2.00** each at meetings, or **£3.14** inc. post/packing. Please contact Jane Gardiner in the first instance.

The aquifer was more than 4 metres below in November and December; with very low rainfall in October and November we cannot hope for much improvement in the near future although December seems to have been fairly wet. Flows being measured by the bailiffs now extremely low, with the channel dry from below Redbourn and very choked by vegetation lower down the valley. The head of the river (i.e. from where there is continuous flow), is now from Dolittle Mill. The tributaries, the River Red and Hanstead Brook have only been flowing intermittently after heavy rain.

2011	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters <i>[Long-term average]</i> (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres $[\pm \text{average}]$ (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamstead)
September	127.71 [130.87]	38.4 [-19.22]
October	127.23 [130.93]	25.2 [-56.47]
November	126.71 [130.91]	36.4, [-40.19]
December	125.26 [130.56]	Not yet available

Our winter visitors have now returned; large flocks of golden plovers, lapwings, fieldfares and redwings are being reported as well as some egrets and snipe. Kingfishers are occasionally being seen and there are plenty of herons and ducks about (mallard, tufted, pochard, gadwall). Other wildlife as expected is rarely seen at this time of year but moles are active and occasionally a hare can be sighted.

We have been concerned for some time about the state of the mill-stream that runs through Fryth Mead, St Albans from Gorhambury Estate towards Kingsbury Mill, as have the residents there. Recently the mill-stream more or less dried up and the mill-wheel could not turn, to the disappointment of the managers of the Waffle House and their customers. In November, John Cadisch and I, with a senior officer from the Environment Agency, investigated back up the mill-stream to where it diverts from the main River Ver in Gorhambury Estate just above the fish ladder. This junction is at right angles to the river channel and was completely blocked by reeds and sedges for about 50 metres until a weir and spillway is reached behind the Pre Hotel. Back in October 2009 the Environment Agency undertook considerable clearance work in the mill channel in Gorhambury from Bluehouse Hill north but apparently did not extend this to the channel above the weir up to the junction with the river. The EA officer agreed that this negated the value of the clearance work already done and proposed to push for further work to be undertaken to clear the mill-stream to the junction with the main channel and possibly reduce the angle at that point to help increase flow (but he warned this may not be possible before the next financial year).

Members may remember I reported some while ago that I had notified EA about the poor state of the sluice above the Kingsbury Mill and silting problems in that part of the mill-stream. They examined this sluice in early 2010 with consultants from Gorhambury estates and the necessary remedial work was agreed. I recently pointed out to EA and to Strutt and Parker (Estate Managers for Gorhambury), that while there was so little water was the ideal time for this long awaited work to be carried out. Strutt and Parker agreed to chase up their contractors. I'm pleased to be able to report that the work has now been carried out and with recent rainfall there is some water in the millstream there. Unexpected flooding occurred in Cottonmill allotments in November which EA investigated and found it was due to burst water main.

One afternoon in late September I gave a talk about the Ver to 30 Year 5 pupils at Maple School with Andy Webb's help showing our display boards. I followed this up a fortnight later by taking them, with their teacher and helpers, on a walk along the river from Cottonmill Lane to the Watercress Wildlife Association reserve. There Steve Simpson, the Chairman, kindly met us and showed the children round; it was a pleasant morning and the children had a lovely time. Hopefully they and the adults learnt plenty about their local environment. I have been attending SADC Environment Forum and Verulamium Park Forum meetings, keeping River Ver and water matters generally in the forefront peoples' minds.

We must hope for plenty of rain in the coming months so there may be more water in the river system by next spring.



Year 5 pupils from Maple school enjoy a Ver walk..



2011 has been the most unusual year weather-wise starting with a really cold winter (remember the New Year freeze) and ending with one of the mildest ever autumns and it seems as I write just after Christmas that we are still waiting for the real winter to begin. This has made a massive difference to which birds we are seeing in the Ver Valley this winter. Although golden plovers and lapwings have passed through, the numbers I have seen are very modest compared to last winter when we had flocks of up to 2000 golden plovers in the fields between Redbourn and St Albans.

This year the biggest flock has only been about 200 and they only stayed for a few days. Even redwings and fieldfares seem to be less common this winter. Other regular visitors to the Ver margins, such as snipe and green sandpipers, have also been few and far between.

On my regular walk along the Ver through the Redbournbury Water Meadows I always hope to see a rare bird but usually I just have to be content with the kites, buzzards, little egrets, kingfishers, snipe and grey wagtails. Not a bad cast and we did play host to a ring ouzel once and occasionally we get a merlin or a peregrine.

Short eared owls and hen harriers are two of my favourite birds and I have made it up the Orkneys a couple of times in recent years where they are abundant. To watch a pale grey male harrier quartering his territory is one of nature's most spectacular sights and you can see why they are known as "sky dancers".

*Grey heron catching a brown trout [Ben Andrew]*



*Grebes on Verulamium lake [Ian Jinks]*

Short eared owls are also spectacular flyers and unlike our barn owls they do fly in broad daylight and you get to see them before it's too dark to see ! Unfortunately although protected species hen harriers and short eared owls are routinely and illegally persecuted on the upland moors of England as they are a threat to the young of the red grouse.

According to the RSPB, last year only four pairs of hen harriers bred in England where there is sufficient suitable habitat to support 100's and unless this illegal activity can be stopped the hen harrier will be lost as an English breeding bird.

Persecution of peregrines, kites, buzzards and sparrowhawks has largely been stopped over the last 20 years and the RSPB believe the potential for diversionary feeding will provide a lifeline for the recovery of the English hen harrier and a way for grouse moor managers to maximise the number of grouse without killing all the harriers.

However every winter in southern England we do get hen harriers and short eared owls as winter visitors from Europe and this winter they have turned up in record numbers, probably due to a really successful breeding season following a super abundance of lemmings and voles.

There are at least two sites in Hertfordshire where both species are being seen on a regular basis this winter and maybe one day one of these iconic species will turn up over Redbournbury. It would be even better if it was a bird that had bred on Yorkshire Moors or Teesdale. Maybe one day?

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).



*Fieldfare [Ernie Leahy]*

Our volunteers have continued to work on the river, clearing vegetation to prevent litter building up or snagging on overhanging branches. The St Albans School Conservation Group helped clear litter and rubbish from the Ver along Riverside Way, Bricket Wood and will be joining us for further work along this stretch of the river, working with the local warden Stephanie White.

Some dates for your diaries:

- **Friday 20th January 2.00-3.30pm**

Vegetation clearance along Riverside Way, meet at Drop Lane Car park, Bricket Wood.

- **Friday 24th February 2.00-3.30pm**

Vegetation clearance along Riverside Way, meet at Drop Lane Car park, Bricket Wood.

- **Friday 23rd March 2.00-3.30pm**

Vegetation clearance along Riverside Way, meet at Drop Lane Car park, Bricket Wood.

Also, the **Watercress Wildlife Association**, Riverside Road, St Albans would welcome help on the last **Sunday of the month from 10.15am** onwards. There are several trees along the river that need cutting back, which we could help them with.

Where possible please bring your own tools and gloves. I look forward to working with you again.

*Stepping Stones at Drop Lane  
- Sue Frearson*



Just recently I have had some much needed help from Rachel Young who has managed to unlock the various pages which I had been having trouble with throughout most of 2011. I hope that Rachel will agree to be co-opted on to the committee at our next meeting in February as although she stresses that she is not a web designer she has already proved to be an invaluable aid to the VVS.

As part of the "Discover the River Ver Project" the details of the nine walks have been added, along with video clips of the historical enactments performed by the actors on the day of the project launch. However some of the original material on the website needs to be freshened up and we will be working on this in the coming months.

Rachel has also worked on our member database and we now have a much improved system from which our printers can readily download the address labels. As this is the first newsletter sent out using the new database I would appreciate it if you could carefully check the details on your envelope and let us know of any errors. Please be reassured that your details are safe with us and that we will not be passing them on to any other organisations.

Also on the new database we will be adding the email addresses of members who would prefer an electronic version of future newsletters and/or occasional email reminders of walks and meetings. Please email [john.fisher@btclick.com](mailto:john.fisher@btclick.com) your preferences and apologies to those who have already done this previously.

If we do not receive an email from you we will assume that you do not want emails or electronic newsletters.



After Andy Webb's evidence on behalf of the VVS to the HCC River Quality Topic Group Section in October 2010, the society was invited to submit evidence to the HCC Scrutiny Group on 'Bankside and River Pollution'. The following is a summary of the evidence I submitted.

The VVS, founded in 1976 and now has nearly 200 members. The society maintains a website, [www.riverver.co.uk](http://www.riverver.co.uk), to keep the public aware of local concerns regarding the Ver. We maintain a watching brief on the state of the River Ver (a rare chalk stream) and its surroundings, through the monthly monitoring of the state of the river, including flow, depth and pollution problems through its volunteer Bailiff system. Each Bailiff covers about a 2 mile length of the river, reporting back to Jane Gardiner, who coordinates any responses to the Environment Agency or other interested parties, such as riparian owners, parish councils and St Albans District council.

A long term concern is the increasing demand for **ground water abstraction** to supply new housing, with the remains of this water then passing in the sewage system into other river catchments, so removing a substantial proportion of the water that in the past would have flowed down the river.

Of general concern to the VVS is the problem of **road run off**, particularly at the bottom of hills such as Holywell Hill and Bluehouse Hill, St Albans, entering the river from old road drains. Are these fitted with interceptors (separators) to remove oil spillage, as would be found in modern drains? If there is a major pollution incident from fires or oil spillage, what measures do the Emergency Services take to prevent pollution entering the Ver through the storm drain system?

Because of the very low flow of the river this year, with water only flowing from south of Redbourn and none in the Red, pollution and litter problems are very noticeable on the remaining stretches of river. The following are of particular concern:

A number of incidents of pollution in the **Kingsbury Mill by-pass channel, St Michaels village** over the past 10 years, including raw sewage 3 years ago and most recently (27/10/11) sewage discharge that is being investigated by the EA and Thames Water. Some of these have been traced to plumbing systems in new homes and extensions being misconnected to the road drainage system, rather than the sewers. This is exacerbated by the large build up of silt in this channel due to the inoperable and rotting sluice gate above Kingsbury Mill. This has been reported to the EA and to Strutt and Parker who represent the owners, the Gorhambury Estate.

## **Riverside Way (HCC owned site, Drop Lane, Bricket Wood)**

- The Drop Lane car park and areas along the river accessible from Drop Lane, are prone to dumping and littering along the banks. Burnt out cars have occurred on a number of occasions.
- At times of high river flow, the overhanging vegetation, particularly the blackthorn traps floating debris, especially plastics. Some of this forms a high water mark along the river, noticeably near the Drop Lane ford and up to and around the confluence with the Colne, where plastic bottles accumulate.
- Dog walkers have nowhere to leave their bags of dog dirt, which are often left hanging on bushes or fencing.

Our suggestion would be a **Management Plan for the Riverside Area** to include:

The 'lifting' of the bankside blackthorn and other vegetation and the removal of low and dead branches to help prevent snagging.

- The thinning of the path bankside trees to allow more light to reach the river
- The removal of the large stones and logs at the concrete 'ford' midway along Riverside Way, which trap litter.
- Provision of two dog bins, one each end of Riverside Way.
- Provision of litter bins or notices requesting that litter should be taken home, in the car park.

## **Verulamium Park, St Albans**

- Litter hotspot in the silted up reed bed, opposite the Duke of Marlborough pub, Holywell Hill.
- Until recently the Verulamium lake, regularly suffered from eutrophication during the summer, due to a large population of water fowl being fed bread by the public. This has been reduced by enabling the sluice to open at the top end of the lake to allow increased flow through the lakes. However, this flow ceases when the river level is low, so in the summer months the problem is likely to recur.

## **Redbourn**

- Fly tipping along Chequers Lane
- Fly tipping under the Harpenden Road bridge.

**Bricket Wood/ Park Street** considerable silting under the M25 behind the Moor Mill sluice gates, with rubbish dumped into the river and litter and fly tipping along the end of Moor Mill Lane (Frogmore, Park Street).

The VVS runs a monthly Action Group of about 12 volunteers who remove litter and debris from the Ver, and support bankside conservation projects agreed inter alia with St Albans City and District Green Spaces officers and the County Council Rights of Way Officer and supported with tools loaned by the Countryside Management Service.

## **Summary of the HCC Scrutiny committee's conclusions November 2011**

### **For the Environmental Agency:**

- To complete the EA record of riparian owners within Hertfordshire in order to inform the owners of their responsibilities regarding litter and pollution of our rivers.
- To release the 2009 spreadsheet of the water quality of Hertfordshire rivers.

### **In general**

- To assist, encourage and support community groups who want to get positively involved in the management issues relating to bankside and river pollution.
- For the Countryside Management Service to advise community groups and to aid them in accessing insurance for any project work.
- For the HCC to note and pass on to the relevant authorities the concerns of the VVS

## Picture Page



*Redbournbury Mill, December 2010.  
[Ernie Leahy].*



*River Red where it crosses Redbourn Common,  
December 2010 [Ernie Leahy]*

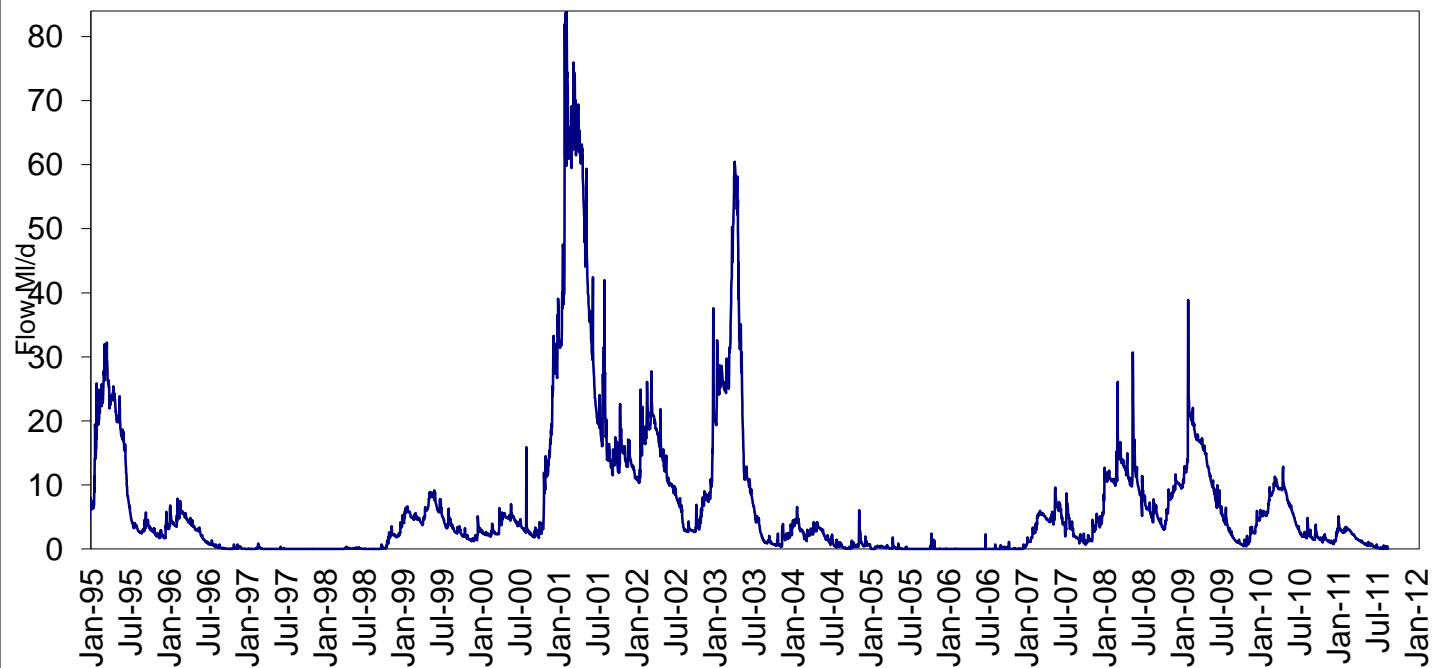


*Just a reminder, the Ver does sometime flow  
through Porridge Pot meadow.  
[John Fisher]*

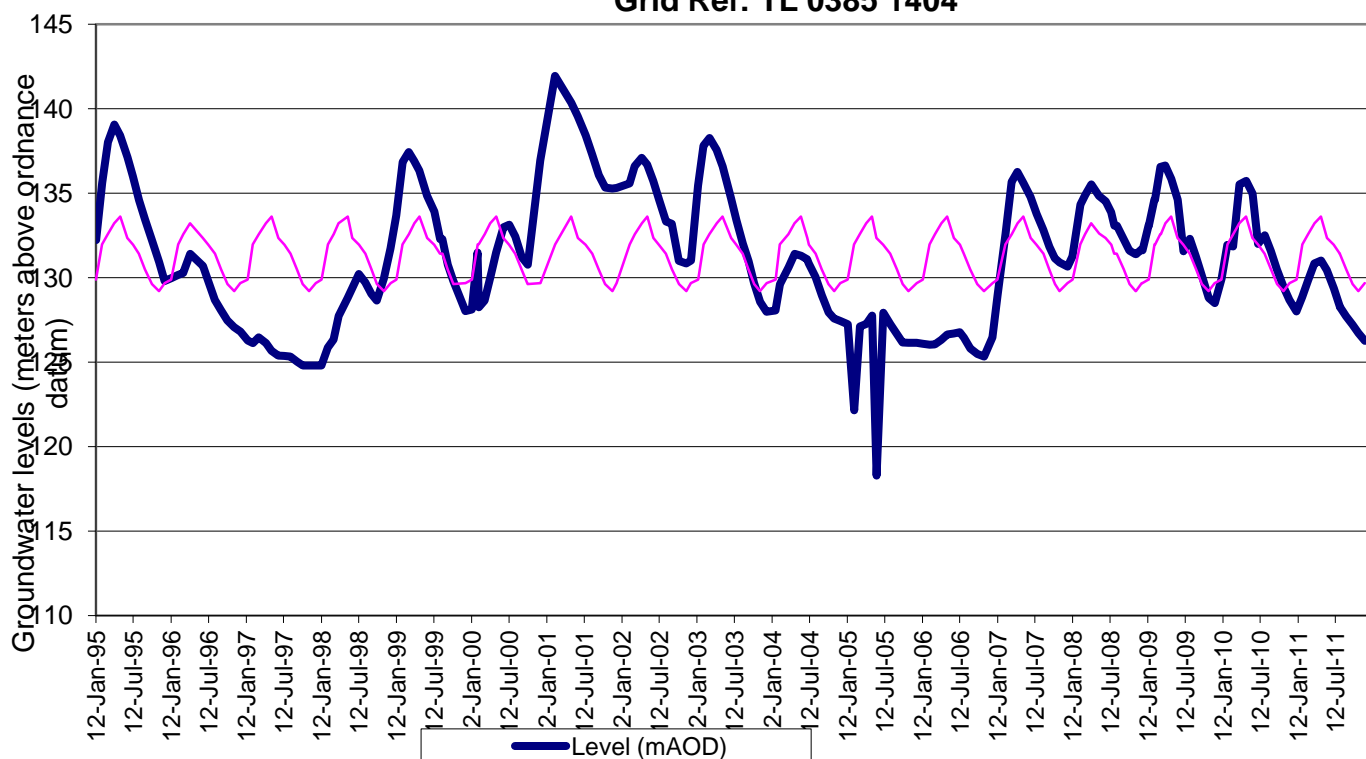


*"Watch out for the Ver crocodile if  
walking near the Irish weir"  
[John Fisher]*

# Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn January 1995 to Date



## Groundwater levels - Ballingdon Farm 1995 - To Date Grid Ref: TL 0385 1404



Veolia Water for providing the flow and ground water charts.

Veolia Environmental for financing the cost of printing and distribution.