



# Ver Valley Society

## NEWSLETTER

*Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society*

Number 120 - January 2014

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

President: Peter Fox, MBE



*The Ver Valley's first great white egret on 3 November 2013 (Tim Hill, HMWT)*

### January Open Meeting

With so many members in Redbourn, our next meeting will be there, please note date/time:

**Wednesday 29th January - 7.30 pm**  
**Redbourn Village Hall**

The Hall is just off the High Street, opposite "Indian Nights" restaurant, limited parking in front of hall otherwise in adjoining main street (formerly the "A5" trunk road).

Please give a good welcome to our new Chairman, Jane Gardiner, who has taken over from Andy Webb after his ten-year stint. As we have two speakers, one either side of the interval, the summary of recent happenings in the Ver Valley will be just before the refreshment break.

During the evening, two local farmers (both VVS members) will talk about their different approaches to environmentally-friendly agriculture in the 21st century - Bill Barr of Dane End Farm and Howard Roberts of Hammondsend Farm, who are to be found on opposite sides of the valley near Redbournbury. Both have VVS barn owl boxes on their land, Howard is 100% organic and supplies Redbournbury Mill. A fascinating evening is in prospect.

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

## Chairman's Report

Jane Gardiner

In this, my first Chairman's report, I wish to record our grateful thanks to Andy Webb for all he has done over the last 10 years as Chairman of the Ver Valley Society and say how pleased I am that as he remains on the Committee, we still have the benefit of his wealth of knowledge and experience to consult.

The Committee have now rearranged some responsibilities. Sue Frearson is taking over as Vice-chairman; Ernie Leahy is now the Open Meetings Organiser; Martin Frearson is the Publicity Officer and Rachel Young is going to take over as Membership Secretary from John Cadisch. They are in the process of reviewing membership arrangements and considering some possible modifications later next year.



*Restored channel, banks and bridges to homes. [Jane Gardiner]*

At the AGM Andy mentioned the new housing development at Markyate and the de-culverting of the river that was entailed. I have now investigated this myself and have written to Weston Homes, the developers, suggesting that if they wish to live up to the name of 'Silverbrook' they could add their voice to ours in pressing Affinity Water to reduce abstraction from Kensworth pumping station which is about two miles up the road and licensed to take six million litres a day from our aquifer. I have not had a response.

On other matters relating to Affinity, firstly there was a Guardian report of a Bill going before Parliament proposing that abstraction licences would no longer be awarded by the Environment Agency but go directly to the water companies or they could purchase licences from any third parties not using them. This could be worrying in the long term, so we will have to watch developments carefully. It is also of concern that the Government has encouraged OFWAT to make sure water prices do not rise too much.

This could impact on their response to Affinity's abstraction-reduction proposals which are now being considered by OFWAT (see Martin's report below on these proposals).



*Outlet behind new homes. [Jane Gardiner]*

## VVS wins Prestigious CPRE Hertfordshire award

Sue Frearson

The VVS Walks project was awarded two plaques to commemorate winning 'the Best Community Based Project' for 2013, by Sir Andrew Motion at the CPRE Herts Rural Awards Ceremony held at County Hall in October. This award has replaced the 'Best Kept Village' award to broaden its scope to cover a wider range of community based projects.



*County Hall Ceremony.*

One of the judges, Anthony Oliver, in his speech praised the walks project of nine leaflets covering the linear trail and eight circular walks along the Ver Valley, saying that it was outstanding and ticked all the boxes for the criteria for the award, by helping people access the countryside and linking communities through the work of our volunteers.

In my acceptance speech I explained that Andy Webb had worked tirelessly with the Countryside Management Service team and other members of the committee over the past ten years, to bring this scheme to fruition. I was able to distribute some of the leaflets at the meeting, but encouraged them to download copies from our website [www.riverver.co.uk](http://www.riverver.co.uk). It was with great pleasure that I was able to present Andy with the plaques at our AGM and thank him again for his hard work and the pleasure that these walks are bringing to so many people. The brass plaque will be displayed at our future open meetings.

## Subscription Time Again !

John Cadisch

Subscriptions fell due on 1 September so, for those who have not renewed already, a reminder will be posted (or emailed) this month by Rachel Young who has kindly taken over from me as Membership Secretary.

The modest rates are currently unchanged (£20 for Five years or £5 for one year), but we are looking at all aspects of subscriptions so as to ease the Membership Secretary's workload. "Watch this space" as they say! No changes will be introduced before next September. This year could be a good one to join the Society with a subscription increase in prospect.



After five years coming down from Baldock to act as Bailiff for the Ver through Gorhambury Estate, Janet Southwood has decided to step down. We thank her sincerely for her sterling efforts and I am pleased to be able to tell you that Dick Downs has returned to the team after a long break. This has necessitated a rearrangement of the Bailiffs as John Bell will take over in Gorhambury from Janet, while Dick takes on the stretch from Moor Mill to Park Street.

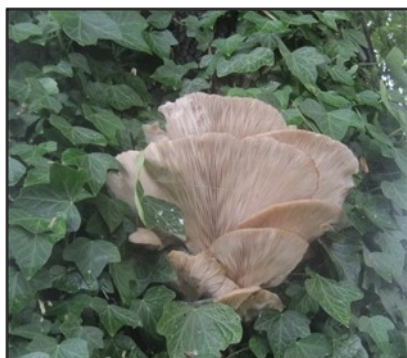
October rainfall was well above average but it was only the third month in 2013 with above average rainfall. November was about a quarter less than average and December to date seems to be generally dry despite some storms. Indeed the total rainfall for the year has been about 10% less than average so the surplus from the year before has now gone. This can be seen from the groundwater levels in November and December which are below average for the first time in a year. Flows have not yet begun to pick up. However the head of the river is still in the north of Redbourn and the River Red is running well. Hanstead Brook near the confluence with the Colne has not been flowing recently. The channel is quite blocked with vegetation in several places and recent storms have brought down many trees, some of which have caused problems with the river, including damaging the mill-lead at Redbournbury, but these are gradually being dealt with.



*River near Redbournbury in November [Jane Gardiner].*

Month 2013	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamsted)
September	132.62 130.87]	50.3 [-7.33]
October	131.42 [130.93]	108.8 [+27.07]
November	130.36 [130.91]	59.5 [-17.13]
December	129.18 [130.56]	[Not yet available]

As I mentioned in the last newsletter the crop of all sorts of berries this autumn has been spectacular and the Bailiffs report treading on unusual quantities of acorns which will no doubt be appreciated by the wildlife. Fungi too have had a particularly good year.



*Three fungi all captured on camera. Bracket fungus (left), chicken-in-the-woods (centre) [by John Pritchard.] and fly agaric (right) [Jane Gardiner].*



I have been getting quite a few reports of ring-necked parakeets and several kingfishers have been seen lately, as well as little egrets, snipe and some siskins. The sighting of a great white egret caused excitement in the valley in November and it was also nice to have occasional green sandpiper reports. Mistle thrushes and long-tailed tits seem more evident at present along with their more usual cousins. Flocks of fieldfares and redwings have returned for the winter. There have also been reports of flocks of skylarks and yellowhammers. Greylag geese and tufted duck have joined the other water-fowl in Verulamium Park and Frogmore Pits. For much more on birds see John Fisher's Bird Notes.

Fish reports include bullheads, minnows, chub and trout. There do seem to be a few hares about in the northern parts of the valley and the activity of moles is very apparent at the moment. One experienced Bailiff thinks he may have glimpsed a water vole which would be wonderful if right – please keep your eyes skinned and fingers crossed!

*Parakeets are noisy but hide well [Paul Foster]*

It is not often we get a rare bird along the Ver, so on the first Sunday in November I had a very unexpected surprise as I was walking my dog near Redbournbury. The stretch of the Ver downstream, from where it passes under the road to the Veolia Waste Plant, is always worth a close look and recently a widgeon, green sandpipers, common and jack snipe have all been seen, also there is almost invariably a little egret about 100 metres downstream. However this morning the white bird I could see looked a bit big and it had a bright yellow bill rather than the black bill of the little egret. This was the Ver Valley's first ever great white egret, so I immediately phoned my long term birding friend, Ernie Leahy, who abandoned his breakfast to join me within a few minutes. Little egrets have gradually colonised the UK over the last 20 years and will probably nest with the grey herons on Verulam Lake before too long, as they have nested in Hertfordshire in the last two years. Great white egrets are following in their wake and are now breeding at Dungeness in Kent and on the Somerset Levels. They could be a regular sight along the Ver in the next few years, so look out for a white bird as big as a heron and with a bright yellow bill. I took a record shot of the great white, but later Tim Hill of the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust was in the area and he took this great picture of this special bird as it flew over and later as it waded in the Ver.



*Lesser spotted woodpecker - [Paul Thrush  
HMWT November 2013]*

Another rare sighting was in Verulamium Park where Paul Thrush who is based at Grebe House, the HMWT Headquarters, found a lesser spotted woodpecker in the trees close to Grebe House. I have seen these before in Verulamium Park but not in recent years and they have declined so much that they are now a very rare sight in Hertfordshire. Paul managed to get this photo but despite some searching it was never found again.

A few days later Ernie and I led a walk for the Redbourn U3A along the Ver. It was a miserable start as we made our way through Gorhambury in constant drizzle and we had to clamber over several trees that had fallen across the path, victims of the late October storms. We did see a couple of red kites and lots of pheasants, but by the time we got to Shafford the sun was breaking through and we found a lovely grey wagtail perched on the fence rail of Shafford Mill. As we walked on towards the Veolia Plant I hoped we might see the great white egret, but alas there was only the usual little egret. However standing on the bridge over the Ver we saw at least 10 snipe fly off from the river margins. Things were getting better and then someone spotted a kingfisher flying downstream! We watched it fly into a bush and everyone in the group was able to watch it perched over the river for a few minutes.

On the opposite side of the road a group of starlings were perched on the overhead wires and with them were two fieldfares and also two corn buntings. The latter are quite a rarity around Redbourn these days but this year has been a good one for them. Another treat was a flyover group of about 30 lapwings.

In early December I walked up Beesonend Lane from the East Ford at Redbournbury and the Hammondsend Farm fields which have been left with winter stubble have attracted flocks of yellowhammers and skylarks. I counted 20 yellowhammers in one stretch of hedge and there were more on the field together with at least 40 skylarks. I searched for the elusive corn buntings but only found a few reed buntings.

Finally at last some good news about our barn owls. A pair has been seen at Verlam End and one was seen flying from the nest box so the box is being used a day roost. Really pleased that at least one pair have survived this terrible year for the VVS barn owls. Hopefully they will last the winter and breed next spring.

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).

## Redbourn Museum - Natural History Display

John Fisher

When the Redbourn Museum reopens after a winter break there will be a "Natural History of Redbourn" display on the first floor. Ernie Leahy and I have been preparing display boards of the mammals, birds and butterflies whilst local keen botanist, Sandra Langstone, has been doing the same to cover the flowers recorded in her survey of the flora. We are aiming to establish a record of all the species seen since 2000 and the display will include lots of photos and prints of some of Ernie Leahy's paintings.

Redbourn Museum is on Redbourn Common right next door to the Cricketers Pub and is open on Saturdays and Sundays 2pm - 5pm starting on the Residents' First Weekend of 25/26 January 2014. Entrance has been free over the last six months and this is likely to continue in 2014.

The "Views of the Ver Valley," "The Winterbourne" and "The Redbournbury" walks all start just by the museum and leaflets for all three walks are available in the Museum or at the pub. Why not visit the Museum, go for a walk and then enjoy the hospitality of the Cricketers?



Several volunteers helped build another deflector at Riverside in October (see photos below). In the subsequent heavy rainfall this proved very successful in changing the river flow to scour the river bottom and reveal more gravel. We hope will this prove attractive to brown trout for breeding purposes and young fish to find protection in the deflector.



*The living willow tunnel at Sopwell. [Paul Foster]*

The task in November at Sopwell Nunnery Green to coppice the willow near the living willow tunnel became quite a challenge after the severe gale, but a significant area was cleared.

Zoe Channon from the Countryside Management Service (CMS) also helped and checked that our group was meeting the CMS health and safety procedures to ensure that the Local Authority can continue to support the work of the VVS Action Group and provide insurance for the volunteers when working on their sites. We had a very pleasant get together with the Bailiffs and Action Group at the Chequers in Redbourn just before Christmas, where we worked up a thirst by clearing bricks, tyres and other rubbish from the river, and removed fallen trees blocking the river.

I have been asked if we could do some more work in Verulamium Park and the opportunity has arisen through the CMS, who have produced a new Management Plan. We will be working with the St Albans School Conservation Group on Friday afternoons.

## VVS Action Group Programme Winter 2014

- **Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> January 10.00-noon Redbourn Lane, (Harpenden Hill), Redbourn**  
Clearance of scrub on the steep chalk bank and over-grown path to allow light to reach the chalk downland plants. (Limited parking in the car park near the roundabout, but parking available on Redbourn Lane going into Redbourn).
- **Friday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2.00- 3.30 pm Verulamium Park, St Albans**  
Removal of scrub; hedge planting (Meet Martin Frearson in the King Harry Lane layby, near the Silchester Gate, opposite Mayne Ave. Park in the layby, or near the Waitrose recycling bins) or meet Sue Frearson at Verulamium car park 2.00 pm.
- **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> February 10.00-noon Riverside, Bricket Wood**  
Clearance of scrub, after the contractors have removed some of the ash trees along the banks. Building another deflector. (Meet in the Drop Lane car park)
- **Friday 28<sup>th</sup> February 2.00 -3.30 pm Verulamium Park, St Albans**  
Removal of scrub; hedge planting (Meet Martin Frearson in the King Harry Lane layby, near the Silchester Gate, opposite Mayne Ave. . Park in the layby, or near the Waitrose recycling bins).
- **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> March 10.00-noon Sopwell Nunnery Green, Cottonmill Lane, St Albans.**  
More coppicing of the willow around the willow tunnel. Scrub clearance. (Park on Cottonmill Lane and walk along the river path, to the willow tunnel approximately 300m).
- **Friday 28<sup>th</sup> March 2.00-3.30 Verulamium Park, St Albans**  
The task is to be decided, but will probably be coppicing willow and scrub clearance along the Ver (Meet in the Park, at the bottom of Holywell Hill. Park at Westminster Lodge; first three hours is free).
- **Easter Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> April (Task to be decided)**  
In the Summer we hope to work with the CMS and EA on the removal of Himalayan Balsam along the river, particularly near the Frogmore Pits and Riverside Way. Once the EA has given permission, there are several sites where we will be able to put in more deflectors.

If you would like to help, please contact me, so that I can borrow the correct

number of tools  
from the CMS  
(01727761878 or  
[sue.frearson@which.net](mailto:sue.frearson@which.net))

*Volunteers constructing  
a deflector in the river  
Ver.*

*Photo left: John  
Cadisch.*

*Photo right Sue  
Frearson*



## Affinity Water Resources Management Plan (WRMP) 2015-20

Martin Frearson

Following last spring's consultation on their draft WRMP, in November Affinity Water published a Statement of Response to the formal comments received (81, including ours) and their final WRMP called "Our Plan for Customers and Communities 2015-20". We can only summarise these highly technical and lengthy documents here – interested members can access them on the Affinity website [www.affinitywater.co.uk](http://www.affinitywater.co.uk), then go to leaflets and reports, Central Region, News Releases, then Water Resources Management Plan. These plans were submitted to Ofwat on 2 December, and their decision is expected this March.

We were pleased to see that although some details of implementation have changed, altering the scope, scale and timing of investments, their overall strategy of leakage reduction, and universal metering (in this area) coupled with enhanced water-efficiency measures, making best use of existing resources and bulk imports from adjoining regions such as Grafham Water and Thames Water are all included from the draft WRMP which we had endorsed. The changes made resulted from feedback from the Environmental Agency (EA), Ofwat, and the Consumer Council for Water as well as thousands of customers. WRMP 2015-20 includes a large investment programme for the Central Region (ours), with sustainable development of water resources, minimal environmental impact and best value for customers all claimed.

As explained to us by Rob Sage at our annual meeting in October, low river flow investigations of the Ver showed that abstractions at four sources were affecting river flows. Planned reductions totalling 14.66Ml/d have been agreed with the EA provided the overall strategy is approved by Ofwat. This was only just before the finalisation of this WRMP in November, and we were delighted to read in the final WRMP that these sustainability reduction measures will start early, in 2014-15 using transitional expenditure. Abstraction is to be reduced at another 12 sources in the Chilterns hopefully halting further environmental declines to the chalk streams. Clearly Affinity has listened to us and recognised its responsibility for maintaining these rare ecosystems.

Affinity plan to save 20Ml/d in leakage, 29Ml/d from universal metering, 2Ml/d from water efficiency measures in businesses, plus 2Ml/d more from sustainable aquifers and 17Ml/d bought in from neighbouring companies who have surpluses in 2015-20. This will continue in the next plan period to 2025. They will invest £19m in leakage reduction, £58m in metering and £3m in water efficiency measures in 2015 -20, with £15m, £51m and £2m to follow in the next plan period, by which time universal metering will be completed. Note - the key cost is metering.

In the draft WRMP Affinity claimed these measures would cost the average customer about £10 per year, but a clear statement of the cost per household is hard to find in this final WRMP. Consulting their Business Plan for 2015-20, submitted to Ofwat simultaneously, Affinity claim the average customer bill will fall by 0.7% before inflation. To us this is a small price to pay for a guaranteed supply of high quality water while reducing the abstractions in the chalk stream valleys. Even so, in these cost-conscious times there might be pressure on Ofwat to reject this Plan. Opposition from those who know the price of everything and the value of nothing could prove decisive, and a disaster for the Ver. We as a society will still battle for reduced abstractions in the valley whatever the outcome.

Let's hope this highly technical document with its well-argued conclusions convinces Ofwat to permit the key and potentially controversial component – metering!

## Verulamium Park Update

John Cadisch

With limited Newsletter space available we have done our best to keep former "FVP" people abreast of major Park developments, and hope they will stay with us after enjoying a "free" membership year.

The SADC Green Spaces Officer (Daniel Flitton) has been authorised to instal new Verulamium Park signboards increasing their number to 18, "dotted at key points around the Park". They will incorporate maps of the Park together with some explanatory text. These will replace all current lectern-style boards and finger-posts. English Heritage have given their approval. They were due to go in December/January so should be fully in place for the new season.

## Technical Problems Last Newsletter

John Cadisch

At the closing stages last October it was not possible to carry out several small but important corrections. In particular it should have been pointed out that Mark Carter's whole page "Restoring the Ver" was originally published in "Hertfordshire Life", he gave permission to reproduce it.



The three spined stickleback is the most numerous little fish in the Ver often netted by children in shallow water. Standing on a bank or bridge you can see little shoals of small dark "tiddlers" swimming against the current as their large dorsal fin and tail powers them forward

In spring male sticklebacks develop a red throat and belly and an iridescent viridian head before preparing a tunnel-shaped nest chamber made from twigs and grasses bonded with a secretion from their kidneys. Males become very territorial fending off rivals before attracting a female by a ritual zig-zag dance enticing her to spawn in his lair.

She lays about 20 eggs and then he repeats his performance to another female until about 120 eggs are finally ready to be guarded by the host male. He guards the eggs by fanning them for ten days until hatched and then guards and feeds the fry for a further 12 days.

The small fry will take two years to mature to 50mm long but could eventually reach 100mm maximum length by bottom feeding on micro worms, tiny creatures and some vegetation.

Sticklebacks avoid danger by acting collectively taking cover from predators like herons, egrets, dabchicks and typically kingfishers. Kingfishers avoid the perils of the dorsal three spines by manoeuvring their catch into a head-first position before swallowing. From time to time the upper Ver and the River Red dries up but when flow returns for a long period the stickleback re-populates the stream.



*Sticklebacks: Painting by Ernie Leahy*

As well as living in streams like the Ver the species is found in static ponds and salt water.

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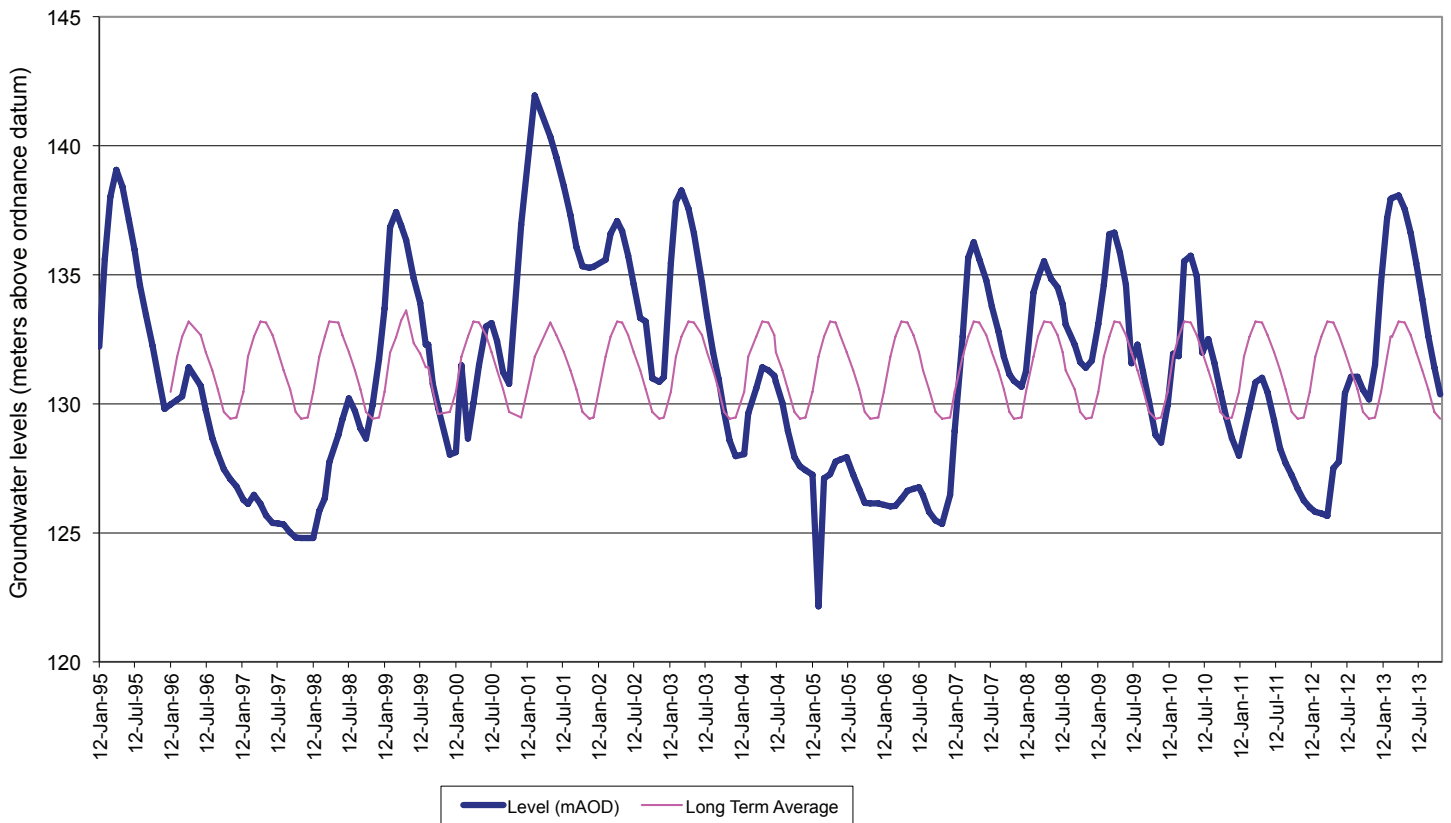
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John Trew  
(Verulam Angling Club)

**HOTLINES**  
EA Incident Hotline: 0800 807060  
("Report all environmental incidents")  
EA Floodline: 0845 988 1188  
"Cleaner District" (SADC):  
0845 125 8000  
Water Leaks (Affinity):  
0800 376 5325

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



**Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn**  
January to March 2013

