



Ver Valley Society

NEWSLETTER

Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society

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President: Peter Fox, MBE



John Fisher has worked tirelessly on his Barn Owl project and will be talking about it at our January meeting.

January Open Meeting

Back to Redbourn this month, where a high proportion of our members can be found:

Thursday 29th January 2015 (7.30 pm)
Redbourn Village Hall

This will be found on the east side of Redbourn High Street, clearly signposted.

Once business and refreshments concluded, our own hard-working Secretary and Webmaster, **John Fisher**, will be explaining how his Barn Owl Project, now in its tenth year, really works.

The Society bought him an extending ladder some years back, this has made possible the ringing of over 50 barn owls.

Likely to be a fascinating evening.

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

Chairman's Report

Jane Gardiner

I am pleased to be able to tell you, that at the first Committee Meeting after our AGM, Paul Foster agreed to take over as Vice Chairman from Sue Frearson. Sue is very busy with Action Group and river-fly monitoring matters as well as being a Bailiff, so Paul will relieve her load somewhat. Paul is also a Bailiff who was co-opted onto Committee during the year and has been active attending external meetings as well as accessing official documents for us. All other roles on the Committee remain the same as at AGM. However **we really do need someone to take the minutes at our 4 Full-Committee meeting a year and at the AGM.** Please do consider if you might be able to help in this way. Our hard working secretary John Fisher has dealt with the minutes for many years but has increasing calls on his time. He would be happy to help someone else get started on this job, so please do phone or email John or me to find out more what would be entailed or perhaps just come along one of the meetings, which are friendly and quite informal, to see what is needed.

We are pleased that Thames Water eventually identified the mis-connected drains that were causing pollution to enter the Ver at the bottom of Holywell Hill for many months. Although the water looks and smells much better the booms have not yet been removed! At the time of writing Affinity and SADC are still trying to sort out the water leak in Romeland which has also been happening for many months.

Last autumn CMS with SADC undertook to clear some trees by the river at the SE end of Verulamium park but then the flooding of the winter and early spring caused other work there to cease and a large amount of debris and rubbish built up in the river channel and on the bank-side area. The warm summer then encouraged huge amounts of nettle and other growth in the area leaving it very unkempt and the path from Holywell Hill beside the river inaccessible. The river channel itself has now been partially cleared but in recent months we have been contacting various authorities and groups to get some general improvements made in this area and hope we may have some news next year - see Martin Frearson's account of the Ver Park Forum which he attended for us.

As well as those mentioned in the last Newsletter, we have been attending various external meetings organised by official bodies like CMS, Affinity, EA, SADC, WWF etc. These enable the Committee to gain further knowledge about chalk streams and reinforce our connections with these organisations which are so helpful to us. Please see reports of some of these meetings elsewhere in this Newsletter.

Finally I'd like to wish all our members a very Happy, Healthy and Prosperous 2015.

2015 Meetings

Ernie Leahy

Some dates for your new 2015 diary:

- 22nd April:** Andy Sands, wildlife photographer [Bricket Wood]
- 21st July:** Linda Smith: "Heartwood - a Forest in the Making" [Markyate]
- 27th October:** AGM + Allen Beechey talking about the ColneCAN organisation and what It means to the Ver. [St Michael's Parish Centre]

AGM Report

John Cadisch

With no other nominations received, Jane Gardiner was re-elected Chairman. Paul Foster, previously co-opted, was formally adopted as a member of the Committee. Rachel Young was confirmed as Treasurer in place of John Cadisch, who continues as "Newsletter Editor" for the time being.

The accounts, which we circulated in advance, were approved *nem con*. David Jinks has been the Independent Examiner of our books almost from the start of the Society. That is a tremendous achievement, but he has asked for someone else to take over the task as from September 2015. Is there anyone out there willing to check our financial "in's" and "out's" on a once-a-year basis?

Treasurer's Report

Rachel Young

Having taken over fully from John Cadisch as from the recent AGM, expenses claims etc. arising in the future should be referred to me. With regard to my other rôle as Membership Secretary, domestic Christmas arrangements have forced this work onto the back burner, but reminders will be going out to "overdue" people early in the New Year.

On the whole 2014 has been a good year for the Ver with reasonable flows being maintained although the very considerable vegetation growth has obscured the river in many places. Some trees that fell into the river as banks were saturated by last winter's heavy rainfall are still causing blockages. The rainfall total for the whole year is still about 20% above average because of that very wet winter.

However the dry, warm summer lasting into September is now being reflected as the aquifer fell to a little below average in November and December for the first time this year. However October and November having had more than average rainfall, and December to date being fairly wet, we can hope to see the groundwater levels recovering at the start of 2015. [See table]

Month 2014	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamsted)
September	133.32 [130.87]	14.8 [-42.81]
October	131.98 [130.93]	95.7 [+14.05]
November	130.54 [130.91]	108.2 [+31.57]
December	129.88 [130.56]	Not yet available

The head of the river is between Redbourn and Markyate and the River Red in Redbourn is quite healthy although the other tributary, Hanstead Brook, is not flowing at present. The paths in some places are inevitably quite muddy at this time of year but at the bottom of Drop Lane the path to the confluence with the Colne has become almost impassable for walkers because bikers have been getting round the crush barrier there and churning up the path – I have reported this to HCC Footpaths officer.

Bob Norrish who has acted as an occasional bailiff in Markyate area for us for several years has now stepped down as he has moved out of the area and we thank him sincerely for the interest he's taken in VVS and the river. There is of course only rarely any water in that area but if anyone living near there could in send in reports occasionally I'd be very pleased to hear from them and discuss what is needed.

The relatively warm autumn meant some butterflies and dragonflies were still being recorded by Bailiffs in November and many berries remained providing lovely autumn colour along the banks into December. The usual winter bird visitors such as redwings, fieldfares and golden plovers are now being reported. Little egrets seem increasingly common as do ring-necked parakeets, and kingfishers seem to have had a good year with many sightings being recorded. Other nice sightings include teal, snipe, stonechats, bullfinches, little owls and mistle thrushes.

Moles are always active at this time of year and muntjac are reported fairly regularly but best of all we have had two or



Spindle berries.



Haws and sloes.

three fairly definite water-vole sightings reported. Fish reports include brown trout, bullheads, and chubb and the riverfly monitoring undertaken by some of our Bailiffs is generally indicating good water quality.

Finally to thank them for monitoring the river over the year, some of the Bailiffs were able to join the Committee and Action Group, after their efforts that morning, for a pre-Christmas drink on 20th December at the Chequers pub, Redbourn – a very pleasant occasion.

So far this autumn and early winter has been really mild and it has been noticeable that our winter visitors such as redwings and fieldfares have only arrived in small numbers so far. I did see a flock of about 100 fieldfares along with a few redwings one afternoon in mid November in a big oak on the path from Doolittle Mill to Redbournbury but they did not stay around more than a day or two.

Lapwings and golden plovers are also low in numbers but I expect once the temperatures drop in Eastern Europe they will be arriving in the fields around Redbourn. Some good sightings have been two pairs of stonechat typically perched up on the fence posts near Shafford and as they have already stayed around for a few weeks they may well stay over winter. The most interesting sighting was a male ring ouzel in mid October which as far as I know is the first seen in Redbourn on the autumn return migration. One was seen in April 2007 in Redbournbury Water Meadows and they tend to get seen more on their spring migration than the autumn. Ring ouzels are the "mountain blackbird" and look just like a blackbird apart from their white neck ring and the grey wing panels. They breed on the uplands of northern England and Scotland but pass through the southern counties on their migration flights.

Kingfishers are being seen around Redbournbury fairly often now. Unfortunately it seems they do not breed north of St Albans but they disperse after the breeding season. Last winter pair of kingfishers were being seen everyday fishing in the Ver where it runs alongside the lake in Verulam Park. Although I have not checked personally I understand that they are back performing just like last winter.

One of my favourite Ver birds is the grey wagtail. This is the most elegant of the three wagtail species we get locally and has the longest tail. Grey and pied wagtails are with us all through year, unlike the yellow wagtails which migrate south at the end of the summer. Grey wagtails tend to stay close to running water and they are often to be seen near the West Ford at Redbournbury, where they feed off the grubs hosted by the water crowfoot which grows vigorously in the gravel bed of the fast flowing water. They nest near the ford and the adults or the juveniles can usually be seen from the bridge at quieter times of the day.

Three members of the bunting family of birds are to be seen in the Ver Valley with reed buntings and yellowhammers by far the most frequently seen but the locally rare corn bunting is now being seen more often particularly along Beesonend Lane. They are all rather chunky birds that do obligingly often perch up on overhead wires or on the top of hedges. They all have characteristic calls with corn bunting's likened to the jangling of a bunch of keys and the yellowhammer to "a little bit of bread and no cheeeese!". Keep an eye and an ear open for these this spring.



Little egret.

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



Two buntings: Corn bunting (left) and reed bunting (above).

Verulamium Park Forum

Martin Frearson

I attended this public consultative forum which is held twice a year to discuss the park management with the stakeholders, who are the local councillors for Verulam and Sopwell, residents associations, the Abbey Theatre, Leisure Connection, the Civic Society, Everyone Active, Peter Wares who represents park users in general i.e. self-appointed, and the VVS. The meeting was well-attended with Verulam councillor Fred Wartenberg taking the chair. Janet Smith from Sopwell was also there, along with Green Spaces Manager Jon Green and Dan Flitton for the District Council.

The various officers had made written reports on their organisation's activities over the past 6 months and answered questions from the stakeholders as well as describing upcoming events. The main item was the Verulamium Park management Plan. The tree work programme along the Ver between the Fighting Cocks and Holywell Hill has been completed and the trees and brash blocking the river have at last been cleared. One broken-down willow remains trailing in the river but that belongs to a Pondwicks Close resident and it is up to the Environment Agency to get them to remove it if they consider it necessary. The council is fully supportive of reducing shading and installing deflectors but are not proposing any more work until the spring when the nettles will be cut back.

I informed the meeting that the VVS had the residual funds from the disbanded Friends of Ver Park available until 2016 and we were anxious to improve the path beside the river which was flooded and impassable last winter. We favoured the construction of a low-level boardwalk along the section past Mud Lane pumping station, which should make the route passable year-round. Tony Mason from the Civic Society backed this and it was generally approved. We are urging the district officers to convene a meeting with us and the Countryside Management Service officer Jon Collins to draw up a plan and costings for the boardwalk so that we can see if the £4000-odd remaining from the Friends funds plus matching funding from the council will be enough to cover the material costs. The boardwalk would be built by our working party and the CMS Wednesday volunteer group, who have recent experience of boardwalk construction in Colney Heath. Unfortunately the CMS is currently being reorganised and not able to commit to new projects until later this year, so we have yet to agree a meeting with them.

We also heard that the council has been treating the lake monthly with a proprietary bacterial preparation which consumes the nutrients from the wildfowl and reduces the risks of blue-green algal blooms. All the stakeholders were concerned about the silt build-up. Jon Green said officers are again looking at measures to improve the flow through the lakes by narrowing the large lake so that sediment is carried through and does not settle out. As there is no current budget for major work this is not going to happen anytime soon, but portfolio holder Daniel Chichester-Miles recognises the problem cannot be left much longer and has asked officers to review the previous studies and proposals for a solution.

On a more positive note the cooperation with the RSPB to mount a nest camera on the 'heron' island continues and the Heron Watch will take place this spring from the February half term week to the early May Bank holiday. It will be fascinating to see if the Little Egrets return to breed with the herons this year.

State of England's Chalk Streams

Paul Foster

On behalf of the Ver Valley Society, I attended World Wide Fund for Nature's launch of their report "The State of England's Chalk Streams". In partnership with Coca Cola the report is aimed at impressing Government on the urgency of taking action to deal with the shocking state of these rivers of worldwide importance. They have identified that there are 262 chalk streams worldwide, with 224 in England, and have been described in terms of importance as an *English Great Barrier Reef*.

Along with 70% of the English Chalk Streams, the Ver is classified as not being in a good state, and less than 5% have protected status, indeed the River Ver is classified as being of poor quality.

Whilst they do recognise that in recent years there has been some progress, a lot more needs to be done to protect and enhance these unique habitats of international importance. The report clearly lays out what each of the Governmental agency needs to do improve the state of England's chalk stream.

You can see a video and the report can be downloaded from the WWF website (www.wwf.org.uk).

Dr Charlie Bell

Jane Gardiner

Stop Press; We have just recently learned that Dr Charlie Bell, the Living Rivers Officer for Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, is to leave shortly to take up a post in Shrewsbury. Although the focus of her work has been with rivers in the north of our region, she has been a really good friend to VVS over several years, attending our Open Meetings and speaking twice at them. She has also arranged for us to attend several events organised by HMWT and others, and generally been very supportive of our work. We will miss her a great deal but of course wish her all the very best in the future and hope she will keep in touch. We look forward to meeting her successor in due course. J.G.

In October our volunteers spent a very useful morning opening a channel through the weed and watercress along the river Red at Redbourn Common. Then on a rainy November day we helped Bruce Banfield-Taylor remove more of the fallen oak tree and some of the rotten overhanging crack willows along the river in the Sopwell Manor meadows.



VVS Action Group Sopwell Manor Meadows.

VVS Action Group River Red.

Our annual Christmas task clearing litter and vegetation, at the Chequers, Redbourn was followed by a very pleasant social gathering with the Bailiffs in the warm, in the Chequers.

Thank you to all our volunteers who have helped over 2014 with our tasks to keep the Ver healthy and flowing. Thanks also to the Riverfly monitors who on a monthly basis send in their surveys to keep the Environment Agency informed about the health of the river.



Action Group Programme Winter 2015

As I will be away in January and March, Paul Foster and our newly qualified team leaders Sue Featherstone and Bruce Banfield- Taylor, will be leading these monthly activities:

17th January 10.00 – 12.00 Riverside Way, Drop Lane car park, Bricketwood. Loppers will be needed to remove sapling Ash trees and the suckers from the Grey Poplars along the bank. Some of the pollarded willows need about 1/3rd of the new growth removed. Please bring your own tools.

21st February 10.00 – 12.00 Sopwell Nunnery Green, please park along Cotton Mill Lane, St Albans. This will involve more vegetation and particularly willow removal. CMS will be able to provide us with some tools.

21st March 10.00 – 12.00 Sopwell Manor Meadows, New Mills car park, Cotton Mill Lane, St Albans. This will involve helping Bruce remove more of the overhanging willows and the 'dreaded' oak tree. It would be helpful if you could bring your own loppers and bow saws.

New Members

Rachel Young

A warm welcome to recent new members.

Mr & Mrs I & J Abrey, St Albans
Dr B W Benson, St Albans
Mr C A DeSilva, St Albans
Mr & Mrs H & S Dore, Hemel Hempstead

Mr Q Keeling, St Albans, St Albans & District Footpath Society
Mr & Mrs D & M Roberts, St Albans
Mr D Vangreen, St Albans
Mrs J Wakefield, St Albans
Mr B J Welch, Redbourn

Earlier this year the chairman of Redbourn Parish Council contacted me to see if the Ver Valley Society would write a brief report about the "East Redbourn Site". The "East Redbourn Site" is the long strip of land either side of the Ver between the bypass and Crown St. Although it is in the green belt zone and much of it is a water meadow or flood plain (under 100mm of water this winter) it is earmarked for a possible 300 houses. After I had submitted the report I was invited to attend meetings of the Neighbourhood Plan Working Party. Basically this is a subcommittee of the Parish Council set up to determine the views of local people on the various aspects of future plans for the village. In mid December there was an "Open Forum" in the Parish centre with displays regarding housing, business, education, health, parking, leisure and the environment. We had a good attendance and there was a good deal of interest and feedback which will be analysed in the New Year before a report is written.

This site, or part of it, would make a wonderful local nature reserve and it could be a valuable community amenity. The importance of this site is not just in isolation but also as a "wildlife corridor" link between the Ver Valley north and south of Redbourn. There is a range of habitats within the area comprising dense scrub at the north end, rough grassland, woodland, water meadow and ponds.

If a nature reserve is not achievable it is imperative that a six metre strip is left on either side of the river to maintain the biodiversity of the site. It is important that the site does not become like the Park Estate in Redbourn which is very neat and tidy but hopeless for wildlife. Another bad example of incorporating the Ver in a housing development is the Hicks Road site in Markyate, somewhat comically called "Silver Brook". The Watercress Association Nature Reserve, St Albans, is a fine example of a community managed site and if ever the land could be secured from the owners the aim would be to emulate this great site.

Water Vole Meeting

Sue Frearson

This was organised by Martin Ketcher (HMWT) and held at Affinity Water Offices, Rickmansworth.

The Water Vole Meeting was very interesting and well attended, although the plight of water voles in the Chiltern Chalk streams is dire in all but the Chess, where they seem to have the mink under control. Josh Kalms, a VVS Action Group Volunteer is helping Martin Ketcher by surveying for water voles along the Colne from the confluence with the Ver into the Munden Estate, where there has been a photographed sighting.

Allen Beechey gave a very good and concise presentation on the role and aims of the ColneCAN group, which we hope he will explain to members at the AGM in October. This group is important to the whole Colne catchment area and in obtaining funds for projects along the Ver.

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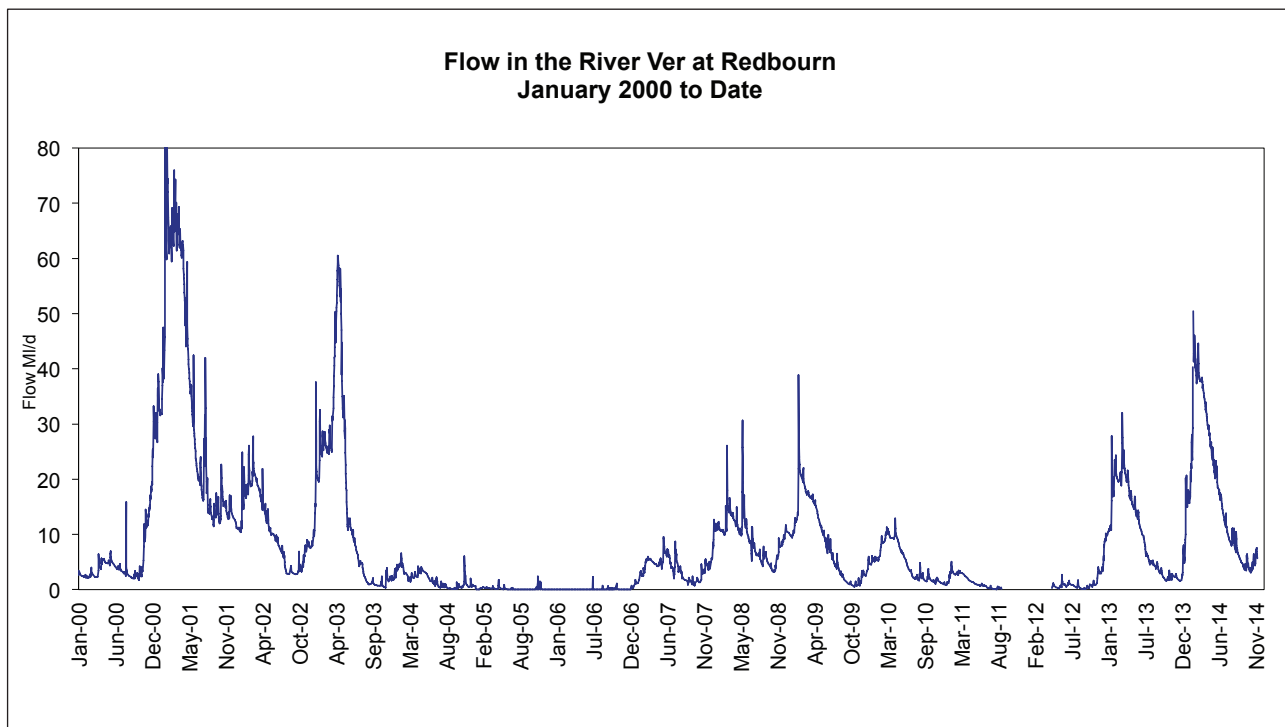
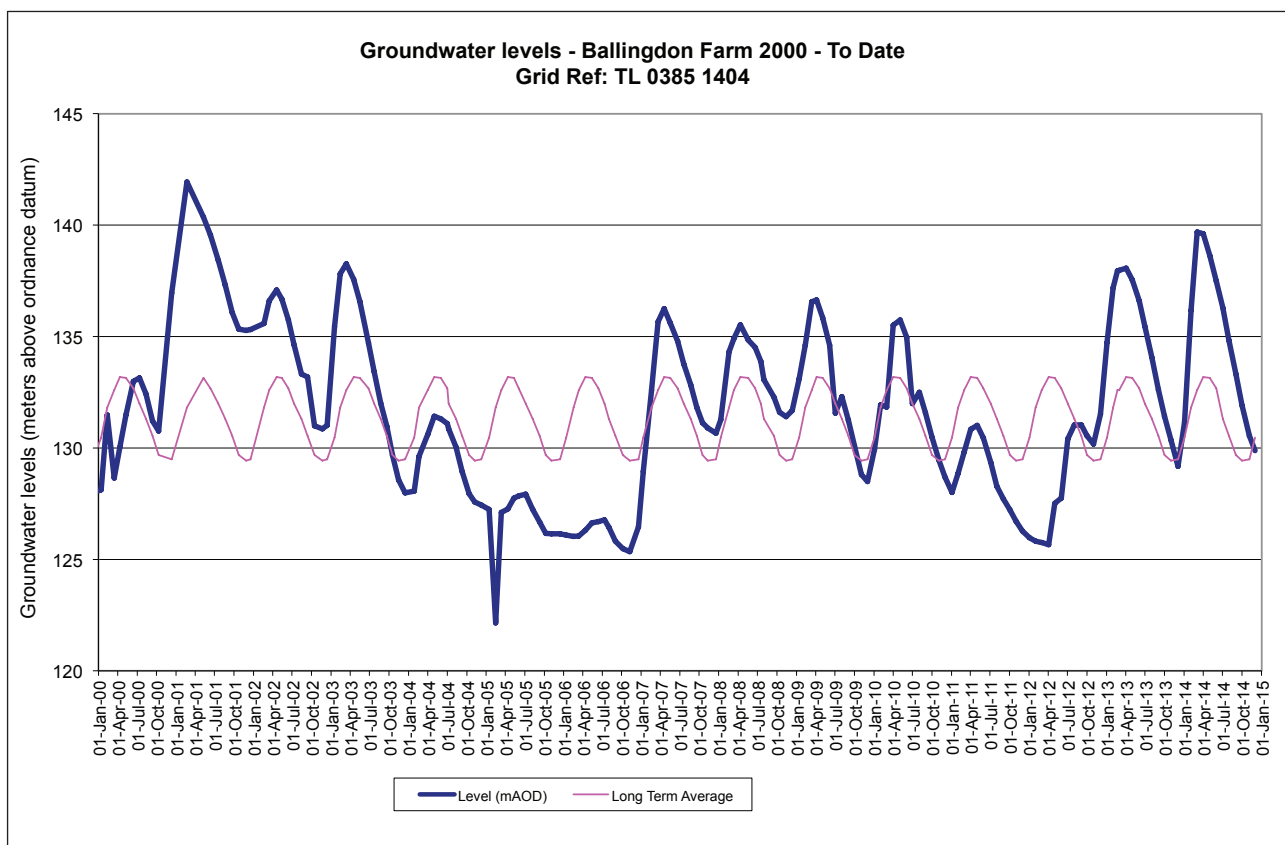
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HOTLINES
EA Incident Hotline: 0800 807060
("Report all environmental incidents")
EA Floodline: 0845 988 1188
"Cleaner District" (SADC):
01727 819598
Water Leaks (Affinity):
0800 376 5325

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.



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