



Number 132 - January 2017

www.riverver.co.uk

President: Peter Fox, MBE

OPEN MEETING

THURSDAY 26th January 2017, 7.30 pm
REDBOURN VILLAGE HALL, CENTENARY SUITE

FARMING THE VER VALLEY

Speaker Ian Pigott OBE

Ian runs a family farming business surrounding Harpenden and nearby villages. He initiated Open Farm Sunday which is now an annual nationwide event with 350 farms involved and welcoming a quarter of a million visitors.

He has also set up The Farmschool at Annables Farm which aims to reconnect children with agriculture, habitats and rural land use.



VAG Volunteers Around the 40th Anniversary Bench at Sopwell Nunnery Green.

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

Chairman's Report

Jane Gardiner

I was sad to have to miss the celebration of the Society's 40 years and AGM in October and also the Action Group's work for SustainableStAlbans. I understand both events went very well and I thank the rest of the Committee for 'holding the fort'. I would also like to congratulate Sue Frearson and the Action group most sincerely for the very well deserved CPRE Award this autumn.

Following the AGM most of the Committee will retain their roles as before but we are very pleased that from 1st Jan. our new Committee member John Pritchard has agreed to take over as Membership Secretary from Rachel Young, who will continue as Treasurer.

Changes to Open Meetings. The Committee has decided not to hold an Open Meeting in late July in Markyate this year. Recently attendances at this have been poor despite having excellent speakers arranged. This may be due to the start of summer holidays but also perhaps being quite far up the valley for some members to get to. We will however produce a shortened Newsletter in July and also that month John Fisher will be leading an orchid walk in Redbourn (details elsewhere). The October Meeting/AGM will be as usual but in future we will have three meetings annually at four-monthly intervals in February, June and October preceded by Newsletters. This will have the advantage of easing the difficulties of producing a Newsletter over the Christmas/New Year period, plus avoiding possible clashes of an April meeting with Easter.

Verulamium Park. SADC has announced that a major study of the lakes and river in the Park in conjunction with EA, CMS and Affinity Water has been commissioned. This is due to report outline strategies and costs in the spring, when public comments are to be invited. We can only hope this will not mean too much delay in any action taking place. (Older members may remember a similar extensive and expensive consultation by Halcrow in 2004, which ended up being shelved). In any case some further removal of silt in the area between the lakes should take place soon, once Historic England and English Heritage have given permission for access for the tankers via the Museum area.

Redbournbury Fords. I am pleased to be able to report that the remedial work to the bridge at the Redbournbury East ford has now been completed to a good standard. Unfortunately the outlet from the ford pool had been very blocked causing water to back up. The EA have now had the outlet channel cleared to some extent and the water level has dropped slightly. However the field behind the ford is full of water so the channel must still be partly blocked, perhaps further downstream, and the gravel added to the approaches to the bridge and seat has been washed away and will need replacing in due course.



East Bridge at Redbournbury. [Jane Gardiner]

Finally may I wish all our members a healthy and happy 2017.

Membership

Rachel Young

I am stepping down as membership secretary this month, and VVS Committee member John Pritchard is stepping up! So new contact details for membership enquiries will be published on our website and membership forms. If you happen to have only my contact details available, I will pass on any enquiries or applications I receive to John. I will continue as VVS treasurer.

The VVS Committee would like to extend a warm welcome to new members Helen Bishop and Clifford Mullet.

And thank you to all concerned for the very good response to last September's renewal reminders, which were sent out by post or email. Consequently, half of the memberships due to expire in 2016 have been renewed. Of course, where possible, we'd love to see everyone continue. The Ver Valley Society relies on its members for financial support so it can continue its wonderful work protecting and enhancing the quality of the River Ver and its wildlife, so your contributions: past, present and future, are greatly appreciated.

If you haven't renewed yet, it's not too late, but hurry! Please contact John Pritchard, the new membership secretary, members@riverver.co.uk, or speak to one of our VVS committee members. If your membership has expired, you should have received a renewal reminder in 2016. There is more information on the Membership page of our website <http://www.riverver.co.uk>

Bailiff Notes

Jane Gardiner

If any new members might be interested in finding out about becoming a volunteer Bailiff please do contact me as two of our team are feeling ready to step down.

Now that much of the vegetation is dying back flows are easier to measure but are generally low. You can see from the table that despite a little more rain than average in September and November the aquifer is now four meters below average. December so far has had little rain so we must hope for good winter rains in the New Year to keep our river flowing well.

Month 2016	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamsted)
September	128.84 [130.87]	70.2 [+12.68]
October	128.00 [130.93]	30.1 [-51.55]
November	127.16 [130.91]	85.7 [+9.04]
December	126.53 [130.56]	Not yet available

This seems to be a good year for berries with plenty of holly, ivy and hawthorn* berries for the birds to feed on. In some places Michaelmas daisies are still flowering and there have been some interesting fungi* reported. Recently some hares have been seen as well as squirrels, rabbits and the occasional fox, muntjac, wood mouse and a yellow-necked mouse; plenty of mole activity is apparent.

Some very nice bird sightings recently recorded are of a water rail, a woodcock and a flock of 30 red-legged partridges.



Chicken of the woods.

[John Pritchard]

Winter visitors are now here with flocks of fieldfare and redwing and also some snipe and egrets often being seen. Yellow hammers also appear plentiful in the north of the valley. John Fisher has seen a little owl again (see his Bird Notes) and regularly reports a green sandpiper.

Other nice sightings include occasional grey wagtails, kingfishers, cormorants, stone chats and a reed bunting. The more usual goldfinches, jackdaws, parakeets, red kites, buzzards, herons, wrens, various tits and water fowl are all reported regularly up and down the valley.

River-fly monitoring continues to show our river in generally good condition and recent fish sightings include bullheads, trout and minnows.



Hawthorn berries.

[Jane Gardiner]

Thanks

John Fisher

We often get compliments about our newsletters. The layout and appearance of the newsletter is due to the skills of John Trew. Although he moved to Suffolk a few years ago, he still sorts out the articles and pictures we email to him and puts them into this very presentable format usually within 24 hours.

Veolia Waste Management sponsors our newsletter by paying for the printing and posting of up to 300 copies each quarter. They are long term supporters of the VVS.

We also should thank Howson Printing Ltd who Veolia use for their printing. They are always helpful, efficient and a pleasure to deal with. Apart from the newsletters we have also used them directly for printing the Walk Summary Sheets and Membership leaflets. If you have printing requirements I would recommend them to you. Website <http://alemanydesign.co.uk/>

Bird Notes - a Winter's Day Walk

John Fisher

I awoke on the last day of November to discover the first hard frost of the winter. It was one of those wonderful winter days with bright sun, blue skies and no wind. A great day for a walk over the frosty hard ground. My original plan was to walk through Gorhambury but this was thwarted because it was a shooting day and the permissive path was closed.

This simple twist of fate certainly paid off as plan B was to walk from Shafford to Redbournbury. At Shafford Stables just about the first bird I saw was a peregrine falcon on a fence about 200 yards up the sloping field. Not a bad start to my morning stroll and it was soon evident why the peregrine was around as there were about 200 golden plovers further up the slope, basking in the rising sun and feeding. Interspersed amongst them were 200 lapwings. Any one of these would make an ideal meal for a stooping peregrine.

Further along the track I came across a big covey of red-legged partridge (I counted 23). They were feeding on the winter stubble and had obviously fled from Gorhambury to the safety of the Shafford fields when the shooting started. On the water meadows there were two little egrets and a heron then I saw three snipe fly down to the unfrozen fringes of the Ver.

Little owls have been difficult to find this year and today was only about my fourth sighting all year. There is a big oak just near the Veolia road and a couple of years ago it was a regular haunt of a little owl. I always check out this tree and was delighted to see a little owl drop down from a branch to a lower one. Later it flew low over the water meadow to another oak. Hopefully the oak will be its regular roost again this winter. All the leaves will soon drop and it will be easier to see. A female kestrel which, just for a moment I thought may have been the peregrine landed in a riverside willow.



I was nearly at Redbournbury by now and scanning over the riverside barbed wire I found a perched female kingfisher.

In the bright sunlight the colour was super brilliant. They are like a jewel in our countryside. All the time I had been walking I had seen several flights of a dozen or so golden plovers flying in tight formation and looking beautiful in the bright sunlight as they turned, showing white and then gold.



At Redbournbury there was the normal cacophony of the house sparrow colony and today augmented by the twenty or so fieldfare, another noisy species. They were feeding on the berries in the hedges around the Mill.

By the time I got back to Shafford there were only a few goldies left but the lapwings were still very numerous. The fields around Punch Bowl Lane are usually favoured by the golden plovers most winters so I thought I would check them out to see if they had just flown over the A5183. I could not find them again but I am sure they will be back as the winter takes a hold on our countryside.

On a day like this I thought I would have seen a few red kites and buzzards but it was not until I had been out nearly two hours I saw my one and only red kite of the day. Another treat was a mistle thrush.

A great morning and I was so glad I seized the chance.

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

Strategic Local Plan

Martin Frearson

On 28 November St Albans District had its draft Strategic Local Plan rejected by planning inspector Mr Hoffer because of a failure to co-operate effectively with neighbouring local authorities. One example he cited was a letter sent by them in April to the St Albans planners requesting a meeting to discuss points of concern, which they did not get around to answering until August, one month before the draft SLP was submitted. The Council 'needs to demonstrate that it has worked with the relevant bodies in a co-operative and positive manner'.

However, Mr Hopper does stress that St Albans does not necessarily have to agree with its neighbours on cross-border spatial planning policies, and the policies it set out with respect to, for example Green Belt, and housing totals and allocations may well be correct, but it has failed to ensure that policies prepared by each local authority are, where appropriate, informed by the views of other local authorities in Hertfordshire.

What St Albans now has to do is to withdraw the SLP and undertake a more rigorous assessment of cross-boundary matters and priorities, or it will be rejected as 'unsound' on grounds of failing in the Duty to Co-operate. How long this will take is anyone's guess but it must be months rather than weeks. Meanwhile we must all hope developers don't try to take advantage of this embarrassing debacle and push for massive housing developments in the Green Belt before we can adopt a 'sound' SLP.

Helioslough/Capita Country Park Proposals

Martin Frearson

In September Helioslough submitted detailed planning proposals for the Strategic Rail Freight interchange at the former Radlett airfield, approved in outline on appeal by Eric Pickles in 2014. These were required within three years to meet the conditions he imposed. Among them were proposals for a country park extending along the Ver from Sopwell to Riverside Walk car park, divided into a total of eight areas, two of which include the Colne valley east of the Midland main line. We have submitted comments to St Albans District Council planning department about most of these areas.

A park visitor centre is proposed to be located at Hedges Farm, which will continue as at present, accessed off the new Park St bypass but on the opposite side of the bypass and at the furthest distance from the bulk of the park. We felt the visitor centre would be better located off Moor Mill Lane just north of the M25. We are also unhappy about future management by a 'Rural Land Management Organisation' with apparently no local input envisaged. We felt it should be managed by a charitable trust with a board composed of local stakeholders, similar to the Highfield Trust which manages the grounds of the former Hillend mental hospital.

We felt the proposals amounted to no, or very small improvements, to many of the sites, and as Capita had carried out no recent ecological surveys along the Ver valley water meadows and former gravel pits it was difficult to see how the benefits of the country park would be achieved in practice. There was nothing directly related to the ecological management of the Ver as a chalk stream, nor mention of the problems caused by Reed Mace, Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam in the Park St pits area, apart from unspecified 'improvements' to the margins of the river, which we imagine refers to the sort of work our Action Group undertakes monthly!

We did welcome more foot and bridle paths with better linking to the freight depot, more car parking and picnic tables at view points along the valley, and in particular a new footpath from Sopwell Mill to New Barnes Mill west of the Ver avoiding the walk along Cottonmill Lane. South of New Barnes Mill the River Ver Trail is very muddy and board walks should have been included to improve this section where flooding is frequent.

We concluded there is little in these proposals that shows a commitment to improving this much-loved resource and restoring the Ver as a chalk stream, more a case of "what is the least we can get away with", which is apparently "as little as possible". This could be a great opportunity to create a first rate facility, along the lines of the Tarmac-provided country park at Panshanger we heard about at a recent open meeting.

Riverfly Sampling

Sue Frearson

Until December our monitor's Riverfly samples showed a healthy population of Caddisfly larvae, Mayfly from the Alban Bridge, Blue-winged olives, Olives and freshwater shrimp as well as Bullheads, Gudgeon and Damsel Fly nymphs. However, the numbers of each species fell in December and at the Alban Way bridge, the sample was just below the target level, so this was reported to the EA and they will enter it as a breach in their data.

There are vacancies for more Riverfly Monitors along the river, particularly in St Albans. Full training and equipment will be provided if you contact me. Sue.frearson@which.net. There are two volunteers who would like to join the scheme, but we always need more monitors, particularly when one of our regulars is ill and unable to provide data. Catherine Mackenzie has kindly offered to monitor another site in addition to the Alban Way bridge site, at Hyde Lane, Frogmore.

Ver Valley Action Group

Sue Frearson

In October five volunteers from the Action Group attended the CPRE Award Ceremony at County Hall, where we were delighted to be awarded the Environment Prize for our work along the Ver in 2016 from Redbourn down to the confluence in Bricket Wood. This was wonderful recognition for the hard work that our many volunteers carry out, in clearing debris from the river, building and repairing deflectors, removing dead or unsafe trees and litter picking.

In October the permissive footpaths in Frogmore pits were again cleared of bramble and fallen trees by a few volunteers, on a grim wet Saturday. This should give the public much greater access to the river, but of course we will need to keep these footpaths clear in the future.

The second annual SustainableStAlbans Event at Sopwell Nunnery Green Nature Reserve was a great success, attracting 18 volunteers, who cut back the bramble and saplings on either side of the laid hedge, giving more light to enable thickening and better growth. We also celebrated the **VVS's 40th Anniversary** by installing an oak bench along the Ver Trail, which will give views towards the river and over the NR. The footpath sign for the Ver Trail and Walk 7 (the Water Meadow Walk) was reinstated. So thanks to all those who came out to help on a sunny, but cold and frosty morning. This gained good publicity in the Herts Advertiser, attracting more people to join the VVS.

Our annual get together at the Chequers, Redbourn was a pleasant morning clearing the Ver and Red of debris. It was good that twenty volunteers could attend and I was able to thank so many of our volunteers in person for their hard work over the year and to wish them the Seasons' Greetings afterwards in the pub.



This robin soon found the new VVS bench.

Ver Valley Action Group Programme

Sue Frearson

Winter / Spring Programme 2017

I will send out reminders and confirmation of the venue a week before the activity. Please confirm by email if you will be coming by the Tuesday before, so that I can borrow sufficient tools from the CMS. sue.frearson@which.net

Saturday 21st January 2017:

10.00 -12.00 Sopwell Manor Meadows (parking at the New Barn Mill car park, Cotton Mill Lane). Cross the bridge and down the footpath to the meadows, where we will remove overhanging trees and blockages in the river.



Sustainability St Albans VVS volunteers clearing the bramble in front of the laid hedge.

Saturday 18th February 2017:

10.00-12.00 Frogmore Pits (parking at Hyde Lane / Moor Mill Lane). For those with waders, we will clear the river of fallen or overhanging trees near the Hyde Lane ford and at the southern end, near the Veolia wasteland. The permissive footpaths will need checking and clearing.

Saturday 18th March 2017:

10.00-12.00 Working North of St Albans, turning off the Redbourn Road at Shafford towards Childwickbury, working at Graham White's property to clear back some of the vegetation. A very attractive site near the water meadows and Shafford Mill.

Saturday 22nd April 2017:

10.00-12.00 Frogmore Pits (parking at Hyde Lane / Moor Mill Lane). The battle with the Himalayan Balsam will start with us hoeing up any seedlings. For those with waders, the debris along the steep valley running south towards the M25 will need to be cleared.

Future Open Meetings

John Fisher

Tuesday 25th April 2017
at 7.30 pm

St Stephens Parish Centre – speaker George Horne of the EA on Fish Surveying on the Ver with an emphasis on brown trout.

Sunday 25th June 2017
at 10.00am

You will have seen in the Chairman's report that we will not be holding an Open Meeting in July this year. However we are leading an Orchid Walk jointly with the Friends of the Nickey Line.

Meet at the car park by the cricket pavilion on Redbourn Common. More information in the April Newsletter.

Tuesday 24th October
at 7.30 pm

At Michaels Parish Centre – Our AGM followed by a speaker yet to be arranged



George Horne with a lovely brown trout.

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).

Although our meetings are free entry to members and non members we welcome donations towards the cost of refreshments, hall hire etc. Suggested £2 pp.

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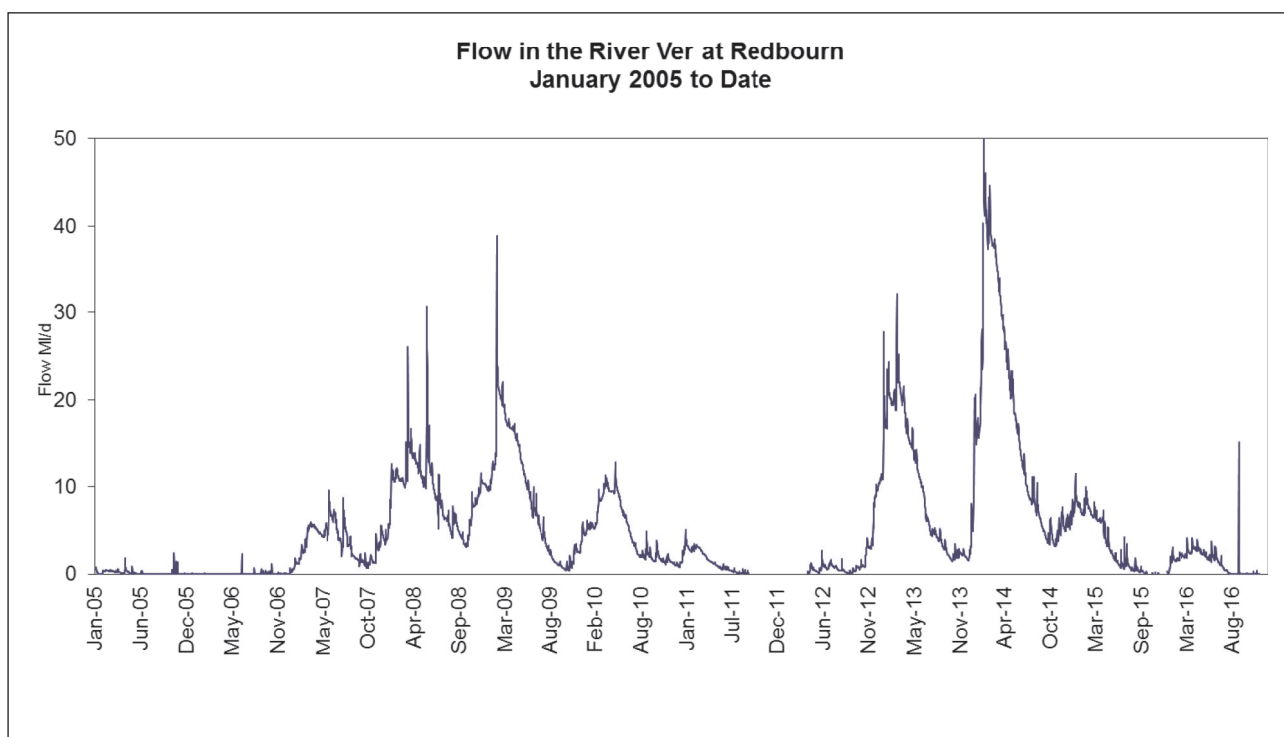
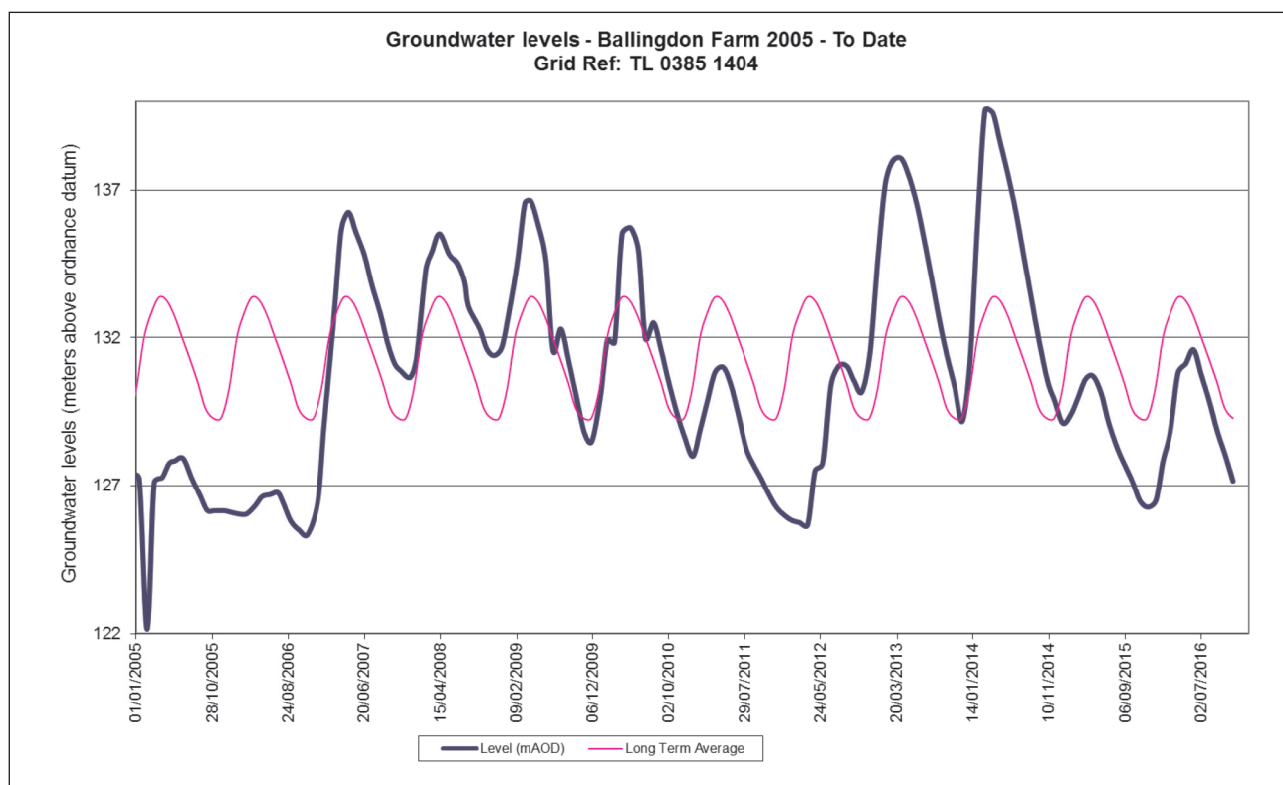
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Newsletter Layout

John Trew

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.