



Ver Valley Newsletter



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July Open Meeting

All members, and members' friends, welcome at our July meeting,
please note the date:

**TUESDAY 27th JULY 2010,
7.30 pm**

Markyate Village Hall, Cavendish Road, Markyate

Take sharp left turn off High Street, hall is on right after about a half mile.

After usual reports and refreshments, Jim Hill will be talking about "Orchids in the Chilterns". After a short introduction covering tropical orchids and their life-cycle, Jim Hill will go on to describe the species that occur (or have occurred) in the Chilterns.

Other UK orchids will be featured, how they are being conserved and where they can be seen in the wild or semi-wild. Unfortunately this talk will be just after the peak flowering time but the speaker hopes that some of our members will be inspired to start looking for them!



Redbournbury mill-wheel work team - difficult job completed.

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

River Ver Access & Interpretation Project

John Cadisch

This is the full title of the complex scheme, slowly being brought to completion by the Countryside Management Service, which will not only improve the riverside walk, but also provide a series of very useful leaflets (folders) for walkers. The main emphasis of these will be circular walks linked to the Ver.

A new source of funding has just been confirmed, this money comes from Landfill tax sources via Lafarge. Some 10% of the monies allocated to the above project has to be matched by the VVS, in the latest case we are providing £1,526 to "unlock" grant money of around £15,000.

This particular fund is allocated to improvements at Hyde Lane bridge, Park Street which will be carried out this July/August. The existing bridge over the Ver is set too low, as is the connecting path, both will be raised, providing a reliable all-weather route between Colney Street (Watling Street) and How Wood (station) along Hyde Lane, which is an ancient "drovers way", now exclusively a well-used footpath.

Future Ver Valley Open Meetings

John Fisher

Some dates for your diaries, all start at 7.30 pm:

Tuesday 26th October 2010: ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, St. Michael's Parish Centre, followed by Rob Sage, (Veolia Water), "Water Issues"

Monday 31st January 2011: Redbourn, St Mary's church hall, John Tyler, "Wetlands and Wildlife"

Late April 2011: Bricket Wood, Chalk Geology speaker (date to be confirmed) (Large hall being requested, upstairs room too small).

Rural Day Walk

Ernie Leahy

As part of the Redbourn 900 Celebrations a Rural Day on May 23rd members of the Ver Valley Society organised four guided nature walks along Redbournbury Meadows. We were blessed with fine weather which bought many families out to enjoy the many events held locally.

Our walks started at Redbournbury Farm and terminated south of the Veolia plant scheduled to be an hour but because of the interesting sightings over-ran by another half hour. During the day about 35 people enjoyed sightings of red kites, yellow wagtails, brown trout and orange tip Butterflies.

Peter Fox's knowledge of the history and geology of the river held every ones interest and the sightings check list given to our participants proved popular. Many people visited our display screens and literature tables. As the weather got exceptionally hot many families chose to sit by the ford where children and dogs had fun splashing about in the river.



Orange tip butterfly [Ernie Leahy]

Ver Valley Action Group

Sue Frearson

I would be very interested if there are any members who would like to form an action group to carry out some basic conservation tasks along the river.

This would include a programme of regular litter picks and carrying out simple tasks such as cutting back overhanging branches over the river. We are at a very early stage, including investigating the insurance coverage for this.

It would be helpful if you are interested, or would like further information, if you contacted me on 01727 761878, or sue.frearson@which.net. [Any stretches in particular need of attention?].

Inevitably the Bailiffs are now finding that the flow in the river has been diminishing. April was much sunnier and warmer than average and particularly dry, only 36% normal rainfall. May too was only 75% average rainfall and. June seems to be similar. As you can see from the table, the groundwater level, for the first time in 9 months, was above average in April when the winter snow and rain had reached the aquifer.

The Ballingdon Farm figure was still above average in May and June so flows should hold up for a while. The head of the river still appears to be just south of Markyate at the outfall from the small sewage works there. The River Red in Redbourn seems healthy but Hanstead Brook in Bricket Wood was only a trickle in May and has now stopped flowing.

2010	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters and [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamstead)
March	131.84 [132.79]	45.2 [-8.73]
April	135.52 [133.6]	18.7 [-34.79]
May	135.70 [134.1]	38.4 [-11.3]
June	134.97 [133.32]	Not yet available

Now to wildlife. It was nice to have several hare-sightings this spring following several poor years and there are some badgers in the valley. There have been no reports of mink but also no reports of water-voles yet. Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust does not have some plans for possible reintroductions at present. Several muntjack have been reported and of course our bailiffs often see squirrels, rabbits and sometimes a fox. There seem to be plenty of chubb and brown trout as well as minnows. Quite a few different butterflies have been seen with over-wintering peacocks, tortoiseshells and brimstones coming first then orange tips, speckled woods, small blues, green-veined and small whites. A few damsel flies have now been reported as well as buff-tailed bumble and other bees.



Speckled wood butterfly.

As far as birds are concerned it is pleasing to know that some lapwings have bred successfully in our valley this year and also yellow wagtails. On Verulamium lakes great crested grebes did manage to raise two young and the herons have again had a successful year. Other reports include chiff-chaffs, blackcaps, willow warblers, whitethroats, reed buntings, yellowhammers, and red-legged partridges as well as the usual red kites, buzzards, herons and grey wagtails.

they have been badly affected by the bad winter. There is better news from 'our' barn owl boxes; several are apparently being used to raise young - for further details see John Fisher's Bird Notes.

However there have been almost no kingfishers reported which is worrying; perhaps



Yellow flag iris.

Reed, cress and nettle growth is now well underway, some stretches south of Redbournbury and through Gorchambury are very congested. Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed are also unwelcome growing strongly but the flowering water-crowfoot is spectacular this year in mid-June with ragged robin and yellow flag iris also making good splashes of colour. Lady smock and marsh marigolds have now finished flowering but were pretty earlier.



Water crowfoot.

The Environment Agency have again inspected the silted-up and rotten sluice above Kingsbury Mill and intend to chase up

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the structural engineer's report which was to be commissioned by Gorhambury Estates. Nothing further has been heard from EA about the problems getting Redbournbury Mill wheel to run more efficiently.

Before Easter I spent an afternoon with 30 eight-and nine-year old children and their teacher at St Michaels School talking about our river. By using our display boards I was able to explain about the global importance of the Ver as a chalk stream, how such rivers work, the wildlife it supports and how it is under threat from over-abstraction.

The children asked many questions and were a very interested audience. They subsequently produced lots of excellent art work, posters and leaflets about the river which were displayed at our April Open meeting and much admired. We hope to use some of this in material to go with our Walks Project to be launched next year.

The Waitrose collection mentioned in our last Newsletter produced a grand total of £272. At a coffee morning recently Peter Fox was presented their official cheque for which he thanked them on our behalf and gave a short presentation of who and what we are. It was good we were enabled to bring awareness of VVS to so many more people.



Ragged robin.

Subscriptions

John Cadisch

The current level of subscriptions is as follows:

Five-year: £20.00. Annual: £5.00

Send all subscriptions to John Cadisch (address on page 1), receipt on request.

New annual members starting after 1st April are in good standing until 31st August the following year (similarly with five-year members).

Principal benefit: Receiving our high-quality Newsletter four times per year through your letterbox. (Sample copy by post if required, just give me the person's name and address.)

Redbournbury Mill

John Fisher

The volunteers at Redbournbury Watermill are planning a working party to clear reeds and other undergrowth downstream of the Mill. This is to allow the newly restored waterwheel to turn more freely. At the moment there is too much water backing up which sits in the base of the wheel and prevents it turning at an even speed.

The date is Wednesday 18th August and we hope to make it a fun day with a picnic! Bring wellies, rakes and any other tools that may be useful! Start time: 10am



*The increasingly rare yellow wagtail still visit the Ver Valley.
[John Fisher]*

Bird Notes

John Fisher

Our barn owls seem to have coped with the hard winter pretty well. I did a survey of most of our 8 boxes in mid June and I think at least two boxes will have owlets for Peter Wilkinson to ring in early July and there could be as many as four boxes used this year. They don't necessarily all breed at the same time and while one box has young already others are being used but eggs are still to be laid.

The valley now has viable populations of three owls, tawny, barn and little. They are not the easiest group of birds to see - you have to be patient and be out late in the evening!

Another success is with yellow wagtails with at least three pairs seen at various sites. The pair I have been watching since early May occupied the same territory as last year. I have seen the brilliant yellow male and the female carrying loads of insects to their nest in a wheat field. This morning I saw the pair again and for the first time they had a juvenile with them. One fledgling is not a great return but there may have been others around that I did not see.

In the same area yellowhammers, linnets, whitethroats, reed buntings and skylarks have all bred. I have also been watching a pair of kestrels who seem to have returned to breed in an old crow's nest which was used for three years up to 2007. However it is so high up in an oak tree and I do not have the technology the guys have on Springwatch, so I will not know for definite until the young fledge and appear above the nest.

Despite the high aquifer level the riverside pools near Verlam End and Luton Lane dried out much earlier this year thus denying little ringed plovers and lapwings their ideal breeding sites. A few pairs of lapwings have bred just north of St Albans but on the whole it has been a disappointing spring for these birds.

Spotted flycatchers seem to get harder to find year by year but as I write I have just heard that one has been seen in Gorhambury.

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

Veolia in New Orleans

John Fisher

In April I visited New Orleans on a Jazz Heritage Tour and I really enjoyed the music at venues like Preservation Hall and seeing the places where musicians like Louis Armstrong, Buddy Bolden, Kid Ory, Sydney Bechet and George Lewis spent their formative years. However I found that after a few days in a big city, even one as diverse and interesting as "Nawleans", I desperately needed some grass and trees as I am one of those people who could never live in a city. So I decided on an early breakfast and by 7.00 am I was striding down Bourbon Street past the long closed music bars and strip joints with the intention of catching the street car to Central Park.

The street cars (trams) were absolutely immaculate with their maroon livery and varnished wooden slatted seats. It is a standard fare of a dollar and quarter (less than £1) and you go as far as you like, which for me was to the end of line or 6 miles. As I was struggling to pass my dollar bill into the machine by the driver something familiar caught my eye as on his ID badge was "Veolia"!

I know they are a multinational but I hardly expected to find them running street cars in Louisiana as well as sponsoring the VVS and providing a lot of Southern England with good clean water.

To get to Central Park we had to branch right from Canal Street and to do this the Veolia man jumped out of the car and with a long metal pole moved the points by man power. At Central Park I got out, walked right round the park for about 2 hours watching the night herons, scarlet tanagers and American Robins. Rather like Hyde Park it has lakes, grassland and mature trees and even a fascinating Sculpture Garden. Thank you Veolia for getting me there and back all for 2.5 dollars!



New Orleans streetcar, operated by Veolia (John Fisher)

THE VER REMEMBERED

by Christopher Chapman

*Banks of weed pulled to and fro
Swaying in the current's flow
Minnows dart among and through
Don't go in though-
Bloodsuckers will get you*

*Under the bridge it's dark and cool
The place to find a Miller's Thumb
We searched
and searched,
but we never found one*

*Sunlight on a clear pool
Look! A tiny pike
Barred and lean,
Hungry mouthed.
Hanging motionless.
Waiting.*

*Among the rocks below the lake
Crayfish
Little black lobsters
Catch him - quick!
But mind his pincers.*

*Going home
Dusk is falling
Mallard cackle contentedly
Bats are swooping
A moorhen calls
The Abbey bells begin to ring*

This poem was written in 1953 and in Christopher's words it is an attempt to recapture a ten year old boy's memories of growing up close to the Ver in Orchard Street which is off Abbey Mill Lane.

Christopher's father, the late Charles Chapman, explored the same places as a boy in the 1920's, when of course the lake did not exist.

Writing in the 1980's Charles wrote remembering paddling in the Ver:-

"The water was deeper then and a lot of weed grew in it. We were quite sure "blood-suckers" lay in wait for us under the weed and did not venture far from the bank.

The meadows beside the river where the lake is now were much more exciting. There was a small weir up near Bell Meadow and an overflow stream went through the Ver Meadow and the water returned to the river where the lake outlet is now. Water forget-me -nots, kingcups and yellow iris grew on the banks of this little stream and in places it was wide enough to jump over.

I think this is a wonderful sketch of growing up with and observing nature in the raw which hardly exists for kids nowadays where their every move is so organised and subjected to a risk assessment and there is so much competition for their attention from modern technology.

I think they are loosing more than they will ever know. My mother and her siblings also grew up close the Ver in Spicer Street. but my Aunt Eva, who only died a couple if years ago, had less romantic view of Ver Meadow and referred to it "as that stinking bog" but she was a girl!

John Fisher - my personal views not necessarily those of the Society.

Picture Page



"Wish we always had as much water" [Alan Bull]



Pedigree cattle near Redbournbury

*"Yes, aren't we attractive!"
(both Ernie Leahy).*



*June means orchids
and here we have
examples of
pyramidal (left) and
common spotted
(right).
[Ernie Leahy]*





Ver Valley Society

