



Ver Valley Newsletter



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July Open Meeting

This is the month for the "northern end" meeting, so please note the date:

WEDNESDAY 27th JULY
7.30 p.m. at Markyate Village Hall

Heading north in Markyate High Street, Cavendish Road is a sharp and narrow turn to the left. The hall (signposted) is on the right after about a half-mile. If anyone has difficulty reaching Markyate it may be possible to make transport arrangements, mention to any committee member.

We are fortunate to have booked **Isabel Crozier** as our speaker who will be describing the Ver Valley Access & Interpretation Project, recently brought to a conclusion, towards the success of which she has contributed so much time and effort. Isabel is a key player in the Herts Countryside Management Service (CMS) and as a result has been able to implement so many of our best ideas!

The meeting will open with usual reports and news, with opportunity to quiz the chairman. After the refreshment break, we will make sure that plenty of time is left for Isabel to round off the evening.

Forthcoming Open Meetings

Tuesday 25 October at 7.30 pm:

St Michael's Parish Centre - The Annual General Meeting followed by a talk by Stuart Hayes, an EA hydro-geologist.

Monday 30 January 2012 (or following day):

Redbourn - Speaker Kate Bretherton on "Remarkable Trees". [We continue to look for a venue larger than the usual Transept Hall at St Mary's]

"Important": All meetings are free entrance to members and non-members. Only VVS members can vote at AGM's. It is recommended that dates of meetings are re-checked beforehand. Extra directions to meeting places and the possibility of a lift - ask a committee member.

Website Expert Wanted !

We would very much like to hear from any member or friend who could help us maintain our well-used website on a regular basis as the committee's skills in that direction are rather limited. The main task is once a quarter when the latest Newsletter is added (and old Newsletter archived). Sometimes news items come up at short notice so these need to be brought in and highlighted. Please contact John Fisher

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

The River Trail and Valley Walks

Andy Webb

(The Ver Valley Access & Interpretation Project)

In December 2005 (yes, it really was that long ago) members of the VVS Committee met with Andy Hardstaff, then the Area Manager for Herts Countryside Management Service, to initiate the process of producing a new and improved River Ver Walks leaflet. The intervening years of lengthy background work have finally resulted in our new series of eight "Ver Valley Walks" (circular) and the "River Ver Trail" (linear) leaflets. They have been printed and are available for distribution. Special presentation packs will be available shortly, containing all nine leaflets. With their distinctive but harmonious tops, their matching format and clear mapping, they form a most colourful and impressive set and will be the mainstay of our publicity for years to come. They will certainly encourage people to get to know their local landscape and appreciate how the River Ver and its valley are constantly changing. In short, they will understand and care more. They may even join the Society and help us to keep the Ver flowing. Personally, I cannot believe there is a finer set of dedicated river or valley landscape walks in the country; that is how good I think they are.

Naturally, we want all VVS members to have their own set; they will be available at all our Open Meetings or, alternatively, contact myself or Jane Gardiner and we will deliver or post the complete set to you.

We were lucky indeed to have the wholehearted assistance of the CMS in the lengthy process of formulating ideas and accumulating information and pictures, in particular that of Isabel Crozier. In addition Justine Wall approached CMS last September, following redundancy from the magazine trade, to see if they needed any volunteer office assistance. This proved to be a godsend for us as she agreed to do two days a week doing all the laborious work needed to complete the Project that we and Isabel found impossible to fit in.

The completed leaflets were launched officially on Monday 16 May when various dignitaries were led around Walk 6, "The Two Cities Walk", to watch and enjoy three historical enactments along the route. A short film has been made of these, and this will be shown at our July/Markyate Open Meeting where Isabel Crozier will also be formally introducing the Project to our members.

Associated with the Walks and Trail will be improvements to our website. All the Walks can be downloaded from this, along with other introductory information. In the next few weeks River Ver "memories" and "History" will also be added for each Walk, illustrating the Ver's landscape and cultural context.

The nine leaflets will be available from St Albans Tourist Information Centre, the Central Library, various local Museums and possibly other contact points like local pubs and post offices. When supplying complete "packs" to non-members we have decided to ask for a donation towards the cost of reprinting. This has already proved worthwhile as on Sunday 3 July we attended the "Festival of Life" event in St Albans and received £120 in four hours!

As part of the Project the two footbridges at Redbournbury and one at Hyde Lane (Colney Street) have been replaced, and waymarking was undertaken - the "River Ver Trail" signs are particularly distinctive. Eight specially-commissioned bench seats have been installed around the valley (see Trail leaflet or website for positions). Each bench seat is bespoke for that location with routed illustrations of historical or wildlife interest. An interesting story has arisen since the installation of the final bench at the Drop Lane ford near Bricket Wood. Less than a fortnight later the back-rest had been kicked off and thrown into the river. Luckily it was rescued by a local resident and has been cleaned and replaced with longer, stronger coach-bolts. The size 14 boot-prints on the back remain visible as a testament to this dastardly crime; Herts police were able to take satisfactory "prints" of these and are now hot on the trail of the culprits! When apprehended, tried and convicted, our lawyers will be asking for those individuals to be given a ceremonial "ducking" and then be placed in cages over the bar at Moor Mill where we can toast their health for a week!

Four new Walk "Friends" have been recruited to monitor Walks 2, 3, 4 and 5 on a regular basis, but we still require volunteers for Walks 1, 6, 7 and 8. (Anyone like to help?)

For the benefit of those people who have little knowledge of the area, I will be leading four of the walks on the following dates:

Sunday 7 August, 2 pm (Walk 1)

Sunday 11 September, 2 pm (Walk 4)

Sunday 2 October, 10.30 am (Walk 2)

Sunday 6 November, 1.30 pm (Walk 6)

Meet Hicks Road car park, Markyate

Meet Redbourn Common car park

Meet outside the "Spotted Dog"

Meet Verulamium Museum

The training Bailiffs and others were given by Alison O'Dea of HMWT for spotting signs of water voles on Wed 20th April and Sat 13th May from 10.30 at Tewinbury Farm nature reserve were very successful with a total of 18 people (Bailiffs and other members) taking part. There were numerous signs of voles being present but none were actually sighted. We must hope that some find their way into the Ver valley because discussions I've had with HMWT personnel are not encouraging for a reintroduction programme in the near future and Alison's 3-year contract as water-vole officer finished in May and is not being renewed.



Looking for water voles on the Mimram.
[Jane Gardiner]

After the dryer-than-average winter, March, April and May were exceptionally dry and rain in June has little effect on the aquifer recharge as trees and plants are now in full leaf and surface water runs off or evaporates. As is usual the ground water figure in May was the highest of the year but, as you can see from the table, was still more than three metres below average and the July figure is nearly four meters below average.

Flows being measured by the bailiffs now are not at all good, with the channel very choked by vegetation in most of the upper reaches and the head of the river, (ie from where there is continuous flow), is now in south Redbourn.

Among all the common water and hedgerow birds, other sightings include grey wagtails, yellowhammers, linnets, reed buntings, chaff-chaffs, kingfishers, green and greater-spotted woodpeckers, goldfinches, red-legged partridges and of course buzzards and red kites. Many of the

2011	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamstead)
March	129.82 [132.79]	10.0 [-40.8]
April	130.84 [133.60]	5.2 [-49.86]
May	131.01 [134.1]	23.6[-31.09]
June	130.45 [133.32]	83.0 [+21.74]
July	120.36 [133.23]	Not available yet



Lady's smock.
[Jane Gardiner]

summer visitors, blackcaps, whitethroats and other warblers (including willow, grasshopper, garden, sedge and reed) have been reported singing beautifully beside the river and all the hirondelles have returned. Breeding pairs of lapwing and gadwall (a first?) have been reported in the meadows between St Albans and Redbourn. Some tufted duck remain on Verulamium lake and at Frogmore Pits.

Other wildlife reported include tortoiseshell, peacock, speckled wood, red admiral, orange tip and brimstone butterflies. Of dragonflies, broad bodied chasers, common blue damsels and banded demoiselles have been seen. Fish reports are mostly of minnows, sticklebacks, roach, chubb and brown trout. There are plenty of fresh-water shrimps in some places.

Lady's smock and king cups made a lovely show early this spring and flag iris were still flowering early this month.

In the hedges guelder rose and dog woods have made good displays. Water crowfoot has been flowering in the stream as have other water-side flowers like brooklime, comfrey and water forget-me-not. Unfortunately Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed are again also flourishing.



King cups.
[Jane Gardiner]

This year has been somewhat disappointing regarding our barn owls. Last year, our best year ever, we had three boxes used and were able to ring 10. This year when I checked the boxes in mid-June it seemed we only had one brood of just two owlets. However when we returned later for the ringing there were actually four. Two who were very small were hiding behind their much larger siblings. When they are ringed they are sexed, weighed and measured to assess their age and condition. All four were very underweight and with practically empty crops, probably due to heavy rain the previous night when the adult owls would have found it hard to find prey.

Luckily the next few nights were fine and when I checked the box again in early July there were three well developed owlets who were well on the way to fledging. I could not see any sign of number four and I will go no further but those of you who watched Springwatch will have an idea of her fate. Incidentally all four were females.

We have now ringed 31 young barn owls in the six years since 2006 and 21 of these have been from the same box which has been used every single year. What a return on our investment of funds and time!



Redbournbury barn owls.

[John Fisher]



Ringling latest barn owl brood.

[Ernie Leahy]

As far as the other boxes are concerned it was pleasing to find pellets in a few of them indicating that they had been used for roosting. Also there was a little owl's egg in the special box we had only put up near Shafford in March this year. Disappointingly they had deserted the box but as adult little owls and later a juvenile were seen regularly in the Shafford area they must have found a tree hole site close by.

One morning in May I saw a tawny owl fly from a box but again this was just a roosting rather than a nesting bird. I will be checking all the boxes again in mid August to see if there are any late broods.

Apart from owls other birds breeding successfully in the valley are grey wagtails, pied wagtails, house martins, swallows and whitethroats

that seem to get more numerous every year. Spotted flycatchers no longer seem to breed in the valley apart from on the Gorhambury Estate.

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

Verulam Lakes - latest news

John Cadisch

From "Friends of Verulamium Park" April Newsletter . . .

"The (important) news is that the EA has granted the licence application to transfer water from the river to the Lake subject to special drought conditions.....there are two abstraction points (both defective).....CMS is getting quotes to repair both."

"The plan is.....that lake improvement works commence late summer 2011, the work should take three months allowing it to refill over the winter.....analytical tests should convince CMS that silt removed from the Lake may be spread in non-sensitive areas in the park....saving considerable expense."

The common frog, common toad and the smooth newt are all found in the Ver Valley but not often in the river itself but in adjacent ponds and backwaters. Near where I live, in early March common frogs always spawn in a ditch adjacent to the River Red on Redbourn Common where the tadpoles will not be washed downstream in their early life. I expect many local garden ponds will experience the mass spawning where each female can produce around 2000 eggs. St Albans also has a good habitat for spawning frogs at the Watercress Wildlife Reserve and Park Street Ponds provides another site.

The lucky surviving tadpoles evolve into froglets within 2-4 months but will take a further three years before they will breed usually returning to the water where they were conceived. Although they could live to five years plus they are the prey of herons and grass snakes.

In the Ver Valley, as nationally, common frog populations have declined because of loss of habitat & disease but it's still the commonest amphibian in the Ver Valley. Frogs live in moist areas within reach of water and hibernate to secluded damp hideaways in winter. Their colours can vary from yellow to grey brown often marked with darker streaks.

The Common Toad is today less common than I remember 30 years ago when hundreds used to attempt to cross the road, on the A5183 near the Pre Hotel at St Albans, on a warm spring evening on their way to the spawning ditches adjacent to the Ver. Unfortunately many were crushed by traffic on their nocturnal journey but yearly I find toadlets in several areas along the Ver. The sites mentioned for the frog have also been suitable for breeding toads. Later in spring than the frog, they lay their eggs in strings in static water. Tadpoles take 2-3 months to metamorphosis into tiny toadlets who will take four years to reach sexual maturity.

They can be very long lived even surviving to 40 years old if they can successfully avoid predators which are fewer than the frog's enemies as the toad has unsavoury secretions to deter them. Toads have warty dry skin and are usually grey-brown living in dryer areas than the frog. They too hibernate often in drains, compost, or even in mud underwater. Like the frog they feed on worms, slugs and spiders.



Common toad. [Ernie Leahy]



Common frog. [Ernie Leahy]

Smooth newts (also called common newt) occur in local ponds and the sites for the frog are suitable for this species. It is a visitor to my Redbourn garden pond also occurring in many sites adjacent to the Ver. In April & early May the 10 cm long frilly males mate with the plainer females who lay 300-500 individual eggs in water weeds. Initially their larva has frilly gills to absorb oxygen from the water and the small newts who take around 10 weeks to metamorphosis before emerging from the water a few weeks later. They too take three years to mature and live on damp land for much of their life. Newts also hibernate under stones as well as in mud under ponds and feed on grubs insects & spiders. Unfortunately few will live to a potential of 20 years as they

are prey for many creatures.

There could still be isolated populations of the great crested newt in the Ver Valley but these have declined drastically.

All Amphibians receive protection from the Wildlife & Countryside Act Section 9. If you have any interesting information on any of these species we would be glad to know about it.

New Members Always Welcome

John Cadisch

We are always on the lookout for new members, welcoming people who enjoy the quiet attractions of the Ver Valley, its walks and its wildlife. Our main method of communication is by Newsletter every three months and through Open Meetings but we are looking at ways to alert members to out-of-course events by email.

Pick up a membership form or download it from www.riverver.co.uk and send with payment to me at my Prae Close address as given on page 1. Form not essential. Receipt will be sent with copy of latest Newsletter. Membership rates continue unchanged, £5 Annual or £20 for Five Year. (Those joining after 1 April are in good standing to 31 August the following year).

Seven members of the action group met behind the Chequers Inn on Saturday morning, 2nd April. We had been told that the task had already been done, but on arrival found a pile of fly tipping, with much more to be removed from the banks and the river. Car bumpers, bricks, kegs and all sorts of plastic rubbish had been left. So the morning was spent removing this, as well as clearing some of the overhanging vegetation along the river towards the confluence with the Red.

In order not to disturb the wildlife, we have suspended our working parties until the Autumn, when I will produce another programme.

If you know of any black spots along the river that might need some attention, please contact me sue.frearson@which.net or 01727 761878, so if necessary I can contact the landowner to obtain permission to work along the river.



If you would like to join us, please contact me by e-mail, so I can give you some advanced warning, Sue Frearson.

*Jane (left) with final pile of litter and another load of rubbish (right).
[Pictures: Sue Frearson]*



Typical example of the series of handsome hardwood bench seats installed as part of the River Ver Access & Interpretation Project. This one has been placed in Porridge Pot meadow, Redbourn.

[John Fisher]

Peter and Ernie tackling overhanging vegetation.

[Jane Gardiner]



Picture Page



*Andy and Jane at the Festival of Life
with attractive new banner.
[Sue Frearson]*



The Ver at Bricket Wood.

[Les Diamond]



*Another attractive riverside location
near Bricket Wood.*

[Ernie Leahy]