



# Ver Valley Society

## NEWSLETTER

*Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society*

Number 118 - July 2013

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

President: Peter Fox, MBE



*Little owls: These two cuties are about two weeks old and have just been ringed.*

*[John Fisher]*

## JULY OPEN MEETING

This month our "northern" members are being looked after, please note date:

**Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> July - 7.30 pm  
at Markyate Village Hall**

From St Albans direction, turn off Markyate By-pass and head north along the High Street (what was A5 trunk road with a 15 mph restriction until the 1950's). About halfway through take sharp left turn into Cavendish Road which quickly widens out. After about a half-mile the village hall is signposted to the right. [Ask a committee member if a lift is wanted, someone may be able to help.]

There will be a short "business session" followed by refreshments and general get-together. After the interval **Charlie Bell**, Hertfordshire Living Rivers Officer, Herts & Middx Wildlife Trust (Grebe House), will be talking about the various aspects of her challenging work, and chalk streams in general. She may even mention red-billed choughs, having studied them.

Charlotte (she much prefers Charlie) studied Ecology at Durham University, completing her PhD at Sheffield University. She has been a National Trust volunteer at Stonehenge, monitoring their grassland reversion scheme and more recently worked on the River Don catchment before being appointed by the HMWT in April 2012.

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

## New members

John Cadisch

We welcome the following new members and hope very much that they will enjoy participating in the Society's activities:

Michelle Havell, Redbourn  
Jane Bedlington, Kensworth  
Christine Aitken, Harpendenbury  
Dr Peter Burgess, St Albans  
Mario Violentino, Redbourn  
Kathleen Harvey, Redbourn  
Brian Seabrook, Harpenden  
Valerie Brown, Redbourn  
Mr & Mrs R.Thornhill  
Chris Harris, St Albans

The well-received Ver Valley Walks folders are still generally available, they can be picked up at Open Meetings, Tourist Offices and several other locations. The full set comprises eight walks, covering the full extent of the river.

## Verulamium Park Notes

John Cadisch

**Litter Picking:** No one has come forward so far to organise a litter-picking team. The equipment is ready (tongs, bags etc.) and we have Council contacts, but someone is needed to motivate a small "gang" which would turn out at regular intervals.

**Information Boards:** SADC has undertaken to re-equip the iron lectern-style notice boards at Park entrances with new vinyl maps by the summer. The old maps have been removed but no progress has been made with replacements.

Meanwhile the CMS (Herts Countryside Management Service) has been active, a fine new hardwood information board has gone in near the Duke of Marlborough pub close to the riverside path - see separate news item.

**Tree-planting:** This appears to be continuing, avoiding the sensitive "Roman Town" areas

## River Ver Trail Information Boards

John Cadisch



Verulamium Park information board. [Isabel Crozier]

To complete the "Access and Interpretation Project", two handsome new hardwood lectern-style information boards ("Interpretation Panels") have been installed, as foreshadowed in the April Chairman's Report. One is at the Holywell end of the Park, the other in Sopwell Mill open space. These are sturdily made and match the distinctive bench seats, i.e. etched with the river course and typical wildlife, but inset with an attractive vinyl map of the area. The map includes "You Are Here" arrows to help walkers uncertain where they are. [Photo kindly provided by Isabel Crozier, CMS team leader.]

Whilst mentioning this major Project, all funding received from the Heritage Lottery Fund, which under the rules had to be channelled through a voluntary group (us), has now been agreed and paid over to the HCC Countryside Management Service.



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)
March	137.97 [132.79]	83.1 [+32.30]
April	138.08 [133.6]	32.8 [-22.29]
May	137.55 [134.1]	55.9 [+1.21]
June	136.61 [133.32]	[Not yet available]

Despite, or because of, the rather miserable and late spring the river Ver is looking healthy with good flows continuing from well north of Redbourn, the river Red flowing well and Hanstead Brook had a trickle of water in early June which is quite unusual. In early May there was even water in the lake at Markyate Cell. Over April and May rainfall was lower than average as you can see from the table and inevitably at this time of year groundwater levels are reducing although still over three metres above the average at the start of June.



Outlet from Markyate Cell.

As with everything, much of the riverside vegetation has been slow to get started this spring but there were lovely displays of king cups and lady smock in May and there are now some good patches of water-crowfoot, yellow flags and purple loosestrife at various places along the river as well as many other wild flowers on the banks.



Yellow flags

I'm glad to report that the areas of fairy water-fern (*Azolla filiculidies*) just south of Dolittle Mill have been very well trampled by cattle which may help to hold it back. Our bailiff for Frogmore Pits has been in constructive, friendly discussions with the angling club to enable him to gain access to the path running beside the river from Hyde Lane. This is another area plagued by Himalayan balsam in summer – see Sue Freason's report for more about this and Japanese knotweed.

I have recently had more reports of mammals than usual, which apart from the ubiquitous squirrels and rabbits, include hares, active badger setts, a stoat and pipistrelle bats from a late roaming Bailiff! Frogs and frogspawn have been reported, also a dead toad. Brown trout are being seen regularly in many parts of the river; chub have been reported and also a shoal of baby bullheads. On sunny days buff-tailed bumble bees have been active and plenty of butterflies are about, mainly whites but also peacocks, small tortoiseshells, brimstones, orange tips and commas. No dragonflies have been reported yet but a few damselflies, red and blue bodied, and banded demoiselles have been seen.



Marsh marigolds

There have been plenty of nice bird reports including the summer migrants, house martins, swallows and recently swifts. Chiffchaffs, willow warblers, sedge

warblers, whitethroats, lesser redpolls, reed buntings, linnets, skylarks, grey wagtails and the occasional egret or ring-necked parakeet are some of the additions to our more usual robins, wrens, thrushes, finches, woodpeckers and tits etc. It is pleasing that breeding pairs of lapwings and little owls have been reported although no barn owls as yet – see more on this and other bird matters in John Fisher's report.



Lady's smock



Most years we get yellow wagtails near Redbournbury in early spring and again on their return migration and a pair or two have usually stayed to breed. However this year there have been up to eight pairs in the fields around Redbournbury. The best area has been either side of Hill Farm Lane. It was while looking for these that my committee colleague and long term birding friend, Ernie Leahy, discovered a real rarity for the Ver Valley - a quail. The quail is like a very small partridge (about half the size of a partridge) and is very secretive as it creeps along the ground in a growing corn crop. They are seldom seen but are easily recognised by their distinctive "wet my lips" call. Ernie and I spent a long time listening to its regular calling but although it seemed to be only a few feet from us we never even got a glimpse. There was a report last year of one calling on the east side of Redbournbury but it was only heard on one day. This one called for several days and was a first for Ernie and me in the Ver Valley.

A bird that is becoming a rare breeder locally is the spotted flycatcher and I always go out in early June to see if I can find a nesting pair. Usually there is a pair near Mayne Farm on the Gorhambury Estate but this year I searched around there in vain. I eventually found a pair with a nest next to a drain pipe on another estate house further up the drive. I think we have lost the cuckoo as a local breeder. I did see and hear one near Shafford in early May but as far as I know it only stayed for a day or two, as I never saw or heard it again. I was in Scotland later in May and cuckoos were abundant there, as were willow warblers, which are another species that have declined in southern England. I always hear willow warblers singing in April near the river but I doubt if any stay to breed.

The heronry on the lake islands had a poor breeding season due to the bad weather in the spring but I have seen a few juveniles along the valley, so some have thrived. Little egrets are now regular each winter, with up to four present most years, but this year one is staying with us through the summer and I live in hope that one year a pair will breed alongside the herons on the lake.

Last year we had our best ever year with the VVS Barn Owl Project, with five pairs producing 21 owlets, then in early 2013 I had more reports than ever before of barn owl sightings in the Ver Valley, many of these in daylight. The good news is that many seemed to have survived the hard



*Yellow wagtails are having a good Year.*  
[John Fisher]

forcing them to hunt by day. When we checked the boxes in mid May and later in June most boxes had fresh pellets, so they are using the boxes to roost but none have started to lay eggs. I think the problem may be that there are not so many voles around this year and although they are surviving they are not feeding well enough to get into breeding condition. Hopefully we will get some late broods, but from laying the egg to the young flying takes over 12 weeks so they will be very late in the year.

The good news is that little owls do not seem to have been similarly affected and this year we have two pairs nesting in barn owl boxes and we have already ringed two youngsters from each box. The diet of the little owl is a lot more varied than the barn owl's and the damp conditions have ensured a good supply of worms which little owls happily devour but barn owls do not..

Banded demoiselles are a stunning looking damselfly and they are regularly seen in summer along the Ver. One of the best places is near Pre Mill where there is fairly dense vegetation overhanging the river which is their preferred habitat. You will see from the photograph taken by my friend Ken Miller that they are a vivid metallic blue with large blue black "bands" on either wing.



*Banded demoiselle.*

[Ken Miller]

## 2013-14 Open Meetings

John Fisher

### Thursday 25 July at 7.30 pm

Markyate Village hall – speaker Charlie Bell – Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust - “Living Rivers”. Charlie will have been in post for just over one year and will be telling us about her work with the rivers of Hertfordshire.

### Tuesday 22 October at 7.30 pm

St Michaels Parish Centre – AGM followed by Rob Sage of Affinity Water – Rob Sage will be explaining the future policies of our local water supplier and how it will affect the River Ver. Hopefully there will good news about reduced abstraction.

### Wednesday 29 January 2014 at 7.30 pm

Redbourn Village Hall Centenary Suite – Speakers are two local farmers – Bill Barr and Howard Roberts – “Farming the Ver Valley”.

### 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)

## VVS Action Group

Sue Frearson

Some of the skills learnt on the River Enhancement Course, were put to good use in the river behind the Chequers, Redbourn, in early April, when we installed a deflector and cleared the river of several bags of rubbish.

During the summer period, we will have very few activities, so as not to disturb nesting birds. However, if the Himalayan Balsam is in flower on **Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> July**, there will be a group of CMS volunteers, working along Riverside to remove it. They meet at 10.00am in the Drop Lane Car park and the VVS volunteers would be very welcome to join them.

Again, provided the Himalayan Balsam is in flower, please set



*The Ver behind the Chequers, Redbourn  
[Ernie Leahy]*

aside **Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> July, 10.00- 12.00, meeting in the Moor Mill Car park**, to pull up this invasive weed and prevent the fruits flowing down stream and invading the banks along Riverside. As there is some uncertainty about this activity, please contact me before the event.



*Near Redbournbury - fencing to corral drinking zone.  
[Ernie Leahy]*

## Riverfly Monitoring

Sue Frearson (co-ordinator)

For those of you who are keen to attend a course to learn how to monitor the Riverfly populations, I am afraid that the news is disappointing at the moment, as Charlie Bell HMWT and Allen Beechey Chiltern Chalk Streams Project Officer have been unable to obtain funding to run a training course.

However, we now have several points along the river which are being monitored on a regular basis, and reported into the Environment Agency, so that any pollution issues which are shown up by a drop in the indicator species, can be quickly investigated.

## **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 a few years ago 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 in the early 50's. 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.

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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 losing 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 of years ago, had a 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.*



# Affinity Draft Water Resources Management Plan

[www.affinitywater.co.uk/futureplans](http://www.affinitywater.co.uk/futureplans)

Martin Frearson

Affinity have just published this plan which aims to ensure they meet the water supply needs of their customers for the next 25 years. It is very different from the consultation document VVS responded to late in 2012, along with over 900 organisations and individuals. It reads like an academic thesis with 147 pages covering all aspects of water supply, demand, leakage, the balance between these and environmental impacts, before moving on to an options appraisal leading to the development of their preferred plan. No less than 19 scenarios were developed, tested and costed. It is illustrated by 35 figures and 35 tables of data and supported by a Strategic Environmental Assessment and a series of Technical Reports.

For anyone wanting to understand these issues this 'thesis' is well worth a read, but fortunately like every good scientific paper it has an abstract and poses questions Affinity would like our response to, found in pages 1 - 22.

Affinity's analysis shows that population growth to 2040 in their area is likely to be 14%, plus recently agreed 6% abstraction reductions from key boreholes in areas like the Ver Valley to protect the riverine environments. As there are no further exploitable aquifers, no surface water reservoirs have been found feasible, and increased supplies from outside the region are either not available or too expensive to pump long distances, two main solutions are suggested to meet the clear supply deficit to 2040.

Based on their experience in the Dover area, which is over 90% metered, with average water consumption 120l per person per day (as opposed to 170l/p/d in Hertfordshire) Affinity propose compulsory metering rolled out street by street from 2015-2020 when 500,000 smart water meters will be installed. Twinned with a water efficiency support programme, to include free home water audits and retrofitting water efficient devices they claim this will reduce per capita consumption (PCC) by 20l/p/d. The cost of this, £100m approx, will be £10-15 p.a. more on everyone's bill, which means that if you already have a meter (42% of households do in our area) you too will be paying for this programme. Average current Affinity water supply bills are £150p.a. so this equates to a 10% increase. By 2021 Hertfordshire residents would be average water consumers at 150l/p/d.

The second main proposal is leakage reduction. Their Preferred Plan from 2015-20 will save 20Ml/day at a cost of £11m, the water efficiency measures would save 4Ml/d, 1Ml/d could come from existing licenses and neighbouring water companies could supply an extra 21Ml/d at a cost of £13m. Affinity also need to invest £15.5m to increase resilience against severe drought from 2015-20. Although they don't spell this out customers will ultimately have to pay for this - it is not clear whether all these costs are included in the £10-15p.a. bill increase.

The questions Affinity want us to consider are:

- **How well do you think our Preferred Plan balances the challenges they face?**
- **Do you agree with spending more on repairing pipes than is cost effective for the volume of water saved?**
- **Are you willing for bills to rise by around £10pa to enable local river environments to improve?**
- **Do you agree with compulsory water metering coupled with water efficiency measures?**
- **Should we invest £15.5m to improve the security of water supplies in case of a future drought in South East England?**

You can send your answers directly to DEFRA at [water.resources@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:water.resources@defra.gsi.gov.uk), or to Affinity at [WRMP.Consultation@affinitywater.co.uk](mailto:WRMP.Consultation@affinitywater.co.uk).

Affinity are holding a stakeholders meeting at the Fielder Centre Hatfield on 19 July. Your committee members have been invited, and will report back in a future Newsletter.

## Committee changes

After only a short but busy time with us Helen McCrorie has been forced to stand down which is very disappointing, she had made useful contacts with local papers and the Herts & Middlesex Trust, and was an avid reader of lengthy water company reports. The "PR" post we created specially for Helen is currently vacant.

Fortunately we have been able to recruit a new committee member, John Bell, one-time Chairman of St Stephen Parish Council and still a Parish Councillor - and, in particular, an active VVS Volunteer Bailiff, one of Jane Gardiner's team.

# First World War Army Remount Depots - Request for information

By Jacqui Banfield-Taylor

Part of the research I did for my book on the River Ver\* included trying to find information on the photo below taken at Sopwell House during the First World War which became a Remount Depot for Army horses. The War Office, on behalf of the regular artillery, requisitioned horses from their owners – around £30 for a troop horse and £70 for an officer's charger. These animals played a vital role in the victory of the allied armed forces. A total of 8 million horses, mules and donkeys died during the War, around 2 million from Britain, many as horrifically as the soldiers whose life often depended on them.

Royal Engineer shoeing staff were trained locally by the Park Street blacksmith Herbert Martin during the war. Upset by the rough way the horses were sometimes treated by the soldiers he chose to join the navy. These soldiers would have been farriers to the horses of the Remount Depot at Sopwell, just down the river as well as using their newly taught skills on the battle field.

At this time, the stables behind the Red Lion Inn near the river at Park Street were used by the Army to accommodate their horses and mules and would have been connected to the blacksmiths and remount depot at Sopwell. It was a short journey along the river for the horses from Sopwell to the blacksmiths in Burydell Lane and the Red Lion.



Boys of the Remount Depot. [Jacqui Banfield-Taylor] (Copyright)

I am looking for more information and photos of the local Remount Depots, especially Sopwell and St Albans (there may have been more in the area as the requisition of horses was country wide), also any information on the River Ver and its surroundings during the two world wars.

I can be contacted by email at [riverver@btinternet.com](mailto:rивerver@btinternet.com)

\* *The River Ver, a Meander through Time*, by Jacqui Banfield-Taylor (2012). Signed copies of this book with a free bookmark are available by contacting the author at the btinternet address above and can be delivered free locally.

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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

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.