



Ver Valley Society

NEWSLETTER

Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society

Number 126 - July 2015

www.riverver.co.uk

President: Peter Fox, MBE



*Dry stepping stones at Irish weir showing already low flows in the Ver, May 2015.
[John Pritchard]*

July Open Meeting

This month we return to our northernmost venue, Markyate, please note time and date:

Tuesday 21st July - 7.30 pm
Markyate Village Hall

Turn off Markyate by-pass and enter southern end of village. Head north along the High Street (former A5). About halfway through take sharp (and narrow) left turn into Cavendish Road. After a half-mile the hall is signposted to the right. (Members needing transport should contact a committee member.)

After usual business and refreshments, there will be a Heartwood Forest presentation by Dr Linda Smith who has been involved with the project since its launch. It comprises an area of 858 acres of brand-new forest between St Albans and Wheathampstead with many exciting arrivals of special wildlife.

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 a new Living Rivers Officer, David Johnson, has been appointed to replace our good friend Charlie Bell. David has particular interest in water voles and river fly monitoring among many other things so we look forward to working with him in the near future.

Some further progress has been made regarding improvements to the path and river access at the south east corner of Verulamium Park from the Holywell Hill entrance. CMS and SADC are now making plans for exactly what to do. Hopefully this will happen within a year with help in actual construction from CMS Volunteers and VVS Action Group workers. Thanks are due to Sue and Martin Frearson for their ideas and efforts over this.

The new path beside the Ver in Frogmore Pits is due to be constructed by Lafarge Aggregates as soon as the EA gives permission for them to cross the ford at Hyde Lane and put in a temporary crossing to enable the work to be done. We are grateful to our Bailiff Dick Downs for attending meetings about this with Lafarge and others on behalf of VVS.

I have responded to a request from Waterwise, the organisation who arranged the river days in Verulamium Park last year. They wanted support for their Water Efficiency Programme, which I was happy to give. I've also replied to a request from an MSc student from LSE about our views on Green Belt, which obviously has relevance in respect of the rail freight depot and much proposed house building, with their likely impacts on the River Ver.

We hope to be involved in some way with the World Rivers Day on 27th September but I know no details as yet, apart from joining in with our Action Group's litter pick (see Sue's note). I hope to know more for the Open Meeting and an email can go out in due course to those of you on line.

Abbey Line Walks

John Cadisch

The Abbey Line Community Rail Partnership being now 10 years old they are organising several events linked to the branch railway, which many will know reached St Albans well ahead of the Midland line through the City station. Members may like to attend this one:

Saturday 18th July: 2 ¾ mile guided walk following the River Colne. Meet Watford Junc. station 10.00 to catch train to Garston (or go straight to start of walk). Organised by the CMS on behalf of the CRP, free of charge.

See also Abbeyline Trail leaflets which can be downloaded from www.hertsdirect.org/walksandmore.

Membership

Rachel Young

We are always looking for new members, please see our membership form to join or renew.

<http://www.riverver.co.uk/pages/membership.html>.

A heartfelt thank you to all our members who have generously embraced our new rates. £8 a year, or discounted £7 for annual standing orders. We will send out reminders shortly for memberships due to lapse in September 2015. For lapsed members, it's not too late to rejoin in September for the next newsletter.

Peggy Pollock - An Appreciation

We were saddened to learn recently from Audrey Pollok that Peggy had died peacefully at Tenterden House, aged 93.

After being elected Chairman of the Ver Valley Society in October 1987, Peggy put her heart and soul into the society which faced some exceptional challenges at that time. The Ver was experiencing particularly low flows, she worked unstintingly to address the problem with monthly committee meetings at her house coupled with a constant round of high-level meetings and letter-writing (all typed by husband Rob). The eventual happy result, just after she handed the Chairmanship over to Dr Peter Smith, was when Friars Wash pumping station was switched off in 1993, that achievement was and still is the high point in the history of the VVS. Peggy's major contribution will never be forgotten.

There is to be a memorial service at Holy Trinity, Frogmore, timed for 11.00 on Wednesday 12th August.

Bailiff Notes**Jane Gardiner**

This year spring has been drier and warmer than usual, apart from May which was cool and fairly wet (20% above average). However this rain came too late to have much effect on the aquifer as growth of vegetation got underway using up the rain before it could get into the ground to help recharge. As you can see from the table the groundwater at the start of June is now more than three metres below average. River flows measured by our Bailiffs are now falling back. This is clearly shown by the dry stepping stones at the Irish Weir north of Shafford. The head of the river is now south of Markyate.

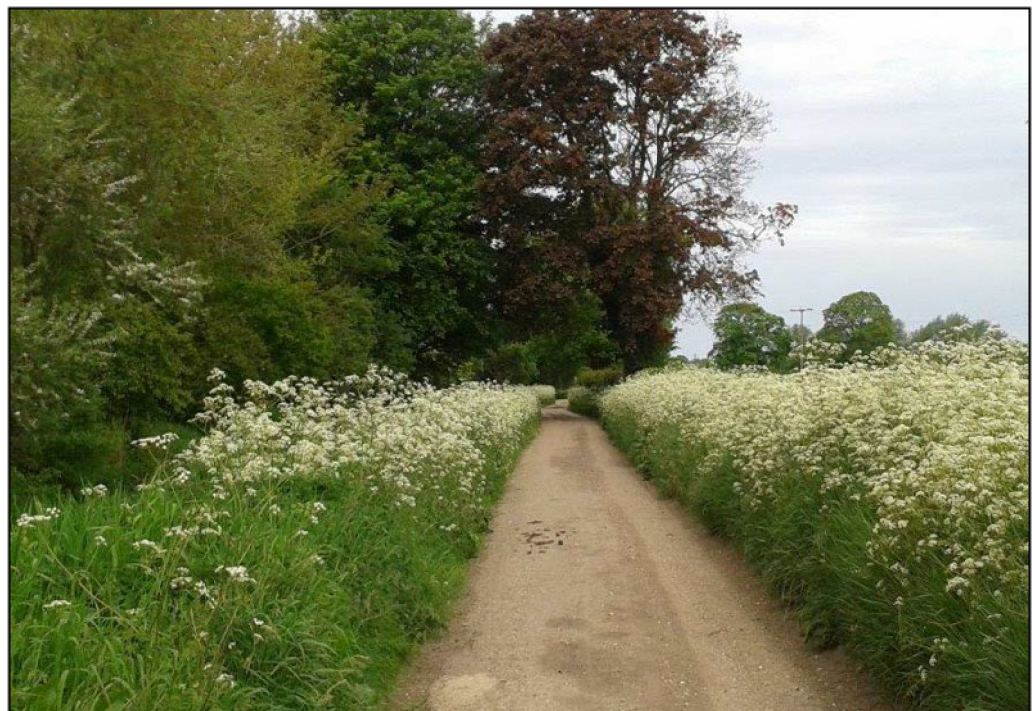
Month 2015	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamsted)
March	130.71 [134.17]	26.1 [-24.67]
April	130.6 [133.56]	31.0 [-24.05]
May	129.4 [132.38]	68.4 [+13.5]
June	130.130 [133.32]	Not yet available

This spring has been notable for wonderful displays of cow parsley along the lanes and hedgerows full of hawthorn blossom. Many wildflowers have done well this spring like bluebells, bugle, lady smock, ragged robin, ox-eyed daisies, and buttercups among others making wonderful displays in the meadows and on the banks with water crowfoot doing very well in the river itself.

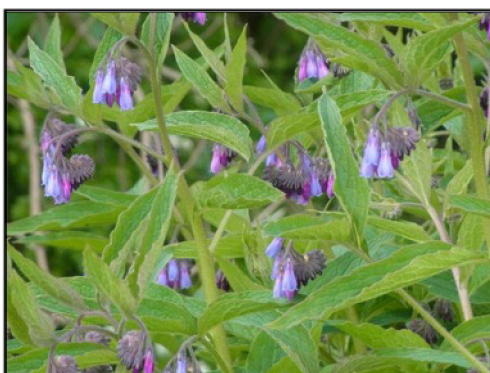
There have been plenty of nice bird sightings reported by the Bailiffs, among them lots of martins, swallows and more recently swifts. There have been regular reports of egrets, which nested in Verulamium Park after the herons (see Martin Frearson's report), many of skylarks, chiffchaffs, some of kingfishers, little and barn owls, a raven and lots of others (see John Fisher's Bird Notes for much more).

As well as the ubiquitous rabbits and squirrels, foxes and muntjac are often seen; a shrew and some bank and field voles have been reported but unfortunately no water voles! Fish seen include brown trout, bullheads, gudgeon and minnows. The most common recent reports of butterflies, apart from whites, are of orange tips tortoiseshells and a few speckled woods.

At our Open Meeting in Markyate I will again be asking if anyone living near there could in send in reports occasionally. There is not often any water in that area but we do need to have evidence of what is happening there when we try to persuade Affinity Water to consider reduction in abstraction from Kensworth pumping station.



Country lane and cow parsley.[John Pritchard]



Comfrey flowers [left]

and hawthorn blossom [right]

[Jane Gardiner]



Bird Notes

John Fisher

Despite a cold Spring passage migrants have been particularly interesting this year. Cuckoos are getting more difficult to find in the Ver Valley each year but in mid May I just managed to connect with one. Cycling near Shafford I heard the call of a male and I knew exactly where to look, as their favourite spot is generally the fence posts along the Ver Water Meadows. Sure enough it was perched showing its distinctive long tailed profile with drooped wings and then it moved on to another post, landing typically clumsily. I went to the same spot the next day and then again a few days later but I never saw or heard it again. I learnt recently that a female cuckoo lays as many as 25 eggs. This one was almost certainly looking for reed warblers which are plentiful but maybe not enough to provide for 25 hosts. Cuckoos are plentiful in Scotland and I saw 100's in the Danube Delta last week but they are getting quite rare in southern England. If you want to see one go to the National Trust site at Wicken Fen in late April.



Cuckoo at Porth Hellick Down St Mary's Scilly.

[Bob Harris]

So many of the best birds this year have been passage migrants, only around for a day or two. One Sunday in late April I got a tip off from VVS member and bailiff, John Pritchard, about two notable sightings. The first was a splendid male whinchat near Shafford Mill. These are northern breeders and in past years I have seen them on their return migration but I think this is the first I have seen in the valley on the outward journey. Very smart peachy bird with a brilliant white eye stripe. The same day another northern breeder, a common sandpiper, stopped off on the margins of the Ver just downstream from Redbournbury Mill. Like the whinchat he was never seen again. We get green sandpipers along the Ver most winters but the more delicate common sandpiper is a rare sight for Hertfordshire. Next day they were both gone.

Swifts were back in early May and hopefully they will nest in the old school on Redbourn Common once again following the conversion work. For me they are the special bird of Redbourn and the one I most look forward to returning each year. They have something magical about them and I love hearing their screaming flight calls over the Common and the High Street.

At Redbournbury and Shafford grey wagtails have bred again and they were joined by their brilliant yellow cousins in April. The yellow wagtails have dispersed now to breed in the crop fields but look out for them around the cattle feeders at Redbournbury in late summer as the juveniles congregate before they migrate back to Africa. Last year there was a gathering of over 40 birds.

You will see from Martin's Heron Watch piece that little egrets with two pairs are now firmly established as a Ver Valley breeding bird. We have already had a visit from a great white egret so what's next? – cattle egret, glossy ibis or maybe a spoonbill..... Climate change does have some benefits!

The Ver Valley barn owls are breeding late this year as I would have expected to find well grown youngsters in our boxes by early June. However when I checked the boxes, despite there being three active pairs, there were only a couple of incomplete clutches so ringing is not going to be until August this year. The cold spring has delayed them as they will only breed when they are in good condition. In other words well fed!



Barn Owl young. [John Fisher]

If you would be interested in a birding walk this Autumn let me know and I will set one up. We usually walk from the St Michaels car park to Redbournbury with a car shuttle or a mini bus for the return journey. We have had four this year and I am told they have been enjoyable. It is only three miles but we take about three hours with birding stops.

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

Heron Watch

Martin Frearson

Once again herons nested on the large island in Verulamium Lake, now officially called Heron Island on the council's new information boards. This year there were eleven nests on Heron Island and one on the (unnamed) small island. This is about average for recent years, though in the early noughties there were up to twenty three heron pairs. We only heard from the RSPB in late January, when a few pairs had already taken residence after a mild winter, that they had failed to secure funding for the trailer and professional 5-day support for the HeronWatch and would not be coming to Verulamium this year as they had since 2008.

Local RSPB group members, Friends of the Park and Ver Valley committee members who had been HeronWatch volunteers were brought together by Martin Frearson in an effort to continue with this much-appreciated effort to engage the park visitors with the herons and other birds in the park. We were able to man a rota on all but three of the Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays from 28 February to May 4, the main heron-nesting season, though this year it was particularly extended with some herons laying in early February and others not until early April. The pair on the small island started early but their two chicks, which were among the first to be ringed on Easter Saturday about 4 weeks old, suffered a disaster a few days later when they fell or were blown out of the nest and drowned in the lake. Undaunted, the pair started again to raise a second brood from mid-April.

We also saw Little Egrets daily on Heron Island. Barry Trevis, local ornithologist and Warden of Lemsford Springs Nature Reserve near Welwyn told us at Easter that a dozen Little Egrets were roosting overnight on the island so we were not surprised to hear that on 30 May, when he and his team came back to do the final ringing session with the heron chicks they had found two Little Egret nests in the willows with two and three young in them, a second success after the first recorded nest on Heron Island in 2014 which had four chicks. Colour-rings were fitted to the latter and one of those was observed regularly at Tring Reservoirs throughout last autumn.

This year's five young have also been colour-ringed and local birdwatchers have been asked to look out for them. Barry's ringing of the herons since 1996 has shown that usually they don't go far from St Albans, about 50 – 70km in all directions, but in late 2014 one bird was recovered in the Greater Manchester area.



Little egret chicks in nest. [Barry Trevis]

Altogether, 20 volunteers manned 101 sessions over 20 days, put in 270 volunteer hours and saw 65 bird species. 4000-plus visitors watched the herons through the scopes loaned from RSPB, including many children we hope will be enthusiastic wildlife watchers of the future. Over £150 was collected for the RSPB, and VVS and Herts & Middlesex re-cruiting leaflets were popular. John O'Connors team of Park Rangers, Gary, Hayden and Martin, helped to put up the gazebo obtained with the aid of a Locality Budget grant from our local county councillor Sandy Walkington.

Rumour has it that RSPB has secured a grant from Lafarge to continue the 5-day HeronWatch event next year, but we are yet to be officially informed of this. What this year's effort has shown is that there is enthusiastic support from local volunteers, the council, local councillors, Herts & Middlesex Trust and the park-visiting public for continuing with this natural spectacle, and we hope to have gained some new members too.

Future Meetings

Ernie Leahy

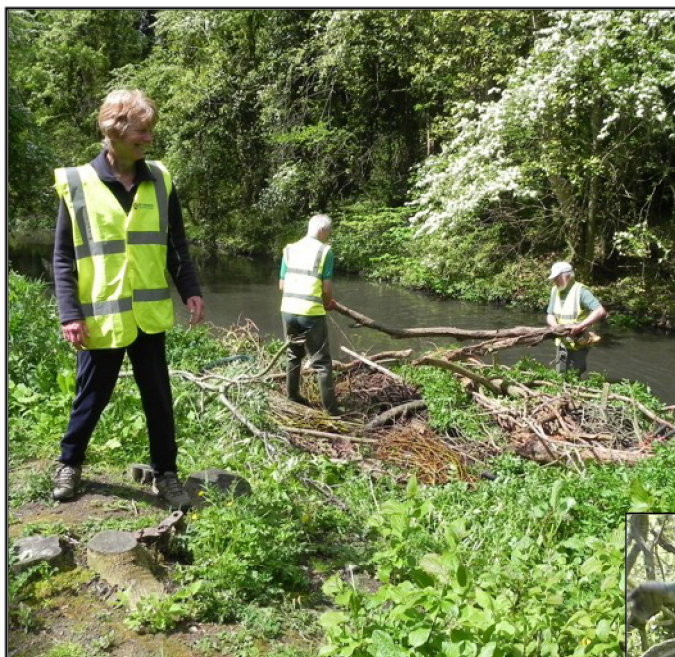
Please make a note of the next two:

Tuesday 27th October: AGM at St Michael's Parish Centre (by Church). Speaker will be Allen Beechey, Rivers Officer from Chilterns AONB, his subject to be the developing Colne Catchment Plan. Allen has helped the VVS considerably in recent years.

Thursday 28th January 2016: Redbourn Village Hall. Dr Ken Smith, co-author of "The Birds of Hertfordshire", will talk on that subject. He has in the past worked for the RSPB on special projects such as bittern conservation, and is known to be a woodpecker specialist.

Recent Projects:

Further work on the overhanging and dead willows near the confluence of the Red and Ver in Redbourn was successfully carried out on a beautiful Spring morning in April.



Marion Shattock & Chris Newman repairing a deflector.

In May we repaired and completed one of the deflectors along Riverside Way. Members of the public are intrigued by these structures, but when we show them how effective they are in scouring the river bed to produce a gravelly bottom, suitable for the trout to lay their eggs, they are full of praise for the work that has been carried out by the CMS and VVS volunteers. Further work was carried out clearing saplings from the banks.

At the time of writing, we are preparing for another litter pick in June in Verulamium Park, and the removal of more debris from under the bridge and the fallen willow.

Thank you to all the volunteers who have helped and in particular to Bruce Banfield Taylor for offering to step in as Team Leader in June.



Bruce Banfield Taylor and John Bell tackling the overgrown willows.

Summer Programme 2015

- Saturday 18th July 10.00 – 12.00**
Moor Mill and Riverside, Bricket Wood, to remove Himalayan Balsam along the banks of the Ver. The aim is to pull up this introduced invasive weed and pile it up away from the river, to prevent the seeds travelling downstream to spread elsewhere. Park at Moor Mill
- Saturday 15th August 10.00 – 12.00**
Moor Mill and Frogmore Pits, to remove Himalayan Balsam along the banks of the Ver. (*This is to be confirmed depending on permission from Lafarge for Frogmore Pits*)
- Sunday 27th September**
World Rivers Day (*locations to be confirmed*) we hope to involve as many people as possible in a litter pick along the Ver Valley Linear trail. We may be involved with other activities, on this special day.

For all these activities, I would be grateful if you would contact me sue.frearson@which.net if you will be attending, so that I can borrow the correct number of tools from the CMS and contact you, if there is a change of plan. You will need to wear stout shoes or wellingtons and bring your own gardening gloves.

Birds of Hertfordshire

Review by Ernest Leahy

This new edition published this February by the Hertfordshire Natural History Society updates the previous three books covering the counties avifauna.

It brings together the latest available information in a very clear presentable way. The four authors Ken Smith, Chris Dee, Jack Fearnside and Mike Illet have done a first-class job in condensing historic and current information to a very readable volume which would be of interest to both keen ornithologists and anyone with an interest in natural history.

The book describes the status of the 308 species recorded in the county including data on breeding species, wintering migrants and vagrants. It compares atlas data at the tetrad level from the 1967-73, 1988-92 and the recent 2007-12 surveys as well as additional numerous county records.

As shown on the accompanying page each breeding species has breeding distribution maps (historic and current), a charted assessment of the species population accompanied by a photo of the bird. For example, the Lapwing (page 101), previously a common breeding bird on farmland and river valleys, shows a worrying decline. However the Common Buzzard (page 91) shows a remarkable increase.

The introductory chapters describe Herts landscapes, the history of Herts ornithology and bird surveys done within the county.

The cover, front piece and article headings have been beautifully illustrated by renowned artist Alan Harris. The book is not an identification guide but is not so over technical that it would not appeal to all tastes. It follows the same size and format as the previously published Herts books on Geology, Moths and Flora. It is available as a hardback with 293 pages from the Herts Natural History Society www.hnhs.org price £39 including postage or collected from HNHS at Welwyn Garden City - £34

ISBN; 978-0-9931217-0-8

Riverfly Monitoring along the Ver

Sue Frearson

There are now ten monitoring stations to survey the Riverfly along the Ver, from the Ver / Colne confluence to Luton Lane in Redbourn and all the surveys show a healthy river. Thank you to our six monitors, who send me there data on a monthly basis, so that this can then be sent to the Environment Agency and checked. If any of the surveys are below the target figure for the location, another survey is carried out. So far the EA has not had to make further checks at any of these sites. We have had some large numbers of water shrimp at most sites and nearer the confluence in May there were Caddis fly larvae and many Mayfly, as well as Olives and Blue Winged Olives along the river.

A warm welcome to our newest monitor, Peter White, who is surveying near the Ver / Colne confluence.

**Chairman,
Bailiff Co-ordinator**
Jane Gardiner, 18 Claudian Place,
St Albans, AL3 4JE
Tel: (01727 866331)
Email:
janegardiner@madasafish.com

Newsletter Editor
John Cadisch, 14 Prae Close,
St Albans, AL3 4SF
Tel: (01727) 862843
Email:
john.cadisch@ntlworld.com

Action Group Co-ordinator
Sue Frearson, 4 Allandale,
St Albans, AL3 4NG
Tel: (01727) 761878
Email:
sue.frearson@which.net

Secretary & Webmaster
John Fisher, 92 High Street,
Redbourn, AL3 7BD
Tel: (01582) 792843
Email: secretary@riverver.co.uk

Meetings Organiser

Ernie Leahy
32 Ben Austins,
Redbourn, AL3 7DR
Tel: (01582) 793144

Email: ernest.leahy@ntlworld.com

Treasurer & Membership Secretary

Rachel Young
58 Castle Road
St Albans, AL1 5DG
Tel: (01727) 868919

(Evening and weekends only)

Email: treasurer@riverver.co.uk

Planning & Publicity Officer

Martin Frearson, 4 Allandale,
St Albans, AL3 4NG
Tel: (01727) 761878

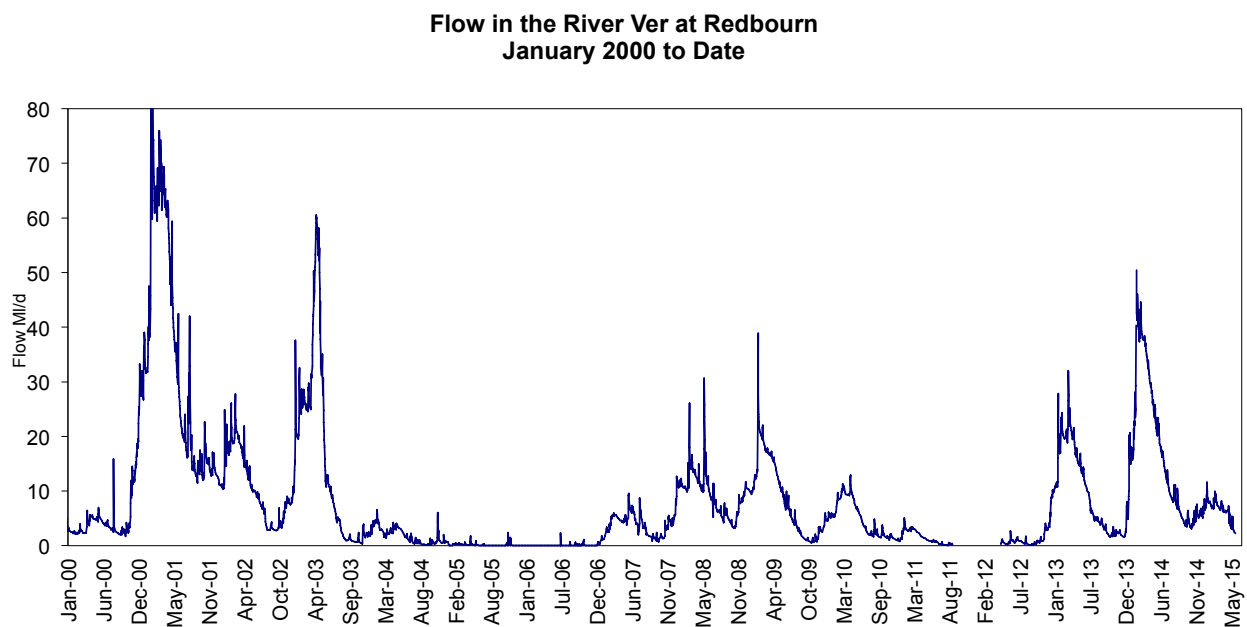
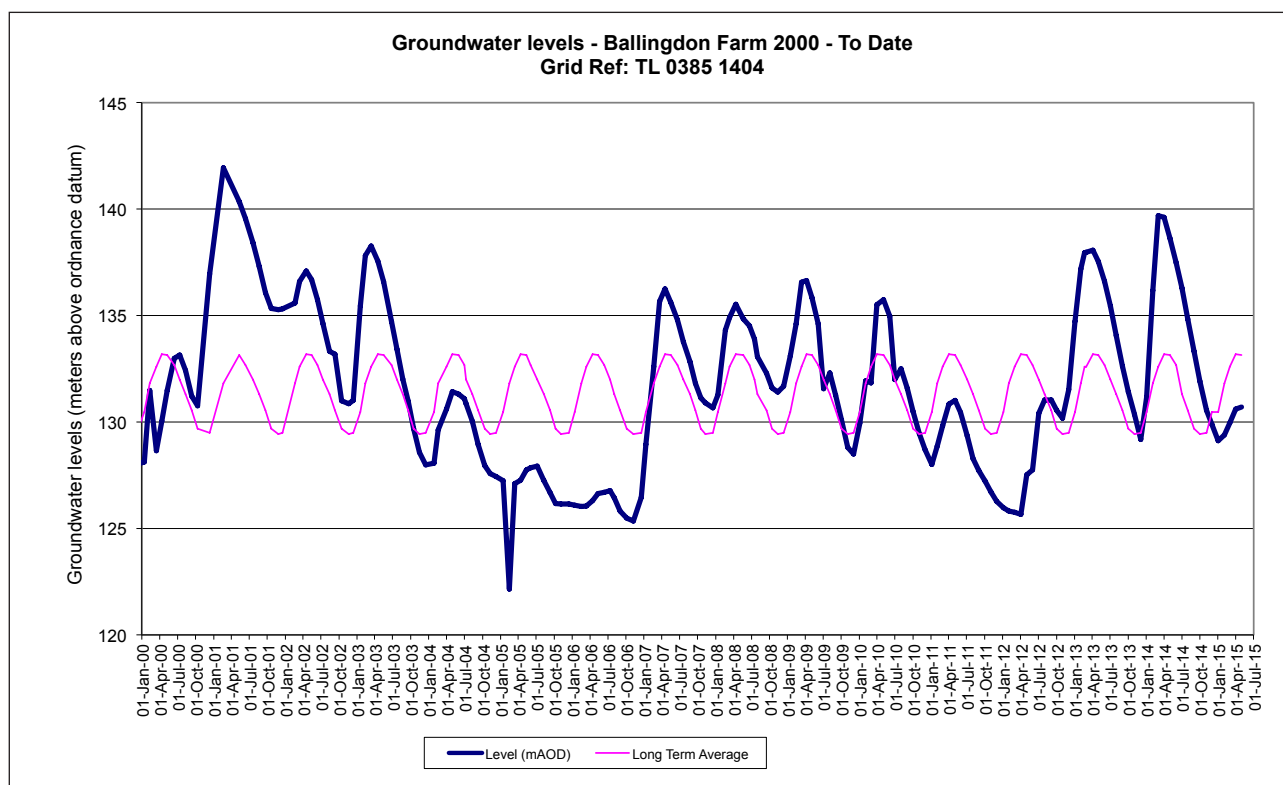
Email: martin.frearson@which.net

Vice Chairman
Paul Foster
Tel: 01727 824043
Email:
paul.foster@paulfosterassociates.com

Committee Member
John Bell
Tel: (01727) 831280
Email: jb43@btinternet.com

Newsletter Layout
John Trew (Verulam Angling Club)

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 the ground water and flow charts and to Veolia Environmental for printing and distributing our newsletters.