



Ver Valley Newsletter



Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society

Number 99

www.riverver.co.uk

October 2008

Chairman:

(also News & Publicity)
Andy Webb, 30 Queens Court, Hatfield
Road, St Albans, AL1 4TG.
Tel: (01727) 839573.

Deputy Chairman:

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

Hon Secretary:

Peter Fox, MBE, 23 Fish Street,
Redbourn, AL3 7LP.
Tel: (01582) 793303.
Email: fox@fishstreet23.freeserve.co.uk

Hon Treasurer:

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

Minutes Secretary:

(also Bird Note Co-ordinator,
Webmaster)
John Fisher, 92 High Street, Redbourn,
AL3 7BD.
Tel: (01582) 792843.
Email: john.fisher@btclick.com

Newsletter Layout:

John Trew
(Verulam Angling Club)

Hotlines

"Cleaner, Greener St. Albans"
0845 125 8000

EA "Floodline"
0845 9878 1188

EA "Incident Hotline"
(Pollution, Blockages etc.)
0800 80 70 60

**The Thirty-second AGM of the Ver Valley Society
will be held on -**

**TUESDAY 21st OCTOBER 2008
at 7.30 pm**

At St. Michael's Parish Centre, St. Michael's Street, St Albans, by Church.
Verulamium Museum car park is close at hand.

The AGM will be held in the upper room with reports on the last year from Chairman Andy Webb and the VVS office-holders. The audited accounts (year to 31 August) will be presented. Nominations for the various posts are invited (one has been received already), these should be in the hands of Secretary Peter Fox by 17th October. The present team is prepared to carry on but new committee members, with specialist knowledge or new ideas for running the Society, are always welcome. A few minor amendments to our Constitution will be put for endorsement.

"Half time" refreshments will be downstairs with "Redbournbury bakery" expected to be on hand so giving the opportunity for re-stocking your bread bin and/or freezer.

To conclude the evening we are looking forward to hearing Miles Morgan who will be talking to us about "Restoring Sustainable Abstraction - an Update on the River Ver". Miles is the EA's RSA Officer, succeeding Vicki Kidney who spoke at our 2006 AGM on the same key subject.

'Bright Spot in Gloomy Summer'

Useful publicity for the Society was in the 25th September "Herts Advertiser" under Aimee Brannen's byline. "...water levels in the River Ver are the highest they have been in years....."

Run-off from the widened M1 Motorway

The Society is watching! Run-off, involving all manner of harmful pollutants, could affect two places - the river Red in Redbourn, and Junction 9 at Friars Wash.

Subscription time!

John Cadisch

Being into a new VVS year since 31st August, some subscriptions have fallen due. Please let me have a.s.a.p. to save the need for a reminder.

Current rates (per household): £5.00 per Year, or £20.00 for Five Years

In supermarket parlance, "five years for the price of four"! (Receipts issued if required.)

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

River Ver - Ver Valley Walks

Andy Webb

('Ver Valley Access & Interpretation Project')

As anticipated last time the linear Ver Walk plus eight circular "Ver Valley routes" have been finalised. Seven VVS members kindly volunteered to "test walk" them for us. In addition to the new waymarking, kissing-gates, benches and other items, new leaflets have to be designed and printed. All of this could prove very expensive but the benefits in terms of enjoying and understanding our river and valley will be very great indeed. Accordingly, working on our behalf, Isobel Crozier (Herts. CMS) has done a lot of patient form-filling in the last few months in order to obtain grants to implement this work, we thank her for that. So far this year we (CMS/VVS) have been fortunate to obtain two grants:

1. £13,850 from Lafarge Landfill Communities Fund ("landfill tax"), to be used in the Park Street and Frogmore area of the valley.
2. £4,500 from Watling Chase Community Forest funds.

Two more substantial grants have been applied for in the last few weeks:

1. £50K from "Your Heritage" (Heritage Lottery Fund)
2. £50K from Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund

We will hear whether we have been successful in the first sometime in December, and the second in the next few weeks (hopefully by the AGM).

The VVS has undertaken to invest up to 10% of the total cost of the project from our own funds. We will also "host" any grant monies received in our own bank account, as all the applications, although processed by the CMS, have to be made in our name. We will then be required to release these funds as the various stages of work are implemented.

We first began discussing replacements for the old Ver Valley Walk leaflet in December '05, so will be very glad to see tangible results for all the hard work involved since then - hopefully in 2009.

It may be worth mentioning at this point that current CMS policy (national policy?) to to replace stiles on walks with kissing-gates for better accessibility.

Bird Notes

John Fisher

In early June the barn owl box at Redbournbury Farm had one live youngster, just a few days old, a still warm dead one and an unhatched egg. When we returned on Saturday 19 July Peter Wilkinson, our barn owl man, was able to ring two healthy youngsters. There was no sign of the dead chick and if you watched Bill Oddie on Springwatch you will know of the gruesome contribution this bird made to the success of its siblings.

This makes a total of 11 reared in this box in the last three years. It is estimated that these two were 57 and 45 days old respectively but as they were in a healthy condition and had obviously been well fed they would have flown after 60 days. In some ways 2 is disappointing after 3 and 5 in the previous two years; however as this has not been a good year nationally for barn owl breeding this is a real success in a wet and cold summer.

The Hudgell family who run a beef herd from the farm have been very keen on the project from day one and take a great interest in its success. I think this pair has been particularly successful because they have a readily available supply of mice and rats from the farmyard. On behalf of the VVS and the barn owls I would like to thank the Hudgells for their enthusiastic support.

In the Shafford box two adults were roosting in June and we were hopeful that they would be late season breeders. However when we looked in July the box was empty although there were feathers and pellets to indicate that the box was still being used as a roost. I did see a barn owl flying at dusk in the area one mid summer evening just as it was getting dark so although this pair did not breed this year I remain hopeful they will breed in 2009. I suspect that they were just not feeding well enough to get into breeding condition.

Red kites are being reported every day now and there are probably at least two pairs breeding in the valley. Nationally they are doing extremely well and I expect they that will increase their population rapidly in the area. On a recent afternoon I saw three red kites, six buzzards, two sparrowhawks and a kestrel along a two mile stretch of the Ver.

It has not been a good breeding year for small birds and in particular the house martin colony at Shafford Stables has been badly affected by the poor summer weather. We did put up 40 nest boxes this spring for tits, robins, nuthatches and finches. These were all sited between Redbourn and St Albans but this autumn I have a further 20 to put up so if you know of any suitable areas along the valley, particularly in the lower reaches of the river please, let me know.

If you read this and have any interesting bird sightings in or around the Redbourn I would be more than pleased to hear from you on 01582 792843 or email john.fisher@btclick.com.

Bailiff Notes**Jane Gardiner**

Nobody can have failed to notice that July and August have been exceptionally wet, both months having double the average rainfall, as you can see from the Rothampstead figures in the table below. The aquifer levels, although inevitably falling back at this time of year, are well above the long-term averages for each month, so do indicate that there has been some summer recharge for the second year running, which is most unusual. As a result flows being recorded are holding up well although the excessive growth of reeds, cress and weeds in the channel have made flow measurements impossible in several areas; I have reported particularly problematic stretches to the Environment Agency. Nettle and other weed growth along many paths has also been a problem. In mid September there appears to be continuous flow from just south of Markyate.

2008	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters and [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [\pm average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothampstead)
May	134.84 [134.1]	87.0 [+37.3]
June	134.52 [133.32]	35.3 [-24.9]
July	133.88 [133.23]	90.3 [+48.2]
August	133.07 [132.56]	107.8 [+54.1]
September	132.29 [130.87]	

Banks and verges in the valley have been brightened in the gloomy weather by unusually prolific flowering of bright yellow ragwort (a plant which can be a real problem in fields of grazing animals) as well as the more usual pinks and purples of mallow and willowherb. Now the bushes beside the river are becoming colourful with berries of hawthorn, dog-rose, sloe, dogwood, guelder rose and spindle, prettiest of all in my opinion.

Unfortunately Himalayan balsam, with its apparently attractive mauve flowers, and Japanese knotweed, which are invasive weeds, have also been thriving in the lower half of the Ver valley. The bloom of bright green algae which was carpeting the lake at Verulamium earlier in the summer, has now disappeared. [This was not dangerous and was of a type more usually associated with salt water, possibly due to the heavy rains washing down something unusual off roads] A sewage leak behind the Chequers pub in Redbourn was reported to the EA by our bailiff there and promptly dealt with.

Some dragonflies have been reported, also banded demoiselles and some other damsels but butterflies seem to have had a poor year, apart from whites - no doubt the weather has not suited them. However the occasional speckled wood, meadow brown, holly blue, peacock and skipper have been seen.

As far as birds are concerned, buzzards, kestrels and red kites are reported regularly in the valley; grey wagtails and kingfishers are seen on the river from time to time. Herons of course are regularly reported and some cormorants come in. Near the river, yellow hammers and goldfinches are often noted. Swifts, swallows and martins seem to have left fairly early this year and who can blame them! [For more on birds see John Fisher's Bird Notes.]

Fish varieties recently reported include roach, chub, perch, rudd, carp, brown trout and some introduced rainbow trout near Moor Mill.

Our Web Site www.riverver.co.uk**John Fisher**

At the suggestion of a member at the Markyate Open Meeting in July I have added the EA "Pollution Hotline", the "Floodline" and the "Cleaner, Greener St Albans Hotline" telephone numbers to the "Contacts" page of the website.

The rainfall and aquifer figures have both been updated following one our wettest summers in living memory.

I have been taking a bit of a sabbatical during the summer months but I hope to add and improve the site over the winter months.

It has been suggested that we should enter the site for an award. Does anyone out there know how I could do this?

Digital photographs and written text contributions are always welcome.

If you would like to be included on our email circulation list just send me an email at john.fisher@btclick.com. If you are on my list and want to be deleted just let me know.

My telephone number is 01582 792843

The Plight of the Horse Chestnut

Janet Southwood

This summer throughout southern and central England many people will have seen horse chestnut trees covered in brown dead-looking foliage. The brown patches on the leaves are caused by the Horse Chestnut Leaf Miner - *cameraria ohridella* - first observed in northern Greece in the late 1970's. In July 2002 the leaf mining moth was found to be established in the UK in the London Borough of Wimbledon - along the southern edge of Wimbledon Common and nearby streets and gardens. Since 2002 the rate of spread across the UK has been 40 - 60 km/year (aided by traffic movements).

Damage by the Horse Chestnut Leaf Miner is primarily an aesthetic problem, there is no evidence that infestation on its own causes die-back or a decline in tree health or tree death. Where the moth is established the safest and most practical means of control is to remove fallen leaves during the autumn and winter (park managers please note) - the leaf miner overwinters as a pupa in the fallen leaves. Commercial composting of the leaves destroys the pupae and reduces the moth population the following spring. In the long term it is hoped that biological control will lead to a permanent reduction in the pest population.

A second, more serious problem the horse chestnut faces is Bleeding Canker, caused by a fungal pathogen known as *Phytophthora*, and was first reported in the UK in the 1970's. Until recently, such bleeding cankers were considered uncommon and were only seen in the south of England. In 2000 only four cases were reported, by 2006 this had increased to 110 cases. Symptoms visible on heavily affected trees include extensive bleeding areas on the trunk and main branches. Closer investigation has now found a new pathogen, *Pseudomonas syringae* *pu aesculi*, is responsible for the increase in these symptoms appearing on horse chestnut.

Trees of all ages have been affected by the recent disease upsurge. Many are highly visible amenity trees in parks and public gardens, others form important features in avenues, historic gardens and landmarks.. Though a non-native species the horse chestnut is very much part of our local landscape. For further information visit: www.forestry.gov.uk.

[Janet has been a loyal VVS supporter for some time now, this is her first "Newsletter" article.]



'Friends of the River Frome'

Many members will know John Hyde, for 10 years chairman of the Watercress and Wildlife organisation.

He has recently moved away from St Albans to Somerset and has set up, based (he says) on our own website, www.friendsofthesomersetriverfrome.org.uk

Anyone visiting the Frome area might like to check it out, an excellent site.

Dates for 2009

We expect to stage Open Meetings on 26 January - 21 April - 27 July - 26 October (AGM).
(Subject to confirmation.)

Friends of Verulamium Park

John Cadisch

We recommend this relatively new organisation, which has the River Ver and Verulamium Lakes within its sphere of influence.

The latest (September) newsletter contains "Pollution or Solution" and "River and Lake Water" (lettuce algae and pollution problems in general), "Mother a goose" (!), and "Restoring the lake island's heronry".

More details from www.fvp.org.uk or phone the FVP chair, Madeleine Sansom, 01727 846761.

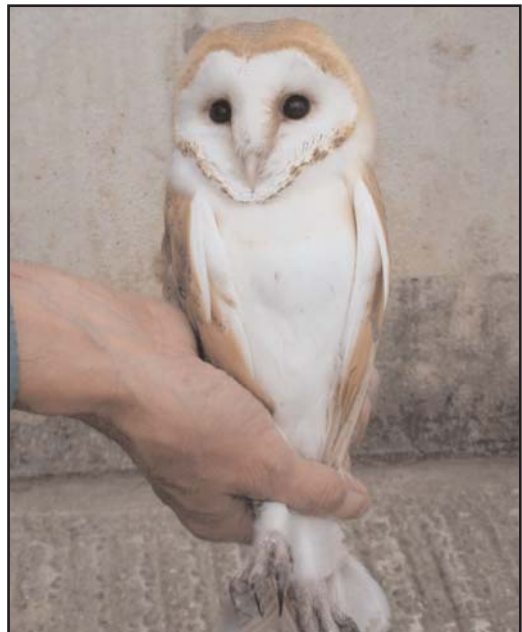
Thanks

Very many thanks are due to John Trew, who works hard on page layouts for this "Newsletter" (although now resident in Suffolk), giving it an attractive, readable style, and also to Three Valleys Water, Bushey, who continue to print and mail them out to members.

Picture Page



*Ver Valley Walkers carefully cross the Irish Weir.
[Andy Webb]*



*Young barn owl after being ringed in July 2008. This was the 11th bird from this box.
[John Fisher]*



If you think 2008 has been a wet year - look at Waterend Lane in 2001

