



# Ver Valley Newsletter



*Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society*

Number 107

www.riverver.co.uk

October 2010

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EA Customer Service: 0870 850 6506

## **Notice of Annual General Meeting**

Please note that the 34th Annual General Meeting of the Ver Valley Society will be held on:

### **TUESDAY 26th OCTOBER 2010**

At St. Michael's Parish Centre, St. Michael's Street, St. Albans (7.30 pm). we have booked the whole Parish Centre for the evening.  
[Car Park - Verulamium Museum next door]

Nominations for the various posts are invited, these should be with the Hon. Secretary (Peter Fox) no later than the preceding Friday. In the absence of these, it is understood that the existing officers are willing to carry on for another year. *However, one important post, Minutes Secretary, needs to be filled, if that special person is out there please let Peter Fox know, or any member of the committee (meets every second month). Why not come along as an observer in the first instance?*

The Annual Accounts will be presented at the meeting. No increase in subscription rates is proposed, £5 one year/£20 five years, no change.

After AGM business there will be a break with refreshments. To conclude the evening our good friend Rob Sage of Veolia Water will be discussing "Water Issues", and afterwards answer questions.

## **Veolia Water (formerly Three Valleys)**

This is likely to be the last Newsletter printed and despatched by Veolia Water, a most welcome and privileged facility which has been of great benefit to the Society over the last 10 years or so, we thank both water companies wholeheartedly.

The original arrangement was set up in conjunction with Three Valleys Water (now Veolia Water) different community criteria now apply. Alternative plans for our January Newsletter are well in hand, we do not expect it to look very different from now!

## **Redbournbury Watermill**

**John Cadisch**

The Autumn Newsletter has just arrived. Steven Mansbridge is the new Master Baker. He has to arrive at about 3am, with the bakery open to the public SATURDAYS ONLY from 9 to 1.

The all-important volunteers receive honourable mention. A new historical display is on the second floor.

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

## Judy Green

Last month we received the sad news that Judy Green had died. Her health had not been good for a long time and in recent years was confined to a wheelchair.

The name will be very familiar to many older members, it was she who put together single-handed the "Little Ver Book", a runaway success, in 1992, and followed this up with "A Source Guide to the River Ver & Its Valley, an Aid to Teachers" (2 editions, 1997 and 1999).

Judy preceded Jane Gardiner as Bailiff Organiser (1991-1999). Committee meetings at her home beside New Barnes mill were always a pleasure, it overlooked the attractive and unspoiled Sopwell meadows.

We extend our condolences to husband John Green, and also to her daughter.

## 2011 Open Meetings

### Monday 31 January at 7.30 pm

Redbourn St Mary's Transept Hall - speaker will be John Tylor a naturalist on "The Changing Wildlife of the Chilterns" - From coral seas, through the Ice Ages, tundra and forest to the farmland of today John will take us through a hundred million years to trace the origins of the Chiltern landscape and the wildlife that it supports, and speculate about what the future might hold.

### Tuesday 19 April 2011 at 7.30 pm

St Stephens Parish Centre - speaker - Haydon Bailey - "Geology of Chalk" - This may not sound an exciting subject but Haydon is an excellent speaker and knows all there is to know about the basic component of our valley. Haydon is a major contributor to the Hertfordshire Geology book.

### 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).

## Autumn dragonflies on the Ver

Ernie Leahy

Several species of dragonflies are usually on the wing well into October. The Common Darter male has a red abdomen and the female in the photo is yellow ochre. They are a mid sized dragonfly and have a total length of 34 mm. It is a regular species along the Ver.

The Southern Hawker will often visit gardens and the female with the green and brown abdomen is shown egg laying.

The male has a blue & brown abdomen and like the female is 70 mm in total length. It's the most common large Autumn dragonfly we will see locally.



As everyone will remember June and July were hot and sunny this year but August was not! The rainfall figures below illustrate this very well. So far September seems to be mixed but mainly dry. The groundwater levels appear to have been behaving strangely although these figures always reflect what happened weather-wise several months earlier. The Ballingdon Farm figure was still above average in June, fell well below in July, rose to about average in August and although it fell in early September was still above average.

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)
June	134.97 [133.32]	23.5 [-36.7]
July	131.99 [133.23]	31.6 [-10.45]
August	132.51 [132.56]	127.6 [73.86]
September	131.59 [130.87]	Not yet available

The Bailiffs are now measuring quite low flow rates as could be expected in September except after heavy rain. The head of the river is probably north of Redbourn possibly in the golf course although there is not even a trickle under River Hill, Flamstead (the outfall there from the small Markyate sewage works must be soaking in to the ground). The mill stream past Shafford is now almost dry as the channel is completely blocked; EA have been informed. The River Red in Redbourn seems fairly healthy but Hanstead Brook in Bricket Wood is now dry.



*Stepping stones across the river.*

Following the Environment Agency's further inspection of the silted-up and rotten sluice above Kingsbury Mill and the structural engineer's report, commissioned by Gorhambury Estates, the following works have been agreed; replace the sluice and paddle, repair a crack in the weir apron and reinforce the toe of the weir and right bank. The situation to be monitored closely until the works are carried out.

The EA have also undertaken to carry out much needed improvements to the river channel between Moor Mill and Hyde Lane by the end of the year, to involve

desilting, thinning out reeds and clearing out blockages. This together with the new bridges at the entrance to Frogmore Pits should enhance the river area south of Hyde Lane. The 'stepping-stones' area just north of the confluence with the Colne has had some new metal bollards installed but still needs further work to remove some large items of debris in the river channel and the stepping stones to be put into useable condition.

A team of volunteers, including some from VVS and some from Veolia, spent a day in August at Redbournbury clearing out the tail-race, the channel below the mill, to the confluence with the river. This enables the water to get away better from below the newly restored wheel, allowing it to turn more freely and generate more power. During that morning's work enough crayfish (not native!) were caught for them to be cooked and augment the lunch provided by Mandy James from the mill.



Regarding other wildlife in the river, a variety of fish have been reported including chubb, brown trout, roach, gudgeon, carp (mirror and common, one very large near Moor Mill), rudd and a barbel as well as minnows and sticklebacks.

Mole activity is beginning to be obvious and other animals occasionally seen by our Bailiffs are foxes, munt-



jack and grass snakes as well as the ubiquitous squirrels and rabbits foxes. Plenty of butterflies have been reported, mostly the various whites but also small tortoiseshells, speckled woods, orange tips, meadow browns, gatekeepers, common blues, red admirals and peacocks. Bailiffs have been seeing both red and blue damselflies and banded demoiselles, as well as dragonflies, hawkers and darters.

You will see from John Fisher's bird notes how successful the barn owl boxes have been this year. Many other breeding successes noted in our valley this summer include great crested grebes, yellow wagtails, whitethroats, linnets, skylarks and lapwings. In Gorhambury Estate hobbies and little owls have nested as well as kestrels, buzzards and probably red kites. As well as the usual common birds and water fowl, other birds seen include sparrowhawk, willow warbler, tree-creepers, grey wagtails and the occasional kingfisher. The swallows, swifts and martins have now mostly departed but several egrets have now returned.

As autumn is getting underway the flowering plants are diminishing but purple loosestrife, willow herb and water mint make colourful splashes and are more welcome than the invasive Himalayan Balsam. The other invader Japanese knotweed is also only too prevalent. Other flowers still being noted are comfrey, woody and deadly nightshade, burdock, ragwort and thistles whose seed heads will soon be attracting goldfinches. Autumn fruit and berries are now beginning to colour the hedgerows and it seems to be a good year for fungi too.

## Access and Interpretation Project

Andy Webb

We now have something on the ground that demonstrates all of our own, and others, hard work: new footbridges have been constructed at Redbournbury east and west fords (the east ford bridge has been realigned, and the various footings/abutment's of former structures at this spot have been removed), and at Hyde Lane, Frogmore. The latter reused the existing metal framework which was raised 60cm and, at the gravel pits end, has a long approach ramp. Each bridge has sturdy wooden hand rails on both sides. The Hyde Lane bridge, in particular, is an imposing structure; it was redesigned to counter the winter 'flooding' at this spot when both ends can be cut off by the Ver (it was just too low and too short). The work was carried out by Maidencroft Rural of St Ippolytes, at a cost of approx £25,000. All three are a big improvement on what was there previously.

The style and format of each of the eight circular Ver Valley Walk leaflets has been decided, and Walk 1 'The Source Walk' has been finalised, with 2,3, and 4 to follow shortly. An illustrative map of the whole of the Ver valley and river has been commissioned for the River Ver Trail (sourced to confluence) leaflet, which will be ready soon.

Earlier this year it became apparent that the OS Explorer maps we intended to use as the base of the eight circular walk maps were prohibitively expensive to license (18p per leaflet plus website downloads, approx £9,000 for a standard print run). It was decided to use the older mapping system currently used by CMS/HCC. However late in the summer we were told that from April next year HCC would be licensed to use the Explorer series for all its work, and we could then use this at no cost. Therefore, it has been decided to put back printing and publication of the leaflets until Spring next year.

Discussions continue about the style of our new 'River Ver' benches which will be placed at various sites along the river and around the valley. Four possible sites have been preliminarily identified for this purpose. Each bench will have some form of 'interpretation' included, but this has yet to be finalised. Tentative enquiries have been made to a stone mason regarding the construction of replacement stepping-stones for the Irish weir in Redbournbury water meadows. These, too, will be interpretive we hope. Thus we have argued that they should have the names of villages and towns on the river's course: Kensworth, Markyate, Flamstead, Redbourn, St Albans, Park Street, Bricket Wood. Each step will take you to one of these points. We are trying to mix subtle interpretation with fun on all these construction projects. The new bridges, and perhaps others too, will have similar interpretation.

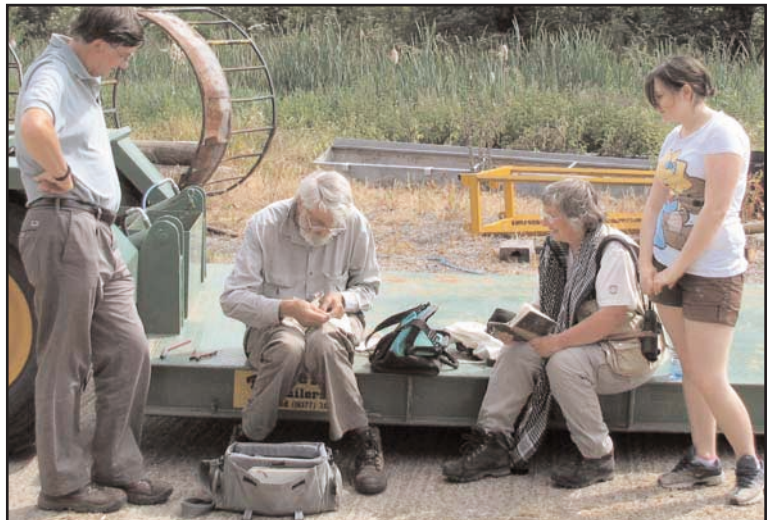
Allied to our Project, but separate from it, will be the construction of a raised walkway through a low lying willow copse next to the river, behind Sopwell Nunnery. Sopwell Residents Association is behind this particular project.

Next spring a major Walk launch will need to be organised. Ideas for this have been suggested, but it is too early to give any details at this stage. We will keep you informed. My thanks to Isabel Crozier of Herts CMS for her continued support and encouragement in the Project.

Despite the hard winter our barn owls have survived in good numbers and we have had by far the best ever results from the Society's barn owl boxes. In July we ringed no less than 10 young barn owls. For the first time three of the boxes were used, one of them just three months after it was put up. The Society has been able to fund the boxes from a couple of generous legacies from Phyllis Hammon and Catherine Tomkinson. Ron Such also funded one box as a memorial to his late son. We have now ringed 27 owlets in the last 5 years and I think these people would have been really pleased that their generosity has led to this success.

The Ver 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 stay out late in the evening! One early August evening I arrived at one of the nest boxes just as the sun was setting and because the nearby wheat field had just been cut, one of the adult barn owls was quartering the field hunting for mice and voles now deprived of their cover. At the same time one of the brood which was fully grown and fledged came out of the nest box and perched on its platform before taking some practice flights to the roofs of the nearby buildings waiting for mum to bring back the "take-away" from the wheat field. Just to cap the evening a tawny owl flew overhead. Another evening later in August after we had been to a VVS committee meeting Peter Fox and I watched three juveniles flying around for about 20 minutes as they waited for the adults to return from their night time foraging for prey.

One of the reasons barn owls have been doing so well is that our local farmers are leaving a lot of land uncultivated either in headland strips or "set aside" and this has provided the ideal habitat for voles which are the main prey item of owls and kestrels. These areas have also assisted the recovery of many of our farmland birds which had declined so disastrously in the decades of "prairie farming". Over the last few years birds like skylarks, yellowhammers, linnets and yellow wagtails have all become more common again. I only hope that with all the government expenditure cuts the countryside stewardship schemes remain in place and our farmers are supported in their efforts. If we want bio diversity in our countryside we need to compensate farmers to act as custodians of "our" countryside.



*The barn owl ringing party.*

Typical of this success are yellow wagtails with at least three pairs seen at various sites close to Redbourn. The pair I watched since early May occupied the same territory as last year. I saw the brilliant yellow male and his mate carrying loads of insects to their nest in a wheat field and eventually I saw the pair for the first time with a juvenile. One fledgling is not a great return but there may have been others around that I did not see. Little egrets returned to the valley even earlier this year and the first reported sighting was in late August. In the first week of September I saw four near Redbournbury. Green sandpipers have also been seen and again this is very early.

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

## **"Hertfordshire Geology & Landscape" (John Catt)**

We were asked as a Society to contribute to this definitive work by the publishers, the Herts. Natural History Society, so as to ensure it could go ahead. Agreeing to this, we have sent a substantial donation, the book is going ahead with first copies expected in December.

Specification: A4 size, hardbound, approx. 400 pages, all illustrations in colour, over 200 maps and photos. Pre-publication price: £29 post free before 15th November, otherwise £39. Order and pay online ([www.hnhs.org](http://www.hnhs.org)) or by post from HNHS, 24 Mandeville Rise, Welwyn Garden City, AL8 7JU.[We may be buying in a small quantity for sale at meetings.] See VVS website for full details and order form for this important new book.

## **Our Website ([www.riverver.co.uk](http://www.riverver.co.uk))**

**John Fisher**

I have recently updated the aquifer and rainfall charts and added details for the January and April 2011 Open Meetings. The Memories of the Ver page now includes the Christopher Chapman poem and I would appeal to members to send me prose or poetry pieces for me to add to this page. There must be a lot out there that is worth sharing.

Ernie Leahy and I had a meeting recently with Isabel Crozier of CMS and Steve Wragg, our website designer, regarding the future of the website. Steve is going to produce a trial page for one of the Ver Walks and once we have seen and approved this hopefully he will be able to go ahead and set up a whole new section of the website which will include the linear walk and the eight circular walks. Each will have an interactive map with icons linked to pop ups of text about the Ver Valley. From the website you will be able to download any of the walk leaflets.

The web address will remain the same and the rest of the pages will be unaffected. For me this is good news is that editing will be much as before which needs to be kept simple.

I am aware that the photo galleries need refreshing and I will be doing something on this in a month or so. Any new pictures - please send them to me.

Finally as people become more aware of environmental issues I have a few requests for electronic versions of the newsletter instead of paper copies. You can opt for this preference by emailing me. From January 2011 the Society will be paying for the postage so this will also save on costs.

If you would like to be included on our email circulation list just send me an email at [john.fisher@btclick.com](mailto:john.fisher@btclick.com). You will not be inundated with emails as normally I only send one out when each newsletter is issued and then another reminder a few days before each Open Meeting. If you are on my list and want to be deleted just let me know.

## **Ver Valley Action Group**

**Sue Frearson**

There are many examples of tasks, too minor for the Environmental Agency, along the length of the Ver, where some voluntary action in clearing litter in the river and along the paths, as well as removing blockages in the river and overhanging branches could help to improve the state of the environment. There are also occasions when local communities ask for volunteers to work on tasks such as tree planting in the vicinity of the river.

Several of our Bailiffs while walking and reporting on their stretch of the river have also collected litter, and cleared overhanging branches along the Ver. For example, John Griggs, who covers the length from the Alban Way to Holywell Hill says 'I walk my stretch of river most days and pick up the litter. Unfortunately my "litter" is more often than not, beer cans and broken spirit bottles.' John regularly fills carrier bags with such litter.

To put this on a more formal basis and to cover ourselves for Health and Safety, I would like to propose to the Society that we form an Action Group, for which we can obtain Third Party Insurance through the British Trust of Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) at a cost of about £200. All tasks would need formal risk assessments. For most tasks we would need to use our own tools, but may be able to borrow more specialist items. However, as some tasks would involve entering the water, we would need to buy a minimum of two pairs of waders.

In order not to disturb wildlife, most of the clearance work should occur in the winter months. I would welcome suggestions of specific tasks that the group could carry out on a monthly basis and am willing to devise a programme, provided I can obtain the land owners permission for access.

If you are interested in joining this Action Group or have any questions, please contact me via e-mail [sue.frearson@which.net](mailto:sue.frearson@which.net) or by phone 01727 761878, or make yourself known to me at the AGM in St Michaels on the 26th October.

## **Rubbish Dumping**

**John Cadisch**

This is becoming a huge national problem. If anyone sees anything suspicious going on, note vehicle numbers. and challenge the people directly - or, better still, and safer, phone "LitterLine" on 0845 125 8000.



## Picture Page



*Sophie Thompson with the  
21st VVS barn owl in June.*

*Below:  
Shafford barn owl larder.*



*Fruits of autumn.*



*New wooden bridges at Redbournbury, east  
ford (left), west ford, nearest to mill (right).  
[Ernie Leahy]*

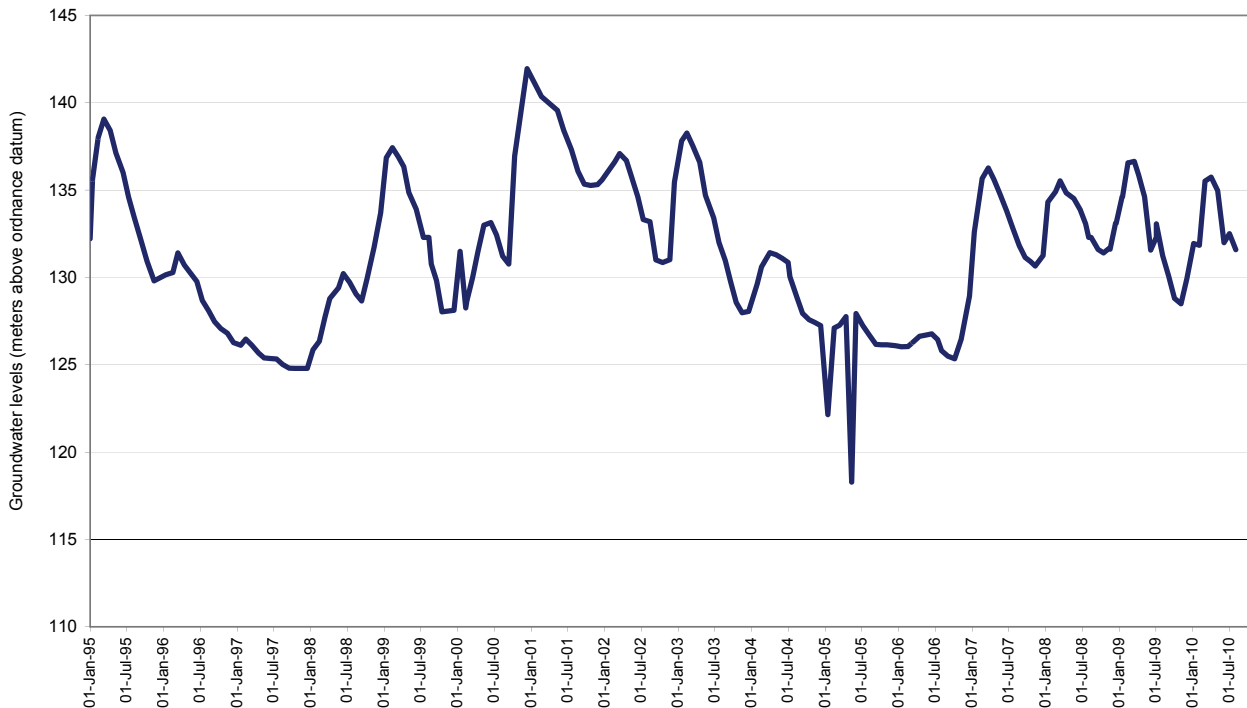




# Ver Valley Society



Groundwater levels - Ballingdon Farm 1995 - To Date  
Grid Ref: TL 0385 1404



Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn  
January 1995 to Date

