



Ver Valley Newsletter



Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society

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www.riverver.co.uk

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NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Please note that the 36th Annual General Meeting of the Ver Valley Society will be held on:

Tuesday 23rd October 2012

At St. Michael's Parish Centre (adjoining museum and church),
St. Michael's Street, St. Albans, 7.30 pm.

Parking nearby, or use museum car park.

Nominations for the various posts are invited, these should be with the Hon. Secretary (now John Fisher) no later than the preceding Friday. Persons nominated must be willing to serve. We would warmly welcome "new talent" but if no-one new comes forward the present Chairman and Committee are willing to continue in office.

As ever, the Ver Valley team will be wanting to maintain their watch over the Ver valley and its river.

Following the Chairman's review, the Annual Accounts (year to 31st August 2012), as examined by David Jinks, FCCA, will be submitted for approval. The promised ex-"FVP" monies have not so far (late September) reached us so do not feature in these latest accounts.

After general discussion and refreshments, we have been pleased to invite back John Tylor as our speaker, this time to give an illustrated talk on "Wetland Wildlife", highlighting the plants and animals to be found in ponds, lakes and streams, and looking at ways in which they have adapted over the millennia to life beside and beneath the water.

Guests are very welcome to attend but in the event of formal votes, only members may participate.

Next Meetings

John Fisher

All at 7.30 pm, please note dates:

Monday 28th January 2013:

Redbourn Village Hall (new, larger venue) – Jonathan Forgham

Tuesday 23rd April 2013:

Bricket Wood – Sandy Norman – Sopwell book author

July 2013:

Markyate – Charlie Bell - Living Rivers

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

Chairman's Notes, Walks and Water

Andy Webb

After nearly eighteen months in circulation, our Ver Valley Walks (x8) and River Ver Trail leaflets have practically all gone. At their launch in May 2011, 5,000 of each of the circular walks and 1,000 of the trail leaflets had been printed and now Jane Gardiner and myself have only a small supply, as do Herts CMS, with the bulk of the remainder on display at: St Albans Tourist Information Centre, St Albans Central Library, Verulamium Museum, Redbourn Mill, Museum of St Albans. A re-print is therefore necessary and Isabel Crozier at Herts CMS is currently organising this for us. However, this time we will have only 1,600 of each printed as uptake has lessened and storage is an issue. We hope to have the reprint (including some amendments) by the end of October.

In June it was announced that Veolia Water, Central, plus the two other, smaller Veolia water companies, had been sold by its French parent company to a consortium of investment banks and pension funds for £1.2bn (Morgan Stanley and Prudential are two of the more familiar names).

After consulting with staff, the new company will be called Affinity. You may have already received notification of this. Otherwise, the newly re-branded company will remain the same, with the same staff and offices.

Our newsletter will continue to be kindly sponsored by Veolia Environmental Services near Redbourn, which remains within the French parent company.

Verulamium Park

John Cadisch

Following Andy Webb's notes in the July Newsletter about the closure of the "FVP" organisation, here are a few general observations.

1. **Cycle Paths:**
These, formally announced last April, are being constructed to a high standard, involving the laying of a concrete surface and edging all the way from the "Fighting Cocks", across the Causeway and up the long path beside the Roman wall to King Harry Lane. These works are almost complete. The contractors were to have followed on straight away and tackled the lengthy Westminster Lodge to St. Michael's cycle path but we understand that budget constraints will delay that work until the next financial year.
2. **Parking problems:**
With so many attractions, especially the highly popular Splash Park, at the northern end of the Park, accommodating visitors is becoming an acute problem, especially over fine summer weekends. Imminent street parking restrictions in St. Michael's will intensify the difficulties for families who need to arrive by car. The SADC is being pressed to provide more spaces, if only at "peak" times. Westminster Lodge car parks are too far away.
3. **Maps featuring the Park's attractions:**
The "lectern-style" signboards at Park entry points have been displaying attractive vinyl maps for several years but these are thin and several have become damaged and need replacement. To be raised with the appropriate SADC department?
4. **Working parties:**
No specific news. Funds will be available on demand for working party tools, gloves etc. if required, or any other genuine Park requirement involving volunteers.

Walks Packs

John Cadisch

For the benefit of keen walkers, we continue to keep stocks of "Discover the River Ver" walks packs. These contain all 8 Walks folders, brought out last year. They cover every part of the river and are supplied in a special card wallet with introductory information.

Although individual walks folders can be obtained free, hearty walkers may like to have complete packs.

Please apply to Jane Gardiner for these, we ask £2.00 at meetings or £3.50 by post. [See further comments from Andy Webb on Walks folders.]

Affiliated Groups

John Cadisch

We are pleased to announce that, in addition to membership of the CPRE organisation (extending back over many years), we are now Herts & Middx Wildlife Trust corporate members. Any local events we aim to publicise.

I'm very sad to report that one of VVS most longstanding Bailiff's, Pat Camp has died. She had been a Bailiff for over 25 years and in that time hardly ever failed to send in her monthly report. VVS owes her a considerable debt. John F has written more about her elsewhere. We are fortunate that her neighbour John Pritchard has agreed to take over her stretch and we welcome him to the team.

Another Bailiff, Trevor Church, who no longer lives in the vicinity, has also decided he has to step down after several years. As a keen fisherman his reports were always very informative and we thank him for his support. I'm pleased that Giles Harrison, who was on my list as a possible reserve Bailiff, has agreed to replace Trevor and we welcome him to the team. So now I have no reserve Bailiff listed ; if that could be you please do contact me.

Now to the facts and figures. From the table you can see (and may remember!) that the June rainfall was about 300% of average and that of July over double the average. As a result the groundwater situation has continued to improve and in early September was very slightly above average for the first time this year. This is at a time of year when the aquifer level is normally falling and after the warm, dry August and first half of September we can expect this to happen over the autumn.

Month 2012	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamstead)
June	127.76 [133.32]	166.50 [+113.21]
July	130.40 [133.23]	128.4 [+78.57]
August	131.04 [132.57]	54.9 [-8.82]
September	131.04 [130.87]	[Not yet available]

Bailiffs are now measuring much reduced flows and the head of the river is in south Redbourn. However there was enough water just above the confluence in early September for my grandchildren and others to enjoy playing on the stepping stones there !

Much growth of cress and reeds filling the channels has made flow measurements difficult in many areas. There is also a problem on some paths with nettles growing vigorously; the situation has been reported to the Footpaths officer at HCC. The problems with invasive weeds, Japanese knotweed and particularly Himalayan balsam from Frogmore Pits south has been raised with EA officers. They and CMS hope to arrange some control measures in the near future, but as it important to work from upstream down, it would be helpful if anyone who notices any further north than Park Street could notify us.



Himalayan balsam.

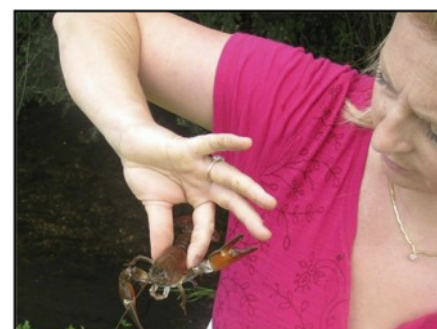
You will see from John Fisher's Bird Notes of the notable successes this year of the owl boxes put up in the valley. Other nice sightings reported by our Bailiffs include the occasional hobby, whitethroats, linnets, red-legged partridges, bullfinches, yellowhammers and little flocks of goldfinches on thistle-heads among many others of the more usual birds. The swifts, swallows and martins have now mostly departed but some of the winter visitors have begun to arrive: gadwall, teal and siskins have been seen in the Redbournbury area.

In the warmer, sunnier days of August and early September more butterflies were reported although still not in large numbers. Those seen include speckled woods, whites, meadow browns, gatekeepers, some second-brood holly blues, and plenty of late summer commas, peacocks and red admirals. Some mayflies and caddis flies have been seen and also the lovely banded demoiselles but other dragonfly numbers do seem to have been reduced by the cold wet weather of the early summer. Not many mammal reports apart from

rabbits, squirrels, a few voles, the occasional fox sighting and two road-kill badgers. Fish reports include brown trout, chubb, perch, roach, sticklebacks, and other small fish, as well as all too many signal crayfish!



Dancing on stepping stones at the Ver/Colne confluence, an idyllic spot.



Ellie and signal crayfish from the Ver.

In the last newsletter I reported that it looked as though we would have our best ever year with the VVS Barn Owl Project. For the first time we have 5 pairs of barn owls breeding in the valley and by early August we had ringed a total of 11 young barn owls from 4 nests. Despite the damp spring and early summer the four pairs are obviously finding plenty of voles and mice as all the ringed owlets were up to a very healthy weight. Also for the first time since our first ever brood in 2006 we have in one nest a clutch of 5 and the project has now delivered 41 young barn owls since 2006.

One nest box which only had a single surviving owlet from 4 eggs was particularly interesting as the adult female had continued to roost in the box with the youngster. Normally once the eggs are all hatched the parents do not stay in the box. We managed to net the adult female and I was a bit disappointed that it was not a bird we had ringed from one of the nest boxes in previous years. So we ringed the owlet and the adult female who was the fattest barn owl I had ever seen and it was obvious when we weighed her that she was carrying a second clutch of eggs.

Each year I do a check of the boxes in early September, to see if we have any late or second broods. Every year since we started in 2006 I come home disappointed having looked into about a dozen empty boxes but this year we have no less than 3 late broods! The pregnant female we ringed in July had 2 youngsters and 2 eggs still to hatch and another box had a single owlet and no less than 7 eggs. Another box we put up in early 2010 had a first but very late brood with 2 youngsters and 2 eggs.



*Red kite they don't always show forked tails.
{John Fisher}*

This means we will have had an amazing total of 7 broods this year. These late fledging youngsters will have it tough, as by the time they fledge and leave the nest it will be late October. They do have an advantage since, with the harvesting in full swing at the moment the adults will have easy pickings, as the voles and mice lose the cover provided by the growing crops.

It is reckoned that in the past 25 years spotted flycatchers have declined by 75%. They are long distance migrants arriving late in May when flying insects become plentiful. Most of the time they perch out on an exposed tree branch waiting for passing prey, then suddenly they launch themselves and snatch the unfortunate flyer in mid air before returning usually to the same perch. I suppose they are a pretty dull looking bird but it is this stunning hawking technique which sets them apart. Although they are a rather drab mousy brown they have amazing dark eyes. You may have guessed by now that they are favourites of mine and I set out to find a pair each May but it is getting harder every year. There is usually a pair or two on the Gorhambury Estate and they used to nest around Redbourn. This year one was seen at Redbournbury just before it migrated back to Africa.

Also from Redbournbury I have had several reports this summer of yellow wagtails and there were three little egrets downstream from the Mill in mid September. Little egrets have not been seen so much this summer as in 2011 but I expect they will be with us now right through the winter. Maybe next year they will join the herons in Verulam Park and breed on one of the islands. I am really pleased to have seen all four of the juvenile little owls together at Shafford. These were ringed in late June so they have done well to all survive their first 2 months out of the nest.

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

Book Review

Jane Gardiner

We are pleased to recommend to our members Jacqui Banfield-Taylor's beautifully produced, hard-backed book "The River Ver – A Meander Through Time". [A4-size, 160 pages, cloth-bound with attractive dust-jacket.] Many years of hard work culminated in the Book Launch at Moor Mill on 18th August. Jacqui has pulled together the records and notes of her late father, Ted Banfield, who was a founder member of VVS, and with many of her own researches has produced a comprehensive book about the Ver. The family's love of the Ver is evident by the many family photos and reminiscences; indeed the text is interspersed throughout with numerous photos, many not seen before.

The brief introduction by the broadcaster Chris Packham, stressing the ecological importance of our chalk rivers, is followed by tables of data and information mainly taken from the VVS website and then two chapters on archaeology and geology. The main part of the book takes the river divided into seven sections from Kensworth south to Bricket Wood, describing the landscape and history of each, with personal memories and stories of people who lived near, which paint a vivid picture of life and industries along the Ver in the past and up to the present. The well-written, easy to read style make it a pleasure to dip into for interest and information about a particular part of the river.

Jacqui intends to come to our AGM and Open Meeting on 23rd October where she will be able to sign copies which are priced at £24.99. Signed copies with a free bookmark are also available from Jacqui by contacting riverver@btinternet.com or 07792 588892 and can be delivered free locally. Or unsigned from www.halsgrove.com

After our very effective efforts last winter along the Ver at Riverside Way, Verulamium Park and the Chequers at Redbourn to clear some of the overhanging vegetation and litter, this is the proposed programme of work for our volunteers for this coming season.

Friday 12th October 2.15- 4.00 pm Riverside Way, meeting at the Drop Lane Car park to work with the St Albans School Conservation Group, under the supervision of the local warden Stephanie Wright. These are her suggestions.

- Cutting back vegetation and scrub growth in the nature reserve along the route of the newly created circular path
- Cutting back the branches from the boundary hedge along the length of the Riverside Way route
- Removing resulting cut material from all work activities to designated locations for disposal
- Management of shrub growth and tree re-growth at specified locations along the river bank and car park.

Saturday 17th November 10.00- 12.30 New Barnes Mill, (near Sopwell Hotel, Sopwell Lane)

Meeting at the Mill car park. Tasks to be decided.

Saturday 16th December 10.00 -12.30 The Chequers, Redbourn

Meeting in the car park to cut back vegetation and remove litter and debris in the river and along the banks.

Once the CMS have finalised and had approved their management plans for Riverside Way, Bricket Wood and Harpenden Hill, Redbourn, there should be opportunities for our volunteers to help, with other organisations, to implement these proposals. The aim is to enhance Riverside Way as a public amenity and to improve the Ver as a trout stream. The vegetation succession along the road cutting at Harpenden Hill has shaded out the very special chalk vegetation (including orchids) and it is hoped that this area can be opened up.

It would be very helpful, if you are interested in joining any of our working parties, if you would e-mail me sue.frearson@which.net .

I can also add your name to our e-mail list to keep you informed of any additional tasks that may arise, or changes in plan.



Summer growth in the Ver.

River Fly Monitoring - our first results

Ernie Leahy

Two members of the VVS Riverfly team did our first trial on 31st July downstream from Bow Bridge, St Albans.

Ernie Leahy and John Fisher were supervised by Josh Hellon from the Environment Agency who helped us with the procedure and the identification of larvae found in the chalkstream.

After placing the samples in the shallow examination trays we were able to identify and approximate the following .

20 Cased Caddisfly larvae
5 Blue Winged Olive Larvae
150 Olives (Baetidae)
250 Gammarus (Water Shrimps)

No Mayfly or Stonefly larvae found on this first sampling but we also found

3 small Signal Crayfish
2 Three Spined Stickleback
Unidentified worms and insect larvae

Findings will be uploaded to our monitoring charts. Further checks will be done at regular intervals and Redbourn Fishery member Clive Pickering will be our local co-ordinator .

Andy Webb's New River Walks

Andy Webb

In the second part of this year our Chairman is leading several walks with a "river flavour", details below:

Andy Webb's new River Walks July to December 2012 (in association with Herts CMS)

Sunday 7th October, 10.30am

'Bull. Brocket and Bunyan'. A River Lea walk.

Start/finish at St Helens Church, Lych Gate, High Street, Wheathampstead.

6-7 miles.

Monday 5th November, 10.30am

'Waterwheels, Wells and Whit'll Watercress.' A River Mimram walk.

Start/finish at Whitwell War Memorial, eastern end of High Street, Whitwell.

6 miles.

Sunday 2nd December 10.30am

'Sand, Sewerage and Pumping Stations.' A River Ver walk.

Start/finish at Moor Mill, Smug Oak Lane, Colney Street.

6-7 miles.

Pat Camp - An Appreciation

John Fisher

Pat Camp, who along with husband Paul was a founder member of the Ver Valley Society back in 1976, has sadly died following a cardiac arrest after a heart operation on 21 August.

I first became acquainted with Pat when we lost the family dog near Shafford one Saturday afternoon probably in the early eighties. She was keen to help us find him and kept a look out that evening. Happily I was able to phone her the next morning with good news. She was almost as happy as my family to hear that he had returned home under his own steam and for the next few years she probably knew our dogs more than she did me. Until recent years she always had a Golden Retriever or two and we often met walking along the Ver and talked dogs.

It was only when we started the Ver Valley Barn Owl Project in 2006 that I really got to know her well as she was our most enthusiastic supporter. Whenever I phoned to ask if it was okay to come and check the boxes or ring the owls she would always come out see how they had done.

She was absolutely delighted this year when we were able to ring four little and five barn owls at Shafford. In fact it was only a couple of days after we ringed the barn owls that Pat collapsed and was taken to hospital. I had borrowed the Camps' ladder that day to get to the nest and typical of Pat when I offered to put the ladder away she said, "No leave it there I am going to prune the wisteria as my son in law is away and he does not do it properly". By the time we had packed up our gear she was up the ladder with husband Paul on the bottom rung. Some lady!

Her happy smile and easy charm will be a sad loss to the Ver community. The attached picture was taken when we ringed the first Shafford barn owls in 2009.



Golden Wedding

John Fisher

Our president, Peter Fox and his wife June celebrated 50 years of marriage on 29th September. Peter, (known as Podge), was for many years our secretary before standing down last year to become president. They were both born and have lived in Redbourn throughout their lives and the Fox family have always been passionate about the Ver Valley. Their family - and there are lots of them - treated "Podge" and June to a special mention in the 27th September "Herts. Advertiser."

We wish them all the best and offer our warm congratulations.

Picture Page



Emperor Dragonfly male, Ver Valley, August 2012.
[Ernie Leahy]



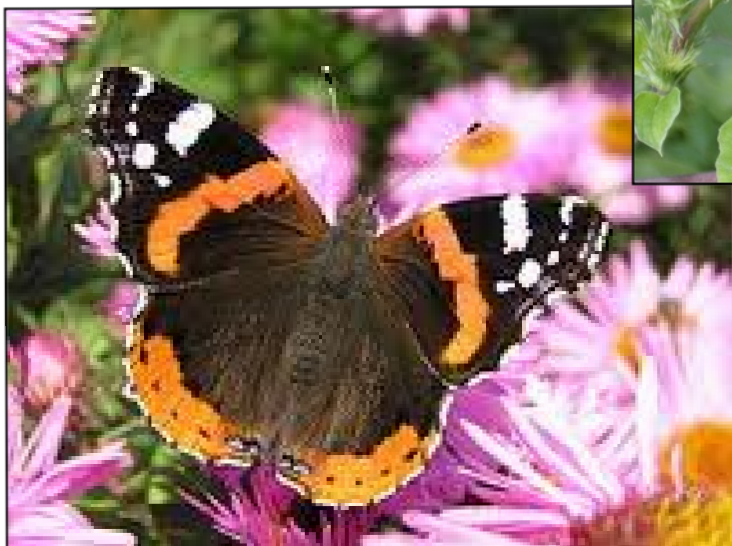
Emperor dragonfly female, egg-laying.
[Ernie Leahy]



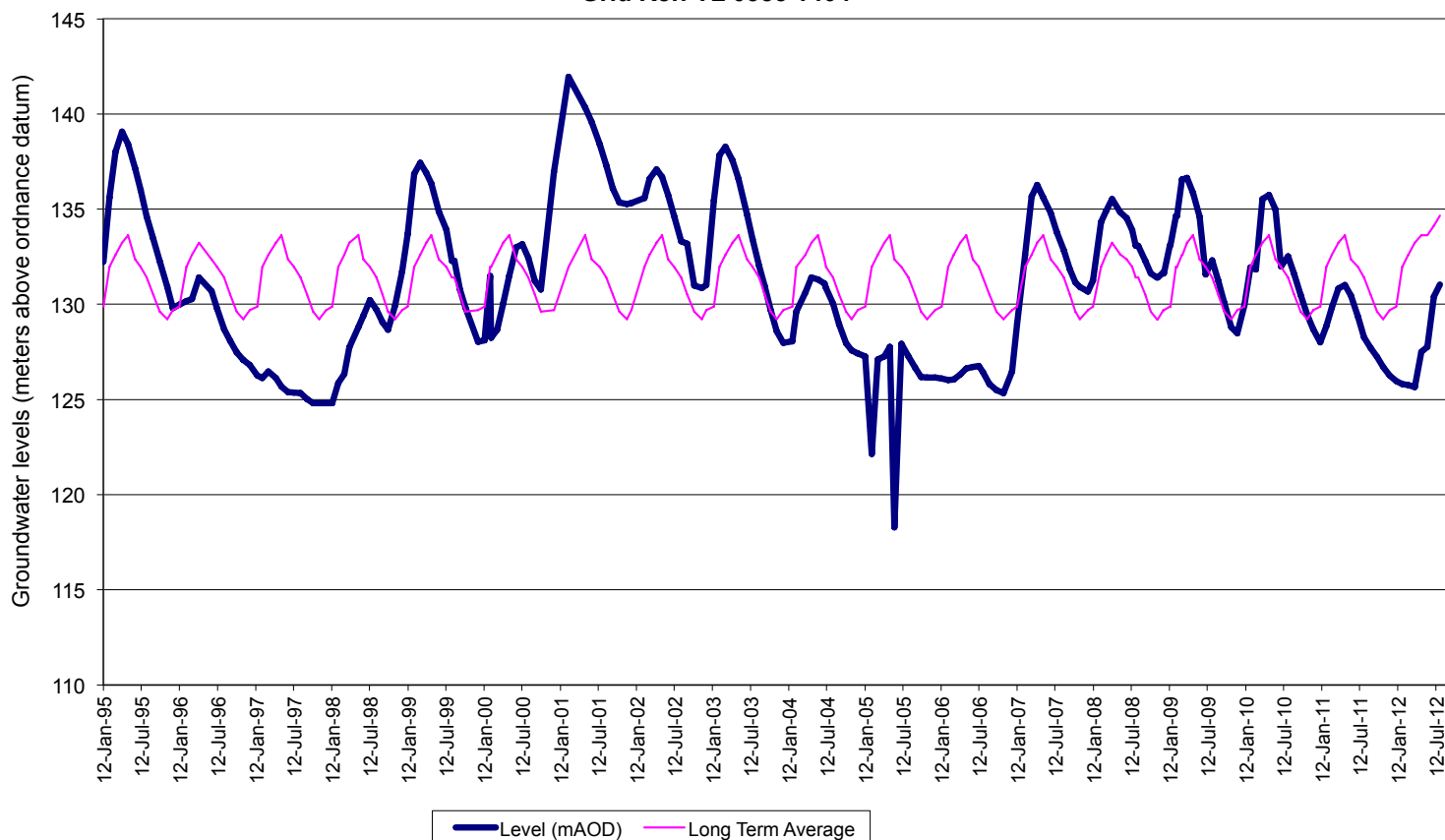
Silvery moth - a day-flying migrant.
[Ernie Leahy]



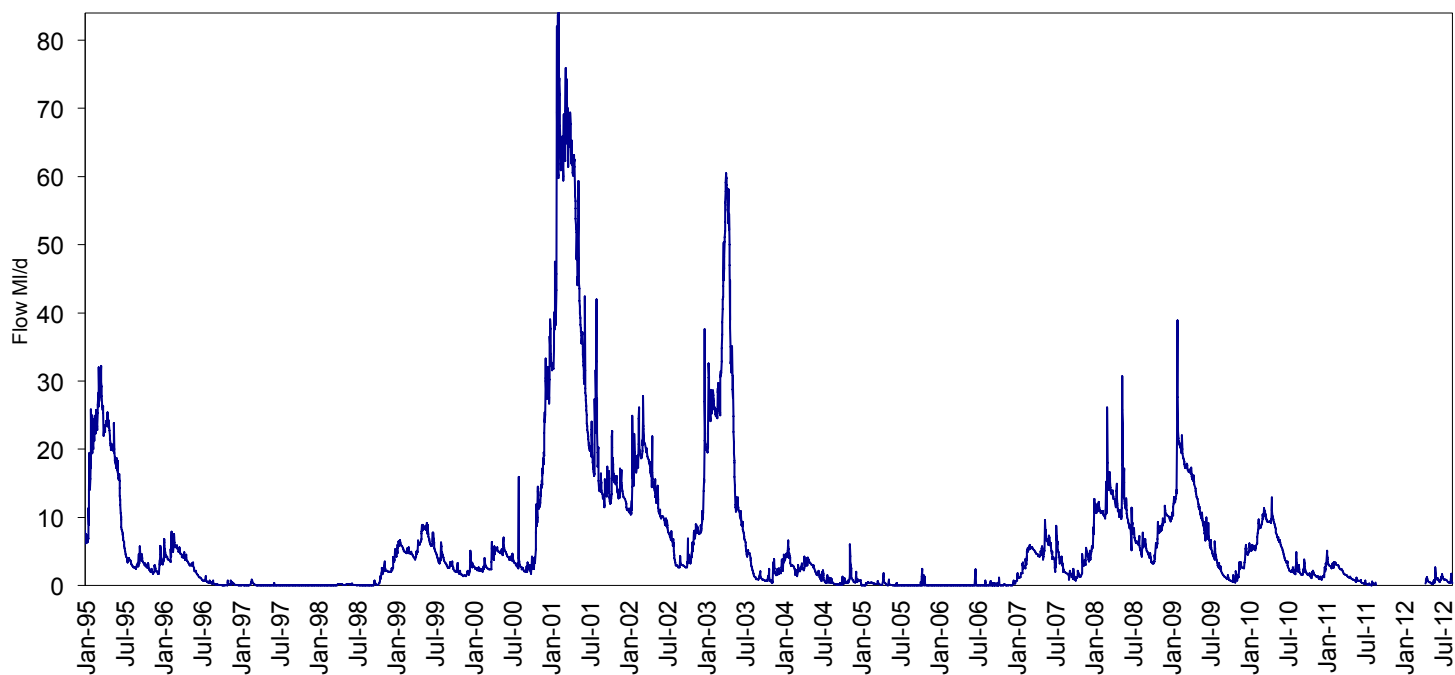
Red admiral (left) and Peacock (above).



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



Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn
January 1995 to Date



**"The Ver Valley Society would like to thank the following for valuable assistance:
 Affinity Water (former Veolia Water) for providing above flow and groundwater charts;
 and Veolia Environmental Services for newsletter printing and distribution."**