



## Notice of 43rd Annual General Meeting

**Tuesday 22nd October 2019, 7.30pm**

**St Michael's Parish Centre, St Albans AL3 4SL**

Free parking in NCP Verulamium Car Park after 6.30pm

Nominations for Chairman and Committee are invited.

These should reach the Secretary, John Fisher, by **Friday 18th October**.

Proposer and seconders will be required.

All the present committee are willing to stand for a further year.

We plan to spend some time discussing the state of the Ver and the challenges it faces.

The Lea looking resplendent in 2015  
©DJJohnson



After refreshments our guest speaker will be **Sarah Perry**, HMWT Living Rivers Officer

### What's Happening O'er the Lea Valley?

Herts & Middx Wildlife Trust are catchment hosts for the Lea and Sarah will give us an insight into the health of the chalk streams that feed the Lea and the work she is leading to restore the rivers and their habitat.

#### SAVE THE DATES

##### Next Open Meetings:

**Thursday 20th February 2020**

Redbourn Village Hall, AL3 7LW

*Speaker* Graham White, Senior Wetland Ecologist RSPB

**Tracks and Signs of Mammals: Have I Got Poo's for You?**

**Tuesday 16th June 2020**

St Stephen Parish Centre, Bricket Wood AL2 3PJ

*Speaker* Steve Brooks, Natural History Museum Entomologist  
**Chalk stream invertebrates and Riverfly Low Flow Protocol**

*Please note: All meetings are free entrance to members and non-members. Please check our website or social media a few days prior to the meeting in case of any late changes. We welcome donations towards the cost of refreshments, hall hire etc. Suggested £2 per person.*

#### LATEST NEWS



### Record Groundwater Low

Sadly when it came, it wasn't any great surprise but the groundwater figure at Ballingdon Farm at the head of the Ver Valley was the lowest for August since records began (1975). The effect on the river has been devastating. Presently (mid-September) the Ver rises well south of Redbourn at Redbournbury Fishery. On 21st September reports began to come in of the river drying up from Ye Olde Fighting Cocks through to Cottonmill and beyond.

Dry riverbed at Dolittle Mill, south of Redbourn 14.09.19  
No water in Verulamium Park below the fish ladder 21.09.19



# A river of blue

My apologies for the slightly late arrival of the Society's autumn newsletter but its publication was delayed so that we could bring you something cheerful to reflect on. The sight of dead brown trout at Shafford Mill in July was bad enough and the river drying up at Dolittle near Redbournbury and then through Verulamium Park was worse still.

Enough was enough! So thank you to everyone who turned out to celebrate World Rivers Day on 22nd September and joined our hastily called 'Protest in the Park' because we barely have a chalk stream to look at. It was a wonderful demonstration of how much we all love our river and are bemused at how it can disappear without so much as a hosepipe ban or a drought being called. We won't stand by and see it happen again.

A sea of more than 300 turned the dry Ver blue, if only for 20 minutes. It was a truly memorable morning and I hope a watershed moment.

We were unable to reach everyone in time so if you didn't hear from us about the Protest in the Park - please make sure that the Membership Secretary has your correct email address for the future.



## Frustrating summer

It started so promisingly when we contributed to the Chalk Streams in Crisis Dossier that led to the Parliamentary debate in July. However, having met with Affinity Water and been invited to meetings with the Environment Agency over the summer the former stalled on imposing restrictions on water use and the latter avoided calling a drought. The net result is that the Ver has disappeared without so much as a sympathetic word.

Groundwater resources are simply not enough to supply current demand in the South East and the gulf between

supply and demand is growing. The answer lies in a whole host of measures: better education to curb demand, rainwater harvesting and grey water reuse at home, improved infrastructure like reservoirs and all of these need to come in double quick time.

We'll keep working to make things happen faster and it's refreshing to know St Albans Council are making strong representations locally too. We'll keep updating our Top 10 Tips on how you can help on our website [www.riverver.co.uk](http://www.riverver.co.uk), so that you can do your bit as well.

Photos: @ChilternStreams



One consultation that would be good to respond to closes on the 11th October – apologies if your delayed newsletter arrives on or after that date! It's the Defra consultation on Personal Water Use. Details at [www.riverver.co.uk/tell-the-government](http://www.riverver.co.uk/tell-the-government)

## MEMBERSHIP

by PETER HILL

# Welcome

**A warm welcome to our new members and thanks for joining the society:**

Jane Carmichael, Pam Lidford, Ruth Pitchford, Zoe Tabraham, Steven and Helen Brown, Stephanie Rainbow, Kate Newton, Margaret Brown, Tim Gannon, Miles Poynton, Andrew Davis, Claire Sim, Denise Murphy, Steve Smith, Nathan Budd, Edward Bailey, Susan Hulme, Susan Taylor, Anne Barker, Lindsay Stevens, Keith Loud, Rosie

Lambert, David Bushnell, Alan Thompson, Steven Preece, Melanie Woods, Karl Davey, Alison Debenham.

We hope that you will enjoy the Society's events, participate freely and maybe join the monthly working group that helps improve the Ver and its environment.

# Beetles and snails

Since May there has been a steady increase in low flow invertebrates and a decrease in the normal Riverfly samples, particularly Gammarus (water shrimp) in most catches. This confirms what we all can see, that the Ver is struggling, with no water at Luton Lane for 4.5 years, none flowing through Redbourn, and the encouraging spring near the Chequers discovered by Bob May in the spring has now dried up.



Gammarus

It may be that since Steve Brooks has held his Riverfly Tutorials, the last of which was at Sopwell Nunnery Green (Alban Bridge) in July, our identification skills have improved, but much more likely we have not seen the numbers of Demoiselle fly nymphs, blood worms, pond beetles

and snails before which now indicate low flows from Dolittle Mill down to Riverside Way.

Bruce Banfield-Taylor sampling at Sopwell Manor Meadows  
Photo: Jacqui Banfield-Taylor



Our thanks to Steve for his invaluable tutorials, which are improving our team's identification skills, providing the EA with a wider picture of what is happening in the Ver. We look forward to the publication of his new Riverfly protocol to help us all identify the low flow species.

Affinity Water plan to start work on their contribution to the Ver Restoration Project in September at Hedges Farm (Sopwell Manor Meadows). Bruce Banfield-Taylor has been monitoring the Riverfly along this stretch since 2014, so his results should act as a baseline to compare future Riverfly data, to see if the stock fencing and narrowing of the river to improve flow and prevent encroachment leads to higher Riverfly numbers.

Our thanks go out to Dick Downs for the Riverfly sampling he has been doing at Frogmore Road Bridge, but unfortunately he has found it increasingly difficult to sample. He will continue as bailiff from Frogmore to Moor Mill.

Four new volunteers will be attending Riverfly training sessions at Digswell in September. I look forward to them joining the team.



Riverfly invertebrate monitoring is a form of Citizen Science in which trained volunteers monitor the health of rivers across the country. Each site has a trigger level set dependent on the number of species and their usual abundance. If the score falls below the trigger level this indicates contamination of the water and the EA are informed. The VVS monitors 19 sites on the Ver.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

by JOHN PRITCHARD

# Instagram launch



The Society's social media audience continues to grow and posts can easily pass 10,000 impressions and it's nearer 100,000 for something of topical interest.

In August we took our first steps on Instagram (@vervalleysoc) – so far it's been an opportunity to show the wildlife of the Ver Valley but it's early days.

Don't forget to keep an eye on the bottom of the Society's website for the latest news and nature notes that we put out in between newsletters.



# Reports from the Riverbank

You will doubtless be aware that the Ver has been suffering badly this summer, so our Bailiffs have had very low flows to measure and have been hampered by much growth of weeds and reeds in the channel. Now at the start of September the first tiny measurable flow begins in the valley below Dolittle Mill, south of Redbourn. However there has been plenty of wildlife to report and some good displays of wild flowers. All the usual mammals, including a bank vole, hares and muntjac with signs of moles and badgers have been seen. Fish reports have been of bullheads, sticklebacks, chub, roach, gudgeon and brown trout although sadly some of these were dead in low water with a temperature of 20°C!

## Butterflies and beetles

Many butterflies have been active on fine days including tortoiseshells, peacocks, commas, gatekeepers, meadow browns, speckled woods, marbled whites, skippers and painted ladies. Recently a tiger moth was seen and cinnabar moths are about. Emperor and various hawk dragonflies have been reported as well as both blue-tailed and red-eyed damselflies and demoiselles. An unusual report was of a Roesel's bush cricket and other insects seen have been various ladybirds, bumble and other bees, a wasp nest in a river bank, soldier beetles and thick-kneed flower beetles – a few of our Bailiffs are excellent etymologists!



## Balsam and berries

Although now nearly over, flowering plants in or just beside the water have included water-mint, water figwort and water-forget-me-not, and on the banks colour provided by mallow, water willow-herb, comfrey, ragwort, hemlock, hogweed, pignut, yarrow, common mullein, burdock and some orange balsam. Less desirable Himalayan balsam is still prevalent, though cleared in some areas by the efforts of our Action team. Unfortunately Japanese knotweed is also doing rather too well in places. Autumn berries that have now formed on bushes alongside the river are beginning to colour up.

**Bailiffs please note** we will probably be gathering with the Committee, Riverfly monitors and with the Action Group after their December working party on 21st for pre-Christmas drinks at the Chequers, Redbourn. I will contact you with the details nearer the time.



Among the usual birds some nice sighting include yellow wagtail visitors as well as the regular grey ones, a young cuckoo, a goldcrest, a nuthatch, some whitethroats and there are also red-legged partridges, egrets, skylarks and yellowhammers in the valley.

Photos: left – Painted Lady, Roesel's Bush Cricket; above right – Water Mint,

## LIST OF BAILIFFS

Below is the list of the team and their stretches. Please say hello if you see them when you are out and alert them if you notice any issues.

1. R Colne to Moor Mill	Sue and Martin Frearson*	sue.frearson@virginmedia.com
2. Moor Mill to Burydell Lane	Dick Downs	d.downs2@toilets.org.uk
3. Burydell Lane to New Barnes Mill	Bruce Banfield-Taylor*	via janegardiner@madasafish.com
4. New Barnes Mill to Sopwell Mill	Giles Harrison	gpharrison13@gmail.com
5. Sopwell Mill to Holywell Hill	Catherine and Derrick Davies*	via janegardiner@madasafish.com
6. Holywell Hill to Bluehouse Hill	Vivien Gates	via janegardiner@madasafish.com
7. Bluehouse Hill to Bow Bridge	Roger Hall	via janegardiner@madasafish.com
8. Bow Bridge to Redbournbury	John Pritchard*	johnp@riverver.co.uk
9. Redbournbury to Dolittle	Jane Gardiner	janegardiner@madasafish.com
10. Dolittle to Redbourn Bypass	Robert May*	bmay@i-c-a.demon.co.uk
11. Chequers to Porridge Pot (and Redbourn golf course to Luton Lane)	John Fisher	john.fisher@btconnect.com
12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)	Peter Hill	members@riverver.co.uk

\* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

# The Ver suffering

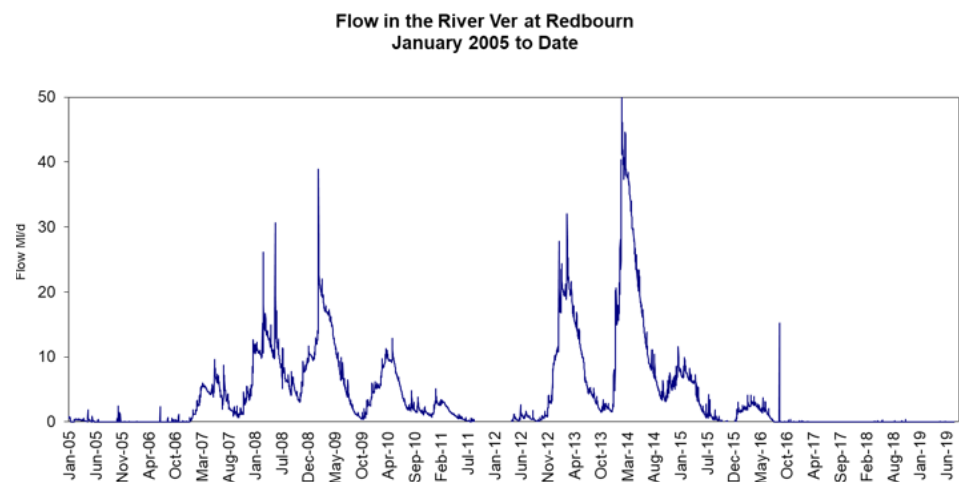
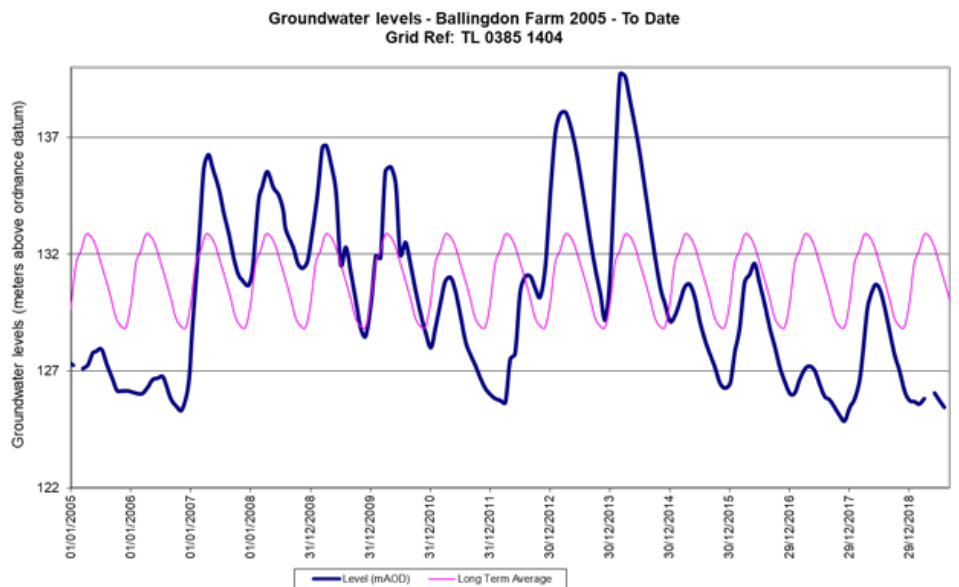
Despite some downpours much of the early summer was very warm and even hot, causing much growth and evaporation, so our river is now in a very sorry state. Even where there is any water our Bailiffs are measuring exceptionally low flows. As you can see only too well from the tables and graphs, the situation is very serious.

There was a little rain at the beginning of August followed by some exceptionally hot weather and the forecast for September does not indicate much rain to help the Ver to struggle on to winter. We must hope for a few really wet months this autumn and winter to give the aquifer some chance to recover. There is still no flow at all north of Dolittle Mill, south of Redbourn.

Below: Ver by A5183 at Dolittle, south of Redbourn; A thin Ver at Holywell Hill, St Albans  
© Alison Debenham



Months 2019	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [ $\pm$ average] (figures from Rothamstead)
		<b>2018 Annual total 683.3 [-49.7]</b>
<b>May</b>	126.0 [134.1]	42.8 [-11.89]
<b>June</b>	126.06 [133.32]	70.8 [+17.5]
<b>July</b>	125.76 [133.23]	44.5 [-4.8]
<b>August</b>	125.45 [132.56]	45.2 [-18.53]
<b>September</b>	125.08 [130.87]	Not yet available



We are grateful to the Environment Agency and Affinity Water for supplying groundwater and river flow charts.

Our thanks to Veolia Environmental Services for printing and distributing our newsletter.

# 2020 Programme

The programme for next year is beginning to take shape. After a successful Bat Walk in August – Noctule, Leisler's, Daubenton's and Soprano Pipistrelles were all seen – Josh Kalms has kindly agreed to run one again



next year. Other notable contributors will be Haydon Bailey with a Walk on the Kensworth Chalk in Feb/March and Kate Bretherton looking at Ver Valley Trees in Spring. Look out for more details on the website, social media and in our February newsletter.

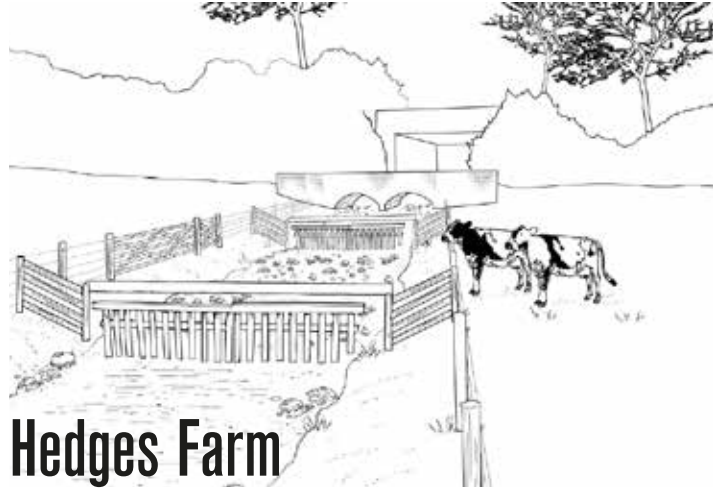
Photo: Josh on the lookout for bats

## MORE NEWS

# Fish Rescue in Verulamium Park

The rapidly shrinking Ver in September was the tipping point for a large shoal of fish we had been keeping an eye on them through several dry summers. The local Environment Agency fisheries team have been walking the river more frequently this year and with the fish trapped in a receding pool of the river in the Park decided to act. The team waded into the muddy waters and electrofished the section from Ye Olde Fighting Cocks to St Michael's.

A few brown trout, including the 2lb beauty pictured, chub, roach and gudgeon and at least one perch were netted. to be relocated downstream in the Frogmore area where there is a little more water in the Ver. If and when the water returns, we are assured there's an EA fish restocking programme being planned.



## Hedges Farm

We received revised detailed design drawings for this site, from New Barnes Mill to Park St on both sides of the A414 out of the blue, on 19 August, not having been previously consulted! It seems that because there is only one land owner and one tenant and no footpath diversions are involved a restoration scheme can be drawn up and agreed between them and the Countryside and Rights of Way team at County Hall No public consultation was needed.

Affinity are funding this and work was planned to start from Sept 9, as follows:

1. Stock fencing to be installed along both banks. This will prevent livestock poaching within the riparian corridor and the associated increase fine sediment input due to reduced bank stability.
2. Formalisation of cattle drinking stations, cattle crossing points and installation of water gates. This will allow the cattle controlled access to drinking water, and to move between grazing areas whilst protecting the river banks and bed.
3. Installation of benches (berms) within the channel to create a more sinuous planform i.e. riffles and pools. This will improve flow velocity and variability.
4. Enhancement of historic backwater pond (the old mill stream) for biodiversity.
5. Tree remedial works to allow more natural light into the river channel. This will encourage marginal and in-channel chalk stream vegetation to grow.

This is standard enhancement work for grazed water meadows and we welcome it. It is the first of its kind on the Ver though similar work has been done on the Chess and other chalk streams. Fortunately we have Riverfly data for the three reaches north of the A414 so we can assess the future impact of this restoration scheme. The River Ver Trail through the site will remain open, but diversions may be in place for public safety. Asset Scientist and project manager Melissa Ahmet has invited the committee to see the works, so we will report back in the next issue. She will be updating their webpage [www.affinitywater.co.uk/riverver](http://www.affinitywater.co.uk/riverver) as the works progress. Please note there is no connection between this scheme and the District Council's RiverVer Restoration Project.

# Nest box report

It has been a very good year for barn owls in the Ver Valley with three of the VVS boxes being used by barn owls and 8 youngsters ringed in June. Another barn owl box was used by little owls and we ringed their four young also in June. The most successful box over the years since 2006 was always the one at Redbournbury Farm but it has not been used by barn owls since 2016. The feral pigeons which gather in great numbers around the farm yard have taken over the box and have raised their usual single chick at least twice each year.

Another box which had two young in early June had a major setback when the fixing to the tree failed and it fell to the ground. It was decided to leave the box on the ground rather than try to refix it and just hope that foxes would not have an easy meal. Fortunately the adults continued to feed them so they successfully

fledged and flew in early July. We refixed the box in August after the young had dispersed and no longer using the box to day roost.

Pierre Cowlard, a new VVS member, has been a great help to me this summer coming along to most of the checking and ringing visits. Many thanks Pierre it is much safer with a man on the bottom step!

## Clumsy kestrels

Although we have had six kestrel boxes in place for several years none had ever been used until this year. However much to my surprise a kestrel box on an oak tree played host to clutch of five young kestrels, three of which fledged successfully and remained around the tree for about three weeks as they progressed from clumsy first attempts to fly to the accomplished flying of adult kestrels. It was a treat to watch their progress.

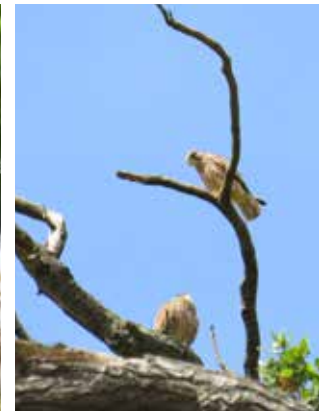
On Heron Island in Verulamium Park the little egrets returned to breed for the fourth year. This year there were

six occupied nests in April but due to heavy rain and hail in May and June two nests failed. The other four were successful but only six survived to be ringed as against ten in 2018.

## Young cuckoo

Other good sightings this summer have included a juvenile cuckoo passing through on its journey to winter in Africa. It is some years now since an adult cuckoo has been seen or heard along the valley in the spring and this are a species which along with turtle doves is really struggling to remain a breeding bird in Southern England. We have had the usual gathering of post breeding yellow wagtails particularly near Redbournbury. A really unusual record was of a marsh tit near Shafford, a species I have not seen around Redbourn for at least ten years.

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



## REVITALISING THE RIVER VER PROJECT

# Verulamium Park

There has been a change in the St Albans City and District Council leadership since the elections in May and we understand that the new portfolio holders have been studying the details of the scheme closely. We are awaiting more news and it seems that the topic will be covered at the Full Council meeting on 9th October.

The Ver has no water to give the boating lake



# Balsam Bashing

It's the summer and what does the Action Group do every year – pull Himalayan Balsam!

We started this year's campaign in **June at Park Street**. Our 12 volunteers divided into 2 teams; the in-channel team worked their way up to Burydell Lane whilst the bank team worked down into Frogmore Pits. The late spring had delayed the germination of the balsam and in many places the plants were very small – you needed a keen eye to recognise the plants and pull them.

**July** saw a return to **Moor Mill** where

there was plenty of Balsam to tackle – some had either grown extremely quickly or might have been lurking in the undergrowth over winter, see the photo. The day was memorable for the down pour that caught many of us out. We were drenched in minutes the trees offered little shelter. The sun returned by lunch-time in time for the customary drink at the Mill.

We moved down towards the **Confluence in August**. If you have not been down there lately – the willow trees have been thinned which made our access easier and has really opened up the area. In August we had 16 volunteers pulling – the same as in July.

Will we ever see a better control of Himalayan Balsam? Last year samples of seed were collected from Frogmore Pits and sent for analysis to CABI. They have advised that the “our” Himalayan Balsam belongs to Group 2, plant genotype E, originating from Wangat Valley, Kashmir, India. As yet there are no rust spores for this, the most common genotype of Himalayan Balsam found in the South East. So it looks like we are going to have to continue pulling balsam until a biological control is identified.

So thank you to all the volunteers who have put up with stinging nettles, rain and sun in an endeavour to stop this invasive species spreading.



## AUTUMN PROGRAMME 2019

**Sat 19th October, 10.00–12.00**

*Riverside Way* where the main task will be pollarding willows to keep them under control.

**Sat 16th November, 10.00-12.00**

*Sopwell Nunnery Green* where we will be working both sides of Cottonmill Lane to improve the light levels to the river.

**Sat 21st December, 10.00-12.00**

*Chequers Redbourn*. I anticipate that we will be working on the margins of the woodland to clear the river bed from the “head of the river” through to the confluence.

See website for details [www.riverver.co.uk/current-year](http://www.riverver.co.uk/current-year)

## YOUR COMMITTEE

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Peter Fox, MBE

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mfrearson@ntlworld.com

### Committee Member

John Cadisch  
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john.cadisch@ntlworld.com

### HOTLINES

EA Incident Hotline:  
0800 80 70 60  
(Report all environmental incidents)

EA Floodline: 0345 988 1188

Flytipping reports  
St Alban's Council:  
01727 809019  
email:  
wastemanagementservices@  
stalbens.gov.uk

Water Leaks (Affinity):  
0800 376 5325