



AGM POSTPONED

Thursday 22nd October 2020

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

Regrettably, we have decided to postpone the AGM as an October meeting in The Parish Centre is no longer a practical solution. The AGM will be held over until February 2021. In the event that a physical meeting is not possible then, the AGM will be held as an online event. Full details will be published in the February newsletter.

The talk is on!

Wed 11th November 2020, 7pm: Our scheduled guest speaker, archaeologist **Dr Wendy Morrison**, will present **Beacons of the Past: 8000 years of human activity in a chalk landscape** as a live online webinar with a Q&A session. Iron Age hillforts in the Chilterns, their chalk streams and role human settlement will be central to the talk. You can book your place with this link: <http://ow.ly/jWIS50BFSXI> or go to the Society's website riverver.co.uk for registration details. The event will be hosted by Bury Water Meadows Group, defenders of the Lark and Linnet chalk streams, who have become experts at hosting online presentations during lockdown.



Wendy pondering the past of the Hughenden Stream

LATEST NEWS

A topsy-turvy year

After a very wet winter and a dry spring, summer has been exceptionally wet. The river remains encouragingly full of water from Redbourn southwards and there's even been the barest of flows recorded between Markyate and Redbourn on a few days in late August. In keeping with climate change forecasts, the rain has been heavy and sudden – over 40mm in a couple of hours on two occasions. It's been mostly the fields that have borne the flash flooding but spare a thought for the householders in Markyate and Sopwell – and the allotment holders of Burydell Lane in Park Street who have been suffered from the resultant deluge.



Redbournbury water meadows; Bell Meadow, Verulamium Park ©Alison Debenham; Burydell Allotments ©Steve Preece

SAVE THE DATES

Next Open Meetings:

AGM. Tuesday 23rd February 2021
Redbourn Village Hall, AL3 7LW
Speaker: Steve Brooks Natural History Museum Entomologist
The Ecology and Biology of Riverflies

Tuesday 16th June 2021 tbc
St Stephen Parish Centre, Bricket Wood AL2 3PJ

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.

Covid Conundrum

It's been a tough year for everyone and the Society has had its share of disappointment with events curtailed too. We are erring on the cautious side in restarting activities but we are looking at inventive ways to get things moving again. The AGM may well have to become an online affair and the Action Group might have to operate in groups of six for some time. Please keep an eye on the website for updates.

Campaigning

Twelve months ago, I stood on a stump near a dry River Ver and expressed frustration that such a disastrous event could have happened with precious little action from the Environment Agency or Affinity Water. What's actually happened since?

Fortunately, it rained heavily last autumn and we've just had the wettest August on record, so nature has averted a disastrous drought this time around. There have been some encouraging words from the EA and Affinity but actions are a little thin on the ground. Our request to close Kensworth pumping station in exchange for abstraction reductions planned in St Albans in 2024 is still under consideration and a November meeting should shed more light on the matter. We've been reassured that Friar's Wash will be 'properly closed'. It had been taking up to 3 million litres a day in recent years but will now only be used in emergencies. We await official confirmation.

More widely we've been involved in CRAG, a Chilterns initiative to get a new approach to chalk stream revitalisation including more abstraction reductions. This in turn has spawned a Chalk Stream Summit called by



Looking for the Ver



A record wet August
©Melanie Woods

Environment Minister, Rebecca Pow for mid-October – so there is progress on a national front. Local MPs including Daisy Cooper have started an All Parliamentary Party Group for chalk streams. The water companies are co-operating regionally to look at future water resources and local groups are collaborating through the Chalk Aquifer Alliance to bring pressure to bear. There is progress but it's slow.

Rowing up the Ver

In June, I received an email from Dorothy Grummitt's son, Peter, to say that his mother had recently died at the age of 95. Dorothy was a long-time member and former Park Street resident who used to volunteer when there was work to be done at the water cress beds. What's more, she would regale her family with stories as a little girl of rowing in a boat into St Albans from Park Street. We will add that to our valuable testimonies of how the Ver was less than 100 years ago.



Rowing to St Albans? 1939, looking downstream towards Hedges Farm before the A414 was built
©Jacqui Banfield-Taylor

RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP!

September is the time that many memberships come up for renewal. You will have received an email from the Membership Secretary if yours is due. Please make the effort to rejoin and support us in our continuing fight to see more water in the Ver more often. The more supporters we have, the stronger it makes us and the better informed and prepared everyone is, should we need to take sudden action!

Join today at www.riverver.co.uk/join-us





Spring and Summer 2020

Thankfully a few of our team of Riverfly monitors were able to resume their monthly sampling in mid-May, when the flow was low and Riverfly numbers were giving some concern. In particular the Red, at Dolittle, Redbournbury Fisheries and Redbournbury Mill, where although the river looked healthy and there were some Bullheads and Sticklebacks, there were very few invertebrates. The samples were below the trigger levels set by the Environment Agency, so I contacted the EA Incident line in July to declare a Riverfly breach. We have been given an incident number and understand that they are investigating. Subsequent samples our monitors collected in the Redbourn area in



July and August were again below the trigger levels. Coincidentally this was after some of the deluges we had which caused extensive run off from the M1, especially concerning as some research suggests that copper in brake linings is linked to river pollution.

Top: Good sampling at Riverside Way
 Top right: Identifying the sample
 Above: Caseless caddis
 Above right: River Red in poor condition
 Photos: ©Melanie Woods



Volunteers welcome

It was a pleasure to meet and demonstrate sampling to three more potential Riverfly monitors who are waiting for the training run by Allen Beechey and Simon Stebbings to resume. I would welcome more volunteers, particularly as we are advised to work in pairs for safety reasons. Unfortunately there are a number of our team who have been unable to resume sampling due to ill health, so I wish them a speedy recovery.

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 usually indicates contamination of the water and the EA are informed. The VVS monitors 19 sites on the Ver.

Welcome

I am pleased to say our membership is steadily growing and we now have 284 paying members. Thank you to the 23 new members who have joined since the last newsletter, and a warm welcome to:

Angela Thurstan, Anna Chatwin, Veronique Corney, Karen Hurford, Elaine Hartless, Mark Bishop, Robin Warner, Andrew Taylor, Emma Tyers, Anthony White, Carol Gibson, Anthony Helm, Greg Smith, Seamus Gaffney, Lizzie Weller, Kevin Keenan, Michael Healey, David Brockway,

Cath Ranzetta, Gordon Baisley, Charlotte Lilley, Isobel Michie and Siobhain Robertson. Many thanks for joining the society and I hope you will soon be able to enjoy the society's events and join the monthly working group that helps keep the Ver as a wonderful local asset.

A very wet summer

We are very pleased to welcome Sue Rowe to our team of Bailiffs. Sue has been covering the top of the valley from Flamstead to Markyate for the past couple of months.

In early August flows were falling back markedly but then the heavens opened giving us an exceptionally wet month and causing flooding in around New Barnes Mill area and Burydell Lane allotments. So the flows now being measured are much healthier – in many places there is much vegetation growth in the river channel preventing easy measurement.

Abundant wildlife

The bailiffs have been reporting plenty of wildlife, in particular it seems to have been a good year

for butterflies with all the following seen; marbled, small and large whites, speckled woods, meadow browns, gatekeepers, commas, small tortoiseshells, peacocks, and red admirals. Dragon and damselflies include southern hawkler, common darters, blue and large red damsels and banded demoiselles.

Birds too have been abundant; particularly nice reports include 120+ yellow wagtails as well as several sightings of the more usual grey wagtails, some kingfishers, willow and sedge warblers, many gold and some bullfinches, yellowhammers, skylarks, and chiffchaffs.

Occasionally muntjacs join the more regular mammal sightings, and



among fish reports are chub, brown trout and bullheads.

A splash of colour

Many wild flowers have provided colourful displays this summer, among them rosebay, great and hoary willow-herbs, common mallow, ragwort, yarrow, purple loosestrife, scabious, pignut, and some wild mint, water crowfoot and forget-me-nots. Hemlock and fat hen have been plentiful. Blackberries, sloes, hips, haws and crab apples are now in the hedgerows.



Top right: Mint Leaf Beetle
Above: Speckled Wood
Left: Ragwort
Middle right: Haws and sloes
Bottom right: Great Willowherb



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 & Peter Hill	john.fisher@btconnect.com
12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)	Sue Rowe	members@riverver.co.uk suer1953@yahoo.co.uk

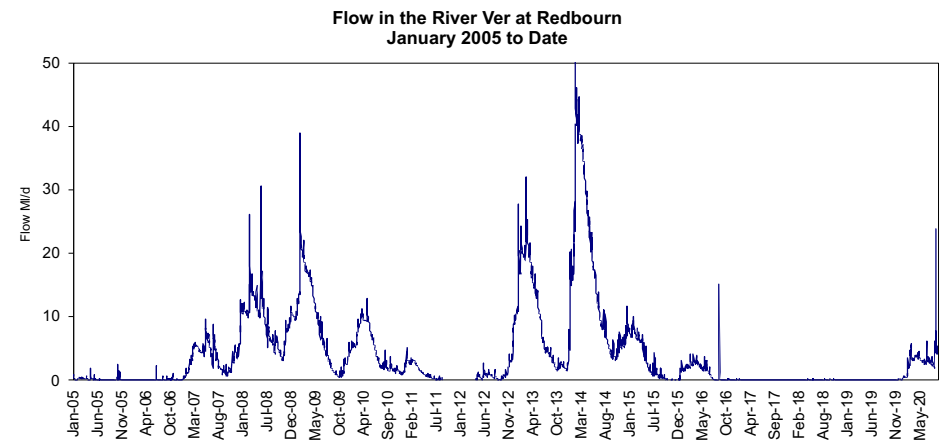
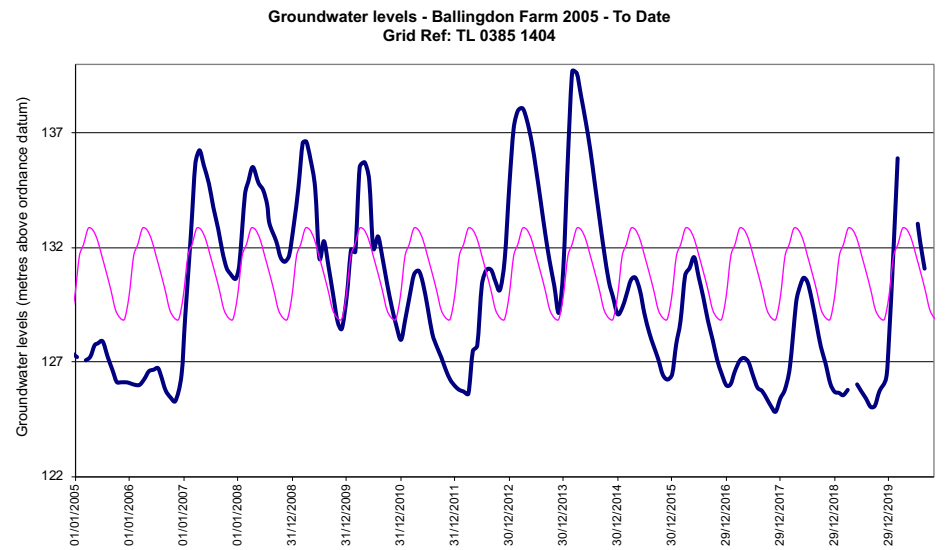
* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

High water

The head of the river in mid-September is just south of Redbourn golf course, although there was briefly flow from near Junction 9 of M1 following August's heavy rain. As you can see from the table and graphs, the groundwater continued to improve until August, despite the lack of rainfall in early spring, and is now just above the long-term average again – there is always about a 2 month lag in rain reaching the aquifer.



	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres <i>[Long-term average]</i> (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres <i>[± average]</i> (figures from Rothamstead)
Months 2020		
May	136.71 [134.1]	3.2 [-51.49]
June	135.34 [133.32]	87.4 [+34.14]
July	133.9 [133.23]	81.2 [+31.33]
August	132.33 [132.56]	172.0 [+108.27]
September	131.10 [130.87]	Not yet available



From top: Looking like a chalk stream, Verulamium Park September 2020; Flooded footpath Walk 7, August 2020 ©Melanie Woods; No flow at Luton Lane, Redbourn in September 2020

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.



John Cadisch

We were deeply saddened to learn of the death of Ver Valley

Society committee member, John Cadisch, in early July. It was days before his 90th birthday, which we had planned to celebrate.

We have much to thank John for as he was a stalwart of the Society. It is quite possible that without his input the fledgling Society would not have blossomed into the well-respected and influential local environmental and river-conservation society it is today.

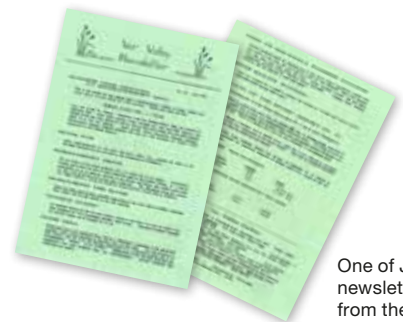
Newsletter editor

John joined the Society in 1977, a year after it was formed, and he served variously as Treasurer, Membership Secretary, Newsletter Editor and was still booking our meetings up until his death. Most notably he started the quarterly Newsletter in



1983 – apparently the first ones were produced on the Cadisch Wire Co. office typewriter and duplicator – and he edited more than 100 issues spanning 25 years. An upgrade to a computer in 2003 just spurred John on and the newsletters kept coming.

It was a pleasure to have John on the committee in my time as Chairman. He remained enthusiastic and devoted to the River Ver. I could always rely on John for succinct and sage advice. Words don't really do justice to a man who served the Ver Valley Society for over 40 years. We were all very fond of him and he will be sadly missed.



One of John's newsletters from the 1990s

VER VALLEY BENCHES

If you have ever walked the River Ver Trail, even unintentionally, you'll almost certainly have spotted at least one of the eight beautiful benches that sit along the



route. These weighty oak pieces, with a different story on every one, were installed over 10 years ago with the help of the National Lottery Heritage Fund and have been looking a little unloved.

Recently, with special thanks to volunteer Melanie Woods and her crew, a programme of refurbishment has begun. The first bench at Frogmore gravel pits has been gently sanded, the detail retouched and several coats of preservative added to keep the bench in good order. Only seven more benches to go!



Photos: ©Melanie Woods





Other good sightings have been redstarts, whinchats, stonechats, and spotted flycatchers. Yellow wagtails have been passing through in good numbers and small flocks have been seen following the cattle. All these are returning migrants and are usually only seen for few days, sometimes just one day before continuing on their journey to winter quarters in Africa.

Special egret drops in

In August I was delighted to see my first ever cattle egret in the Ver Valley, feeding among the cattle on the Redbournbury Water Meadows. It's only the third one ever recorded in our valley. Cattle egrets are following in footsteps of little egrets and are now breeding in good numbers on the Somerset Levels where over 100 were seen at times this summer. Maybe a few years before they join their relatives to nest on Heron Island on the lake, but I am sure they will be seen more and more in Hertfordshire. They are far less dependent on watery habitats than herons and little egrets and favour the invertebrates stirred up by grazing cattle.

Migration in full flow

A few days later a juvenile marsh harrier spent a day or two around Shafford. The occasional harrier has been seen along the valley in recent years, but this was a first for me. They have been successful at re-establishing themselves over the last 20 years and roosts of over 50 birds can be seen at a few sites along the Norfolk coast.

It has been a poor year for our barn owls with only one successful nest where 3 owlets were ringed. We will be checking the boxes in late September to see if we have any late broods, but our experience reflects the national picture which I suspect is due to a poor year for voles, their main prey item.

Above: Cattle Egret (inset) has an orange bill and appears stockier than the Little Egret ©John Fisher; Yellow Wagtail ©John Fisher. Record shot of Marsh Harrier ©Andrew Steele.

Below: Around cattle is a good place to find egrets and wagtails.



NATURE NEWS



Beautiful demoiselle

It's amazing what there is to see on the river, especially if you keep looking. One day back in June, one of our bailiffs spotted an unfamiliar demoiselle with completely brown wings. Fortunately it was quite early in the day and the insect was still a little sluggish, allowing a photo to be taken at close range with a mobile phone. A little bit of investigation identified it as a Beautiful Demoiselle

(*Calopteryx virgo*), a cousin of the more familiar Banded Demoiselle (*Calopteryx splendens*) with its 'thumbprint' wings.

The photo shows a recently emerged male – though not necessarily suggesting local emergence – whose brown wings will soon turn metallic blue. The Beautiful Demoiselle is very rare visitor to Herts, with only a handful of recent records. It prefers fast flowing streams which may explain its local scarcity.

Ranunculus Recovery

Stream Water Crowfoot (*Ranunculus penicillatus*) is a good indicator a healthy chalk stream. It thrives in clean, pure alkaline water with energetic flow. Invertebrates, especially freshwater shrimps, like to make their home beneath the fronds.

Its roots survive well, even in times of drought and it re-establishes itself if the water returns. The better flows of 2020 have seen more of this wavy weed with white buttercup-like flowers in the Ver. Look out next spring, because if we have a wet winter there's likely to be a bumper spectacle of ranunculus, a plant that used to flourish up and down the river.



ACTION GROUP VOLUNTEERS

by **RICHARD WALLIS**

Finally, after a break of 7 months we were able to run an Action Group session in August.

After what seemed like months of sun the rain started as we assembled in the Riverside Way car park and continued until after we finished at lunchtime. But the rain did not deter anyone, and even at the end of the morning, when most of us were thoroughly wet, everyone was still smiling!

As usual at this time of year, the task was to clear Himalayan Balsam along the stretch of the river between Smug Oak Lane and the

top of Riverside Way. To maintain separation, we worked in 4 groups, one on each bank and 2 in the channel so that separation was easy to manage. The water was running fast and deep, about 90cm deep, which is very unusual for the Ver.

Photos ©Lee Wood & Peter White



Normally in August our volunteer numbers drop, but this year we had 18 volunteers which meant we were able to clear the planned section and also had time to work on the balsam at Moor Mill.

It was great to be back in action, pun intended, and we look forward to returning to something like normality before too long.



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Peter Fox, MBE

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@stalban.gov.uk

Water Leaks (Affinity):
0800 376 5325