



Ver Valley Newsletter



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Dr Peter Smith, CB

First Chairman and First President:
Richard Thrale

April Open Meeting

We gather this month at the southern end of the river, on:

MONDAY 21st APRIL 2008 (7.30 pm)

ST. STEPHEN PARISH CENTRE,

STATION ROAD, BRICKET WOOD

(Upstairs room) (Ample parking) (Parish Centre adjoins "Gate" P.H.)

After usual reports and updates on what has been happening up and down the Ver Valley, we are hoping to arrange refreshments. These may be limited to fruit juice again due to the acute lack of "refreshment helpers" at the present time. (Do we have any volunteers who could help on a rota basis??)

For our second half speaker we have been lucky to secure the services of Matt Hart, an Environment Agency Fisheries Officer.

Matt comes from Westbury-on-Severn, his family were commercial salmon fishermen for many generations, he is currently responsible for the Colne catchments which of course includes the Ver.

He will talk about the fish species of the Ver including brown trout, their life patterns, preferred habitat and breeding.

July Open Meeting:

We have had to change the date for this, it will now be on TUESDAY 22nd JULY (not Monday), same place, Markyate Village Hall, speaker John Wyatt, "The Chilterns Experience".

M1 Motorway Widening Works

Andy Webb

These works will, at times, add significantly to the rivers Ver and Red at two outfalls, the first just south of Junction 9, the second between the Nickey Line and Redbourn by-pass (western section).

All drainage systems from the M1 have been designed to a one-in-a-hundred-years storm scenario. Both discharges are in Highways Agency M1/Area 8. A pumphouse will be constructed between the M1 and Redbourn for the river Red outfall; this will be alarmed for pump failure.

Both drainage systems have a series of bunds and reed-beds to filter out (inevitable) pollutants. Regular maintenance of the various systems affecting the river Ver should be undertaken by the Highways Agency.

If the widening works continue to plan, J9-10 will re-open April/May, J8-9 next December.

(Above based on a review supplied by Steve Barnes (Balfour Beatty-Skanska Environmental Advisor and Q&A at January Open Meeting, Redbourn.)

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

Peter Smith

We are very pleased to report that Dr Peter Smith, who was VVS Chairman from 1992 to 2003, has agreed to take on the rôle of President in succession to the late Richard Thrale.

Bow Bridge Pumping Station

Andy Webb

This remains off-line following the Buncefield Oil Depot fire of December 2005. Obviously, the closure has a direct benefit on flow in the Ver southwards from Bow Bridge (Shafford); the 6 Ml/d previously abstracted from the aquifer has remained in the ground to "maintain" the river - this certainly helped last summer.

Three Valleys Water are confident that there is no PPHOS contamination in the surrounding groundwater, and continue to actively pursue a protocol with the EA to bring the PS back on-line by the summer.

Walks and Talks

Andy Webb

Andy Webb led two more of our possible "new" Ver Valley Walks recently, on behalf of CMS, namely "Walk 6, St Albans" on 20th January (56 people!!), and "Walk 4, Redbourn South" on 24th February (18 people).

He also attended a meeting on 17th January at the EA offices in Hatfield with other similar river/water interest groups and senior EA staff.

Instigated by EA/NE Thames Area Manager, Innes Jones, this was a very interesting event, which may become an annual one. We would certainly support this as it was a rare chance to talk to others with interests overlapping our own, and with EA staff who safeguard our river landscape.

Bird Notes

John Fisher

Last year the Society agreed to buy 40 nest boxes and I arranged for some friends of mine who are Watford RSPB members to make and supply them this winter. Watford RSPB have been making nest boxes for several years and the great thing about their boxes is not only are they really well made but the marine ply they use is donated and cut by a supporter and they are put together by volunteers. This means that practically all the money they raise from selling the boxes goes directly to the RSPB and their conservation programmes.

All 40 boxes have been put up now ready for the spring breeding season. They have been sited on trees along the Ver Valley Walk between Redbourn and Redbournbury. They have a range of hole sizes to suit blue tits, great tits, sparrows and one for a nuthatch. We also have a few open fronted boxes which we hope will attract spotted flycatchers as they are now only occasional breeders in the valley. The committee have just agreed to buy a further 20 boxes for later this year and with more time available I may be able to put these up a bit further from Redbourn! Any suggested sites - please let me know. I would like to thank Ernie Leahy and my son Martin for their help with putting up the boxes and Mandy James for the loan of the Redbournbury Mill ladder.

Some of you will know about the barn fire which destroyed one of the barns on the north east side of Redbournbury farm. Our barn owl box which has been successfully used in the last 2 years was not affected but I am concerned that the construction work to replace the barn may disturb this year's breeding. We do have another four boxes in the valley so hopefully if there is a lot of disturbance they will relocate to one of these boxes.

This winter has been notable for even more regular sightings of little egrets with up to four present at times. Snipe are not being seen so often this year which is particularly disappointing but I did see one right up near the junction 9 of the M1 where the river is flowing for the first time in about 5 years. Flocks of lapwings have been seen along the valley throughout the winter and also the occasional flock of golden plover.

My good friend Ernie Leahy saw a female peregrine in late March in a field to the east of the river near Shafford. I have heard of occasional peregrine sightings along the valley before but I have yet to see one so close to home.

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

Bailiff Notes

Jane Gardiner

As everyone will have noticed January rainfall was over 50% higher than average (see table below) so although the month had more sun and was warmer than average it definitely did the river some good. However February was much drier, over 50% down on rainfall and sunnier than average, so may have cancelled out the good January but perhaps March will make up for it! However you can see from the groundwater figures that the aquifer as usual has been recovering from January and since February is considerably above average.

2007	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)
December	130.66 [130.56]	67.1 [- 3.0]
January	131.26 [131.36]	103.2 [+33.5]
February	134.22 [132.38]	21.9 [-26.9]
March	134.9 [132.79]	Not yet available

At the time of writing in mid March the head of the river is at Flamstead but there is nothing towards Markyate. There is very healthy flow from junction 9 of the M1 south under Luton Lane and across Redbourn golf course.

By quite early in January the hazel catkins were in full swing and by February the blackthorn, celandines, coltsfoot and dogs mercury were flowering and butterbur is now well advanced.

Moles have been very active and one or two hares have now been seen in the northern part of the valley but there seem to have been fewer than in previous years. Our April speaker will be giving us information about fish of which there are plenty reported especially in the lower reaches of the river.

A few pochard, shovelers and tufted ducks have been on Verulamium lakes this winter as well as the colourful Egyptian goose. Quite a few little egrets have been reported in the valley, plenty of kingfishers and lapwings are around but snipe have been less commonly seen this year. Our Bailiff at the lower part of the river near Bricket Wood has been pleased to see a Little Owl on two occasions recently and other sightings include grey wagtails, bullfinch, goldcrest and redpoll. More on birds in John Fisher's bird notes.

Bailiffs may be interested to know that I have been in communication with a Dr Chris Westwood working for an Environmental Research Group, who had been commissioned by EA to assess the river's vegetation over the past 16 years, particularly from just before to after the Friar's Wash 'switch-off'. Although EA has plenty of technical data, background information, river width and flow measures as well as flora and fauna reports were requested. I have been able to send him quite a large selection of our Bailiff report forms from 1990 onwards, which have been gratefully received and will be acknowledged in the final report. Bailiffs can be pleased that further use has been made of their regular contributions over the years.

Jobs Well Done!

John Cadisch

St Michael's Bridge has been carefully restored by Herts Highways following the unexplained damage. Replacement bricks were colour-matched as closely as possible and an expert brick-layer put it all together as before, finished off by using the old, undamaged, coping stones.

Further north, the two-wheeled oil tanker in the river near Redbourn has been towed away, the hire company were very grateful to John Fisher for pointing out where it been dumped.

Membership Notes

John Cadisch

Subscription reminders went out in February to those whose subs were overdue as from last September. There has been a good response but several are outstanding. For those who have not renewed, this will have to be their last "Newsletter", sorry to say.

New members always welcome, rates unchanged: £5.00 ANNUAL, £20.00 FIVE-YEAR. Full details of what the VVS is all about, membership rates and sample "Newsletter" sent on request, just let me have the person's name and address. Corporate membership also available.

Our Web Site -- www.riverver.co.uk

John Fisher

Over the last few weeks I have had a really frustrating ongoing problem with editing the website. Although the website was still available on line I was unable to change or add any text or pictures. The web hosts had changed the password procedure and despite numerous emails and calls to their 0870 number and listening to "you are at position 13" I eventually decided, after taking advice from Steven Wragg, that the best option would be to change the web host.

Once we did this the problem was solved within 24 hours and I am now able to update pages and in particular amend the date of our July meeting.

Bob Aldritt, who only joined the VVS about a year ago, has given me about 60 excellent digital photographs that he has taken of the river over the last 10 years or so. These may well be used in this newsletter and I will certainly be putting some on the website galleries. If you have photographs of any aspect of our precious river please email me or do as Bob did and give me a disc. I want to add more pictures and replace some that have been on the site. Any contributions are welcome - you don't have to be a David Bailey!

Elizabeth Warren, a Southampton University student, contacted us in January about rainfall and aquifer data after browsing our website. We gave her lots of data and contact details where she could get more. She has since written a 55 page dissertation on "Assessing the Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources in the Ver Valley". Not only has Elizabeth thanked us and acknowledged our assistance but she has kindly given me permission to put all or sections of her paper on our website. I will be doing this shortly. This is really pleasing as so often we have given assistance to students in the past without being thanked.

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.

Ver Valley Fossils

Peter Fox

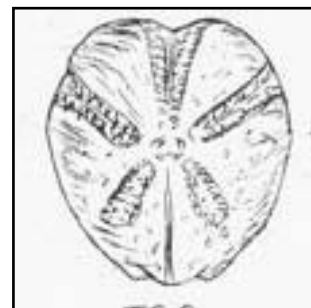
The fossil illustrated here is the third of its kind found in the fields close to the Ver as it flows on its way through Redbourn Parish.

I found the first when, as a fourteen-year-old schoolboy, I was one of a group of local lads employed by Farmer Weir at Redbournbury for the potato gathering season. It was hard work, but great fun, and we did the work in schooltime -- and even got paid for it; very welcome in 1953.

My classmate Graham and myself took our find to the science teacher at school, but he showed little interest, and we left school not so long after without getting this intriguing find back. However, I did remember its curious heart-shaped form, and the lovely patterns on it.



Thirty plus years later, when looking for a stray golf ball in the field to the north of Luton Lane, close to Redbourn Golf Club's par three course, I found another almost identical fossil.



This time we researched it as a family project, and found that our fossil was formed in the chalk laid down on a tropical sea bed in the Cretaceous Formations, some one hundred and twenty million years ago. It is an echinoid (sea urchin) known as a micraster, and was formed when sediments entered the dead creature's shell-like casing and solidified to form a solid cast, call a "test" by palaeontologists.

Just a few weeks ago, when walking towards Friars Wash (M1 Jnc 9) along the Ver Colne footpath to check river flows, I found my third example of this still intriguing object, which has prompted these notes. What I wonder, can it tell us about the conditions in those remotely far off days.

If there is anyone out there who can tell us more about these ancient objects, or who has found other fossils in the Ver valley, do please get in touch with us. Perhaps the findings could form the subject matter for a future open meeting speaker.

Reference: British Cretaceous Echinoids, Smith & Wright, Palaeontological Society 1989-2000.

The Miller's Tale

John Cadisch

This might be of interest to members or their families, from the April Verulam & Sopwell Directory: "9 mile cycle ride, St Albans to Redbournbury Mill, Sunday 13th April, 1.30 pm, details from 01582 762120". (No further informa-

Picture Page



Redbournbury Mill - (Bob Aldritt)



View from St Michael's Bridge - (Bob Aldritt)



River Red in Winter White - (Bob Aldritt)



The Ver from Blue House Hill - (Bob Aldritt)