



Ver Valley Newsletter



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January Open Meeting

Please note in your diaries the date of our next Open Meeting:

MONDAY 25th JANUARY 2010, 7.30 pm
at Transept Hall, St Mary's Church, Redbourn

Attractive, modern hall adjoining Church.
Parking in old Hemel Hempstead road (now by-passed).

Most people will know that red kites have been successfully re-introduced into the Chilterns, and as a result are often to be seen performing aerial gymnastics over the Ver Valley. Phil and Ann Farrar are coming to tell us the whole fascinating story.

We hope to provide refreshments at the half-way point, with the illustrated talk rounding off the evening.

AGM Report

Our Annual General Meeting took place on 20th October, around 30 members attended. We apologise to anyone who did not receive their "Newsletter" (confirming the date) in time, steps have been taken to bring it out earlier in future.

Andy Webb (Chairman) and the Committee were re-elected en bloc. To support the current crew, the AGM was pleased to endorse formally and welcome a new committee member, Sue Frearson of St Albans, the surname will be familiar to those living on the Verulam estate. She is also one of our volunteer Bailiffs.

The annual accounts were presented by the Treasurer and approved nem con (copies available on request).



*Wintry river
Ver near
Redbournbury*

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

The River Ver and AMP5

Andy Webb

In October 2006 Vicki Kidney of the Environment Agency told our AGM that flows in the river Ver are generally below that required to sustain a healthy chalk stream and that more work was needed to be undertaken to build on the 1993 "ALF" (low flows) scheme which resulted in the downgrading of Friars Wash pumping station to "standby" status only. We were grateful to Vicki for making this important point so clearly.

You may have heard or read of important decisions at the end of November by OFWAT regarding their 5 yearly Price Review and the degree of consumer price rises which will be allowed by various water companies in the UK. OFWAT judged that these (modest) increases - generally less than the suppliers had requested - will be sufficient for infrastructure improvements such as leakage reduction, and at the same time healthy profits for the monopoly service providers in each region.

Within this regulatory framework there is a National Environment Programme (NEP) whereby the EA can work with local companies (in our case Veolia Water Central Ltd.) and find solutions to one or a number of "failing" rivers within their supply area. This appraisal work is funded by Veolia and undertaken by their own staff, overseen by EA staff at Hatfield. For this next AMP5 period (Asset Management Plan of 5 years' duration), studies will be undertaken of the river Ver (Kensworth to St Albans), the upper Colne, the river Misbourne and the upper river Rib. The Ver study will begin in March 2010 and finish in 2013.

In the appraisal stage, modelling work on the flow of the Ver will be undertaken along with studies of the benefits to the river of increased flow and what practical and physical improvements may be needed to the river to cope with this. The study will look at all solutions to Restore Sustainable Abstraction (RSA) and may include the transfer of abstraction licenses to other pumping stations and/or out-of-area imports to decrease the direct abstraction from the Ver Valley even further. The cost/benefit analysis of each solution will also form an important element of the study.

At the end of the three year study the EA and Veolia will discuss which is the best way forward for the Ver and how this will be funded. This, too, will take time.

The VVS will be 40 years old in 2016. The best present the river Ver can receive will be more water. Hopefully this will be a fitting outcome for all our campaigning during that time.

My thanks to Miles Morgan, RSA Officer, EA North East, Thames Area office, Hatfield, for assistance with this summary.

An Unwelcome Invader

Ernest Leahy

Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) was first introduced by the Victorians as an ornamental garden plant but it has now spread to become the most invasive and problematical shrub of recent times. It has a preference for a riparian habitat and has found its way onto our riversides.

This year I have seen two large stands of Japanese Knotweed on the banks of the River Ver at Bricket Wood ref TL147015 and the River Red at Redbourn, Chequers Meadows ref TL107017. Also our bailiffs report a substantial colony at Frogmore Pits TL150034. There are probably many more in the Ver Valley and we would be grateful to know of any more locations so we can monitor the population increase of this shrub. Contact your Ver Valley water bailiff to alert us to unrecorded plants so we can add the information to our website.

Photos of Japanese Knotweed are on page 6. In appearance the plant is near heart-shaped, but flat topped, leaves approximately 10 long by 8cm wide growing alternately along woody stems. Its small white flowers grow on curved stalks about 10cm long. The largest plant I have come across so far has reached 3 metres high & extends for 6 metres along the riverbank of the River Red. In autumn the leaves are discarded & the brittle red-brown stalks start to break up and some drift downstream.

Recently there was a new small road bridge built adjacent to the Redbourn shrub resulting in the soil being removed during construction and probable disturbance to the rhizomes causing fragments to regenerate and spread a further 3 metres. Currently the plants we know about along the Ver and Red are remote and there are no plans I know of to curb its spread. In many counties with a bigger problem they have a strategy for eradication of Knotweed.

This very unwelcome invader to our European ecosystem has no natural controlling predatory insects or fungi enemies away from its country of origin so controls have been set out by the Environment Agency under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1991.

There are several websites detailing the controlled eradication of the plant with warnings of fines for offences linked to the illegal methods of disposal of fragments of the plant highlighting the dangers of promoting further regeneration. These regulations apply both private & public landowners.

The best website I found was www.devon.gov.uk/index/environment/japaneseknotweed.htm

The exceptional rain in November [and in early December] was really welcome after the very dry September and October and the autumn months were all sunnier and warmer than average. The groundwater will hopefully soon start to recover from over 2 meters below the monthly long-term averages for November and December. The Bailiffs for areas south of Redbourn are now recording improved flows, although much of this will be due to run-off following heavy rain, but the channel north of Redbourn just has damp patches without continuous flow.

2009	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters and [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [\pm average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamstead)
August	132.30 [132.56]	63.4 [+9.7]
September	131.24 [130.87]	15.9 [-45.1]
October	130.09 [130.93]	39.1 [-35.55]
November	128.80 [130.91]	146.1 [+79.88]
December	128.49 [130.92]	Not yet available

Our winter visitors, lapwings, fieldfares, redwings, and golden plovers have now arrived in considerable numbers particularly to fields in the valley north of St Albans and I have had a report of a peregrine flying over them. Little egrets are now being reported fairly regularly from north of Redbourn down to the confluence, along with kingfishers and grey wagtails which the Bailiffs are always pleased to see. Some wintering ducks, gadwall, tufted and one or two teal have also been reported. Mixed flocks of tits are busy in the hedgerows and plenty goldfinches are being seen, as are woodpeckers (green and greater-spotted). Foxes are being seen by our Bailiffs more often and moles are quite active now. Fish reports recently include chubb and trout. Some rather tired-looking fungi are still about by the footpaths.

Extensive channel clearance north from Bluehouse Hill into Gorhambury was undertaken by EA in October but there is still negligible flow in that channel. My investigations lead me to believe this is due to a blocked, silted-up and rotten sluice-gate upstream from Kingsbury Mill belonging to Gorhambury Estate. We and the Waffle House manager are concerned about possible flooding should the sluice-gate fail with a build-up of water behind it. The EA have agreed to investigate.

We have been asking for some time for the trees overhanging the river channel in Verulamium Park to be cut back. SADC, in the person of Mr Jim Bennie, is hoping to get all the necessary permissions from relevant parties shortly, so that the work can be done before the coots use the dangling branches for nesting!

Finally I have to tell you that unfortunately David Bunney has had to step down as a Bailiff and I would very much welcome hearing from anyone who might be interested in taking over. The stretch of the river concerned, from Holywell Hill to the Watercress Wildlife Reserve, in central St Albans, is heavily used by the public, so it is important to have regular reports on it.



Bailiff Sue Frearson measuring river depth.

How Two River Bailiffs Work

Sue and Martin Frearson

Mid -month again, so it was time to survey our stretch of the river Ver, from Moor Mill to the confluence with the river Colne. This was the third December that Martin and I had monitored this stretch of the river, so we were anticipating some good views of birds such as redwing and fieldfare, feasting on the rich supply of hawthorn berries. With no leaves on the trees, the views across the valley were stunning.

On summer visits, we might call into Moor Mill for a pint in their lovely gardens, but today we were there to give the manager a copy of the VVS calendar, which features the Mill for December 2010. This visit brought to my attention the severe silting above the water mill, so we were taken around the back to measure the water and silt levels. In what should be about 2 metres of water, there was up to 1.5 metres of silt. All of this information to be noted and then sent to Jane Gardiner to be reported to the Environmental Agency.

Moor Mill stocks the river with brown trout, but only a few monsters survive from the attention of the local grey herons. Sure enough, just downstream was a young heron. We did advise not to restock until after the herons have finished breeding in Verulamium Park, in May.

Continued on Page 4

The riverside walk is always a pleasure to visit, with its information board, statues and picnic tables. We seldom walk its length without chatting to one of the many dog walkers, cyclists or horse riders, who are always intrigued by our measuring stick and clip board. At our measuring point, we took the width 3.5 metres, (less than last month) the depth 38cms (slightly deeper) and then timed how long it took for four similar twigs to travel 10metres downstream. This data will be used by Jane to work out the flow of the Ver. The water was very clear, and the gravel bottom could be seen clearly.

As it was mid afternoon, on a cold but sunny afternoon, we had hoped to see some more birds, to make up for the lack of plant life at this time of the year. The heron obliged by moving ahead of us, a few moorhens scuttled out of our way, but very little else was seen or heard, apart from three redwing. Not even the kingfisher, of which we have had good sightings in the past few months. Hanstead Spring can now just be seen, making its way through the reed bed and watercress, coming down from the lakes in the HSBC College in Bricket Wood. Not many obstructions or litter to be reported back, or fallen trees, but a lovely view of the river from the pedestrian bridge.

After a short walk along Drop Lane, we turn off to photograph the stepping stones at the ford. The light was interesting, with some great reflections in the river of the skeletal trees at the confluence. The Colne has looked very sad for some time, always very muddy and slow flowing. Perhaps it needs a sister pressure group, such as ours.

Bird Notes

John Fisher

The bird spectacular of the Ver Valley this winter has been the amazing flock of golden plovers that has been around since mid November on the west side of the A5183 between Redbourn and St Albans.. In recent years the golden plover flock has become a regular feature of the winter months but this year the flock has reached well over 2000 birds and could be 3000. Although golden plovers are not quite so smart in the winter, when they lose their black breasts, they are a wonderful sight when they fly in tight formation. The low winter sun picks out the light underwings as they wheel in the sky, showing why they are named "golden". A few hundred lapwings are often alongside them but look quite different with their black and white stubby wings making their flight look "wobbly". The now expected 4 little egrets have adopted the Ver as their home territory again this winter with at least one being seen along the Red.

At the January Open Meeting we will have a barn owl nest box on display together with some pictures, facts and figures about the breeding success. I hope that you, our members, will agree this has made the money well spent. Your committee has agreed to fund a further three boxes which will be fixed in January or February, bringing the total in the Ver Valley to 10.

Our first two boxes were fixed in April 2004 but it was not until 2006 that they were used for breeding when a pair raised five youngsters which were ringed in the August of that year. This year we ringed two from that first box and for the first time we had a second box used from which another four were ringed. We have now ringed no less than 19 young barn owls in just four years.

In particular we need to thank two dedicated individuals who have helped us so much with our "Barn Owl Project". Peter Wilkinson, a licensed bird ringer, has not only fixed all the boxes for us he has also ringed all the young barn owls. Peter rings hundreds of barn owls every year and his knowledge of owls is unsurpassed.

Most of the boxes have been made for us by Austin Hollands of the Watford RSPB Group. Austin, aided by a few other group members, has been making a variety of nest boxes since 1997 and he must have made hundreds in that time. In doing so they have raised several thousand pounds for RSPB funds as all the money paid for the boxes goes directly to RSPB funds. This is because a local benefactor donates all the wood and the boxes are put together by Austin and his band of volunteers. In 2000 his efforts were honoured at the RSPB Annual Conference with the "President's Award". This award is given each year to a very few people who have given exceptional service to the Society over the years. The award took the form of an exquisitely carved model of an avocet, the symbol of the RSPB, but typically of the self effacing Austin got someone else to receive the award from Julian Pettifer, the RSPB President, on his behalf as he had a previously planned bird watching trip that weekend!



Peter Wilkinson fixes a VVS barn owl box.

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

Redbournbury's New Water Wheel

John Cadisch & Justin James

Early in the 19th century what would have been a "state of the art" mill wheel was installed at Redbournbury mill, this must have been a significant outlay for the owner, the Earl of Verulam. The iron wheel measured 10 ft dia. and was 8 ft wide supporting 60 wrought iron buckets. The mill shaft is solid iron, 8 in square and 14 ft long weighing in excess of one ton. Unfortunately no record of the cost or the foundry involved exists.

This wheel worked successfully for as long as 150 years, but the major fire of 1987 put it completely out of action, masonry falling on to the top of the wheel caused major damage. Repairs were carried out but the wheel was out of balance and did not turn smoothly.

However, thanks to a generous donation from the family of Peter Smith (former VVS Chairman) and an ancient building charity (SPAB), funds were sufficient to commission a completely new mill wheel and this has now been installed. It comprises 60 new buckets and 12 internal plates (weighing 40 kg each) and, in addition to much cleaning and painting, 1000 holes had to be drilled to assemble the whole structure. The new metal is all stainless steel, powder-coated black, and should last for another 150 years.

The intention now is to turn the wheel whenever there is sufficient water and, when funds allow, to install a recirculating pump (back pump) to feed water back above the wheel at times of low flow.



Volunteers cleaning ironwork and fitting new buckets.

Moor Mill Pits (a waste disposal issue)

Sue Frearson

In November, Colin Searle drew the attention of the committee of the VVS to the proposal in the county Waste Core Strategy and Development Policies to re-restore the Moor Mill Pits, and so allow further disposal of waste inert material into this pit which is adjacent to the river Ver in Park Street. This was in a consultation document, which can be viewed as part of the Hertfordshire Development Plan website, www.hertsdirect.org/envroads/environment/plan/hcde-vplan/wasteplanning/

I wrote in on behalf of the VVS to object to the proposed re-restoration of the Moor Mill pits, on the following grounds:

- ◆ that this is in the Green Belt,
- ◆ it would decrease the amenity value of the Ver valley in this area,
- ◆ it would disturb the wildlife,
- ◆ the local community would suffer from heavy lorries accessing the site.

“Different Name, Same Great Company”

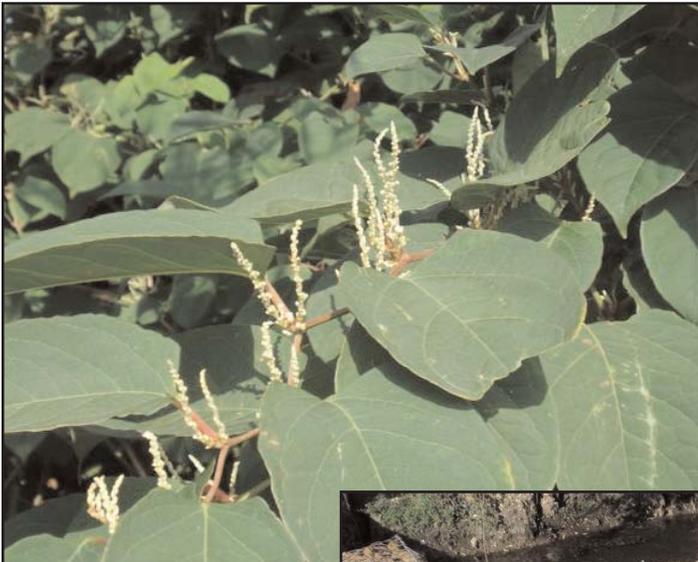
Statement supplied by Veolia

Veolia Water Central is the new name for Three Valleys Water. Since we adopted our parent company's name and branding last summer, Veolia Water can be seen out and about in your community - with our distinctive red logo on vehicles and ID cards, on uniforms and signs.

So, who is Veolia Water? We're the world's largest water services provider, working in 64 countries with 93,400 employees. We have owned three water companies in the UK, including Three Valleys, for over 20 years and also provide services on behalf of other water companies around the country. You may already know our sister company, Veolia Environmental Services, which handles domestic waste disposal for many local councils.

What does mean for you? The combination of our local experience, gained over 130 years as the water company in your area, with Veolia Water's global strength and investment in technology creates a wealth of knowledge and expertise in managing water. This means we can better respond to increasing environmental challenges to provide you with the highest quality water- now and in the future.

An Unwelcome Invader (continued from page 2)



Japanese knotweed.



Picture Page



A misty view of St Albans abbey.



Riverside Way walk, near Moor Mill.



Sheep crossing near New Barnes Mill.