



Ver Valley Newsletter



Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society

Number 108

www.riverver.co.uk

January 2011

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January Open Meeting

All members and friends are invited to our January meeting:

MONDAY 31 JANUARY 2011
at 7.30 pm

at St. Mary's Church, Redbourn (Transept Hall).
Park in old Hemel Hempstead Road, by the church,
the hall is adjoining.

Our guest speaker is John Tyler, and his subject is:

"The Changing Wildlife of the Chilterns"

Some notes about John: He has always been fascinated by wildlife and having studied Zoology and Conservation at university, he developed nature reserves in London and Kent and is still actively involved with reserves in Bucks where he now lives.

Usual reports and (hopefully) refreshments will come first !

Communicating with Members John Cadisch

We often receive notices of coming walks and river-related events which are of interest to members. Nearly all arrive via the internet, but the cost and effort of printing and posting the notices is too great. By the time our quarterly Newsletters are sent out many of the events have taken place.

John Fisher is compiling a list of the email addresses of members who are willing to receive news of forthcoming events electronically. If you would like to be included in the list, please send your email address to him as follows: john.fisher@btclick.com.

Veolia, continuing to support the Society

John Cadisch

We are most grateful to Veolia Environmental who have undertaken to continue (as from this month) the sponsorship that was granted to us by Veolia Water, i.e. underwriting the cost of Newsletter printing and distribution.

Veolia Environmental operate, under carefully monitored conditions, the Redbournbury treatment plant.

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

A group of VVS members and friends of Redbournbury Mill were invited to a viewing of the Plant and Processes at the Veolia Environmental Treatment Works at Redbournbury on the 17th of November. These works were previously run by Leigh Environmental and then Onyx before the present owners took over the business.

During a Power Point presentation explaining the procedures we were told about the rigorous pre delivery and on arrival waste sampling before the tankers were accepted on site before the neutralising processes went ahead. Next transportation and waste processing were explained before we adorned the compulsory protective clothing to take the guided tour.

The site is nestled in an old excavated lime quarry which has had a safety apron of impervious lining to prevent the ingress of unlikely chemical spills leaching in the ground & the nearby River Ver. We were first shown the chalk face at the back of the works where many fossils had been found and 60 years ago the remains of a baby Mammoth made national news.

There is a notice board within the site illustrating the species of the ancient fossils and because of its archaeological interest the chalk cliff and surrounds have Special Site of Local Interest status. The relatively safe vegetation surrounding the site also provides a good habitat for birds, insects and wildlife.

Continuing on the tour we were shown the receiving and neutralising tanks before viewing the hydraulic presses which squeeze out the liquid from the sludges and form solid cakes which could possibly fuel power stations or go to landfill. Reclaimed oil is also sent for fuel.

Treated harmless inert liquids are pumped away into the sewage system. We learnt that there are several types of tanker linings on the lorries according to the materials transported.



Redbourn plant aerial view in 2008

The tour was organised by the site manager, Mike Sammons and we came away impressed with the cleanliness of the site and felt we had an appreciation of the important work Veolia do. Arrangements for visiting the site to see the archaeological interest should be made via the site which can be contacted on phone number 01582 791124.

Redbourn Millennium Park is Accessible

Ernie Leahy

The small Redbourn Millennium Park, formerly a station on the Nickey Line and adjacent to the River Ver, is now accessible to all thanks to a new footpath connecting the High Street opposite Medivet to the Nickey Line. The new tarmac path was financed by Redbourn Care Group & the Parish Council and now wheelchair access makes it available for every-one. On 16 October a working party from local organisations helped to clear the path borders and plant dozens of sapling shrubs to enhance the environment for the future.

Sue Frearson has initiated the Ver Valley Action Group and organised several of its members to contribute to the work involved. Podge Fox cleared the Ver by the bridge and John Fisher erected ten bird nesting boxes while others cleared and planted.

The park & footpath was officially opened with a celebration on November 28th where locals gathered to see some of our handicapped friends cut the green tape. Afterwards helpers gathered to socialise at the Village Hall where hot soup and rolls were provided.

As well as a park for people to relax in it's possible to see a good variety of birds, butterflies and wild flowers in their seasons.

As you can see from the table the groundwater level has continued to fall through the autumn as is usual but the high rainfall in October and early November, with less sun than average and lower temperature since then, has meant the Bailiffs have been reporting reasonably good flows in the river for this time of year. However the very cold weather at end Nov and early Dec has been quite dry but the aquifer should soon start showing recovery.

2010	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters and [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamstead)
September	131.59 [130.87]	59.7 [-1.31]
October	130.49 [130.93]	84.9 [+10.20]
November	129.45 [130.91]	54.8 [-11.4]
December	128.68 [130.56]	Not yet available

The head of the river is now just north of Redbourn and there is a little flow under River Hill, Flamstead from the Markyate sewage works outfall. The River Red in Redbourn seems fairly healthy and Hanstead Brook in Bricket Wood has a trickle in it.

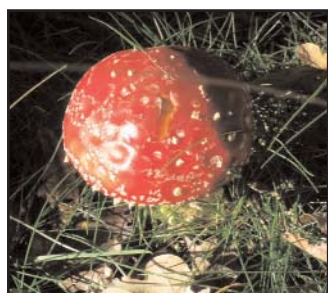
Some clearance of the mill stream past Shafford has been undertaken by the owner of property there. As far as I am aware no works have as yet taken place to repair the silted-up and rotten sluice above Kingsbury Mill or any improvements to the river channel between Moor Mill and Hyde Lane, promised by EA for the end of the year. The large items of debris at the 'stepping-stones' area just north of the confluence with the Colne have not yet been removed nor the stepping stones themselves improved.

Some clearance work by EA has occurred under the bridge by the Fighting Cocks which was blocked. New steps, paths and an excellent boardwalk have been installed in the Sopwell Nunnery Open Space down to the Alban Way viaduct funded by a Community Grant via SADC. From Holywell Hill to Cottonmill Lane the path is to be resurfaced as soon as the weather is suitable, as part of the Ver Valley Access project and this includes crown lifting and cutting back overhanging vegetation.

This Autumn seems to have been good for fruit and berries in the hedgerows and it has been a good year for a wide variety of fungi too. As is to be expected mammal and insect reports have been very few recently, although I did find a hornet on a path in mid November and there are plenty of signs of mole activity. However many of the visiting winter birds have arrived; redwings, fieldfares, lapwings, golden plovers, snipe and siskins have joined the egrets which have been here for quite some time. Other recent nice sightings are a goldcrest, a redpoll, goldfinches and of course numerous tits. I have not heard of any waxwings in this area yet but if the winter continues cold perhaps we'll be lucky enough to have some in the valley.



Crimson berries on the spindle.



Fly agaric fungi.

HMWT have appointed VVS to become Water Vole Champions and I collected a smart framed certificate from Grebe House in November which will be on show at the next Open Meeting in January. As far as we know at present there aren't any mink on the Ver following the eradication programme but neither have there been any signs of voles this summer. Next spring HMWT hope to provide training in recognising such signs to our bailiffs and any others who are interested. There might be a possibility of a joint vole-reintroduction programme on the Ver between HMWT and VVS. A water vole breeder from Devon has inspected the river and is enthusiastic that it could be successful, but considerable financial commitment and voluntary monitoring from the two bodies would be needed. It may be possible to say more at our January meeting.

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Stop Press: Ian Jinks, our bailiff from north of Park Street to Cottonmill Lane, intends to step down next year. If you might be interested to take over please contact me, it involves in taking a pleasant walk once a month through the meadows and sending in a brief report.

As I write these notes winter has set in really early bringing in massive numbers of winter visitors. Perhaps one of the most charismatic of these is the waxwing and it is reckoned that as many as 6,000 arrived in Scotland from Northern Europe in mid November and they are now moving steadily southwards. Their full name is Bohemian Waxwing which relates to their origin rather than their life style. Mind you with their flamboyant crest they always remind me of 80's punk rockers. They are called waxwings because they have red and yellow tips to their flight feathers which looked to our forefathers as though they had been dipped in sealing wax. Not sure if we can call them a Ver Valley bird just yet but they have been seen in a number of residential areas in St Albans. The nearest I have seen them to our river is a few years back when some were feeding just near the Waitrose supermarket.

Other arrivals in good numbers have been fieldfares, redwings, golden plovers, lapwings and snipe. Up to 500 golden plovers and 100 lapwings were seen for several days in the fields opposite the old Punch Bowl pub. Later in the winter, numbers could build up to a few thousand. I saw at least 20 snipe feeding along the edges of the Ver when the freeze meant that all the ground away from the river was frozen solid. Their long bills can only penetrate soft ground.

Red kites are seen every day now in the upper Ver Valley. It is amazing how quickly they have colonised the area and as they are so much bolder than buzzards, you see them often over residential areas where they scan the ground for carrion.

The little egrets arrived earlier this year and I wonder how long it will be before they breed locally. They could well be joining the heron nesting colony on the island in Verulamium Lake maybe next year even.

Peregrine falcons have been seen from time to time but they usually only stay around for a day or two. One has roosted during recent winters on the BT building in Hemel Hempstead but it is always gone by the spring. It can not be long before a pair breed locally and it is reckoned that the stone clad face of St Albans Abbey could prove to be just right for a peregrine. To them it is just like a stony cliff face which is their favoured natural nest site. Peregrines have nested in recent years on the Tate Modern, Coventry Cathedral and Grantham Cathedral so why not St Albans ? They would not starve with all our pigeons.

Over the last few years we have put up a total of 60 nest boxes for small birds and eight barn owl boxes. Following the success with the barn owls your committee have agreed to fund some other bird of prey boxes and I have stored in my garage two kestrel boxes, a tawny owl box and a little owl box all waiting to be put up hopefully in some warmer weather in January. We also need to check the 60 small boxes to see if they have been used and to clear out old nesting material.

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

"New Bridge over the River Ver"

John Cadisch

This appreciative report appeared in the latest St. Stephen Parish Council Newsletter from which we quote:

"Regular users of the footpath (which allows access to the fishing lakes at the Frogmore end of Hyde Lane) will be delighted with the new footbridge that crosses the River Ver. The bridge is of wooden construction to maintain a rustic feel, to blend in with the natural landscape of the area and replaces the old version which was prone to flooding when the river was swollen.

"Now, the paths which are often used by Park Street School pupils, will be walkable at all times whatever the weather. The design also includes ramps to enable people who have walking difficulties ease of access to enjoy this lovely local beauty spot."

See also Andy Webb's note in the October "Ver Valley Newsletter", accompanied by photos of similar bridges installed at Redbournbury (same contractor). There is a possibility that the planks may become a little slippery in winter, but other than that slight criticism the VVS committee, on visiting the site, was well satisfied with the build quality.

Seven volunteers from the Ver Valley Society and the Friends of Verulamium Park escaped the rush of Christmas shopping, to work on the section of the river opposite the Duke of Marlborough on Saturday 11th December. Several bags of litter were collected from the banks and from the river; let us hope that those who chuck their beer cans and bottles into the river will begin to understand that we do care for the area. Some dead vegetation was cut back and bramble removed to improve the views of the river. Under the Elderberry trees, dead wood was built up into eco-piles, so that a good habitat was maintained. More of this work will need to be done in January. Two intrepid volunteers (Ernie and Anthony) entered the river to remove a lot of debris which was obstructing the flow. The photos show some of the work we have been doing.

If you could join us, these are a few planned activities:

Saturday 8th January:

10.00am - noon. Verulamium Park.

Meet on the green in front of the Duke of Marlborough.

Friday 11th February:

2.00 - 4.00pm, Riverside Way.

Meet at the Drop Lane Car park, Park Street, off Smug Oak Lane, to walk the river with Julian Thornton (HCC Rights of Way officer) to start removing some of the saplings along the banks and any debris in the river.

Friday 11th March:

2.00 - 4.00pm. Riverside Way.

Meet at the Drop Lane Car park to continue the work along the river.

The Countryside Management Service has kindly agreed to lend us tools for these tasks, but you would need to wear suitable footwear and gloves. We are not allowed under the terms of our BTCV insurance, to wear waders.

It would be helpful if you would contact me on 01727 761878 or sue.frearson@which.net if you will be able to join us. I will circulate reminders of each task by e-mail.

Some members of the group are willing to go out at short notice to remove litter and branches that might catch weeds and litter, which the EA might take several weeks to clear in their present over-stretched state.

Please would you let me know of any work that you think we should tackle, so that I can assess what tools would be needed.



Improved flow in the Ver in front of Duke of Marlborough.pub.



Anthony and others collecting dead wood for the habitat piles.



Ernie removing rubbish from the Ver.

BOOK REVIEW: Hertfordshire Geology and Landscape Sue Frearson

Editor and main author, John Catt plus 13 contributing local experts from the Hertfordshire Geological Society.

This book is a tour de force and a mine of information, with something in it for all to dip into. The photographs, maps and diagrams are excellent. It covers in ten chapters a range of topics from the character of Hertfordshire and its geology, how the concealed bedrock geology of chalk from the Palaeogene to the Quaternary has influenced the landscape to the effect on soils, agriculture and plant ecology. This has affected man's occupation, including the routes of roads, railways and canals.

Of direct interest to the VVS is Chapter 9 covering hydrogeology, water supply and waste disposal, but also in Chapter 10 how mineral resources have been used in church building stones and brick making. An excellent index enables access to a range of local topics from the Abbey, pudding stones to the Ver.

Cost £39.50. Order and pay on-line at www.hnhs.org or send your order and cheque to HNHS, 24 Mandeville Rise, Welwyn Garden City, AL8 7JU.

Freshwater Crayfish in the Ver Catchment

Janet Southwood

When walking along the river Ver at Gorbambury last summer I found the remains of a half eaten crayfish by the ford near Bow Bridge. The large front claws were missing, but enough remained to identify it as a north american signal crayfish (*Pacifastacus leniusculus*). These crayfish were once stocked in the vicinity of Shafford Mill in the late 1970s/early 80s and have spread throughout the Ver catchment replacing the native white-clawed crayfish (*Austropotomobius palipes*).

The native white-clawed crayfish was once abundant in many rivers across the UK, but since the late 1970s numbers have declined dramatically after the introduction of non-native species for the restaurant trade. The most abundant of these is the signal crayfish introduced from North America in the 1970s, it is larger than our native white-clawed crayfish and much more aggressive. The signal crayfish carries the crayfish plague which has caused the death of large numbers of native white-clawed crayfish.

The white-clawed crayfish reaches 12cm in length and can live for up to 12 years, they can be identified by the dirty white to pink colouration on the underside of the claws. They require clean well oxygenated water with a high calcium content - hence their association with chalk streams.

The signal crayfish can be identified by red colouration on the underside of the claws and a white band where the moveable and non-moveable parts of the claw meet. They are long-lived and produce many offspring, they are very mobile and can spread through catchments very quickly.

The rivers of Hertfordshire contain two other species of introduced crayfish, the turkish and virile, some of these have escaped or been released into local waterways, including the river Lee.

Researchers at the University of Hertfordshire have set up a breeding program for the white-clawed crayfish at their Bayfordbury field station - creating an artificial mini river where females were successfully "berried" and several young have hatched and survived. This is an ongoing project which when sufficient numbers of white clawed crayfish have been bred they may be released into "safe" water bodies.

Roy Bentley

VVS member Roy Bentley along with his wife Anne assisted at the Redbourn Rural Day Walks back in May this year.

Roy took a photograph on the day and then drew this graphite sketch which really captures this very special stretch of our river.

Roy is an artist, author, illustrator and cartoonist. You see more of his work at www.roybentleyart.com



Picture Page



Two seasonal photos:
The Ver at Waterend Lane (left): P. Fox

The big oak tree - Green Lane to
Porridge Pot (below): John Fisher



Opening of Millennium Park and footpath,
28 November 2010.



Fossil notice board near the Veolia site.