



Ver Valley Society

NEWSLETTER

Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society

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www.riverver.co.uk

President: Peter Fox, MBE



The front cover painting of "Birds of Hertfordshire" is by Alan Harris.

The book's authors are Ken Smith, Jack Fearnside, Chris Dee and Mike Illet.

January Open Meeting

Thursday 28th January at 7.30pm

This month we are in Redbourn at Redbourn Village Hall in the Centenary Room. The village hall is on the east side of Redbourn High Street - AL3 7LW - Small car park and in the High Street.

The speaker will be Ken Smith who is one of the four joint authors of Herts Bird Club book "Birds of Hertfordshire". Ken is now retired after long service with the RSPB. You will be able to purchase a copy of this outstanding publication at the meeting and avoid the postal charge.

During the evening there will be a short Ver Valley news section and the usual refreshments.

We would welcome a suggested donation of £2 per head towards the costs of the hall hire etc. Members and non members welcome – bring a friend!

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

Chairman's Report

Jane Gardiner

Just before the International Climate Change conference in Paris in early December, Sustainable St Albans Week took place and was a great success. The Ver Valley Society got involved by doing clearance work along the Ver in Verulam Golf club on Monday 24th November. This attracted several non-VVS volunteers to Sue's working party which was pleasing, (see her report later in this newsletter). These included David Coasby who has since joined VVS and agreed to join our Bailiffing team, keeping an eye on the Markyate area for us.

Committee members attended the Verulamium Park Forum in late November. It seems SADC are still considering possible solutions to the build up of toxic sludge in the bottom of the lake and regrettably any improvements to the path or river access at the south east corner of Verulamium Park from the Holywell Hill entrance are being shelved for the time being – Martin Frearson reports on this more fully later in this Newsletter.

Following the AGM there has been some reorganisation on the Committee. I am pleased that Martin has agreed to act as Vice-chairman of VVS this year. Paul Foster wanted to step down from that role but has agreed to become our Webmaster. The Newsletter is now the responsibility of a subcommittee.

Several committee members were able to attend a celebration of the Chilterns AONB 50th anniversary in Chesham at which Richard Mabey gave a very interesting talk. John Cadisch has written a report on this elsewhere in this newsletter. On 19th December the Action Group was working behind the Chequers Pub, Redbourn and after the hard work they were joined by other members of the Committee and Bailiffs for a pre-Christmas drink at the pub, which was a very pleasant occasion.

VVS Membership

Since the last newsletter went to press, a very encouraging nine new members and their families have joined the VVS, so we'd like to welcome: A Barker, Mr & Mrs P Rowland, Dr H Bailey, J Hardy, C Tyley, R Sullivan, D Brooke, D Coasby and N Gale. Thanks to everyone involved.

And, yet another appreciative nod to all of you who renewed their membership this year, although, for memberships that lapsed in Sept 2015, this will be the last newsletter / reminder sent out.

Any membership enquiries can be sent to members@riverver.co.uk, and membership forms are downloadable from <http://www.riverver.co.uk/pages/membership.html>.

Our current membership stands at 280 including complimentary membership to various related organisations such as CMS, HMWT etc, and councillors. If the 20 or so people who haven't rejoined since September realise their mistake, our numbers might reach 300, which would be encouraging!"

A Chilterns Celebration

John Cadisch

Most of the VVS committee headed for Chesham's Elgiva Theatre on 25th November to join the special event celebrating "50 Years of the Chilterns AONB". We were greeted with a number of interesting displays in the foyer, and the theatre was full of Chilterns enthusiasts keen to take part in this landmark occasion.

Highlight of the evening was an informal talk by the well-known naturalist and writer Richard Mabey, who was born in Berkhamsted and grew up in the Chilterns which helped to form his thoughts on landscape; he signed his latest book afterwards. Richard Mabey is a prolific writer on the natural world and his most notable publication is probably "Flora Britannica" which was published in 1996 and is still the definitive guide to wild flowers, plants and trees in Great Britain. He also co-wrote "Birds Britannica" with Mark Cocker and this was published in 2005.

There was also an impressive presentation by the Conservation Board's newly appointed Chief Officer, Sue Holden, who has come over from the Woodland Trust. The River Ver is on the fringes of the Chilterns "area of natural beauty" so the VVS is happy to co-operate with the Chilterns Conservation Board, we help one another. Allen Beechey, who has been the Chilterns Chalk Stream officer for the last 10 years, has always been a helpful and enthusiastic friend of the Ver Valley Society.

After the dry warm autumn it was good to have some rain in November and December although those months were also noticeably warm, dull and dismal as I'm sure you all noticed! This helped keep some flow in the river but the aquifer has continued to fall as is usual at this time of year. However the fall in December was slightly less than in the previous month and there should be an improvement over the next few months.

Month 2015	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres <i>[Long-term average]</i> (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres <i>[± average]</i> (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamsted)
September	127.74 [130.87]	45.5 [-12.18]
October	127.17 [130.93]	64.4 [-17.04]
November	126.48 [130.91]	84.0 [+7.4]
December	126.27 [130.56]	<i>Not yet available</i>

Bailiffs have had some difficulty actually making measurements recently as there is so little water and blocking vegetation is not dying back with lack of frosts to kill it off. However Ernie Leahy, who has not been able to measure for several months, was able to send in a report after the Action Group's efforts behind the Chequers pub, Redbourn just before Christmas.



Peregrine falcon. [Paul Foster]

Although there is not much water the Bailiffs have had some nice wildlife to see and report; John Pritchard spotted a weasel for the first time in years and John Fisher saw 10 red kites following a plough. Paul Foster noticed a peregrine falcon near Hog End Farm one foggy morning and managed to get a rather hazy photo of it. Mole activity is very obvious and as well as rabbits, squirrels, foxes the occasional muntjac have been reported. Fish reports include a roach, brown trout, chubb and bull-heads.



Oyster fungi. [John Pritchard]

The damp and mild weather has encouraged the appearance of many different sorts of fungi and some very early hazel catkins but only a few berries remain now to brighten hedgerows. Berries on ivy and holly will be the main food source for birds like the redwings and fieldfares which have started arriving now.



Large flocks of golden plovers have also come in as have some siskins and lapwings. There have been short-eared owls in the district and among the more usual water fowl teal, gadwall, a widgeon, snipe and little grebes have been seen. There have also been some reports of kingfishers, little egrets, nuthatches, grey wagtails and occasionally a bullfinch – see John Fisher's bird notes for more on birds in the valley.

As always, at the end of another year, I'd like to thank all the volunteer Bailiffs for their efforts and commitment to monitoring the river. It was good to be able to welcome some of them to a pre-Christmas drink at the Chequers pub in Redbourn, a pleasant way to start of the holiday season.

Woody nightshade berries. [John Pritchard]

November and December have been incredibly mild and many of our winter visitors are still lingering in Scandinavia. However I was delighted to find a flock of about 200 golden plovers towards the end of the month. John Pritchard, our Shafford Bailiff had seen about a dozen one Sunday, so I set out on the Monday to try and find them in the fields by Punch Bowl Lane which are favoured most years. Sure enough these regular visitors to the Ver Valley were stretched along the distant rows of a winter sown crop, close to Jerome's. At that range they were difficult to count but there were at least 200.



Some winters we have had flocks of over 1000 and of course the best sight of them is when they all take flight, turning in unison and catching the low winter sun on the golden undersides of their wings. A few days later I saw a mixed flock of lapwings and golden plovers but by that time the flock was much reduced and there were only about 30, with 20 or so lapwings. Lapwings, with their black and white

Golden Plover flock resting in the Ver Valley in January 2016 – [Tim Hill]

wings, appear very wobbly in flight whereas the golden plovers look so slick and purposeful. Hope we get many more stopping over during this winter.

I often walk over the Scout Farm fields towards the now dry stretches of the Ver north of Redbourn and this winter there has been a gathering there of yellow-hammers. Some mornings I have seen as many as 50 perched on the hedges and feeding on the winter stubbles. These fields are also good for skylarks which are renowned for their soaring song flight in the spring but at this time of the year you are more likely to see pairs chasing and flying low over the crop fields.



Golden Plover – [John Fisher]

As they fly you get a great view of the white outer tail feathers. Another day I walked east from Rebourbury Mill and there were ten red kites following the plough as it went up and down the field along with about 500 black headed gulls. They were gouging themselves on the very nutritious worms brought to the surface.

Although we now have a good population of barn owls in the Ver Valley, as far as I know we have yet to have a visit from a short-eared owl in the Upper Ver (north of St Albans). There has been a report of one near the Frogmore Pits and this winter there has been an influx from the European mainland where they have obviously had a good breeding season. Must be a lemming year! One of the best sites to see them has been the Heartwood Forest near Sandridge where up to five have been overwintering. They quarter the rough grassland in broad daylight and you get fantastic views. I was there the other day with my old friend Podge Fox and we saw at least three as well as five kestrels, a male sparrowhawk and a kite. Other birds to look out for this winter are kingfishers, snipe and green sandpipers, all of which are very much birds of the Ver Valley. Also look out for hares as they seem to be recovering in numbers. I saw two near Redbournbury recently, but north of Luton Lane is the best area to go looking for these.

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

Hare [Barry Turner]



Future Vision of the Ver in 2030

Paul Foster

The Ver Valley Society were asked to take part in the Sustainable St Albans Week and provide a vision of what the Ver may look like in 2030 for **Future Visions 2030**.

“Now in 2030, we found ourselves with the River Ver almost back to its past glory; the most influential occurrences being the implementation of the river catchment plan, and the reduction in abstraction across the region. The Red now flows permanently, and whilst the Ver will always be a winterbourne in its upper reaches, flow is present a good part of the year. Walkways have been built over those areas likely to flood, and disabled access has been increased dramatically. The wildlife has benefited immensely, monitoring of River invertebrates which started in 2014, now extends the full length with the small army of Riverfly Monitors, and they have shown the river is back to where it should be, resulting in healthy populations of insects and plants.

Trout are now seen along all stretches, the Red Signal Crayfish has all but been irradiated, and the indigenous Crayfish has made a welcome return. The reintroduction of the Water Vole which started in 2020 is now complete, and they can be seen as far North as Flamstead. Lower abstraction has occurred across the Chilterns, and specifically on the Ver; Bow Bridge pumping station was closed down in 2016, abstractions at Holywell and Mud Lane pumping stations were halved in the early 2020's; with the reduction in abstraction from Kensworth, the whole river has benefitted. The River Catchment Plan has helped to manage the needs of the local communities.

This along with a better understanding in the community about the source, and scarcity of supply, has increased the public's desire to protect the environment. The increased flow, and better management of the river has seen a great improvement, landowners are taking greater care of the river banks, the section through Verulam Park has been made more naturalised, and the river is now accessible down its entire length enabling people to enjoy the river at its best. Maybe it's too much to expect beavers to return, but certainly there are hopeful signs of otters reappearing, several sightings have been reported in the last two years.”

Verulamium Park Consultative Forum

Martin Frearson

I attended the 23 November meeting on behalf of the VVS, There were two items of interest to the society:

The Lake:

(also debated at the 5 November meeting of the Local Services Scrutiny Committee which I attended).

There is no enthusiasm for dredging the lake, because of the huge cost and the silt likely to return. The Council is looking for an alternative long-term solution which might involve constructing a borehole to provide water to continuously “flush” the lake. It seems this has been successfully applied in Welwyn-Hatfield's Stanborough Lakes. Also, the earlier proposal to plant reed beds behind gabions between the little bridge and the small island using the accumulated silt is being investigated again.

Apparently this has been tried at a lake in Hitchin and officers were going to see this. We support this as it would filter out future silt and remove pollutants with the help of a recirculating aerating pump. The Environment Agency is unlikely to grant a new abstraction licence, and only allow water out of the river into the lakes at times of high flows. Even if a viable solution is found, there is at present no budget allocated to improving the Lakes. Six new signs asking the public not to feed the birds were to be installed later that week and officers were hopeful this would help to reduce the pollution and related avian botulism outbreaks.

The boardwalk project to improve the riverside walk between the Causeway and Holywell Hill.

After a six-month delay officers had replied to our offer to use the £4000 remaining from the Friends of Verulamium Park funds to build a 100m boardwalk across the flood-prone section of this key link in our Two Cities walk. They claimed 350m were required, clearly unaffordable, and they had no budget for future maintenance. Instead, they invited us to give them the money towards a project to open up the council-owned small overgrown area opposite the Fighting Cocks on the north side of the river to the public and incorporate it into the Park. Your committee felt unable to support this as it would do nothing to improve access to the natural part of the Ver in the Park.

I reported this to the Forum and asked that the boardwalk idea should be reconsidered, especially as the route is shown close to the river on the new information boards, where it is frequently impassable. The two local councillors present were supportive so jointly with officers we are looking at long-life recycled plastic boards, and whether grants would be available from Affinity Water community awards for future maintenance. Since this is not a Definitive Path the local authorities are not obliged to maintain it.

Recent Projects:

On a very miserable Saturday in October, a few volunteers helped along Riverside Way, clearing Ash saplings and tidying up a deflector. It is now looking very good, with Brown Trout and Chubb being seen regularly.

The **SuStAinable StAlbans Week** programme attracted seventeen volunteers, more than twice our usual attendance, to Verulam Golf Course on Monday 23rd November to help clear debris and litter from the river and coppice some willows. Although a cold and frosty day, it was ideal for working in the river and much was achieved.



Verulam Golf Course volunteers clearing a blockage. [Sue Frearson]

Allen Beechey, the Chilterns Chalk Stream Officer had previously given me considerable guidance for work we could carry out in this very beautiful site. We hope to return there again, but because of the rising river this won't be until next Autumn, when we hope that **SuStAinable StAlbans Week** will be repeated. My thanks to the many volunteers who joined us and to the management of

Verulam Golf Course for the very welcome hot drinks we had in the clubhouse, when we finished.

Our annual Christmas tidy up near the Ver confluence with the Red, on a lovely Saturday, was well attended, with fourteen volunteers removed litter, debris and made several rotten trees safe. Our get together afterwards with the Ver Bailiffs and the Riverfly Monitors in the Chequers at Redbourn was particularly pleasant.



VVS volunteers. [Sue Frearson]

A big thank-you to all our volunteers who helped along the river as Bailiffs, as Action Group volunteers, or Riverfly Monitors in 2015. May we wish you a very Happy New Year.

Winter Programme 2016:

- Saturday 16th January 10.00 -12.00**
Frogmore Pits (meet at Hyde Lane car park) to continue the clearance of the original permissive footpath running along the Ver. I will borrow some slashers and loppers from CMS to tackle the brambles, but good stout boots and gloves will be needed.
- Saturday 20th February 10.00 – 12.00**
Sopwell Nunnery Green (South of Alban Way) turn off Cotton Mill Lane towards Sopwell Mill, to park in front of the derelict garages near the allotments. We will be **laying a hedge** as part of the new Nature Reserve between the Ver and the playing fields. (Training will be given, if you haven't tried hedge laying before!)
- Saturday 19th March 10.00 – 12.00**
Clearance of New Barnes Mill leat / Frogmore Pits clearance of permissive footpaths.
(Task to be confirmed nearer the time)



Verulam Golf Course volunteers helping coppice the willows. [Sue Frearson]

Redbourn Parish Council has just put up this display board near the seats provided a few years back by the Redbourn Care Group. The Ver Valley Society is very fortunate to have such a talented wildlife artist as Ernie Leahy on our committee. He has provided the artwork showing the birds and plants that can be seen nearby.

Back in the 1970's this area was deemed untidy and "smelly"! and the Parish Council were planning to put the Red in a concrete pipe and level the ground over it. I remember Podge Fox and me taking a bunch of Parish Councillors to Lemsford to show them the nature reserve there and convince them that the Red was a great asset. Thankfully we still have the Red to enjoy along the edge of the common and I really like to see new generations of kids paddling and getting muddy! The wildlife display boards at Verulamium Park are also fine examples of Ernie's work.

RIVER RED AND THE MOOR



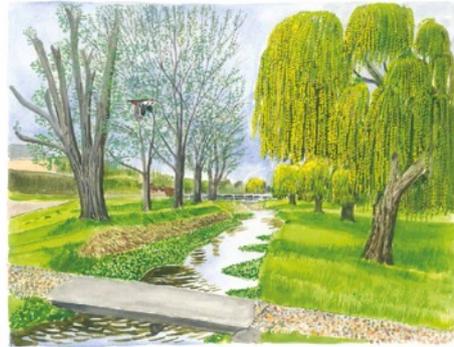
WILD LIFE

The short stretch of the visible river is a mini-haven for native wildflowers like Lesser Celandine, Dog Violets, Comfrey and a nice group of Bullrushes which enhance the river entrance.

Unfortunately, the Inedible Watercress and the Fools Watercress grow profusely, and often take over the river bed, requiring cut back. However, the cress does act as a natural funnel, narrowing the stream in low water which, by increasing its flow rate, helps to clear the mid-channel of silt and reveal the gravel base of this chalk stream.

Common Frogs spawn in the ditches in spring, but Sticklebacks will only re-populate when river levels allow.

A variety of birds visit the River, and Moorhens and Mallards often breed. Kingfishers, Little Egrets and Snipe are special visitors which are sometimes seen.

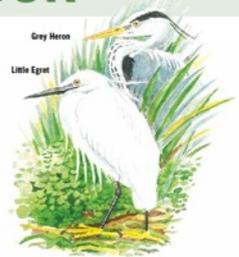
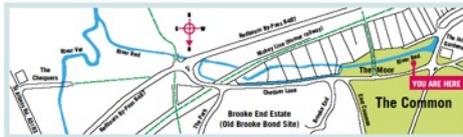


THE RIVER RED

The village of Redbourn takes its name from the River Red, (reedy stream or reedy bourn). It is one of only two chalk stream tributaries to the River Ver. It is just over half a mile long as an open river. It is fed, via pipe, from an overflow bund in Three Cherry Trees Lane, Hemel Hempstead, to appear as a stream opposite the "Jolly Gardener" (former public house) by the crossroads of Hemel Hempstead Road and Chequer Lane. Here, road run-off from rainfall often supplements its flow.

Only about 250 yards of the open river has The Common on both banks, an area known as The Moor, where it passes through a corridor of weeping willows and several established trees. In times of good flow the gravel bottom can be seen, which is a characteristic of chalk streams.

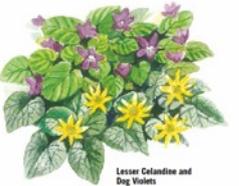
The river then passes through several gardens in Chequer Lane, before turning south to flow under the Nicky Line and Redbourn By Pass, and through woodland to meet the River Ver behind the car park of the Chequers Public House on St. Albans Road.



RECENT HISTORY

In the mid nineteen-sixties, there was a large pond next to the River Red, when the area was, appropriately, called The Moor.

A proposal was made to fill the pond and pipe the water across The Common, but the authorities agreed to preserve the river, and bordered it with the now well-established Weeping Willows.



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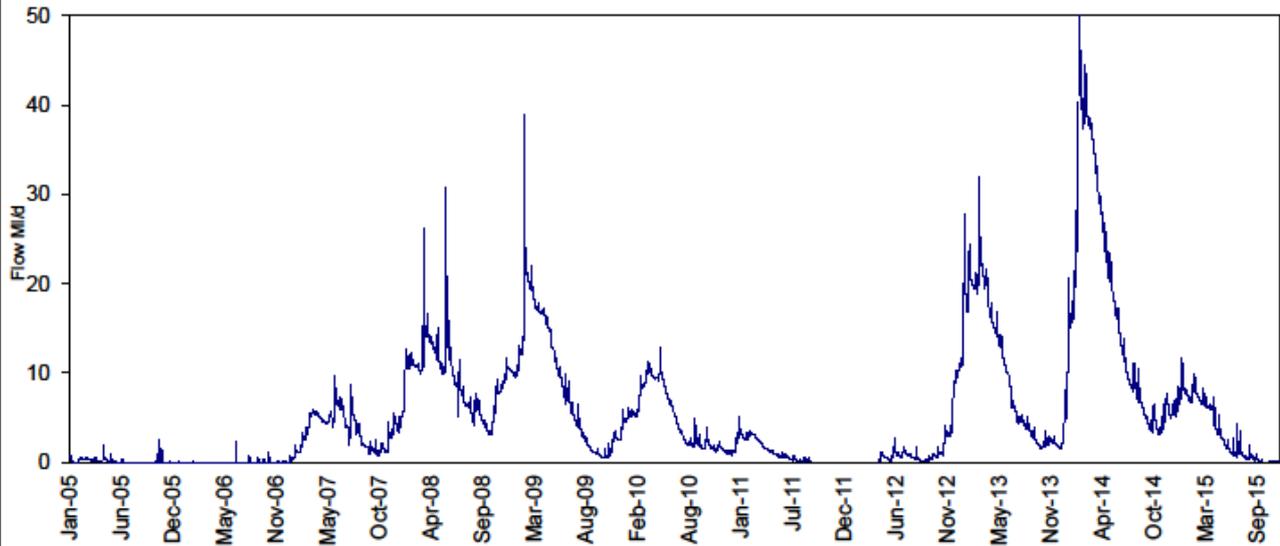
Newsletter Layout

John Trew (Verulam Angling Club)

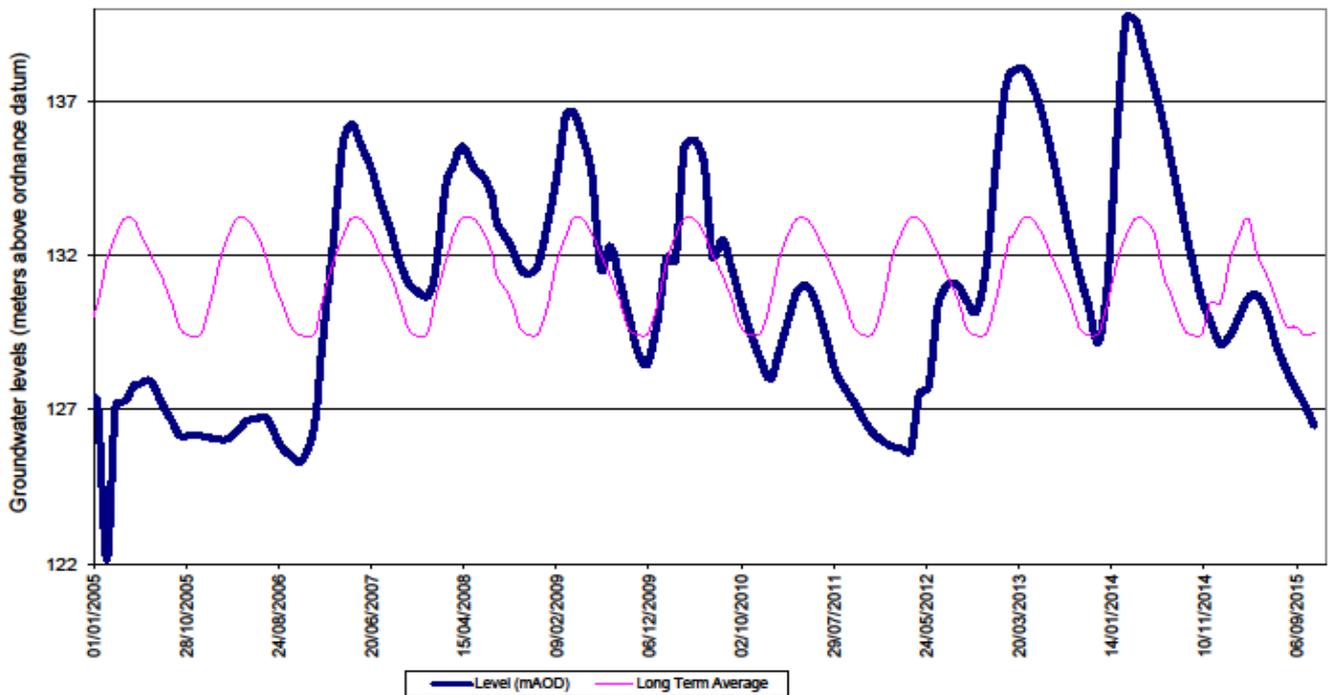
HOTLINES

EA Incident Hotline: 0800 807060
("Report all environmental incidents")
EA Floodline: 0845 988 1188
"Cleaner District" (SADC):
01727 819598
Water Leaks (Affinity):
0800 376 5325

**Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn
January 2005 to Date**



**Groundwater levels - Ballingdon Farm 2005 - To Date
Grid Ref: TL 0385 1404**



We are grateful to Affinity Water for supplying the ground water and flow charts and to Veolia Environmental for printing and distributing our newsletters.