



Ver Valley Newsletter



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July Open Meeting

Please note the date !

We will be at Markyate Village Hall, Cavendish Road, Markyate for a repeat visit on

TUESDAY 22nd JULY (7.30 pm)

Guest Speaker - John Wyatt

Subject: "The Chilterns Experience"

"An introduction to the birds, butterflies, plants and animals of the Chilterns showing just how diverse and beautiful our flora and fauna still are in spite of all the threats facing this special chalk habitat"

This is likely to be an outstanding talk and members and friends are warmly invited to attend. John Wyatt takes superb slides and his knowledge of local natural history is widely regarded as second to none. Our John Fisher "talent-spotted" John Wyatt on a Nile cruise some 10 years ago and they have kept in touch ever since.

The first part of the evening will give news of Ver Valley matters and answer any questions from members or guests. We then break for tea or coffee, during which time freshly-baked bread from the bakery at Redbournbury Mill will be on sale.

Events

Andy Webb

We have attended these events recently:

Thurs. June 5th: Chiltern Chalk Stream Forum at the Maltings Arts Theatre, St Albans, followed by a visit to Redbournbury (lunch) and riverside walk back to St Albans. {AW, JF, JG, JC}

Sun. June 22nd: "Festival of Life", VVS/River Ver display, St Peter's Street, St Albans (AW)

Mon. June 23rd: Three Valleys Water Draft Water Resources Management Plan entitled "Deliberative Forum", St George's Street, London (AW)

Mon. July 14th: ("To come") Environment Agency workshop on EU Water Framework Directive and other issues, County Hall, Hertford. (AW & JG)

VVS AGM - Tuesday 21st October

Another date to reserve !

Our AGM has been booked at the St. Michael's Parish Centre (7.30 pm).

More details next time.

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

Peter Smith CB (1929-2008)

We much regret to announce that Dr Peter Smith died on 17th June after several months of ill-health. He served the Society extremely well, having been a committee member and then Chairman from 1992 to 2003 and then, for a far-too-short period this year, President in succession to the late Richard Thrale.

Peter's legacy was steering the Society during his eleven years of Chairmanship and ensuring that it continued to campaign after the shut-down of Friars Wash pumping station in 1993. He also made a point of establishing good relations with senior Three Valleys Water officers. We continue to benefit from those connections today. He also worked tirelessly at Redbournbury mill, spending many hours handling grain and flour with the team of millers, and was a director of the organisation.

His working career was of great military significance, including radar development at Malvern with the Defence Scientific staff, moving on to the Central Scientific Staff at the Ministry of Defence, finally as Director General responsible for procuring guided weapons and electronic equipment. He was appointed Companion, Order of the Bath, in 1988. Qualifications: Ph.D and B.Sc (both in physics).

In retirement he kept up his interests in music, gardening, expert bird-watching, reading - and the environment, from which the Society greatly benefitted. His wise counsel will be greatly missed.

The VVS extends its sympathy to Peter's two daughters, Alison and Linda, who cared for him latterly (his wife Doreen pre-deceased him), and the rest of the family.

Four members of the committee attended the funeral at St Peter's Church on 4th July.

Bird Notes

John Fisher

There is more good news this year regarding barn owls, as a pair has bred again for the third successive year near Redbournbury and it looks as if a second pair will breed late near Shafford. It will be interesting see which strategy pays off. You have to be licensed to even check a barn owl box so in early June I watched while our barn owl man, Peter Wilkinson, looked into all 6 of the boxes we now have along the Ver Valley. One box had one live youngster, just a few days old, a still warm dead one and an unhatched egg. Barn owls are very dependent on voles and mice which may be in short supply this year and of course the very wet May would have made it a difficult hunting time for the adults. Hopefully there will be two healthy young barn owls when we return to ring them in early July. In the other box two adults were roosting and as there is still time for them to produce a brood before the autumn we are hopeful. This pair had bred late in 2007 as there was one dead fledgling still in the box from last year's brood. It is likely that two or three youngsters flew from this box in September or even October. Our barn owls are very elusive and to see them you need to be around at dusk as they seldom hunt in daylight. Two breeding pairs of barn owls in the Ver Valley must a first for decades.

I saw my first cuckoo this year on the very last day of May, having heard my first on 26 April. As with most years I found that the best local area for cuckoos are the water meadows just north of Shafford where a lot of reed warblers nest which are probably the hosts for our cuckoos. I heard cuckoos calling several times in early May, including the strange bubbling call of the female, but could never manage to get a sight of one until on this late May evening I saw the very distinctive profile of a cuckoo on the top of a fence post. Cuckoos have very long wings which when they are perched extend beyond the tail and it is this feature which I think makes them unmistakable.

Buzzards and red kites are both now firmly established around the valley and although red kites live mainly on carrion I saw one take live prey while on an early morning walk through Gorhambury. Several pairs of lapwing are breeding this year along the Ver and it's great to see the swooping flight and hear the plaintive calls of these wonderful birds. It was these calls which first drew my attention to a pair mobbing a red kite. This is normal behaviour especially when they have young to defend from predators but in this case the defence did not work as the kite dropped down to the ground and grabbed a lapwing chick and then was pursued into the distance by the furious lapwing pair. Hopefully they had another two or three chicks hidden in the grass which will survive. I am afraid this is nature at this time of the year when the success of one species depends on preying on others. Even your garden blue tits depend on caterpillars which are really just like the young lapwing.



*Great Crested Grebes Springtime Display
on the Lake - Ian Jinks*

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

Bailiff Notes

Jane Gardiner

The heavy rains in March (up 100%) and May (up 70%) have done the river a lot of good, so the aquifer levels and flows being recorded are holding up well. Still in mid June there is good flow from just south of Markyate but the weather has also been warmer than average with some very sunny days so vegetation growth is prolific and right across the channel in many places.

2008	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)
March	134.9 [132.79]	108.5 [+54.6]
April	135.53 [133.6]	53.5 [+0.0]
May	134.84 [134.1]	87.0 [+37.3]
June	134.52 [133.32]	35.3 [-24.9]

The valley has been colourful with cowslips, red campion, oxeye daises, elderflower, dog roses and hawthorn doing well in verges and hedges this spring and early summer. Nearer the river marsh marigolds, yellow flag iris, comfrey, butterbur, water crowfoot, starwort and forget-me-not have been flowering. Unfortunately Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed are also already being mentioned in bailiff reports.

Briefly in early June a sudden bloom of bright green algae was carpeting the lake at Verulamium. This was not dangerous and was of a type more usually associated with salt water, possibly due to heavy rain washing down something unusual. However it was thick enough to tempt at least one small child to try and run across it and it was largely removed by netting after a few days. However it has been actively re-growing through latter part of the month despite further clearance attempts.

Moles have continued to be active and a few hares have been seen, 3 together on one occasion. There have been one or two muntjack sightings and of course rabbits and squirrels abound. I have not heard of any mink being seen but evidence of water voles is uncertain though they may well be about.

Some dragonflies have already been reported, brown hawkers, banded demoiselles (famous as Bill Oddie's favourite!) and some other damsels but few butterflies seem to be about as yet.

As far as birds are concerned, the news from our nest boxes is encouraging and there have been a few interesting sightings (see John's bird notes). Willow warblers and chiffchaffs have returned, and as usual grey wagtails, kingfishers, buzzards, kestrels and red kites are reported fairly regularly.

The path of the Ver Valley Walk through Sopwell Nunnery Green Space has been rebuilt as the old route on the river bank was overgrown and degraded so much it was in danger of slipping into the water in places. We had been concerned about it for some time. The excellent new path was designed by CMS and EA and the work was undertaken by Herts Probation Service on behalf of SADC. This area now has Herts Green Flag status and is worth a visit as is the Watercress Wildlife Conservation Area nearby.

Ver Valley Walks

Andy Webb

The linear "Ver Walk" and eight circular "Ver Valley Walks" have now been finalised; although the process of liaison and planning with CMS has been protracted, these new and improved routes will make an outstanding series of River/Valley walks and are, I believe, unprecedented. Isobel Crozier at CMS is now beginning the laborious process of applying for grants to fund the design and printing, and the additional associated works. The proposed titles are set out below:

1. Linear - THE RIVER VER WALK
2. Circular - THE SOURCE WALK (Markyate & Kensworth)
3. " THE UPPER VER (Flamstead & Markyate)
4. " REDBOURN NORTH
5. " REDBOURN SOUTH
6. " CHILDWICKBURY, REDBOURNBURY & GORHAMBURY
7. " ST. ALBANS & VERULAMIUM
8. " ST. ALBANS & PARK STREET
9. " THE CONFLUENCE WALK (Park Street, Colney Street and Bricket Wood)

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

John Fisher

You can now hear the bubbling sound of the Upper Ver whenever you log on to the web site as we have added a short video clip taken on a quiet Sunday morning just south of Verlam End. You may have to free download real time player.

We have also changed the layout of the galleries so that now you see a page of "thumbnails" from which you can select any picture as required.

I still want to rewrite the Mills page, add a Geology page and add personal contributions to the "Memories of the Ver". These will be projects for when the days get shorter.

The web counter indicates that we get about 300 visitors each month who download about 800 pages. Last month we did get a new member who downloaded the membership form from the website.

Digital photographs and written text contributions are always welcome.

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.

The Ver Valley Society

John Fisher

The Ver Valley Society holds four open meetings every year at different venues along the Ver Valley. On Tuesday July 22 our meeting is at Markyate Village Hall starting at 7.30. There is no admission charge and non members are always most welcome, but of course we hope they will take up membership which is only £5 per annum or £20 for 5 years.

The first part of the meeting is to give news of Ver Valley matters and to answer any questions from members or guests. We then break for tea or coffee. Freshly baked bread from Redbournbury Mill will be on sale during the interval.

For the second part of the evening we have a really outstanding speaker in John Wyatt who comes from Tring. His talk is entitled "The Chilterns Experience" and will be an introduction to the birds, butterflies, plants and animals of the Chilterns showing just how diverse and beautiful our flora and fauna still are in spite of all the threats facing this special chalk habitat.

I first met John on a cruise down the Nile some 10 years ago. John is now a largely retired professional ornithologist, naturalist, photographer and wildlife tour leader. His trip to Egypt led to a long term interest as he now describes himself as an "Ornitho- Egyptologist" working fulltime to complete a book entitled "The Birds of Ancient Egypt". He reckons this will keep him fully occupied until he is 136!

John slides are superb and his knowledge of our local natural history is second to none. If you are interested in nature you should not miss this evening.

The Ver Valley Society has a web site www.riverver.com. This contains lots of information and pictures.

If you have any comments or queries about the meeting or membership please phone me 01582 792843 or email john.fisher@btclick.com.



The Island on the Lake one a Winter's Morning - Ian Jinks

Peggy Pollok - New Address

Members will be interested to know that Peggy Pollok (Committee member and Chair 1987-1992) is in quite reasonable health but finally decided to leave her Colney Street house and is now being looked after at Tara's Retreat, High Street, Sandridge.

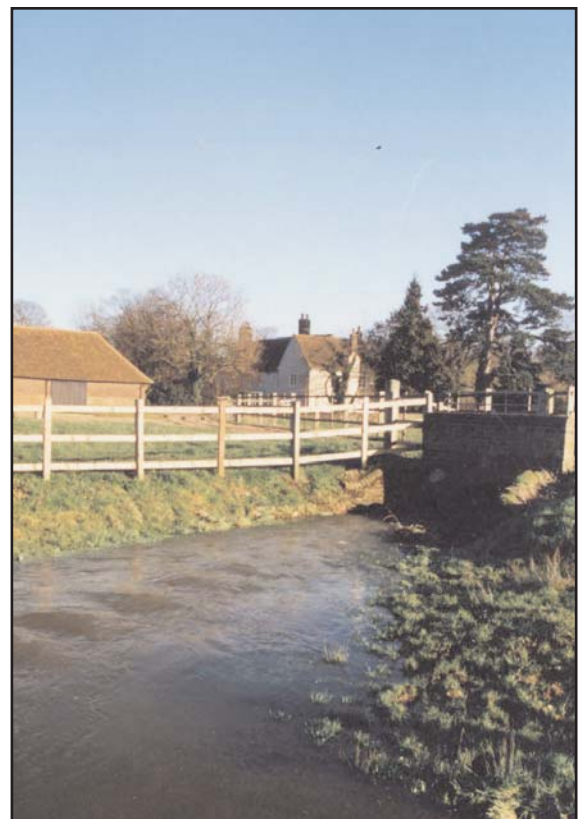
Picture Page



*Chalk Stream Forum Delegates Walking Back to St Albans
along the Ver - Andy Webb*



*The Ver in Flood at Luton
Lane Redbourn - Alan Bull*



Redbournbury Ford - Bob Aldritt