



Ver Valley Newsletter



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July Open Meeting

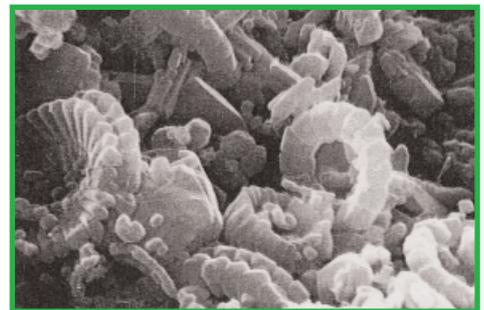
Markyate is becoming our regular July venue, so please note this date in your diary:

Tuesday 28th July 2009, 7.30 pm
at Markyate Village Hall,
Cavendish Road, Markyate (½ mile west of High Street)

We have been able to secure the services of a rather special guest speaker, Dr John Catt whose subject is The Geology of the Ver Valley.

He has worked on Soil Research at Rothamsted from 1963 until retirement in 1999, since then has been Honorary Professor in the Geography Dept. at University College London. At present he is writing a book on the geology of Hertfordshire. "Pudding stone" is sure to be featured.

We look forward to welcoming everybody and hope to provide refreshments between the business part of the meeting and Dr Catt's talk. Redbournbury Bakery will be bringing along a selection of their rather special breads.



Electron photomicrograph of chalk showing the minute fossils and shell fragments that make up chalk. Mag: approximately 10,000

Three Valleys Water – new name, new address

Since the last meeting Three Valleys Water have undergone a move from Bishops Rise, Hatfield to new premises at Tamblin Way, Hatfield.

They have also adopted the name of their parent company "Veolia Water Central Ltd." However, to assist people over the next six months they are now called "Veolia Water Three Valleys."

We continue to be most grateful for the facilities they provide for the Society, printing and despatching our Ver Valley Newsletter

Annual General Meeting

We have booked the St. Michael's Parish Centre, St. Albans, for Tuesday 20th October (7.30 pm). Please reserve the date !

Refreshments (details to be announced in next Newsletter) half-way through the evening, after which Kim Morgan will be telling us all about a subject close to everyone's hearts - "Water Aid".

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

Bow Bridge (Shafford) Pumping Station

Andy Webb

Early this year Three Valleys Water (3VW) and the Environment Agency (EA) reached agreement whereby Bow Bridge Pumping Stn. (licensed to abstract 6MI/d) could be brought back into operation; remember, it ceased abstraction from the Ver aquifer immediately following the Buncefield Oil Depot fire in December 2005 and subsequent pollution fears.

3VW have never believed that any contamination of groundwater occurred following the massive explosion and fire, rather that any insignificant positive results that the EA subsequently gathered were the result of test-sampling failure or existing PFOS contamination from elsewhere. (PFOS was the basic chemical component of the fire-retardant foam used by the Fire Brigade at the time, which is also used in other industrial processes.)

Anyway, 3VW and EA concluded that the GAC filters at the pumping station would remove any remaining trace elements of PFOS from the abstracted groundwater. However, electronic patterns following the installation of a new pump delayed test-pumping scheduled for mid-April; this, in fact, began on 16th June, initially at 2 MI/d (one third of the licenced abstraction figure). The abstracted water is put straight into the complex 3VW supply network so coinciding with the summer peak-demand period. Naturally, a rigorous system of sampling both groundwater at abstraction and drinking-water after carbon-filtering is in place. Water quality is 3VW's primary concern; any doubts would result in the cessation of pumping at Bow Bridge once again. Rob Sage (Water Resources Manager, 3VW) does not foresee this possibility however and abstraction is planned to increase to 4 MI/d by mid-July and to the licence maximum (6 MI/d) by mid-August.

It will be interesting to see the effect this has on the Ver aquifer. Look at the top graph on the final page of this Newsletter - disregarding the two exceptional "wet" years of 2007 and '08, I believe that since the "closure" of Bow Bridge PS the average level of the Ver groundwater is more than that before December 2005, thereby demonstrating the detrimental effect abstraction still has on our river. Neither we, nor the EA, have been able to demonstrate this conclusively - although one would think with over 50% of recharge still abstracted it would go without saying - because of the lack of demonstrable statistical analysis.. Miles Morgan (EA) has assured us that extra monitoring of river levels is in place so that the consequences of the stepped increases in abstraction can be observed here.

So, although the loss of 6 MI/d from the Ver aquifer is, in the short-term, disappointing, in the long term it may provide the VVS and EA with further proof that the Ver and its groundwater remains over-abstracted thereby damaging the river environment. After all, we just want to keep the Ver flowing !

Decking at the Water's Edge

Andy Webb

During our recent walkabout with officers from SADC and EA as reported elsewhere, two instances of inappropriate and unfortunate riverside alteration were observed on private property adjacent to the river Ver in St Albans. The first and most shocking example can be seen at the end of one of the St Michael's Court cottage gardens (adjoining the Blue Anchor pub). At this location sheet piling has been driven into the water's edge then topped with concrete paving to form a "deck" area about 10 ft . square.

Considerable planning and construction effort has been put into this project, involving attractive views across the Ver to the Park. The second example was in Riverside Close where a wooden deck had been built out from the side of the house to the water's edge, about 4 ft above it.

Both seating areas had, apparently, been well planned and executed - but what permissions had been sought, indeed, were these necessary? From SADC - or EA? There was no doubt that both deck areas altered the river bank utterly in the first instance, and drastically in the second.

The EA officer present was shocked and surprised also and went away muttering that she would talk to EA compliance/enforcement colleagues. I have not yet been able to follow this up but fully intend to do so. One would hope that river banks and margins should be protected but I feel that, in practice, householders can do what they like with impunity (unless clearly impeding the flow of the river).

Redevelopment of Westminster Lodge Leisure Centre

John Cadisch

We are watching the situation carefully. After years of indecision, the SADC is trying to get a scheme under way, consultants have been working for over three months. The aim is to build the new facility on an adjoining site whilst keeping the current building, with its ongoing maintenance problems, in commission.

Space is very limited nearby, the Abbey theatre do not want to lose their car park, and we do not want to see a vast new complex constructed on the "funfair meadows" with many implications for the river and the path alongside.

March, April and May were drier, sunnier and warmer than average, and June is likely to be the same, so it is no surprise that flows which were so good in the winter have now been falling back considerably. The aquifer figures are still above average and as is usual have continued to increase slightly in spring until May, which is usually the highest month but not this year. Now that Bow Bridge is back on line we must expect flows from there south through St Albans to be reduced further. At present the head of the river is just south of Markyate.

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 Rothampstead)
March	136.57 [132.79]	37.3 [-16.6]
April	136.64 [133.6]	46.7 [-6.8]
May	135.85 [134.1]	24.8 [-22.9]
June	134.61 [133.3]	Not yet available

Now of course there is abundant growth of all vegetation in and beside the river. Water crowfoot seems to have been particularly prolific this year; lady smock and kingcups did well in the early spring, and yellow flag iris have made bright splashes of colour in many places. Some bee and pyramidal orchids have been reported on the river banks. Woody nightshade is quite common and one report mentions deadly nightshade.

Recent sympathetic cutting back on banks has left many wild flowers to bloom and the area by the Drop Lane Ford has been improved. Unfortunately Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed are also thriving south of St Albans and the carpets of bright green 'lettuce' algae normally associated with salt water have reappeared on Verulamium lakes this June as last year. The other foreign invader 'fairy fern' continues to spread below Dolittle Mill although it is now mostly green so less obvious than when it turns bright red in the autumn and winter.

Quite a few different butterflies have been reported including painted ladies in unusual numbers, holly blues, orange tips, red admirals, peacocks, brimstones, speckled woods and meadow browns; some early dragonflies, banded demoiselles and other damselflies have also been seen. Other insects include a hornet and buff- and white-tailed bumble bees.

As well as the usual rabbits and squirrels sightings include frogs, a hedgehog near River Red, a short-tailed field vole, a slow worm, and badgers north of Redbourn. On the islands in Verulamium Park terrapins, presumably tipped from aquaria, are reputed to be doing well! They may be responsible for the loss of at least one of the baby great-crested grebes on the lake although the herons could also be the culprits - the great-crested grebes chose rather a vulnerable site to try and breed. Fish reports include minnows, chubb and brown trout.

Along with the more usual bird reports are those of whitethroats, chiffchaffs, blackcaps, a mistle thrush with young, cuckoos heard and seen, a hobby, grey and yellow wagtails, swifts, swallows, red-legged partridges, a family of greater-spotted woodpeckers, and a whinchat. (See John's Bird Notes for more information).

I have written on behalf of VVS strongly opposing Helioslough's re-application for a rail-freight depot at Park Street, which would be a huge blight in our valley.

Visits and Meetings

Various members of the Committee have attended the following:

1. Chilterns Chalk Stream Forum, a very useful one-day meeting in Hemel Hempstead
2. Bricket Wood Residents Association 50th Anniversary, with our display boards
3. Geology of Chalk, at Verulamium Museum a two-day symposium and field trip
4. Westminster Lodge Consultation on proposed new facilities, at the District Council offices
5. River Corridor Improvement Plans visit with CMS, SADC along the river in Verulamium Park to Alban Way viaduct
6. Channel improvement visit with EA from Bluehouse Hill into Gorhambury

Back in March I was hopeful that little ringed plovers would breed and it was a great thrill to see them return to the flooded fields along the Ver in late March. This is the first time I had seen them in Redbourn since the great floods of 2001 when four pairs bred. This year two pairs were present for a long time and both pairs raised three young right up to the stage where they were ready to fly. In the same area at least 5 pairs of lapwing bred as young chicks were seen before the vegetation grew up giving them the essential cover.

Redshanks were also present in early April but did not breed along the Ver Valley. Maybe next year! A new bird for the Ver Valley in April was a ruddy shelduck which is a beautiful duck from Eastern Europe. It is more than likely that this bird was an escape from a wildfowl collection but it certainly was a colourful addition to the flood plain for a while as it commuted between the Upper Ver Valley and the fishing lakes at Tyttenhanger.

Yellow wagtails are another welcome visitor this spring with pairs probably nesting near Verlam End, Scout Farm and in the fields around Hogg End and Punch Bowl Lane. Like the little ringed plovers they are not regular breeders.

At the end of May, when we did at last have some warm evenings, I was able to see a pair of barn owls near Redbournbury. It was nearly dark before I saw one adult fly into the nest box and then just as it was almost impossible to see a second adult flew in and perched on the platform in front of the nest box hole. It stayed there for about 5 minutes staring at me and there I was thinking I was hidden behind a bush! Eventually it flew off and I trudged off home with the happy knowledge that we may have young barn owls later this summer for the fourth successive year. There could well be a second pair breeding in another of our boxes as I saw an adult barn owl with prey close to this box in late June when I was watching a tawny owl at 10. pm.

On the downside I have not heard or seen a cuckoo along the Upper Ver this year and I always reckon to see one before the end of May. They are now on the "Red List" so this is a national concern. House martins seem to be very much reduced in numbers this spring but I have just learnt that the long established Shafford Stables colony have just relocated to the Shafford cottages. Spotted flycatchers are another species which seems to be in decline but just as I was writing these notes in late June I was lucky to see 5 adult birds one sunny morning within a mile of the Ver. Not so long ago this was a regular but not abundant breeder at several locations along the valley and until I saw these five I thought we had lost them as a breeding species.

One May morning as I was walking my dog I amazed to see about 20 painted lady butterflies in just a few minutes. I later found out that there had been one of the largest invasions ever recorded as thousands made it from their wintering area south of the Atlas Mountains. It always amazes me that a fragile creature like a butterfly is able to fly thousands of miles across Africa and Europe and arrive on our shores. The warm spell in late June resulted in a lot of banded demoiselles, marbled whites, speckled woods and meadow browns on the wing.



*Barn Owl ringed 19 July 2008
[John Fisher]*



*An increasingly unusual sight these days,
Yellow Wagtail*

[John Fisher]

There is no doubt that badgers are around in good numbers along the valley, but as they are seldom seen it was a great thrill to spend a warm summer evening just before dusk watching an adult and three youngsters emerge from their sett and forage around in a field for about half an hour before it got too dark to see. We waited for an evening with an easterly wind as we knew that if you are not down wind you have little chance of seeing any action since badgers have an amazing sense of smell but very poor eyesight. While waiting for the badgers we saw a fox with the most amazing rusty red coat.

There is a list of birds seen along the Ver Valley on our web site www.riverver.co.uk . If you have any comments on the status or notice any omissions please let me know. Also if you have any interesting bird sightings I would be pleased to hear from you on 01582 792843 or email john.fisher@btclick.com.

Beating the Bounds of Medieval St. Albans 2009

Janet Southwood

A regular supporter of the VVS joined the last "Beating the Bounds" walk and has produced a graphic account of how the day worked out with the river Ver playing a prominent part in proceedings. Janet's complete text below:

On a warm sunny afternoon on Sunday 3rd May a group of about fifty people gathered outside Kingsbury Mill in St. Michael's village to join the Mayor of St. Albans in "beating" the bounds. The ceremony is held at Rogantide (the third Sunday after Easter) and involves the Mayor, accompanied by the Mace-bearer, the Town Crier and the Mayor's Chaplain, to walk the medieval bounds of St. Albans. At specified locations the accompanying people are invited to "beat" the bounds with willow wands and a volunteer is "bumped" to reinforce the position of the boundaries. The walk follows the ancient boundary of 1327 as closely as possible along the four mile (6.5km) route with the River Ver marking the southern boundary.

The Mayor welcomed everyone to the ceremony and a young volunteer was "bumped" three times whilst the puddingstone in front of the mill was beaten with willow wands by the gathered crowd, followed by a prayer from the Mayor's Chaplain. The Mayor then led the group through the picturesque streets of St. Michael's and up through the alleyways to the top of Holywell Hill, reaching the north end of Snatchup Alley where the Stone Cross once stood close to the 'Jolly Sailor' pub. Here the Town Crier rang his bell and proclaimed the boundary, the bounds were then beaten again and a volunteer bumped. From Stone Cross we walked through St. Peter's churchyard and along Upper Marlborough Street to Keyfield, near Old London Road. The boundary was once again marked and a short refreshment stop at the 'White Hart Tap' was a welcome break on a warm afternoon.

The Mayor and his followers continued walking the medieval boundary down Cottonmill Lane and through the VVS-inspired Pocket Park that runs beside the River Ver towards Verulamium Park. After crossing the meadow at Mud Lane we stopped by the bridge over the River Ver at Abbey Mills next to 'The Fighting Cocks' where the bounds were beaten and a volunteer bumped for the last time. We then headed through the Park alongside the River Ver back to Kingsbury Mill where a final prayer was said by the Mayor's Chaplain and the Mayor thanked those who had attended "Beating the Bounds 2009". Each participant who completed the whole walk was given a certificate of attendance.

For details of "Beating the Bounds 2010", see the "Let's Walk" leaflet produced by the City of St. Albans Tour Guides or visit www.stalbanstourguides.co.uk.

Contributions to the 'Newsletter' / 'Letters to the Editor'

John Cadisch

Many people would like to get into print but the opportunity never seems to arise ! With seven pages to fill every three months, we can now take 'Newsletter' contributions, preferably (although not essential) by email.

These can be short articles (not more than one side A4), or in the form of 'Letters to the Editor', and should be clearly marked for publication, and should reach myself or another committee member by the third week of September, December, March or June to meet compilation deadlines.



Your committee making a splash at St Michaels - (Left to right) Ernie Leahy, Peter Fox, Andy Webb, Jane Gardiner, Isabel Crozier (CMS), John Cadisch, John Fisher

2010 Calendar

John Fisher

We are hoping to go ahead with a 2010 calendar based on members' photographs. This year John Cadisch and I will select the 12 pictures including 4 buildings, 4 river scenes and 4 wildlife. We hope to have the calendar printed and ready for sale at the AGM in October at a very reasonable cost - £4/£5.

To encourage recruitment we may offer any member a free calendar if they recruit a new member. They should make excellent Christmas presents for all your friends and family.

Next year we aim to run a photo competition in the run-up to the 2011 calendar. Members will be invited to submit pictures next spring but you should start thinking about your entries now as we want a variety of pictures taken throughout the year. As with the web site I would really like to see some summer and autumn scenes with sunsets, autumn leaves, summer flowers, butterflies, dragon flies etc and you will not be able to take these next spring.

We have a member who is a professional photographer and he is willing to be our judge. Essentially taking part is the important aspect as we will want 12 "winners" - one for each month. So now is the time to get out along our river with your camera.

Veolia Lorries

John Fisher

Earlier this year it became evident that tanker lorries were being parked on the access road from the A5183 to the Toxic Waste Plant. The view from Redbournbury and Shafford across the water meadows was being ruined by this ugly blot on the landscape. Apparently the planning consent for the site which was given some 25 years ago did not preclude this.

However we raised this issue with Redbourn Parish Council and after some good work by their clerk, Diane Whiskin, Veolia who run the plant agreed to change their policy and for the last three months no lorries have been parked on the access road.

It is really pleasing that the company have responded to a request from the public. Apparently the company's lorries were assessed, serviced and repaired as was necessary before being redistributed to other Veolia Companies. All these vehicles have now been moved off the site and all the remaining vehicles have been allocated designated parking within the site boundary. This will ensure vehicles are parked in an environmental safe area where any potential of contamination by vehicles can be contained safely and effectively.

A big thank you to the Plant Manager, Mike Sammons, his staff and to Diane Whiskin. The view across the meadows this summer has been so much better.

Our Website (riverver.co.uk)

John Fisher

I was delighted when one of our members, Charles Edwards, volunteered to write up a web page about the Mills of the Ver and even more pleased when he responded very quickly with a well researched piece with facts and pictures about each of the Ver Mills. It is well worth a read so check it out! Thanks very much Charles - a great contribution.

I hope this will encourage other members to write pieces for the web site. It does not have to be a lengthy text, and in particular I want to add a series of members' "Memories of the Ver". If you do not have a computer I am willing to transcribe hand written texts.

I am always happy to receive photographs for inclusion in the newsletter and the website. I do have a proliferation of snow scenes so what about some morning mists and evening sunsets!

I have updated the rainfall and aquifer charts and added recent new Ver birds such as the merlin and the ruddy shelduck to the bird list.

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.

Railfreight Terminal Decision

Anne Main

Anne Main MP has just written as follows: "A decision on the application is now due at the Planning Referrals Committee meeting on Monday 20th July. The meeting will begin at 7 pm and will be held at the Alban Arena. I will be attending and would urge as many of you as possible to be there to show the community's opposition to these plans."

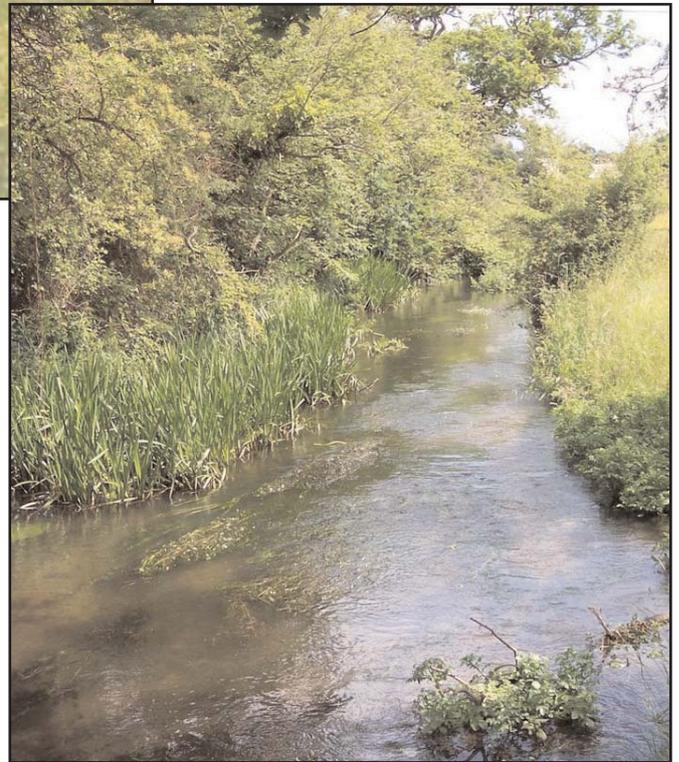
Picture Page



*A Ver water meadow
[Duncan Gardiner]*



Ver near the Colne confluence [Andy Webb]



Our chalk stream - The Ver. [Liz Delaney]



Male pochard and cormorants on Verulamium Lake [Ian Jinks]



Ver Valley Society

