



Ver Valley Newsletter



Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society

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www.riverver.co.uk

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July Open Meeting

It's back to Markyate this month, please note date:

THURSDAY 26th JULY
7.30 pm at Markyate Village Hall

Heading north through Markyate High Street, take a sharp and narrow turn to the left into Cavendish Road which quickly widens out. After about a half-mile the hall is signposted to the right. Anyone seeking a lift should mention to a committee member, help may be possible.

After refreshments and general get-together, our speaker will be **Allen Beechey**, a good friend of the society who has been running the Chiltern Chalk Stream Project for several years. This time he will update us on his work and also that of the Chilterns Conservation Board, in addition to outlining the River Fly Monitoring Scheme which we hope to start on the Ver shortly - expect to see a lot of creepy aquatic creatures! Allen has been on the Countryfile TV programme with Julia Bradbury (paddling down the Chess together), and also appeared on an Australian TV environmental programme.

Next Meetings

John Fisher

Tuesday 23rd October (VVS AGM):

St Michael's Parish Centre, St Albans, 7.30 pm. Only paid-up members may vote. Speaker after the formal business is over - John Tylor, back by special request. [More information in the October Newsletter.]

Monday 28th January 2013:

Redbourn Village Hall, 7.30 pm. (Note the new, much more spacious, meeting place). Speaker from Thames Trust.

Mayor's Pride Awards

John Cadisch

Many congratulations to our Chairman Andy Webb who won the "Environmental Champion of the Year" award in the final run-off at this prestigious event held on 26 April. Well done, Andy, all your hard work over the years has finally been recognised! There was extensive coverage in the "Herts Advertiser", on-line and elsewhere. He is likely to be bringing the engraved plaque that was presented by Mayor Aislinn Lee to the next Open Meeting.

Unfortunately we were beaten into second place in another category at the same event, "Community Project of the Year". We had put forward our "Access and Interpretation Project", involving walks folders, benches, waymarking etc. in conjunction with the Herts. CMS. Disappointing as Isabel Crozier (CMS team leader) had put in a lot of effort to bring it to fruition, as had several members of our committee.

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

The Friends of Verulamium

Andy Webb

At the beginning of the year I was contacted by the local pressure group 'Friends of Verulamium Park'. It was with some sadness, especially to myself and Jane G. as we had been to meetings 10/12 years ago when the 'Friends' were forming, and subsequently, to learn that they would formally be wound up at their AGM on May 17th as various committee members were standing down (most significantly Madelaine Sansom, Chair since its inception), and no-one had come forward to take their places. Should this come to pass the VVS was asked if we would agree to harbour the 'Friends' remaining funds (approx £5k) in our own accounts.

The FVP felt that the VVS, with its long-standing and stable committee, and membership, its track record of campaigning and lobbying, and its well managed affairs was the most suitable guardian of its ethos and funds. Remember that the River Ver and its neighbouring ponds are the central feature of the park.

After informal discussions with members of the FVP, and within our committee, we agreed to this, with the following proviso's:

FVP assets of approx £5k be transferred to VVS, to be held in a ring-fenced account for up to 4 years. If an active Verulamium Park sub group of VVS emerges in the period May 2012-May 2016 the money would be available for that group's activities (e.g annual litter picking). Otherwise the monies be absorbed into ordinary VVS funds.

FVP members be invited to join VVS by completing the VVS application forms but will have their first year of membership waived.

Those FVP members not wishing to join VVS will be offered a refund of their 2012 subscription to FVP provided they apply within a period of six weeks. This process will be managed by FVP.

VVS Committee will have the final say on any allocation of funds during the 4 year period detailed above.

At the time of writing, this process is ongoing and no funds have been transferred; we will update these events in the October Newsletter.

In her formal letter of approach Madelaine Sansom wrote in her final sentence" It is our hope that under the established leadership of VVS those who care about the future of the park and the river will be motivated to participate actively in their maintenance". Amen to that.

FVP/VVS Merger

Anthony Oliver

Many people, both St Albans residents and visitors, are enjoyers of Verulamium Park and are interested in it being appropriately managed into the future. Some of those have supported the Friends of Verulamium Park (FVP) and all that group has done during the past ten years. It is disappointing to them that administrative difficulties have made it necessary for FVP to be wound up, However, the VVS has become their "Knight in shining armour" by agreeing to an effective merger of the two organisations.

This means that VVS will welcome as members any FVP supporters who wish to apply, and will encourage them to evolve into a sub-group of VVS with a specific interest in the Park. The FVP's funds will be transferred to VVS but will be reserved for Park oriented projects. The small band of FVP members who have been involved in Park working parties will continue their activities, complementing the existing VVS working parties run by Sue Frearson,

On behalf of FVP members I should like to thank VVS and its committee for their enthusiastic support for these arrangements. We look forward to a long and effective future together.

Verulamium Park - a few notes

John Cadisch

It is early days yet following the disbandment of the "FVP" organisation, however we are hoping that from time to time Verulamium Park news will be fed to us, for reporting in our Newsletters. Critical "press dates" are the third week of September, December, March and June.

Please address to myself as Editor or to any committee member, and we will do our best to include. We are particularly on the look-out for reports on the lakes, paths, trees, wildlife, working parties etc.

In the meantime, we are glad to print the following which has just reached us from Anthony Oliver of Fishpool Street, an active member of the former "FVP" committee:

I am starting with the weather data for the year to date as it has been exceptional but also because in the last Newsletter the figures for the first 3 months somehow became scrambled between me and the printers – hopefully they’ll be correct this time. I last wrote in that record dry, warm March with the groundwater levels then and in early April at an all time low. But the record rains in April (over 300% of normal) meant that there was a two metre improvement in the aquifer by May although it was still over 6m below average. By June groundwater levels have improved a little more and as the month has so far been very wet and cold, although it is miserable for holiday makers, it should help the aquifer to some extent.

Month 2012	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamstead)
January	125.98 [131.30]	58 .0 [-11.97]
February	125.82 [132.38]	24.7 [-25.44]
March	125.75 [132.79]	34.7 [-16.13]
April	125.66 [133.60]	168.6 [+113.57]
May	127.51 [134.51]	52.6 [-2.08]
June	127.76 [133.32]	[Not yet available but hope to get in early July]

As a result of the above, bailiffs are measuring much improved river flows, especially after heavy rain, which is helpful in keeping the river channel established and supporting wildlife. But if we get some real summer weather soon the flows will quickly drop back as the underlying ground water situation is still poor. Andy Webb and I attended SADC Environment Forum meeting on water matters and were encouraged that the District Council and others are keeping well informed on the problems of water supply etc.

Of course there has been much verdant growth of unwanted as well as pleasant and vegetation. Ragged robin, yellow flags, dog roses in the hedges have been flowering well and in places water-crowfoot (a healthy chalk-stream indicator) is flowering well. But reeds, cress and grass filling the channels, nettles on paths, and invasive weeds, Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed on the banks are problematic.



Yellow flag.



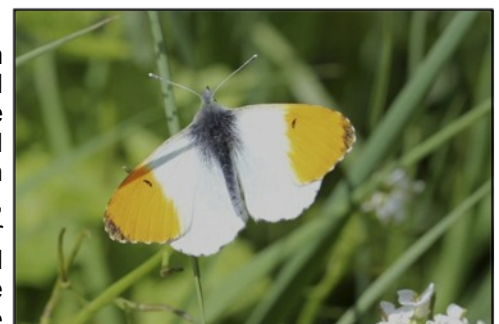
Ragged robin.

Recent Bailiff bird sightings include plenty of our summer visitors; willow and grasshopper warblers, whitethroats, chiffchaffs, black caps, spotted flycatchers, swallows, martins and swifts. Some lapwings and tufted duck appear to have stayed on to breed and other nice sightings include hobbies, a little grebe pair with young, great crested grebes on Frogmore Pits, lots of yellow hammers, the occasional kingfisher and cuckoo. Of course lots of young mallards, coots, moorhens and Canada

geese are reported too. Red kites and buzzards are a common sight in the valley and we also have barn owls, little owls and tawny owls: see all the good news in John Fisher’s bird reports.



Butterflies have been suffering in the wet, cool weather but whites, orange tips and some speckled woods are about. Fish reports include brown trout, a pike, minnows and other small fish as well as signal crayfish. Muntjac deer are seen fairly regularly in the valley. I close with a photo [left] of some interested



Orange tip..

watchers from the bank, of a strange being wading in the stream apparently doing some sort of measuring !

It looks as though we will have our best ever year with our Barn Owl Project. I checked all our boxes in mid June and for the first time we have four pairs of barn owls breeding in our valley. There are two pairs with four young each, a pair with two young and two eggs to hatch and one pair in a barn roof space with six eggs. When I check the boxes I always look to see what prey they have in the "larder" as this is a good indicator as to how well the young are being provided for. Usually there are a few wood mice and voles but this year we found a rabbit in one of the boxes. It was only a quarter size rabbit but still rather a large prey item for a barn owl and I understand is quite unusual.



Redbournbury barn owl young 25 June.

[John Fisher]

Also a first this year, we have a box being used by little owls. Although we provided a special little owl box with a long tunnel to give them the dark conditions they favour they chose to ignore this box and use the nearby barn owl box. When I opened the access door of the box it seemed empty but tucked into a corner of the box was an adult and what turned out to be four brown downy owlets – see the picture taken when we ringed the four. Because their fledging period is only about 30 days compared to 60 for barn owls the four healthy owlets have already been ringed. By the time of our July meeting we should have ringed the barn owls and I will be able to report on a really successful season. It is just possible we will be up to 50 ringed owlets since 2006.

Red kites and buzzards are seen so regularly now that they hardly merit a mention. Twenty years ago I would never have thought I would ever say that. I have not seen much of our little egrets since April, whereas last year they stayed with us throughout the year. They are breeding elsewhere in the county and I rather hoped they might attempt to join the herons at Verulamium Lake but I have not seen any.

A couple of quite rare birds put in brief appearances near the Frogmore lakes. First a male pied flycatcher turned up on passage one Sunday in mid April, staying just one day before moving on to its breeding territories, probably in Wales or Gloucestershire. My friend, David Evans, managed to take this really good picture of the bird. A wood warbler, in fact probably two, also stayed in a woodland glade at Frogmore for about four days in late May before moving on. I understand that they sang very loudly but when no females responded they moved on. Although not rare birds for the western and northern regions of the UK they are significant records for Hertfordshire.

Little owl fledgling ringed at Shafford.
[John Fisher]



Spotted flycatchers, which still breed in small numbers in Hertfordshire, have been seen regularly in their usual territory near Mayne Farm on the Gorhambury estate.



A small party of yellow wagtails were at Redbournbury towards the end of June feeding on the insects attracted by the cattle. A pair bred in the Rothamstead fields near Redbourn in 2009 and 2010 but has not returned in the last two years. I think the wet spring and early summer will be disastrous for tits and warblers breeding, which is an awful shame. I have heard a few reports of cuckoos at Redbournbury but they no longer seem to stay long these last few years.

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

Pied Flycatcher,

[David Evans]

Over the last few months Ernie Leahy and I have led a number of walks for a variety of local organisations, including The Redbourn Women's Institute, RSPB Groups from Watford and Hemel Hempstead, The Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust and the two Colonies of Redbourn Beavers.



Redbourn Beavers queue to see the heron's nest.

[John Fisher]

Normally we start at the Museum Car Park at St Michaels and walk through Gorhambury to Shafford and then on to Redbournbury. Often we arrange a car shuttle back to the car park but the hardy ladies of Redbourn WI, including one who I think is in her eighties, insisted on walking right through to Redbourn.

Birds we have seen on these walks include red kites, buzzards, kestrel, hobby, raven, sparrow hawk, little owl, barn owl, green woodpecker, great spotted woodpecker, yellow wagtail, grey wagtail, little egret, heron, teal, mallard, tufted duck, snipe, green sandpiper, little grebe, great crested grebe, spotted flycatcher and so many more.

If like me Beavers are new to you as they to me they are the junior section of the cubs and they are boys and girls aged 6 to 8. We took them around the lake to see the herons nesting on two really wet and grim April evenings. When the weather looked so bad I contacted their leader thinking they might like

to call it off and I was told in no uncertain terms "Beavers are tough cookies and they probably won't even bring a coat". Sure enough they splashed through the puddles in their wellies and peppered us with questions about the ducks and the herons.

Hopefully we may have sparked an interest in wildlife as an alternative to "screens". In April one the herons nest had three well developed youngsters and the Beavers enjoyed watching the nest through our telescopes. Good fun and not a single beaver fell in the lake!

Action Group

John Cadisch / Sue Frearson

With the nesting season upon us, customary undergrowth clearance has had to be suspended.

In the meantime, Sue Frearson would like to be told about "Litter Black Spots" for attention once we get into the autumn - parts of the river where rubbish has been thrown into the channel, or maybe fallen branches that require removal.

Ruth Partington

John Cadisch

Long-serving members will be distressed to learn that Ruth, our Secretary from 1985 – 1988, has passed away. She was a dear person, a Ver Poet and a founder member of the VVS in fact. She worked hard at her typewriter for the cause, agendas, letters etc., until it wore out and another had to be found. Ruth found the river stimulating, visiting it as often as she was able in advancing years. Her poetry will live on, here is just one example:

"The river called me:
so I stepped a careful path:
over wet grass:
and saw the swirling current:
two moorhens were surprised:
stumbled across for cover:
then in a magic moment:
faster than thought:
flashing upstream:
under the bridge:
flew the kingfisher!"

In the second part of this year our Chairman is leading several walks with a "river flavour", details below:

Andy Webb's new River Walks July to December 2012 (in association with Herts CMS)

Monday 30th July 7.30pm

Ver Valley Walk No 6 'The Two Cities Walk.' A River Ver walk.
st/f Verulamium Museum,
4 miles.

Sunday 12th August 10.30am

'Source and Chalk.', A River Ver walk.
st/f Hicks Road cp, Markyate,
8-10 miles.

Monday 17th September, 10.30am

'Brooks, Bournes and Swallow Holes'. An Upper Colne walk.
st/f Bus Stop, Colney Fields Retail Park, London Colney.
11 miles.

Sunday 7th October, 10.30am

'Bull. Brocket and Bunyan'. A River Lea walk.
st/f St Helens Church, Lych Gate, High Street, Wheathampstead.
6-7 miles.

Monday 5th November, 10.30am

'Waterwheels, Wells and Whit'll Watercress.' A River Mimram walk.
st/f Whitwell War Memorial, eastern end of High Street, Whitwell.
6 miles.

Sunday 2nd December 10.30am

'Sand, Sewerage and Pumping Stations.' A River Ver walk.
st/f Moor Mill, Smug Oak Lane, Colney Street.
6-7 miles.

Sopwell: A History and Collection of Memories

This book by Sandy Norman of Sopwell Residents Association is a fascinating collection of personal reminiscences interspersed with historical information about this less-well-known area of south St Albans. It is beautifully produced containing many illustrations and photographs.

Of course the River Ver runs right through the area and has had considerable influence on its history and development and the Ver Valley Society was pleased to be partly responsible for sponsoring its publication. Our Chairman, Andy Webb, provided material for it and I was pleased to meet other contributors at the successful launch At Sopwell House Hotel in May.

We are pleased to recommend it to members; 2 inspection copies will be available at our next Open Meeting on 26th July and copies at £15 can be obtained from the Sopwell Residents Association c/o 23 Tavistock Ave, St Albans AL1 2 NQ

The River Ver, A Meander Through Time

This book, due to be published in late July, is a new colour hardback all about our river by Jackie Banfield-Taylor priced at £24.99 and with a forward by Chris Packham, 350 illustrations and covering all aspects of the river from pre-history to present.

Originally her father, a founder member of VVS collected much material about the Ver intending to produce a book. Since his death Jacqui has gathered this and much more material, some provided by us, and worked for several years to produce this comprehensive work.

You can see more about it on the publishers website www.halsgrove.com, signed copies can be ordered from the author Jacqui Banfield-Taylor, 21 Jordans Way, Bricket Wood, St Albans, Herts, AL2 3SJ, e-mail riverver@btinternet.com, tel. 07792 588892 and we await its publication with considerable interest. A full review will appear in our next Newsletter.

Fly fishermen on their precious trout rivers have been increasingly concerned about the serious decline of Mayflies and other flies originating from larvae in the river bed. This initiated the formation of the Riverfly Partnership which brought together anglers, entomologists, scientists & water quality managers to design a system which could be used nationally to gain knowledge and monitor riverfly populations.

Since 2005 they started to monitor the quantities of species to be found in our rivers by setting up a standardized system of counting and recording the larvae. By doing this they have comparative measurements of river health as poor results could indicate pollution, habitat decline or changes in river ecosystems.

In May three of our bailiffs went on the Riverfly Partnership one day course to Leckford, near Stockbridge, which is adjacent to the River Test. Our classroom lessons consisted of a Health and Safety induction followed by the ethics and methods of the monitoring system. We then learnt about the eight main species groups we were looking for which were the larvae of mayflies, stoneflies, olives, blue winged olives, flat-bodied upwings, cased caddis fly larvae, uncased caddis fly larvae, and gammarus (water shrimps). In our course folder we were provided with the procedures and identification sheets which would help us in practice.

The practical part of the course was a visit to the fast flowing River Test where we were first given a demonstration by Josh Hellon, of our Local Environment Agency, for the standard procedure used by monitors to collect specimens from the river bed. The tester agitated the river bed for three one-minute kicks collecting the larvae from the flow of the river in the special nets, as shown in the photos. The further two parts of the test consisted of scooping through the semi-submerged riverside reeds with the net and lastly lifting stones



John Fisher and Ernie Leahy examine samples found in the river Test.

[Sue Frearson]



John Fisher and Ernie Leahy examine samples found in the river Test.

[Sue Frearson]

on the riverbed and brushing the underside creatures into the net. After cleaning silt and debris from the net the contents were emptied into a bucket to be transferred to the flat identification trays in the laboratory. Two Ver Valley bailiffs also participated in similar trials while Sue photographed the event.

The contents of specimen buckets were poured into the shallow examination trays for analysis of species identification and quantities, most of which are estimated. With practice many of the specimens could be visually identified but individual larvae could be removed with a suction pipette & studied under a microscope.

The tabulated counts were downloaded onto the internet programme which automatically gave the cumulative health line on a chart. Now several of our water bailiffs will be applying the scheme on the River Ver at strategic points to be decided with the help of the Environment Agency. We will be obtaining the approved kits to execute the procedures and we hope we will be able to show a healthy river.

For further information see www.riverflies.org



Samples collected in buckets and the special net.
[Ernie Leahy]

