



Ver Valley Newsletter



Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society

Number 95

www.riverver.co.uk

October 2007

Chairman:

(also News & Publicity)

Andy Webb, 30 Queens Court, Hatfield Road, St Albans, AL1 4TG.
Tel: (01727) 839573.

Deputy Chairman:

(also Bailiff co-ordinator)

Mrs Jane Gardiner, 18 Claudian Place, St Albans, AL3 4JE.
Tel: (01727) 866331.
Email: jane@gardiner33.fsnet.co.uk

Hon Secretary:

Peter Fox, 23 Fish Street, Redbourn, AL3 7LP.
Tel: (01582) 793303.

Email: fox@fishstreet23.freeserve.co.uk

Hon Treasurer:

(also Membership Secretary,
"Newsletter" Editor)

John Cadisch, 14 Prae Close, St Albans, AL3 4SF.
Tel: (01727) 862843.
Email: john.cadisch@ntlworld.com

Minutes Secretary:

(also Bird Note Co-ordinator,
Webmaster)

John Fisher, 92 High Street, Redbourn, AL3 7BD.
Tel: (01582) 792843.
Email: john.fisher@btclick.com

Newsletter Layout:

John Trew
(Verulam Angling Club)

"Cleaner, Greener St Albans" Hotline:
0845 125 8000

EA "Pollution Hotline": 0800 807060.
EA "Floodline": 0845 9878 1188

President & First Chairman:
Richard Thrale

Notice of Annual General Meeting

The Thirty-first Annual General Meeting of the Ver Valley Society will be held on Tuesday 23rd October 2007 at St. Michael's Parish Centre, St. Albans, at 7.30 pm. The Parish Centre is beside St. Michael's Church and Verulamium Museum, large museum car park.

The AGM will be in the upper room, "half time" refreshments in the lower room. These are expected to include "cheese and wine" as well as tea and coffee. Redbournbury bakery will be there with a selection of their quality loaves, a good opportunity to re-stock your bread-bin.

Nominations for the various posts are invited, these should be in the Secretary's hands by 19th October. All Officers and Committee members are willing to continue in the short term but an additional Committee member is required, this is because one of our key officers wishes to stand down in the New Year. Commitment: not too demanding! About every six weeks the VVS committee meets to review the state of the river and its valley.

The AGM agenda will be distributed at the meeting, also audited annual accounts for approval. (Ask John Cadisch if copy required by post.) The Chairman (Andy Webb) will give his report on the year and other officers will give their own reports.

The speaker after the interval will be Ian Gibbon on the Ver Valley Walks Project, this has been a major focus of the Society in recent months - agreeing, then testing new walks, all of which connect with the river. It's taken a lot of time !

2008 Open Meetings

John Fisher

ROCKS, FISH, FLOWERS AND WATER – FOUR ELEMENTS OF OUR RIVER VALLEY

Arrangements are now in hand for next years programme. Provisionally it will be as follows:-

Tuesday 22 January:

Redbourn St Mary's Transept Hall – Speaker Vicky Fry – Environment Agency Hydrogeologist on "Geology of the Ver Valley"

Monday 21 April:

Bricket Wood – Speaker Matt Hart – Fisheries Officer – Fish of the Ver.

Monday 21 July:

Markyate – Speaker John Wyatt – The Chilterns Experience - This talk will be mainly on flowers but will include mammals, birds and butterflies of Chilterns Chalk Streams

Tuesday 21 October:

St Michaels AGM – Speaker Vicki Kidney of the Environment Agency on Flow and Abstraction in the River Ver.

Check the web site or your newsletter nearer the date as these may change to suit the availability of speakers.

If you know of a speaker who you would like to recommend or you have a subject you would like covered please let us know. The aim each year is to present a variety of topics relevant to our river and its environment.

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

Redbournbury Mill – Teas and Refreshments

Andy Webb

For the best part of 20 years the James family have made the Mill a very popular destination for many people, not least because of the fine teas and lunches which have been served from the tiny first-floor kitchen every Sunday afternoon in the summer months and at various other times.

The income from this has been invaluable during the big process of restoration; the food has undoubtedly brought many visitors to the Mill and by so doing, raised their interest in the building and the river Ver. Numerous volunteers have assisted Mandy James in the enterprise and have gained much satisfaction. Last year the James's restored and refurbished as a bakery the former pigsty and barn in the mill yard; two professional bakers have been employed to produce high quality bread and other products using the Mill's own flour. It is an astonishing achievement, and testimony to the family's many years of commitment and hard work. They, and those volunteers who have given so freely of their time, deserve great credit. Now, with restoration complete and mill and bakery working intensively - remember that Justin James has a full-time teaching job - it has become, in some ways, a victim of its own success. There is just too much to do; naturally, milling flour for the bakery and other retail outlets, attending local farmers' markets etc. is central to any long-term plans.

So, Mandy and son Justin have taken the decision to cease serving refreshments to visitors when this current season ends (early October) and they will no longer be available as before. It has always been their intention to operate the Mill as a working watermill and museum, and now all the family and volunteer effort will be focussed on this. The mill will, however, continue to serve refreshments for walkers on New Year's Day and at the Christmas Open Day on Sunday 9th December. In 2008 the Mill will be open informally every Sunday 2.30 – 5.00 for purchases of bread and flour and to view the milling process and other displays. Private group bookings available by arrangement on week-days. We wish the family continued success. [Website: www.redbournmill.co.uk] [Phone: 01582 792874] [Bakery: 07962 893756]

M25 Motorway Widening

Andy Webb

For many decades now successive governments and their various agencies have proposed a policy of increasing traffic congestion - this is widely regarded as being an outstanding success. In order to maintain and demonstrate their continued commitment, and to ensure that the south-east of England can remain at the forefront of this issue, a number of initiatives have been proposed in recent years to extend vehicle use and congestion still further. New homes in the next twenty-five years - 500,000 are proposed - will aid this certainty. To accommodate the extra stationary cars, vans and lorries the Highways Agency is now at an advanced planning stage to widen the M25 north of London. This can only enhance its reputation for being the biggest car park in Europe. Naturally, fields and woods and bubbling streams which have formed our green and pleasant land for hundreds of - thousands of - years are rapidly becoming old-fashioned and outdated, and consequently must be removed. They stand in the way of economic progress and increasing quality of life.

The motorway crosses our river south of Park Street, making a pleasing backdrop for Moor Mill. Widening will mean the motorway would be even more handsome, and create a delightful audio accompaniment whilst sipping your pint at one of the outside tables. A public exhibition was held in Abbots Langley on 5/6 October to explain the impact of the scheme on the local environment. Other public exhibitions are anticipated.

Committee members are already overstretched with other work - is there anybody out there who is able to ascertain how the Ver will be affected? "Safe hands, reliable journeys, informed travellers" is the motto heading the consultative flyer issued by the Highways Agency. In the future this should become "Hellish motorways, frustrated drivers, lost landscapes". If you have a question or comment, call the Highways Agency infoline 08457 504030.

Our Website www.riverver.co.uk

John Fisher

After a period of very low activity recently I hope to add and improve the web site in the next few months but. I really desperately need more contributions from you, our members. If you have any photographs of any aspect of the river please send them to me. Also if can write about your thoughts on the river. If you can not send me digital material I am quite happy to accept hard copy which I can adapt.

Thank you to the people who have sent me emails about the site – mostly complimentary which is nice but constructive criticism would be more helpful really. Even if it is only a spelling mistake (there must be some!).

The web site is seen by your committee a very much the future of the society and now we have a "stat counter" it is amazing that about 20 people log on to us each day. If only one or two would join us!

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.

Bailiff Notes

Jane Gardiner

The wet spring (apart from April) was followed by a wet summer/early autumn (apart from September) so the flows reported by our Bailiffs are much healthier than at this time in the last few years. Groundwater figures also show good recovery still being above the monthly average although they have naturally fallen back over the summer (see table). There is no river north of Redbourn at present.

2007	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters and [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [\pm average] (figures from Dave Yeoman at Rothamstead)
June	134.79 [133.32]	72.4 [+12.2]
July	133.78 [133.23]	86.8 [+42.2]
August	132.83 [132.56]	64.6 [+10.7]
September	131.82 [130.87]	29.2 [-33.8]

The warm, wet weather has encouraged the growth of watercress, reeds and weeds and has resulted in the river channel becoming rather blocked in many places, although the good offices of Paul Corley at EA have resulted in some clearance of blockages due to fallen trees etc. and some Bailiffs have done what they could. The verdant vegetation growth has also meant the Ver Valley Walk became overgrown with nettles etc in many places although the CMS volunteers and HCC Footpaths Section have undertaken some clearances.

We have welcomed three new Bailiffs this year; Ian Jinks has taken over through Gorhambury, Sue Frearson is reporting on the final section south from Moor Mill to the confluence and Robert Norrish is keeping an eye out for any water and wildlife in the Markyate/ Flamstead area. I would like to thank all the Bailiffs for their efforts to monitor our river over the year. The team contributes significantly to the aim of the Society to protect and conserve the river and its environment.

The wide variety of flora and fauna recorded in the Bailiff reports is filed. The only mammals commonly seen are rabbits and squirrels, although we do occasionally see muntjac and usually hares early in the year. I am pleased to say I have had no reports of mink this year, so perhaps we can look out for the return of the water vole before too long. There have already been a few signs of them in the Redbournbury area.

The varieties of fish recorded this year include chubb, roach, pike, tench, perch, carp, brown and rainbow trout, although one of our Bailiffs is concerned that there may have been some poaching of trout recently and also of ducks!

On the whole it has not been a good summer for butterflies but red admirals, tortoiseshells, various whites and browns, commas and peacocks have been seen. Similarly I have not had as many dragon- or damsel-flies reported as usual.

As far as bird life is concerned John Fisher is our resident expert [see his Bird Notes], but I have recently had fairly regular reports of kingfishers and of grey wagtails; breeding lapwings and a sighting of spotted flycatchers this summer were nice to note. Buzzards and red kites are now regulars in the valley as well as all the common water fowl.

Radlett Railfreight Depot

Jane Gardiner

As members will be aware the Ver Valley Society is very concerned about the adverse effect this proposed development would have on the southern part of the Ver Valley and we have written expressing our views to the original Inquiry, when the Council turned down the proposal, and now to the Public Inquiry into the Appeal by the developers, Helioslough.

This Appeal will take place from 10 am on Tuesday 6th November at the District Council Offices lasting up to 32 days and is open to the public.

You can request to speak at that Appeal by telephoning the Programme Officer on 01727 819304 or you can show your opposition by turning up for as many occasions as you can manage.

Full details on Council website www.stalbans.gov.uk, click on Rail Freight link.



River Ver and Hedges Farm which is threatened by the Proposed Rail Freight Depot.JPG

Reducing Sustainable Abstraction (RSA) -- More Water for the Ver

Andy Webb

At last year's AGM Vicki Kidney (RSA Technical Specialist, EA, Hatfield) told us that any benefits accruing from the big Friars Wash PS "switch-off" of May 1995 were now officially regarded as negligible, thus coming into line with the view of the VVS that the river Ver needed further work to increase flow to a more sustainable level. She had reached this conclusion following two reports (Friars Wash and "Middle Ver") that she had commissioned that year which stated that water levels in the Ver were indeed too low to sustain a healthy chalk stream. This year she has been awaiting the completion of a computer model for the hydrology of the Vale of St Albans which will inform options appraisal next year; this is being undertaken by W S Atkins.

At the beginning of October she commissioned Dr Kevin Skinner (Jacobs) to undertake a fluvial audit of the Ver; take the form of a geomorphological and ecological survey which will highlight "pinch" points in the river where interim work might be carried out by the EA in order to prepare the Ver for increased flow, should they transpire.

Both of the above will be ready by Christmas. Next year she hopes to commission one further study to identify and appraise options likely to increase the amount of water in the river. This will be wide ranging in its scope and Vicki will closely supervise its progress. By the end of 2008 all the necessary technical and scientific data required by the EA will be at hand. The Ver is the furthest forward of any of our threatened chalk streams in this process.

Unfortunately there is one large cloud on the horizon as, following the Water Act 2003, January will see the introduction of a new method of dividing monies gained from an extra 10% levy from charges resulting from abstraction licences which will be used for environmental schemes. Government (Defra, Offwat, EA) have yet to decide whether this will be given to EA regional offices or entirely to its national office in London.

Regional funding will mean work to improve rivers like the Ver more likely; national funding will probably mean that funding will disappear to SSSI sites outside the South-East so that HQ can meet its targets set by the European Water Framework Directive to enhance and direct these. The latter would be a terrible mistake as these sites are "special" already; they would be in danger of becoming "Disney" landscapes whilst other places and features go to rack and ruin. Surely, the cost benefits of improving chalk streams in the heavily populated areas is far greater than "protecting" remote areas in Norfolk, for example? We will continue to assist Vicki in her work whenever and wherever we can.

Bird Notes

John Fisher

I have been travelling a lot this summer so I have not been seeing as many birds along the river as in most years. However just this week I did find a splendid male stonechat close to the river in Redbourn and it will be interesting to see if stays around or if it is just passing through on migration. Stonechats are both a resident and a migratory species. I think it has been proved from ringing records that birds from the same brood often are split between stayers and movers. Stonechats do not normally breed in Hertfordshire so most of the stonechats seen locally are passage migrants with a few staying through the winter.

I have also noticed that numbers of skylarks have been building up on the winter stubble fields but I have yet to see any fieldfares and redwings.

Following the success with barn owl boxes we have decided to put up 40 nesting boxes for small birds like tits and robins this winter at various site along the valley. As with the barn owl boxes these will be made by our friends at the Watford RSPB Group and once again our payment will provide funds towards all the good work that the RSPB carry out. This is because Watford RSPB get the wood free from a local supplier and uses their own volunteers to make the boxes. So our funds are simply recycled into more conservation work. I have in mind a few suitable areas for the boxes but I welcome suggestions from any of our members

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

Membership Notes

John Cadisch

With the membership year having ended on 31st August, we invite members to renew their subscriptions, unchanged at Five Year £20 and Annual £5.

If in doubt, a phone call will confirm whether you are in good standing! Membership forms for friends or neighbours - just ask.

During the wet winter of 2000/01 the Ver flowed for a while over its natural course in a number of places including Verulamium Park where it ran across Bell Meadow into the top pond and overlapped the shabby concrete sides of the main pond creating a far better “naturalistic” lake. Following that freak occurrence an idea surfaced through the Councils’ Environment Forum to perhaps make this state more permanent.

The Rivers Restoration Centre, and later Halcrow’s, were commissioned to come up with options for improving the river corridor here. Initially, the VVS actively supported these efforts because, we believed, the 1930 Lakes (really ponds) stink - and sometimes they do, literally (you may have witnessed the long threads of slimy algae in the top “model boat” pond this summer). However, we could not support Halcrow preferred Option 6A because it did too little to improve the main pond (lake) and did too much harm to the 2000-year-old Abbey millstream. We withdrew our support and stepped down from the Stakeholder Group.

The plan continued with the support of the ruling Lib. Dem. Councillors and several local interest groups, with secretarial services being provided by the CMS. In order to, ultimately, apply for Lottery funding the project has been metamorphosed into a “whole park” strategy, and earlier this year nearly £50,000 was awarded to draw up a master plan in readiness for a full Lottery bid next year.

Specialist consultants Landscape Partnership have been contracted to launch a public involvement and research programme. Their brief was to judge how to improve understanding of the Park’s Roman heritage and also the Ver and Lakes. An ecology report and maintenance plan will be produced. We wonder if they will be brave enough to reject the Halcrow recommendation.

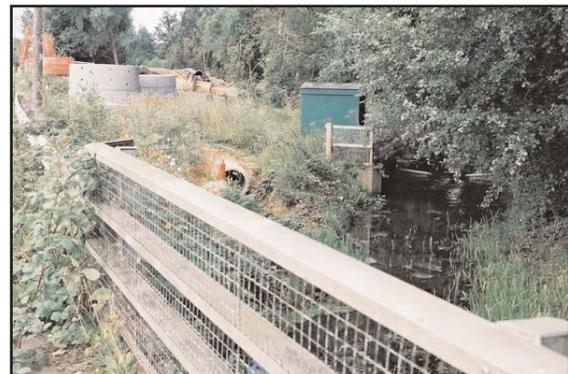
The consultation is due to be finished soon; a public exhibition will be held at the Bonfire Night event on 3rd November, and their findings and recommendations will be presented to the Council in December.

Andy Webb met briefly with Landscape Partnership representatives in the Park in late September to seek our views.

[See also www.verpark.stalbans.gov.uk]



Sunday 15 July Mayor Kate Morris -- St Albans to Pondyards Walk, with Sir Nicholas Bacon (in tights).



M1 Widening Works Surface Water Pipe where it will enter the River Red at the Redbourn Bypass.



Chidwickbury House as seen from the proposed Ver Walk No 5



Hypocaust and St Albans Abbey seen from proposed Ver Walk No 6