



Ver Valley Newsletter



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Notice of Annual General Meeting

Please note that the 35th Annual General Meeting of the Ver Valley Society will be held on:

TUESDAY 25th OCTOBER 2011

at St Michael's Parish Centre (by museum and church),
St Michael's Street, St Albans, 7.30 pm.
Parking: In front of Verulamium Museum

Nominations for the various posts are invited, these should be with the Hon. Secretary (Peter Fox) no later than the preceding Friday. Persons nominated must be willing to serve.

The present Committee is willing to continue but if anyone would like to help us keep a watchful eye on the Ver Valley they will be warmly welcomed. Please contact any committee member.

The Annual Accounts (for year ending 31 August) will be submitted, these have been independently examined by David Jinks FCCA. No increase in Subscriptions is planned, these remain at £20 for five years (£5 for one year). [John Cadisch will bring his VVS membership receipt book to the AGM!]

Following the formal business and refreshments . . .

**Stuart Hayes has been invited to talk, his subject being
From Lead to Gold, the Clean-up of the Olympic Park and Rivers.**

This draws on Stuart's considerable experience after working on the Stratford Olympic site as an EA hydro-geologist.

Forthcoming Open Meetings

Monday 30 January 2012 at 7.30 pm

Redbourn St Mary's Transept Hall – speaker is Kate Bretherton on "Remarkable Trees". The Transept Hall was rather cramped for space this year but we are hoping that a better seating set up will improve matters.

Very Important

All meetings are free entrance to members and non members - If you are coming to one of our meetings please check our newsletter or the web page a few days prior to the meeting in case of any late changes. If you require directions to any of the venues please contact a committee member. (see contacts page).

Other dates in 2012 are being arranged, details in the next newsletter.

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

I provide here a summary of various important issues:

Kensworth Pumping Station:

During August this pumping station (6 ml/d) at the head of the valley was due to be taken off-line for 10 days to conduct a "pump test". The groundwater, and in particular the "core of influence" beneath it, would be monitored using new observation boreholes nearby to see if it recovered during that time. This experiment is part of the EA/Veolia Water AMP5 study into continuing low flows in the Ver. Findings are not yet available but we may know more by the AGM but if not available it should be possible to include details in the January Newsletter.

Walks Project:

Now largely complete. (*Members please contact myself or Jane Gardiner if you would like to receive your own pack of leaflets.*) Recently, the footpath beneath the Alban Way has been resurfaced and a new footbridge constructed over the river at Verlam End (Friars Wash). Although waymarking is basically complete, some additional improvements and "tidying" will be carried out. All eight benches are in place. Bridge signs for many of the footbridges are currently being designed and will be installed soon. All nine Walks/Trail leaflets are available individually from St Albans Tourist Information Centre, S/A Central Library, Museum of S/A and Redbournbury mill; leaflets particular to that locale have been issued to Verulamium museum, Redbourn museum and an increasing number of shops and pubs the length of the valley.

Ver Valley Website:

Our website now has all the walk routes in downloadable form, plus a huge amount of river memories and local history associated with each of the settlements along the river, i.e. Kensworth/Markyate/Flamstead/Redbourn/St Albans (not yet complete)/ Park Street/Bricket Wood. We will shortly begin discussions about how to improve the website further and, just as important, how to reconstruct it so that we can update more easily. We want to connect people with their river and its valley; the social history, via the website, illustrates this, as does recently-enrolled member Tom Savory's articles in this Newsletter. We are always looking for similar jottings and ramblings. Would anyone else like to submit something?

"Sopwell" book:

We have agreed to part-sponsor this new hardback book by Sandy Norman, due out early next year. It will include much about the river thereabouts.

"History Channel":

This TV Channel, widely available, will broadcast a programme on 1 November at 10 pm featuring the archaeological "dig" in the car park of the "Six Bells", St Michael's Street. A "Roman hotel" was reportedly located. During the filming a "Roman beer" (or ale), using Ver water, was brewed.

"Redbourn Vegman":

Graham Goldring, who has kindly let walking groups view the large piece of Hertfordshire puddingstone on his small-holding in Waterend Lane, has started a small fruit and veg. growing enterprise on the site. It is open 9 – 6; visit www.vegman.biz. Alternatively phone 07778 190636 for more details.

River Ver puts in an appearance at Beer Festival

Tom Savory

Kevin Yelland, the Chief Brewer of Award winning Verulam Brewery will have brewed two Roman style ales (not beers) for the festival. Both will be brewed without hops and will use Ver river water, extracted from a shallow part of the river in Verulamium park about 100 metres in from the St Michaels entrance where the water runs over flint, so is quite clean. He leaves this water to settle in a fermenting bucket and there is hardly any sediment due to its purity. It will contain seasonal fruit for flavouring. Kevin also adds yarrow that he's ground, and nettles.

The two ales were: Roman September Middle Class ale, which contained honey and was 7.5% abv.
Roman September Serf ale which was 2.5% abv. with no honey!.

Only a pin of each (36 pints of each) will have been brewed. Ale was drunk a lot in Roman times and Roman households always had a brew on the go!!

"Hertfordshire Geology & Landscape"

John Catt, Editor

This important work, launched a year ago, is still available in case anyone is thinking about Christmas presents, it must be the last word on the subject. Please apply (with email or phone details) direct to the publishers: HNHS, 24 Mandeville Rise, Welwyn Garden City, AL8 7JU. Price inc. P/P: £39.50 or £37.50 if "Ver Valley Newsletter" quoted.

If it is possible to collect the book from WGC, phone Linda Smith on 01707 330405 and she will offer a further price reduction, post free.

It is nice to be able to report that a new Bailiff, Paul Foster, has joined our team of Bailiffs covering the stretch from Holywell Hill, St Albans to the Alban Way viaduct. The previous Bailiff, John Griggs had been unable to get out for a few months following an injury and decided he should step down but we thank him sincerely for his efforts over the past year or so to keep this much-used walk along the river in a good state.

The aquifer was more than 4 metres below average in August, but the wet June may have helped the slightly less poor September figure, although it was still more than 3 metres below average; possibly the damper, cooler, less sunny August has also contributed, certainly few people needed to use their hosepipes!

Flows being measured by the bailiffs now extremely low, with the channel dry in the upper reaches and very choked by vegetation lower down the valley. The head of the river (i.e. from where there is continuous flow), is now south of Redbourn, with just a trickle behind the Chequers pub visible but not measurable due to weed growth, [yet another sewage leak at that point was reported to EA by Ernie Leahy, our bailiff there]. The tributary the River Red is only flowing after heavy rain and Hanstead brook is dry.

2011	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in meters <i>[Long-term average]</i> (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [\pm average] (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamstead)
May	131.01 [134.1]	23.6 [-31.09]
June	130.45 [133.32]	83.0 [+21.74]
July	120.36 [133.23]	44.6 [-5.27]
August	128.27 [132.56]	81.2 [+17.47]
September	127.71 [130.87]	38.4 [-19.22]

A recent problem that has come to attention at the Redbournbury fords is the use by many 'Landrover Experience' vehicles to demonstrate, presumably to prospective customers, their ability to navigate through fords at speed. This causes considerable disturbance and erosion at the fords and the hope is that the landowner, Crown Estates, may be able to take some action to stop this nuisance.

On a happier note many of the Bailiffs are commenting on the great displays of berries this autumn with crab-apples, hips, haws, sloes and spindle being particularly colourful; this may be due to the warm, dry spring followed by damper, cooler summer, although at the time of writing in late September, we are experiencing an Indian summer - the weather is certainly unusual this year! Water forget-me-not, water-cress, hemp agrimony, willow-herb and ragwort are still flowering and Himalayan balsam is only too prolific, although colourful!



Fruits of autumn: haws and sloes.



Wild watercress.



The bright pink berries of spindle.

Some interesting bird reports include flocks of 30 or more migrating yellow wagtails in the meadows north of St Albans, good numbers of linnets and skylarks; a few ring-necked parakeets have been seen, also willow warblers, tree creepers, goldfinches, grey wagtails and plenty of long-tailed tits in

mixed flocks along with other common hedgerow birds but only the occasional kingfisher. It seems the egrets may have departed briefly from the valley but are now coming back. Some bailiffs out in the evenings have seen or heard owls and even bats. The number of road-kill polecats reported indicates a thriving population must be present in our valley and the occasional hare is sighted as well as the ubiquitous rabbits, foxes and squirrels.

Butterflies seem not to have had a very good year – the topsy-turvy weather again? – but red admirals are being regularly reported at present. Fish reports include brown trout, chubb, perch, roach and minnows so where there is water it must be healthy and we must hope for some wet months to come if our river is to have much chance next year.

Towards the end of September on a glorious late sunny summer day I walked with members of the Hemel Hempstead RSPB Group to show them the birds of the Ver Valley. We started at St Michaels and from the car park we heard, then saw a nuthatch, before moving to the churchyard where we stood under the big yew trees listening out for the goldcrests. After a while we all managed to see at least one or two albeit briefly before they disappeared back into the foliage. We also saw two mistle thrushes perched at the top of churchyard trees. Unfortunately the permissive path through Gorhambury was closed owing to the Saturday shoot so we had walk north along the A5183 to Shafford but on the way we saw three coveys of red-legged partridges, one on the estate and two of 6 and 12 birds on the NE side of the road. Red-legged partridges are an introduced species rather like pheasants and they to are bred in pens for release for shooting. Unfortunately our native grey partridge is largely absent from this part of Hertfordshire and it a couple of years since I have seen one locally. Also on the recently ploughed field was a buzzard feeding on insects and probably earthworms. Although they are majestic fliers as they soar on the thermals they are quite ungainly on the ground as they swagger along the furrows left by the plough. I always think they look like chickens when they are grounded.

The walk became a deal more pleasant once we left the traffic behind to walk through to Shafford Farm. House martins breed here each year but they had all left earlier in the month. However we did see one flying high over us as we walked. Probably the best sighting of the day was an adult little owl perched in an open doorway of a small shed near Shafford Mill. Although little owls laid eggs in the nearby VVS box they did not successfully raise young from the box but I am sure they bred in a tree hole nearby as juveniles were seen in August. This bird was most likely one of the parents now released from "childcare" duties. Although it appeared to be dozing, its huge yellow eyes were watching our every move, but it was a mobbing chiffchaff which forced it to fly off into a nearby bush. We could still see it but it was unlikely we could have found it there if we had not seen it fly in.

As we walked we saw the usual Ver birds like kite, more buzzards, heron, little egret, skylark, and a female reed bunting on a wire. One of our party even saw a kingfisher flying rapidly along the river near the Irish Weir but it was gone before most of us could react.

Another good sighting was a hobby in flight which was first seen by one of the younger birders. It was really good to have a couple of teenagers in our party as they have such keen eyes and ears. This hobby was most likely a first year juvenile as the adult hobbies have probably already started their return migration. Hobbies have bred occasionally in the Ver Valley but as far as I know not this year.

At Redbournbury I told the party about the success we have had with the Barn Owl Project but pointed out it was extremely unlikely we would see one in the midday sun. I was right - we didn't!



A full bench of happy birders at Redbournbury East ford.

[John Fisher]

At the Redbournbury Mill we saw pied and grey wagtails but sadly there was no sign of the yellow wagtails where up to 50 had been feeding alongside the cattle for the last couple of weeks. Most of the party then visited the bakery to buy bread before returning to St Michaels in the cars Mandy James had kindly allowed us to leave in the Mill Car Park

Finally some really good news. Little egrets have bred at Tring and Amwell this year which I think are the first breeding records in Hertfordshire. I think little egrets will now be seen along the Ver every month of the year whereas up until now they were only visiting from September to April. I have seen at least one every month in 2011. Maybe they will join the island heronry in Verulam Park next year.

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

Every 5-7 years or so the cricket willows on Gorhambury land north of St Michael's are culled to make into cricket bats, around 30-40 bats being obtained from each tree. This happened again in early September when ten trees were taken away from the paddock adjoining Prae Close, similar cutting took place further up the river. Specialist contractors J. S. Wright from Chelmsford rough cut the bats which are then finished elsewhere, at same time having their cane handles fitted. Replanting with "willow wands" will take place this coming winter and so the whole process carries on, a useful crop. More information can be found on www.cricketbatwillow.com.

The new season has started well, with six volunteers increasing the flow of the Ver in Verulamium Park, opposite the Marlborough Arms, by removing some of the invasive Reed Mace and scrub. The main reed bed is still difficult to access, so we only removed some of the beer bottles, cans and glasses that get thrown down there. However, if the river keeps low, we should have safe access when the vegetation has died back, and so tackle this problem later in the year.

I have devised a once a month session for the Action group, but can add more tasks, if you let me know about the problem, so I can visit and draw up a risk assessment and contact the owners of the adjacent land. If you contact me on 01727761878 03 or sue.frearson@which.net I can inform you of additional activities.

Suggested Programme Autumn 2011 and Winter 2012

Friday 7th October - 2.00-4.00pm: Riverside way Bricket Wood at the Drop Lane car park.
Scrub clearance

Friday 4th November - 2.00-4.00pm. Riverside way Bricket Wood at the Drop Lane car park.
Scrub clearance and litter pick

Saturday 10th December - 10.00-12.00. Redbourn, at the Chequers.
Scrub clearance and litter pick (and afterwards for a Christmas drink)

Saturday 8th January - 10.00 – 12.00 Verulamium Park, opposite the Marlborough Arms.
Litter pick and scrub clearance

The Countryside Management Service will provide us with litter pickers and some tools, but it would be helpful if you would bring gloves, loppers and bow saws. Foot wear at your discretion, but it is usually very wet underfoot.

Isn't there a river here somewhere?



Scarecrows take over Ver Valley village

For 10 years now, the Ver Valley village of Flamstead has held a three-day scarecrow festival in August and has now raised £67,000, for:

- The upkeep of St Leonard's, the local parish church. St. Leonard's was built in the twelfth / thirteenth century and in constant need of repair. The money raised goes towards the repair and general maintenance of the church. Recent repairs include work on the windows high up in the church, just below the roof.
- The Herts Multiple Sclerosis Therapy Centre (HMSTC). HMSTC does not get any financial support from the Government, relying entirely upon donations, fund raising events and people bequeathing money to them in their wills. The Scarecrow Festival is HMSTC's biggest fund raising event of the year.

This year:

- The festival raised just under £11,000.
- Visitor numbers were over 5000..
- The number of entries from local residents has built up to 130, with hundreds of scarecrows.
- The weather was fairly kind, except for Saturday afternoon when it rained quite a lot and visitors numbers were significantly down on last year, but Friday afternoon and Sunday made up for the shortfall.

Well done one and all!

It's a fantastic day out, but still a well-kept secret! Having lived in St Albans for 11 years I was totally unaware of this event, but after completing the inaugural walk of the Ver Valley Trail, from the source to the confluence, led by Andy Webb in June, we were returned to our car near the source by John Cadisch who "tipped us off" about the Flamstead scarecrow festival! It seems only fair to tip you all off!

This year the festival was held between Friday 19th (Mid-day) - Sunday 21st August (5pm). There is ample free marshalled parking. You buy your voting form and scarecrow location map for £2, or 4 voting forms for a family of 4 costing £5. You each vote for first, second, and third, not as easy as it sounds!

We went on the Sunday. The weather was good and arriving at 12:30 we had given ourselves enough time to do the "course" which took us 4 hours, stopping off for refreshment at the "Crow Bar" at Trowley Bottom's Rose & Crown.

The entrants must spend months and a lot of effort preparing their scarecrows. And, it is amazing what they think will scare the crows! There were a variety of creative and imaginative entrants and great camaraderie in choosing our favourites. Driving into Flamstead from the south you were greeted to the festival by a family of traditional scarecrows.

Some of the entries had musical accompaniment. These included Only Fools and Horses (the winning entry), the wild west and Eastenders (a joint complimentary entry from a couple of neighbours). Topical scarecrows included Bob Crow, Seb Crow, the Olympics, Rebecca Crow, and Boris Johnson on one of his bikes.

There were scarecrows for everyone! But not just scarecrows! The church grounds had been taken over! with a small steam train, a BBQ (there were several, with some of them raising money for the charities), a very entertaining brass band, Morris dancing, Punch and Judy, and stalls including plants, home baked produce and a train . The village pubs; The Spotted Dog, The Rose and Crown and The Three Blackbirds as well as the Sports and Social club were selling a range of meals and snacks. There were BBQs raising money for charity too!

Next year's event is planned for 24th, 25th and 26th August. It is in our diaries! I suggest you put it in yours!

And remember, Ver Valley walk Number 2 starts from here and takes in the iconic view of Flamstead Church with its Hertfordshire spike being unique to this county. For more pictures and details visit: <http://www.flamstead-herts.co.uk/>

See pictures on page 7

Butterflies 2011

Ernie Leahey

2011 has been a rather difficult year for many of the 30 or so species found in the Ver Valley and the surrounding area. The season started off with the usual early March sightings of brimstones and small tortoiseshells followed by good numbers of orange tips in May.

Despite the coldest weather for 18 years, however at the end of June and early July the rare purple emperor was seen and photographed by a lucky observer at Bricket Wood Common - a site I visited later to enjoy many marbled whites and several silver washed fritillaries. Also at this venue were white admirals and purple hairstreaks and many of the common species.

With dull weather during much of August it became evident that butterfly numbers were down as garden buddleia were not being adorned with their usual visitors but with only a few peacocks, tortoiseshells and commas. I saw only one migrant species, painted lady, in August at Sandridge and none near the Ver but the other expected migrant red admiral appeared in smaller quantities. Of our blue species the holly blue fared well and was numerous on the Nickey Line while the common blue was scarce at Verlum End, Harpenden Hill and the Aubrey field at Redbourn. Their other little relative the small copper was seen in our area again but with fewer sightings. The small and large whites seem more resilient being common well into September.



Peacock, scarcer in 2011



Brimstone, seen from spring to autumn.



Speckled wood, a familiar woodland species.

Many of our butterflies have a very small critical window of opportunity to fly so if you want to see a particular species it is a good idea to be aware of their seasons. For example the ringlet, a grassland species sightings page of the Herts & Middlesex Butterfly Conservation web-site which gives sightings news on a daily basis.

Of concern is the breeding success of a smaller population our local butterflies this year as their caterpillars and chrysalis over-winter in preparation for 2012.



Ringlet, had a poor year.
[Ernie Leahy]

Useful books are The Butterflies of Hertfordshire by Brian Sawford and the recently published Butterflies of Britain & Ireland by Jeremy Thomas & Richard Lewington.

Picture Page



Welcoming the many visitors.



Boris.

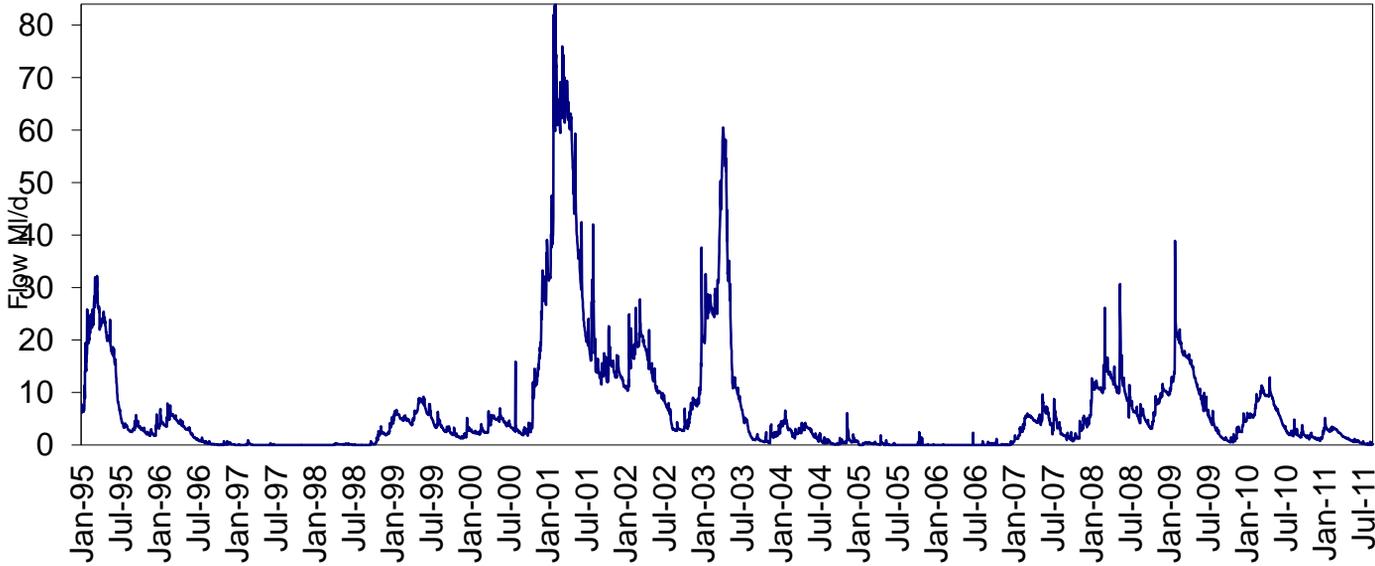


William Shakespeare.



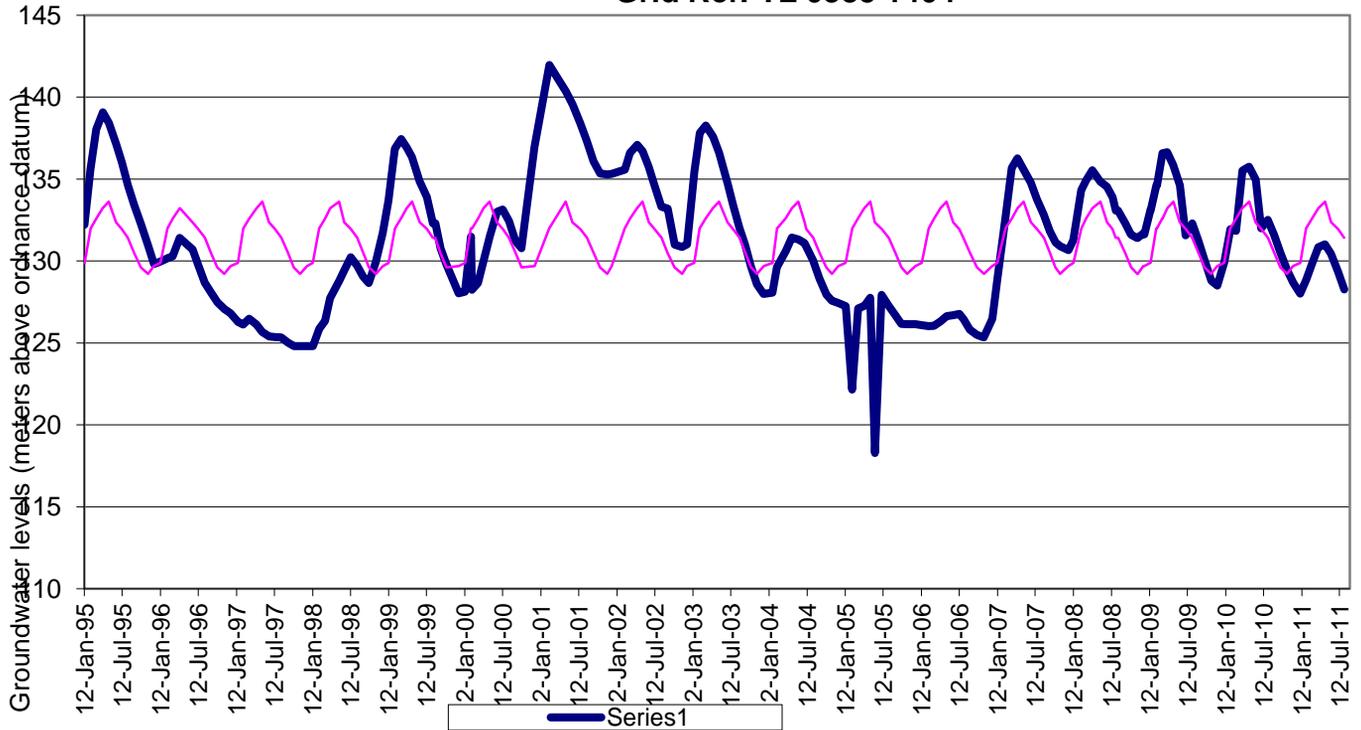
Wallace and Gromit

Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn January 1995 to Date



Actual level - blue. Average level - mauve

Groundwater levels - Ballingdon Farm 1995 - To Date Grid Ref: TL 0385 1404



The Ver Valley Society would like to thank the following:
 Veolia Water for providing the flow and ground water charts.
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