



Ver Valley Society NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 2019
No 139

NEXT OPEN MEETING

Tuesday 26th February 2019, 7.30pm
Centenary Suite, Redbourn Village Hall, AL3 7LW

Wetland Wildlife

Speaker: John Tyler

A tour of the plants and animals to be found in ponds, lakes and streams, looking at the ways in which, from marine land-loving ancestors, they have become so beautifully adapted to life on, around and beneath the water.



SAVE THE DATES

Next Open Meetings:

Tuesday 4th June 2019
St Stephen Parish Centre,
Bricket Wood.
Speaker tbc

Tuesday 22nd October 2019
St Michaels Parish Centre,
St Albans.
AGM – speaker tbc

Please note: All meetings are free entrance to members and non-members. Please check our website or social media a few days prior to the meeting in case of any late changes. Although our meetings are free entry to members and non-members, we welcome donations towards the cost of refreshments, hall hire etc. Suggested £2 per person.



EVENTS

Events Programme

We're bolstering the Society's Events Programme in 2019 to give everyone a chance to enjoy the River Ver and the wonderful biodiversity that our chalk stream and its surrounding valley have to offer. We expect to announce the full programme at the February Open Meeting. It'll be a mix of old favourites and new ideas but please pencil a **Beginners' Birdwatch in Verulamium Park** on 17th March, look forward to a visit the **Building Research Establishment (BRE) in July** and anticipate a **Ver Bat Walk in August**. To whet your appetite, here's one that's already in the diary...

Bluebells and Early Purple Orchid Walk

Sunday 12th May 2019, 10.00 am

Join the Friends of the Nickey Line and the Ver Valley Society on a joint walk to see bluebells, early purple orchids and springtime birds. We will start at the car park at Amenbury Lane, AL5 2HU and walk along the Nickey Line to Knott Wood and expect to return by 12.30. 4/5 miles. Wear stout shoes and bring binoculars if you have them.

More information:
John Fisher 01582 792843.



The hot seat

It's certainly a challenging time to take over the reins as Chairman as the River Ver faces its third successive dry winter with low flows, low groundwater levels and 11km of dry river bed. The river currently rises 50m above the confluence with the Red, behind the Chequers at Redbourn.



John Pritchard, Dorset chalk stream childhood, bird watcher, frustrated photographer, fly fisher, countryside lover, vegetable gardener.

More water, more often

Looking on the bright side we are making great strides to raise the profile of the Ver and the crisis that faces it and the South East's chalk streams. I'm keen to continue and reinvigorate the Society's campaigning to achieve more water in the Ver, more often. See further news and what you can do to help in the water resources article below.

New events programme

In the meantime, let's get out there and appreciate what we do have! To that end, there's going to be a wider Events Programme in 2019 to give members a better chance to see what makes a chalk stream such a special asset and take the opportunity to enjoy the beauty of the Ver. I hope we will inspire a good few new members to join too. If there are any events or activities you'd like to see included in the programme, please let me know.



Photos: Ten sacks of rubbish after the River Clean
Right: East Ford footbridge at Redbournbury

Local successes

There's been plenty to cheer since September. The East Ford footbridge at Redbournbury has been repaired with new planking and handrails, thanks to Herts County Council. The Environment Agency has done their bit too – clearing out the exit channel to allow the water to drop to a better level. It's a bit of a mouthful but in October we joined Plastic Free St Albans on a Surfers Against Sewage River Clean in and around the Ver at Sopwell Nunnery Green. It was a big success with our wader clad members making friends with a new generation of local environmentalists and collecting 10 bags of rubbish that won't find its way downstream.

Then there was Steve Brooks' really useful Riverfly tutorial (see Sue's report), four more Riverfly monitors qualifying to start kick-sampling, making more friends at the Colne Catchment (ColneCAN) conference – we've been busy.

Thanks again to Jane for her sterling five years. I'm looking forward to my time as Chairman and I intend to do our venerable Society proud.



CAMPAIGNING FOR OUR RIVER

by JOHN PRITCHARD

What can you do?

The most important thing happening in the coming months is the publication of Affinity Water's third draft Water Resources Management Plan where they will again detail their plans for the next five years, 2020-2025 and outline their ambitions further ahead. The public consultation period is expected to be 1 March to 26 April 2019.

We would urge all the Society's members to respond to the

proposals and offer constructive criticism if they fail to deliver positive steps that might lead to the Ver's future improvement.

To help you respond we'll be issuing our thoughts and guidance following an earlier pre-consultation session in January and a field visit with senior figures from Affinity to several of Hertfordshire's struggling chalk streams in early February.

If you would like to hear more, please make sure we have your email address if you come to the February Open Meeting. We will publish an

article on the Society's website to assist our members in replying.

Every reply helps, especially when similar groups like the River Chess Association and The Chiltern Society will all be doing the same.



Riverfly Monitoring

Despite slightly better flows some of our team of twelve monitors are still finding slightly lower numbers of Riverfly, hovering around the trigger levels for their sites.

But again we are finding more 'pond water invertebrates' such as Damselfly nymphs, Crane fly and water beetles, particularly in the weedy margins. Our very helpful EA coordinator Rosalind Brown has confirmed Bob May's discovery that there could be a new Riverfly protocol to be introduced later this year, for slow flowing sites, for those who would like to use it. Results using this protocol would give us further evidence of low water levels along the length of the Ver.

Riverfly invertebrate monitoring is a form of Citizen Science in which trained volunteers monitor the health of rivers across the country. Each site has a trigger level set dependent on the number of species and their usual abundance. If the score falls below the trigger level this indicates contamination of the water and the EA are informed. The VVS monitors 19 sites on the Ver.



Masterclass on the Ver

Dr Steve Brooks, an expert in river invertebrates at the Natural History Museum, helped ten members of the team with Riverfly identification at a very helpful tutorial at Riverside Way, Bricket Wood in November. He has also offered to help us again in the Spring in the Redbournbury area, where we are likely to see a different range of river invertebrates. This will be very useful for those of us who might want to use the new protocol.

We are now monitoring at three new sites, the Chequers Redbourn, the Red Redbourn Common and the leat at Park Street. Thanks to our new monitors.

■ The next training session for new Riverfly monitors will be in the Spring, and I already have one volunteer, but if there are any other members, who would be interested, please contact me by the end of February at sdfrearsen@virginmedia.com

SOCIAL MEDIA

by JOHN PRITCHARD

Up-to-date news

The extra news, nature notes and walk highlights that the Society puts out on social media can now be found at the foot of the home page on our new website. So if you are not on Facebook or twitter, this is an easy place to look without any need to sign up to these social media sites.

Spreading the message

In recent months the most popular post on both Facebook and twitter was 'Who pulled the plug?' Two photos graphically show the Ver from Bow Bridge just north of

St Albans – a full river in the 1980s contrasting with the invisible flow of 2018. It underlines the work the Society still has to do for the river to again be a jewel in the Hertfordshire countryside.

This post was seen and shared by our 700 regular followers resulting in 14,000 people seeing, and reacting in horror, at the sorry state of our chalk stream. Our social media posts help share our story. They reach not only residents in and around the St Albans district but also those with an interest in the environment from ecologists and ornithologists to water companies and the Environment Agency.



MEMBERSHIP

by JOHN PRITCHARD

Many thanks to our newest members for joining the Society: Darren & Juliet Voisey, David Luxford, Dr Peter St. John Stokes, Harold Frayman and Pierre Cowlard.

A very warm welcome to you all and we hope that you will enjoy the reinvigorated events programme for 2019 and might join us working along the Ver.

Forgotten to renew?

Now is the time for anyone who thinks they may have forgotten to renew their membership to double check by emailing members@riverver.co.uk. Renewals generally fall due in September at the beginning of the Society's year. If your June newsletter doesn't appear, you'll know your subscription is 9 months overdue!

From the bailiffs' reports

At this time of year many things are rather quiet and not all the Bailiffs have been able to get out. Although the flow in the river is still very low [see facts and figures later] at least some vegetation die-back has allowed measurements to be made! Most paths are now quite accessible if rather muddy in places. Just a few berries were still hanging on into late December and in January, in warm spots, hazel catkins were flourishing with alder catkins also well advanced. There are some fungi being seen.

Wagtails and water rails

Naturally there have been no insect sightings at this time of year except somewhere river-fly reports have been sent in. A few bullheads, chub and trout have been spotted as have hares and squirrels, and the moles have been visibly very busy! With bare branches making birds easier to see, Bailiffs have been able to report many sightings; these include a goldcrest, a stonechat, a meadow pipit, a green sandpiper, one or two of water rails, several of grey wagtails, kingfishers, siskins, egrets, herons and parakeets, as well as numbers of the winter visitors fieldfares, redwings, golden plovers, lapwings, teal, gadwall and pochards.

Photos: Catkins, Fungi, Water rail



LIST OF BAILIFFS

I have been asked who are on our Bailiff team and where are their stretches, so that members can look out for them or perhaps alert them to any issues they notice. This is the list of their names and river beats. Please contact me as Bailiff Co-Ordinator if no contact details are given.

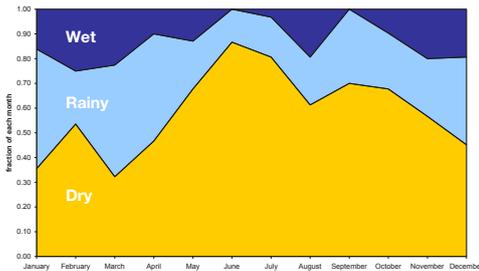
1. R Colne to Moor Mill	Sue and Martin Frearson*	sue.frearson@virginmedia.com
2. Moor Mill to Burydell Lane	Dick Downs*	d.downs2@toilets.org.uk
3. Burydell Lane to New Barnes Mill	Bruce Banfield-Taylor*	
4. New Barnes Mill to Sopwell Mill	Giles Harrison	gpharrison13@gmail.com
5. Sopwell Mill to Holywell Hill	Catherine and Derrick Davies*	
6. Holywell Hill to Bluehouse Hill	Vivien Gates	
7. Bluehouse Hill to Bow Bridge	Roger Hall	
8. Bow Bridge to Redbournbury	John Pritchard*	members@riverver.co.uk
9. Redbournbury to Dolittle	Jane Gardiner	janegardiner@madasafish.com
10. Dolittle to Redbourn Bypass	Ernie Leahy	
11. Chequers to Porridge Pot (and Redbourn golf course to Luton Lane)	John Fisher	secretary@riverver.co.uk
12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)	VACANCY	

* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

Still dry

You can see only too well, from the tables and graphs, that the autumn and early winter have been very dry and therefore the aquifer has had no recharge and remains exceptionally low. Although the annual total is only 7% below the average, the wettest months were March, April, May and August which are not the best for recharge. I have included a colourful diagram illustrating my own subjective monthly records of rainfall to illustrate the situation shown in the table below. After some heavy rainfall up to Christmas some Bailiffs noted better flows but these soon fell back to very low as it has been largely dry from Christmas to mid-January. There is still no flow at all in Redbourn and northwards.

Weather 2018

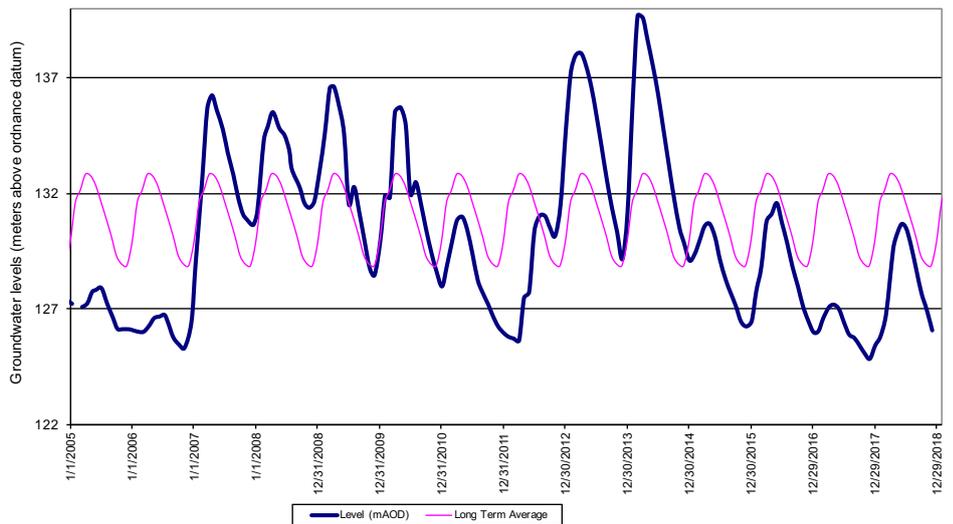


	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Rothamstead)
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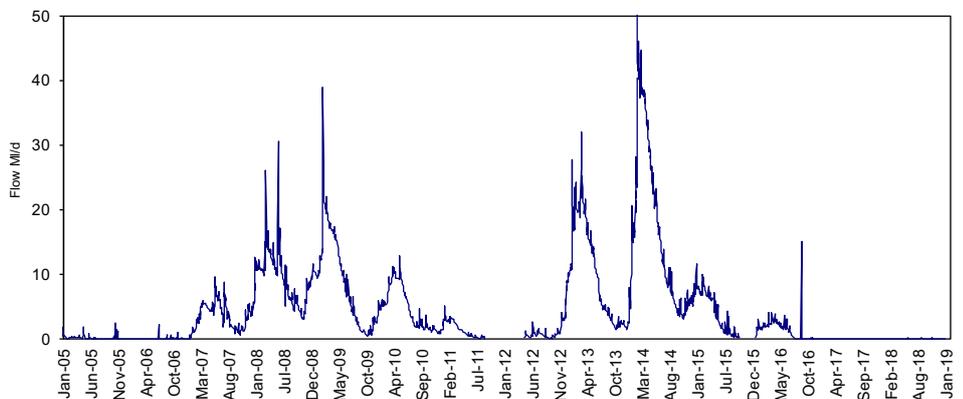
Months 2018/9

September	128.66 [130.87]	51.0 [-6.63]
October	127.70 [130.93]	71.0 [-10.67]
November	127.01 [130.91]	63.8 [-12.83]
December	126.10 [130.56]	75.0 [+5.48]
		Annual total 683.3 [-49.7]
January 2019	125.74 [131.36]	<i>Not available on going to press</i>

Groundwater levels – Ballingdon Farm 2005 to date Grid ref: TL 0385 1404



Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn January 2005 to date



Photos: A dry Ver at Redbourn, low flow below Doolittle Mill.

An update

The St Albans District Community, Environment and Sport Scrutiny Committee held a special meeting on 30 October 2018 to consider a report on the consultations held earlier in 2018 on what is now being called Revitalising the River Ver project, which also includes the Verulamium lakes. Liam Dennis of the Environment Agency and project manager, Daniel Flitton the council's Principle Green Spaces Officer and Tom Perry, an EA Water resources Specialist, were there to present a project overview, and answer questions from scrutiny committee members and stakeholders who had been invited to speak to the committee. These were Bill Free of the Society of St Michael's and Kingsbury, Rick Taylor of the Sopwell Residents Association, Keith Reynolds of the Cottonmill Allotment Association, Alison Shipperlee of local residents association SAPHRA, and myself for the VVS.

Citizens' response

There had been 228 individual on-line responses plus 25 paper questionnaires received and 9 local councillors had expressed their views. 74% of the public responses were in favour, 16% were unsure and only 10% were against. The 9 local councillors split much along the same lines, 7 in support, one undecided and 1 against spending this much on the Park and River Ver when roads and pavements needed more repairs.

The allotment holders and local associations were concerned that moving the river to the lowest point in the valley in Reach 4 (Cottonmill) would impact on the allotments and possibly increase local flood risk. Officers and the Portfolio Holder for Environment did their best to reassure them that the allotments would be re-provided – indeed the council has a statutory duty to do this – and the remaining ones would no longer be regularly flooded, on average every 3.5 years since 2008. I expressed our

Ver at Sopwell Nunnery Green



Ver in Verulamium Park

strong support for the scheme while sympathising with the displaced gardeners, and that we could help fund the boardwalks in Reach 2 as part of the first phase of the implementation, perhaps as soon as 2019-20. I also described the monthly efforts of our Action Group, Riverfly monitors and bailiffs to monitor and improve the river and the Ver Trail.

£7.5million budget

The EA is now going ahead with detailed designs at a cost of £400,000 and estimates that the grand total for the 6 reaches will be £7.5m – the first time a global figure for the scheme has emerged! The EA will cover £2.5m leaving £5m to be raised by the other stakeholders, mainly the district to fund the work in the park and allotments. This will be spread over 4-5 years.

The Scrutiny Committee (an all-party body) unanimously backed the scheme, and recommended that engagement with current stakeholders continues, installation of a dedicated noticeboard in the park, and officers explore possible funding opportunities without delay eg. a Heritage Lottery bid.

What's next?

The next steps will be planning pre-application discussions, tendering for the detailed designs (3 months) and award of contract, with submission of detailed designs 2019/20. Some delivery might be possible 2019/20. We have proposed all along that this first stage should be the Ver River Trail from the Causeway to Holywell Hill with its two boardwalk sections, but it could be Reach 6 ie. creating the Local Nature Reserve where our Action Group worked on 19th January 2019.

At long last the door may be opening to address the problems of the Ver through St Albans. The council's website will provide continual updates on the progress of the project and it will remain in the Scrutiny Committee's forward plan so they will receive regular updates.

Little Egrets

For the last few years little egrets have bred on Heron Island in the lake. Barry Trevis rings all the fledglings using big colour rings. It is interesting to see where these birds are after they leave the nest. One flew to South Wales and another to the Midlands. I saw one at Redbournbury a couple of years ago and in early September I saw one at Lemsford NR with a "Z" black ring and a "F" orange ring and I saw another at Redbournbury. If you see a colour ringed little egret



let me know and I will pass on the information to Barry. Better still take a picture.

Island nesting

Little egrets have nested on the island in the lake at Verulamium since 2014 when there was a single nest with four young. Since then the colony has steadily increased each year so we now have four pairs and it maybe more in 2019. As they nest a lot later than the herons it is difficult to observe them as the trees are in full leaf by the time the eggs hatch.



Ver Valley Bird Watching Walk Thursday 21st February, 10.00 am

A walk set up by Watford RSPB to which VVS members are invited. Meet at the St Michaels Car Park adjacent to the Roman Museum to walk through Gorhambury and Shafford to Redbournbury where 2/3 cars will be parked to shuffle walkers back to St Michaels. With stops to hopefully look at little egrets, lapwing, golden plover, red kites and buzzards, this walk normally reaches Redbournbury at about 1.00 pm. There is a voluntary donation of £1 to RSPB funds. It's 4/5 miles. Wear stout shoes and bring binoculars if you have them.

More information:
John Fisher 01582 792843.

Photos: Left Paul Barnes. Right John Fisher

CAMPAIGNING SUCCESS

by JOHN PRITCHARD

More visitors

Hot on the heels of summer visits to the Ver and our neighbouring chalk streams from DEFRA and OFWAT, we hosted Emma Howard Boyd, Chair of the Environment Agency

on a whistle-stop tour to emphasise how disappointed we were with the abstraction/environmental balance in the Ver Valley and beyond. Feargal Sharkey was again the prime mover in initiating this visit and is continuing to voice support for Hertfordshire's chalk streams on a regular basis.



Chalk Conference

One result of all our activity was the calling of the first ever Herts & North London Chalk Conference at Hatfield House. Joint hosts Affinity and the EA left us in no doubt that they have access to some wonderful tools giving exceptional insight into the chalk aquifer's behaviour. The question remains, will they be brought to bear to put more water in the Ver and other rivers of the South East?

The above is just a snapshot of the committee's activities in the past few months and we will be continuing apace in 2019. We'd be happy to have more members with an appetite for campaigning join our team.



Action Group Volunteers

Sept 2018 Frogmore Pits: The Action Group always welcomes a challenge! A tree with its head in the river and its base still attached at the top of the valley was certainly that. Too big and heavy to move it got a severe haircut to limit debris catching in the river. The falling tree had brought down other trees and branches. These were cleared together with a lot of weak immature growth. When we finished we had created a small glade which allows light onto the river so that the trees and plants can grow naturally.

Oct 2018 Sopwell Nunnery Green: If you walk along this stretch of the Ver you will notice the changes that the group have made. The trees adjacent to the boardwalk have been trimmed back and this work continued on the pathway past the allotments. The pathway through the

bridge is now clear of trailing vegetation. You will also find a newly created viewpoint at the Southern end of the path. The plan is to provide places where walkers can see the river but to discourage their dogs from paddling.

Nov 2018: Volunteers undertook a survey of the river "furniture" the benches, seats and signs along the river. Many of these have been installed for some time and we need to work-out what maintenance is needed and who is going to do it.

Dec 2018: Following our tradition the group met at the Chequers in Redbourn to work on obstructions in the Ver from the Confluence with the Red through the wood and down towards Doolittle Mill. The sun shone and we finished the session and the year by enjoying a Christmas drink in the Chequers.

Looking back at 2018 our volunteers have contributed a total of 292 hours of work on the Ver and its environment – Thank you all.



SPRING PROGRAMME 2019

Saturday 16th February, 10.00–12.00
Sopwell Nunnery Green. A variety of tasks: tree pruning by the path and in-river, litter to collect and a viewpoint to create.

Saturday 16th March, 10.00–12.00
Riverside Way. Pollarding willows along the bankside and clearing a blockage on the Colne adjacent to the confluence.

Saturday 20th April, 10.00–12.00
Frogmore. Clearing in-water trees in the valley and opening up the canopy to improve the river and bankside light levels.

YOUR COMMITTEE

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President
Peter Fox, MBE

Committee Member
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HOTLINES

EA Incident Hotline: 0800 80 70 60
(Report all environmental incidents)

EA Floodline: 0345 988 1188

Flytipping reports
St Alban's Council: 01727 809019
email:
wastemanagementservices@stalban.gov.uk

Water Leaks (Affinity): 0800 376 5325