



NEXT OPEN MEETING

**Tuesday 4th June 2019,
7.30pm**

St Stephen Parish Centre, Station Road, Bricket Wood, AL2 3PJ

The History of The Box Moor Trust

(including the award-winning Bulbourne restoration project)

Main Speaker: Caroline Evans, Education & Community Manager The Box Moor Trust



The Bulbourne after restoration September 2018

Come and hear about a rich history spanning four centuries. This self-supporting charity manages nearly 500 acres of grazing and amenity land on the outskirts of Hemel Hempstead and Bovington on behalf of the local community. Its Area of Benefit embraces parts of the Gade and Bulbourne chalk streams and even a sliver of the Ver Valley. A thriving group of volunteers help out with conservation and other tasks on the estate.

PLUS: Melissa Ambrose from Affinity Water will give us an update on their restoration projects on the River Ver.

SAVE THE DATES

Next Open Meetings:

Tuesday 22nd October 2019

St Michaels Parish Centre, St Albans.

AGM: speaker Sarah Perry, Living Rivers Officer, HMWT

Thursday 20th February 2020

Redbourn Village Hall, AL3 7LW

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 PROGRAMME

How Healthy Is The Ver? Riverfly Demonstration

Saturday 18th May 10am – 4pm

This is a drop-in event in Verulamium Park, on the Ver near the St Michaels entrance, as part of the Sustainable St Albans Festival.

Our Riverfly monitors will be there to show where the invertebrates hide and explain why they are such a good indicator of our chalk stream's health.

Allen Beechey from the Chiltern Chalk Streams Project will provide expert identification advice and be interpreting the results!



It's a child friendly event – bring the family and the wellies, so everyone can have a go!

*More information:
Sue Frearson 01727 761878*

New Member Recruitment

St Peter's Street, St Albans

Sunday 19th May 11am – 5pm



We'll be manning a VVS Society market stall in the Sustainable St Albans Market Takeover event. Drop by and say hello, it could be a long day for our volunteers! Better still, if you can spare an hour to help talk about the river and our efforts to revive it, please book a slot on the rota.

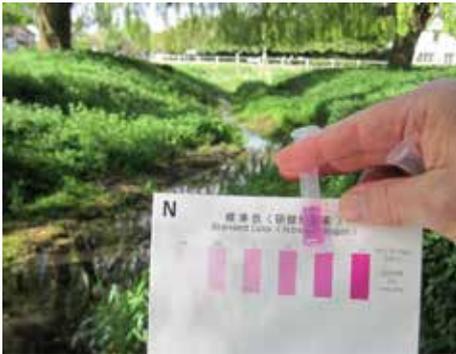
Contact John Pritchard 01727 835957

No change

There's been little change in the River Ver's fortunes over the past three months. Groundwater levels rose briefly a couple of months after December's rain but at Ballington Farm (at the top of the Ver Valley) remain 7.78 metres below the Long Term Average (LTA). It's a sad fact that it's now 54 consecutive months, four and a half years, since the aquifer was above the LTA. The river is going to face a terrible summer unless we enjoy almost unprecedented amounts of rain.

As we go to press a water-sampling exercise is underway up and down the Ver. Early indications are that nitrate levels are well above average with phosphate levels lower but still beyond the ideal limit.

Photo: High nitrate levels



On the campaign trail

The solution to the chalk springs flowing more freely is unfortunately not a quick one and relies on alternative sources of water coming on stream to allow the groundwater some respite. Equally it requires a massive change in consumer consumption habits to trim the amount of water we all use.



Photos: BBC Countryfile films the dry Ver, interviewed by Tom Heap



BBC Countryfile

Our efforts to publicise the river's plight have been rising as the flow has been falling. A field visit with members of Affinity's team was enlightening for both parties. What's more, the Ver reached a wider audience with an appearance on BBC Countryfile, illustrating the challenges our receding local chalk streams face.

Committed committee

I'd like to extend a warm welcome to Peter Hill who has been co-opted onto the committee as Membership Secretary – thank you for taking on this valuable job. Other committee members have been busy in areas that often go unreported: the prospect of kissing gates to replace a few rickety styles near Redbourn edges closer, Riverside Way 5-year Plan site meeting, Affinity consultation, Affinity Stakeholder Event attended, Lawes Trust meeting, Ver Park Forum attended, talks given to Our Planet Our Future and North London Outdoor Group, a Riverfly morning for Maple School, an appearance on Radio Verulam and the list goes on.

Thank you to all our Members who responded to Defra's consultation and more recently to Affinity Water's draft Water Resources Management Plan to let them both know, in no uncertain terms, that we'd like more to happen and much more quickly so that the environment might benefit.

Please make sure that the Society has your email address if you'd like to be involved in similar campaigns.

Welcome

A warm welcome to our new members and thanks for joining the society:

Anthony and Tessa Oliver, Timothy Smith, Stan Redfern, Margaret Smallbone, Michael Coleman, Joe Gray, David Buxton, Wayne and Hanna Allen, and Joe Randall.

We hope that you will enjoy the Society's events, participate freely and maybe join the monthly working group that helps make the river a wonderful local asset.

December '18 to April '19

Most of our Riverfly monitors have been sending in monthly records of their samples, which I then report to the Environment Agency. Although there is still no water at Luton Lane, Bob May is just able to sample at the Chequers. Overall there has been an improvement in invertebrate numbers along the river since last year, but north of St Albans there are more low flow invertebrates such as Demoiselle nymphs, Water Lice and Leeches. We have had concerns about the water quality through Verulamium Park, but Clive Pickering has more recently had samples above the target for his site at the bottom of Holywell Hill.



Low flow indicators

Our thanks to Dr Steve Brooks for another very helpful tutorial at Redbournbury Mill in April, where many Olive nymphs and one recently emerged adult (see photo) were seen, plus many other invertebrates, including three species of leech, water snails and water beetles, all indicating low flow. Our thanks also to Mandy James for allowing us to park at the mill and to the members of the public who showed an interest in our sampling. Steve has kindly agreed to run another tutorial the last weekend in July, under the Alban Way Bridge in Sopwell Nunnery Green Park. Dates and time to be confirmed.

■ For the St Albans Sustainability Festival in May, we will be demonstrating Riverfly Sampling in Verulamium Park, near the St Michaels ford, on Saturday 18th May 10.00-4.00. This is a family event, so if you would like to participate please bring your wellies.

Photos: Leech and Olive, Paul Foster



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.

SOCIAL MEDIA

by JOHN PRITCHARD

Regular updates

Don't forget to keep an eye on the bottom of the Society's website for the latest news and nature notes that we put out in between newsletters.

A wide audience around the country are waking up to the plight of the Ver and seeing it as a poignant example of how not to treat a chalk stream. Over 5,000 saw the image of another bridge with no water beneath it at a time when water saving messages are in short supply.

A healthy chalk stream is supposed to enjoy a steady year round temperature of around 10°C, so Alison Debenham's January photo of a frozen river in Verulamium Park astounded an audience of



nearly 5,000 people. To be fair that section of the Ver is the heavily modified former Abbey Mill stream which doesn't enjoy the gradient



of a typical chalk stream – partly explaining the ice and underlining why the Revitalising the Ver project is so badly needed.

Reports from the river bank

Firstly I have to report that sadly after many years loyal service Ernie Leahy has had to step down as a Bailiff due to health problems. On behalf of the Ver Valley Society I thank him most sincerely for all he has done for the Society and wish him all the best for the future. I'm pleased that Bob May has agreed to take over from him, acting as the Bailiff for the south of Redbourn from behind the Chequers Pub to Dolittle Mill. I am also happy to say that Peter Hill has agreed to keep an eye on the section of the valley from Flamstead to Markyate although there are rarely any signs of the Ver there!

Although the dry winter and spring have not helped river flows, measurements were made more easily before the vegetation started growing again. There was some rain in the first half of March and slight improvements in flow were measured for a while but these have now fallen back to very low for the time of year.

Wildlife and plants

Despite the state of the river itself much wildlife continues to thrive in the valley to be reported by our Bailiffs. All the usual mammals, including hares and muntjac with signs of moles and badgers have been seen. In the warm spells many butterflies have been active including

tortoiseshells, brimstones, peacocks, orange-tips and whites; red- and buff-tailed bumble bees have been busy in sunny spots and some ladybirds have been about. There have not been many fish reports yet this year although a few minnows, sticklebacks and bullheads have been seen.

Most of the winter bird visitors have now departed although some teal, gadwall and tufted duck still remain, perhaps to breed? Some swallows have been back since the end of March. The herons have been busy nesting in Verulamium Park and several little egrets have been about (see John Fisher's Bird Notes about a rare sighting of a cattle egret). A Cetti's warbler was heard and nice bird sightings include reed buntings, lesser redpolls, blackcaps, chiffchaffs, bullfinches, goldcrests, yellowhammers, grey wagtails, some kingfishers as well of course as all the usual tits and finches, wrens, parakeets, buzzards and red kites.

The very warm spell in February seems to have kick-started a wonderful display of blossom this spring. Blackthorn, various catkins and field maples have been spectacular. By the river, lesser celandines, violets, marsh marigolds, comfrey, some early bluebells and cowslips have made lovely displays.

Photos: Marsh Marigolds, Violets, Grey Wagtail, Celandines



LIST OF BAILIFFS

I have been asked who is 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*	johnp@riverver.co.uk
9. Redbournbury to Dolittle	Jane Gardiner	janegardiner@madasafish.com
10. Dolittle to Redbourn Bypass	Robert May*	bmay@i-c-a.demon.co.uk
11. Chequers to Porridge Pot (and Redbourn golf course to Luton Lane)	John Fisher	john.fisher@btconnect.com
12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)	Peter Hill	members@riverver.co.uk

* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

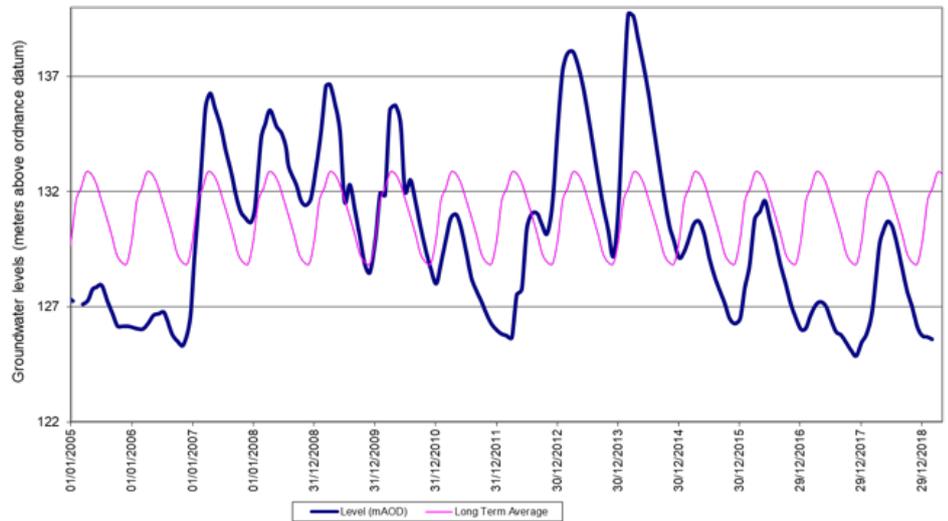
Summer rain?

After a third dry winter, the very variable weather in the early spring has sadly produced little rainfall with some very warm dry spells, so our Bailiffs are measuring very low flows. As you can see only too well, from the tables and graphs the situation is very serious. At the start of April the aquifer, at -7.78m from the average, was as low as it has been since spring 2012 when a "Minister for Drought" was appointed and severe summer floods followed. We obviously do not hope for floods but plenty of rain would be welcome to help the Ver survive the coming summer. There is still no flow at all in Redbourn and northwards.

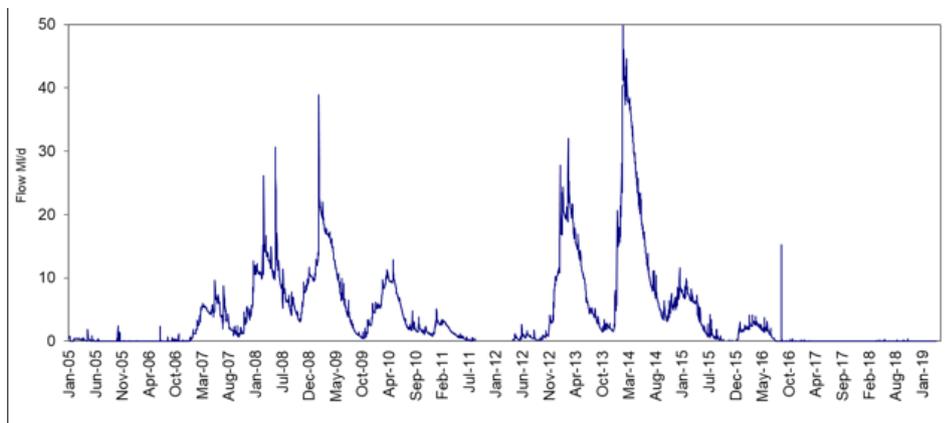


Months 2019	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Rothamstead)
		2018 Annual total 683.3 [-49.7]
January	125.74 [131.36]	34.8 [-55.17]
February	125.69 [132.38]	43.2 [-6.94]
March	125.58 [132.79]	60.4 [+9.6]
April	125.82 [133.6]	Not yet available

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



Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn
January 2005 to date



We are grateful to Affinity Water for supplying the groundwater and flow charts and to Veolia Environmental for printing and distributing our newsletters.

Photos: A bridge at Redbourn Golf Club, The Red only a few inches deep, Verulamium Park with the river level falling

Book a Bat Walk!

**Saturday 31st August 2019, meet 7.40pm
on the bridge near Ye Olde Fighting Cocks**

Join Josh Kalms, HMWT People and Wildlife Officer and VVS member, on an evening stroll by the Ver in Verulamium Park. The ready supply of hatching insects from the river makes chalk streams a favourite haunt of bats, not to mention the roosting spots old bankside trees afford. Josh will have his bat detector on hand to convert the ultrasound signals to audible frequencies to help with bat identification.

**Booking is essential, so please email
josh.kalms@hmwt.org to reserve your place.**

Please note the proposed July BRE visit featuring water and sustainable housing will now be part of our 2020 Events Programme.



Photo: Daubenton's Bat © Dale Sutton2020vision

MORE NEWS

VVS Archive

John Fisher reports...Some years ago our past chairman, Andy Webb, set up this wide ranging archive of material about the Ver, its people, its history as well as the history of the Society itself.

St Albans Central Library is on the second floor of the Maltings Shopping Centre next to the Arts Theatre. Following a reorganisation the Local History shelves are now on the back wall of the library next to the clock.

I was there last month and found several very interesting folders, particularly the following:-

1. "Eddie Butcher – Well Sinker" – b 1901 and founder member of the Society. Andy Webb's well researched writing about this man of the Ver.
2. "The Upper Ver" – by the late David Scott, a long serving VVS committee man, who was one of the people who campaigned in the 1990s to have Friars Wash Pumping Station put on "Standby Only".
3. "After the Deluge" – When all the Chilterns chalk streams were in flood in the 2000/01 winter the Ver flowed for a few days even at Kensworth. The Chiltern Society compiled this case study which covers several rivers including the Ver. How we need a repeat of that winter soon!

If you know of college student or a school pupil thinking about a river or local history project this is a wonderfully comprehensive resource which you could never match on any website.



Giant Hogweed

This invasive plant has a toxic sap that causes severe irritation of the skin, nasty blisters and leaves the skin sensitive to sunlight for many years. There have been a host of sightings of new plants in recent months – in the Park Street area. If you spot any Giant Hogweed on the Ver, please let Richard Wallis know and we'll do our best to assist with the plant's eradication.

Photos: John Lepley



Plastic pollution

Our recent litter pick along the River Ver with Plastic Free St Albans showed just how long plastic and other rubbish persists in the environment. A 1991 vintage Walkers crisp packet was discovered in the undergrowth and a Peter Dominic Lager can was pulled from the bank having been first discarded in 1988!

Photos: Rob & Emma Tyers



Rare Birds

It is not often we get a rare bird in the Valley but in mid-April we got three in two days! First, a male ring ouzel stopped over for just one day in a horse paddock near Doolittle Mill Cottage just south of Redbourn and was photographed by Rupert Evershed. I walked down along the Ver Walk path early next morning trying in vain to see the bird, but it seems that the ouzel had flown on the previous night on its way to its northern breeding grounds. I always think of them as the mountain version of a blackbird which they resemble apart from a distinctive white collar and pale wing panels. I was a bit disappointed as this would have been only my second ever record along the Ver Valley. However, in searching I was amazed to find another passage migrant, a common redstart, and although they have been recorded a handful of times it was a first for me.

Not one but two!

A friend of mine who lives in Bushey phoned me and wanted to meet up with me to see the redstart. I was under pressure and I was relieved when we relocated a redstart quickly, but this seemed a much better marked bird that one

I saw in the morning which was comparatively drab. Sure enough, later we saw two birds together and then Rupert met up with us to see these birds but a further search for the ouzel ended in failure.

Egret excitement

On the same day that Rupert saw the ring ouzel in Redbourn he saw a cattle egret on Sopwell Water Meadows. This was almost certainly the first ever record for the Ver Valley. Cattle egret are gradually colonising the UK probably due to climate change. This is not necessarily due to our warmer winters but possibly due to Spain and France becoming hotter and drier with consequent loss of the wetlands favoured by all egrets and herons.

These birds are certainly not nationally rare birds but are special for the Ver.

The Cetti's warbler is back again in the small reed bed near Shafford, ravens are being seen almost daily now around Childwickbury and Shafford and it looks promising for our barn owls, with a few sightings near our boxes.

Thank you to Rupert Evershed for agreeing to share his pictures with us.

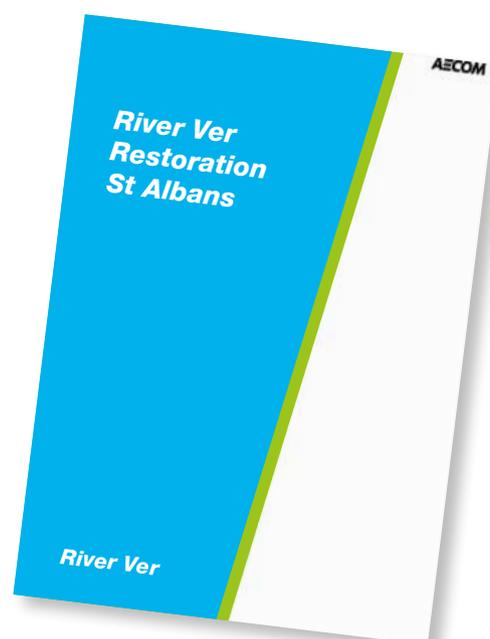


REVITALISING THE RIVER VER PROJECT

An update

Shortly before this newsletter went to press, St Albans City and District Council released the River Ver Feasibility Study for public scrutiny. It's a weighty tome running to over 600 pages and 75MB in size if you fancy downloading it. Suffice to say we haven't had the opportunity to review it in detail just yet. We are anticipating our Planning Officer, Martin Frearson, will have examined the contents and will be able to report back in the September Newsletter!

We are awaiting more news on the planning pre-application discussions and tendering for the detailed designs. Any news we do get will be posted on the Society's website and our social media feeds.



Action Group Volunteers

January & February 2019 – Sopwell Nunnery Green.

On a cold January morning we started the New Year by tackling 3 jobs. The dead hedging that had been installed in October was extended to loop around the tree to limit access to the river.

Our second job was to restring the bankside safety fence that ran north from the Alban bridge. Using some newly learned skills, the team replaced the broken posts. By the end of the morning half of the fence had been re-instated.

Meanwhile, the “wet team” were tackling a fallen tree. The tree lay across the river and in falling it had demolished the fence and other trees. Over the morning a transformation occurred – the tree was removed and when the debris was cleared it revealed a beautiful view across to the river.

In February we returned. Where the tree had fallen the

fencing was replaced and a series of dog holes were blocked using woven branches that should deter the canine adventurers.

A new view point was created at the southern end of the walkway so that you can view along the river as it turns away from the pathway. The young trees were coppiced, and the scrub cleared. The movers and stackers did a wonderful job shifting the cuttings over the walkway before stacking them in the wood. All without complaints about the thorny bramble that seemed to get everywhere.

To end the morning everyone moved north of the walkway to remove and trim trees and that were encroaching on the footpath.

March 2019 – Riverside Way. A forecast of gales did not deter the 16 members who assembled in Riverside Way to tackle an area of scrub and bramble. This was cleared to allow the vegetation to regenerate. Meanwhile other members re-pollarded some of the willow trees that had been cut back 5 years ago. The winds arrived as we finished the morning – great timing!



SUMMER PROGRAMME 2019

Sat 18th May, 10.00–12.00

We are having a rare break! Many of our volunteers will be in Verulamium Park helping with the Riverfly Event. Please come along and join in.

Sat 15th June, 10.00–12.00

Sycamore Drive, Park Street. We'll be pulling up Himalayan balsam an invasive species which has a foothold by the Ver as far upstream as Park Street.

Sat 20th July, 10.00–12.00

Moor Mill (Beefeater). A morning of Balsam bashing to continue our battle to eradicate this persistent pink flowered plant on the Ver.

Sat 17th August, 10.00–12.00

Riverside Way and the Confluence. A final Balsam bash of the summer pulling the mature plants before they can set seed and spread downstream into the River Colne.

YOUR COMMITTEE

Chairman & Communications

John Pritchard
01727 835957
johnp@riverver.co.uk

Vice Chairman & Action Group Co-ordinator

Richard Wallis
01582 794332
richard_wallis@btconnect.com

Bailiff Co-ordinator

Jane Gardiner
18 Claudian Place,
St Albans, AL3 4JE
01727 866331
janegardiner@madasafish.com

President

Peter Fox, MBE

Riverfly Co-ordinator

Sue Frearson
4 Allandale,
St Albans, AL3 4NG
01727 761878
sdfrearson@virginmedia.com

Secretary

John Fisher
92 High Street,
Redbourn, AL3 7BD
01582 792843
john.fisher@btconnect.com

Membership Secretary

Peter Hill
7 West Common,
Redbourn, AL3 7DF
01582 793785
members@riverver.co.uk

Treasurer

Rachel Young
58 Castle Road,
St Albans, AL1 5DG
01727 868919 (evenings/
weekends only)
treasurer@riverver.co.uk

Planning Officer

Martin Frearson
4 Allandale,
St Albans, AL3 4NG
01727 761878
mfrearson@ntlworld.com

Committee Member

John Cadisch
01727 862843
john.cadisch@ntlworld.com

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@
stalbens.gov.uk

Water Leaks (Affinity):
0800 376 5325