



## NEXT OPEN MEETING

**Thursday 20th February 2020, 7.30pm**

**Redbourn Village Hall, AL3 7LW**

There will be plenty of opportunity to discuss all the latest news on the River Ver before our guest speaker is given the floor.

### **Tracks and Signs of Mammals: Have I Got Poos for You?**

Speaker: Graham White, RSPB Head of Reserves Ecology



Come and enjoy Graham's entertaining talk with a serious purpose. Scat, spraint and dung are really useful in the identification of mammals not only along the River Ver, where they are generally shy and retiring, but around the world too. Here's your chance to brush up on your identification skills!

Who dung that? If we didn't know better, this shot might have been taken on the dry plains of the Ver Valley last summer!

### SAVE THE DATES

#### Next Open Meetings:

**Tuesday 16th June 2020**

St Stephen Parish Centre,  
Bricket Wood AL2 3PJ

Speaker: Steve Brooks Natural  
History Museum Entomologist

**Chalk stream invertebrates and  
Riverfly Low Flow Protocol**

**Thursday 22nd October 2020**

St Michaels, St Albans

Speaker and venue details 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. We welcome donations towards the cost of refreshments, hall hire etc. Suggested £2 per person.*

### LATEST NEWS

## A river with water in it!

It's good to report that there is a healthy flow in many sections of the River Ver again. All the stretches that dried up in September have flow once more, however, the 12km

from Redbourn to Kensworth isn't flowing as we go to press. Here are some cheery images of our chalk stream this winter and how we'd like to see it more often. The *Chairman's Report* (p2) touches on our continued campaigning for more water, *Riverfly*

*Monitoring* (p3) reveals if the Ver's invertebrates are showing signs of recovery and *Groundwater & River Flows* (p5) gives the technical details of how wet it's been.

The Ver at Gorhambury and Redbournbury, December and January 2020



# Wet and dry

It's pleasing to report that after 4 months of above average rainfall the Ver is looking much more like a chalk stream in many areas. Now is not the time to get complacent though. It's mid-January and the river again rises behind the Chequers, just south of Redbourn. That still leaves 12km with no flow between Redbourn and Kensworth as the photo near the splendidly named, Porridge Pot attests.

There's just a chance that the springs higher up the valley will fire before Easter.

## Affinity & EA Respond

It's important that lessons are learnt from last summer's disastrous dry river and there's progress. Nationally the EA are reviewing Drought Management Plans and we recently met with Sam

Lumb, Environment Agency (EA) Area Director for Herts and North London, not least to encourage a look at what might be done differently on the Ver.

Affinity Water are working on solutions, in addition to their Water Resources Management Plan, that could bring more water to the St Albans area within a few years and provide relief for the Ver and local groundwater abstraction. We are expecting an imminent announcement, more news when we have it.

Photos: A dry Ver at Porridge Pot; Flow in the Park again; (top) Bim Afolami MP, Daisy Cooper MP



## MPs Support

Thanks to Bim Afolami MP (Hitchin & Harpenden) for dropping in on the dry Ver to meet with us and the EA in the autumn. Thanks also to Daisy Cooper MP (St Albans) for mentioning the plight of the Ver in her maiden speech in Parliament. The team working to restore the Ver is growing stronger all the time!

## Verulamium Park

Late news arriving as we go to press...the EA led project in the Park through to Sopwell to deliver lake improvements and return the river to a more natural state is picking up pace again. £300,000 has been pledged to have detailed designs drawn up during 2020 with public consultations on the plans to follow thereafter.

There's another EA consultation underway Challenges and Choices. It explores how we can work together to manage our water. It'll help form the next 5-year River Basin Management Plans – in our case the Colne Catchment. We'll provide some tips on the VVS website on how to respond. Closes 24/04/20. <https://consult.environment-agency.gov.uk/environment-and-business/challenges-and-choices>



## OBITUARY

by JANE GARDINER

# John Bell

The Ver Valley Society has been much saddened by the news of the sudden death of our good friend John Bell, just before the New Year. He had a long and generous association with the Society. He was a Bailiff for a number of years, on the Committee briefly and recently was out regularly with the Action Group which he helped to found. It was certainly unexpected news as he was wielding

a pole-saw in December behind the Chequers and was his usual genial self enjoying a pre-Christmas drink with us all afterwards.

In addition to many years working for St Stephen Parish Council, he was involved with CMS and other local conservation groups. He will be greatly missed by the VVS and the wider community in general.

Our sincere condolences go to Valerie, Richard, Stephen and other family members.



John out Balsam Bashing on the Ver last August

# In times of drought and flood 2019

Until June and July the Riverfly samples, although slightly low, were not out of the ordinary. Then the lack of water in the aquifer affected the upper reaches of the river directly in July, with low flows and more pond invertebrates than classic chalk stream river flies. For example, at Dolittle (by the A5183 bridge just south of Redbourn) there was reduced flow with no olives (a small mayfly) and reduced cased caddis from July and the samples have below the trigger set by the Environment Agency (an indication of a problem, such as pollution or drought).

The widespread drying of the river in early September naturally made kick sampling impossible in many places and when the river did return invertebrate counts were below the trigger in 8 of the 20 sites we monitor.

Photo: Olive; A promising sample; Bob resuming Riverfly sampling. Photos: Paul Foster, Jacqui Banfield-Taylor



## One thousand shrimps

Not only were springs drying up affecting the upper river but as all water levels fell, the river slowed and the lower river's invertebrates were struggling too. However, there are already signs of a recovery as the water has returned. For example, the samples taken at Riverside Way near the confluence with the Colne where the trigger level is set at a score of 9, the score has been steadily rising; from a low of 8 in October, it was 9 in November, 10 in December and 11 in January 2020 with 51 mayfly, over 100 olives and more than 1,000 shrimps in the 3 minute sample.

In contrast to the drought of summer, Peter White was spectacularly unable



to sample because of the depth and flooding at the confluence in December!

## Vacancies

Finally, we have two vacant monitoring sites: the top end of Riverside Way and the Frogmore Road bridge, which I would love to fill in 2020. Training is provided and monitoring kits are usually available. If you would like to participate in this 'Citizen Science Scheme' please contact me: [sdfrearsen@virginmedia.com](mailto:sdfrearsen@virginmedia.com).



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 usually indicates contamination of the water and the EA are informed. The VVS monitors 19 sites on the Ver.

## MEMBERSHIP

by PETER HILL

# Welcome

**A warm welcome to the 29 new members who have joined since the last newsletter:**

Stephen Potter, Paul Ridgeway, Wendy Sturdy, Josu de la Fuente, Angela Ewer, Joanne Martin, Sara Crofts, Caroline Coombs, Rhona MacDonald, Gillian Winkworth, Katherine Reeve, David Bunting, David Camm, Anne Kuehne, Nigel Pate, Bill Free, Lee Wood, Sheila Laidlow, Christopher Tilley, Andy Norman, Richard & Jacky Parfitt, Anthony Harris, Roger Fisher-Payne, Rhiannon Daniels,

Emma Williams, Sue Rowe, Max Hebington, Richard & Amanda Derrick and Debra Childs.

Thanks for joining the Society. We hope that you will enjoy the events, participate freely and maybe join the monthly working group that helps improve the Ver and its environment.

# Bailiffs need boots again

The substantial rain in the last quarter of last year meant that many Bailiffs were cheered by having some reasonable flows to measure, at least where some of the vegetation growth had died back, and some silt has been washed away by strong flows exposing clean gravels. In fact in December, after heavy downpours, one Bailiff was able to report considerable, if transitory, flow at Kensworth Lynch, the source of the Ver. There is still no sustained flow in the Ver through Redbourn itself until near the bypass although the River Red is flowing well on occasion.

The bridge replacement behind the Chequers pub has needed the Ver to be diverted into 2 pipes from which water was pouring in early January;

this work is due for completion by 1st February. Some of the water meadows like those above Shafford have been flooded. I have reported the poor state of the Redbournbury ford bridges several times and have hopes that repairs here will be done early in the new year.

## Fantastic fungi

Over the winter there is so less wildlife about. There are always some squirrels, rabbits and the occasional fox and muntjac seen, and there have been some reported signs of badgers in the valley and the numerous molehills show that moles are very prevalent. Only a few brown trout and bullheads have been reported recently.



However there have been plenty of bird sightings; gadwall, cormorants, shovellers, teal and a little grebe have joined the more usual waterfowl. Other usual sightings include little egrets, herons, red kites and buzzards, wrens, goldfinches, skylarks, meadow pipits, the various tits, parakeets and the occasional green woodpecker, goldcrest, stonechat and green sandpiper.

Most berries are now over but spindle was prolific this autumn and ivy berries still provide some sustenance for the birds. Many fungi have also done well in the autumn/early winter.



Photos: (top) Giant Puffball on Gorhambury; (left) The new bridge behind The Chequers; Autumn fungi; Spindle in abundance



## LIST OF BAILIFFS

Below is the list of the team and their stretches. Please say hello if you see them when you are out and alert them if you notice any issues.

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*	via janegardiner@madasafish.com
4. New Barnes Mill to Sopwell Mill	Giles Harrison	gpharrison13@gmail.com
5. Sopwell Mill to Holywell Hill	Catherine and Derrick Davies*	via janegardiner@madasafish.com
6. Holywell Hill to Bluehouse Hill	Vivien Gates	via janegardiner@madasafish.com
7. Bluehouse Hill to Bow Bridge	Roger Hall	via janegardiner@madasafish.com
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.

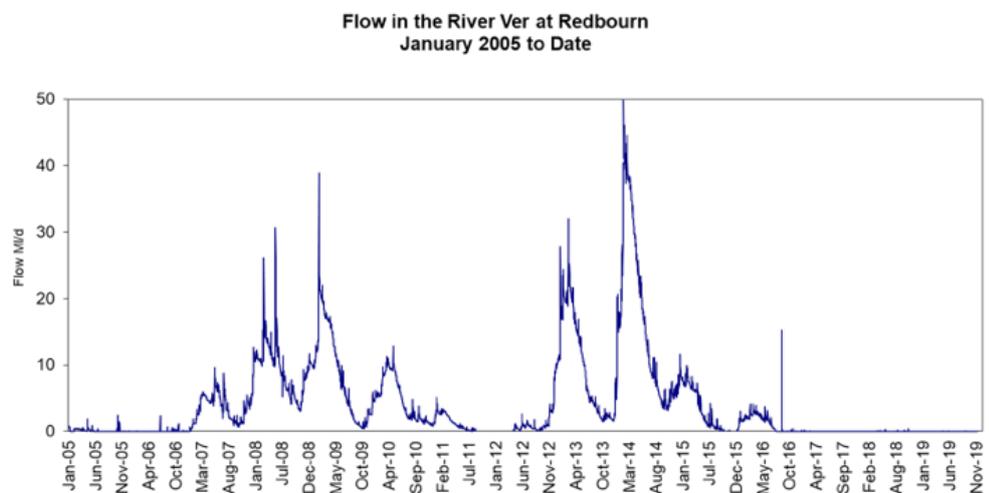
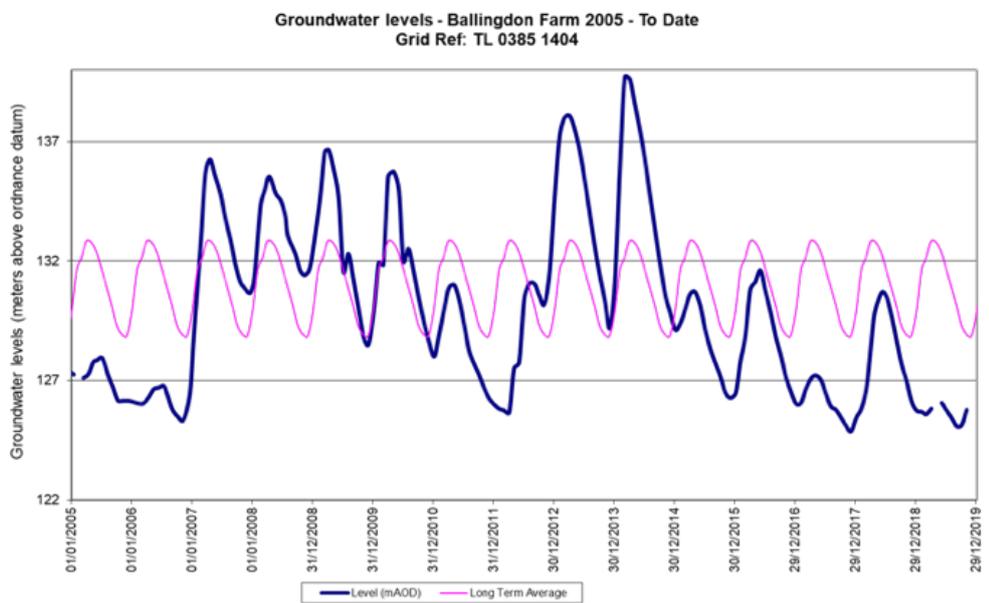
# The Ver improving?

The substantial rainfall in the last 3 months of 2019 has meant the aquifer is steadily improving although it is still over 3m below average and we need plenty more rain this winter for the improvement to continue. The year as a whole had very slightly above average rainfall. The outlook for January so far seems to be less wet so flows may continue to fall back and the flooding in water meadows diminish.

Flooded meadows, Redbournbury; Clean gravel; No flow at Redbourn High Street



Months 2019/20	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Rothamstead)
		<b>2018 Annual total 683.3 [-49.7]</b>
<b>October</b>	125.13 [130.93]	109.6 [+27.92]
<b>November</b>	125.77 [130.91]	91.0 [+14.37]
<b>December</b>	125.70 [130.56]	111.6 [+42.08]
<b>January 2020</b>	127.95 [131.36]	Not yet available



We are grateful to the Environment Agency and Affinity Water for supplying groundwater and river flow charts.

Our thanks to Veolia Environmental Services for printing and distributing our newsletter.

# 2020 Programme

There's a full programme of events scheduled through 2020, all associated with chalk streams and the unique habitat they offer. Here are a few highlights from the coming months.



Exposed chalk at Kensworth Quarry © Haydon Bailey

## Walk on the Chalk Sunday 8th March

with Haydon Bailey (Geological Adviser to the Chiltern Society and Chairman of the Herts Geological Society) will lead us on a pleasant Walk on the Chalk on the edge of the Chilterns including a visit to the perimeter of Kensworth Quarry at the top of the Ver valley.

We are expecting to see the underlying geology and how this affects water flow through the chalk down the Ver valley. Haydon will also seek to prove that not all chalk is the same. Full details on our website. To join the walk please email haydon.bailey@btconnect.com or call him on 07885 596692.

## Trees of the Ver Valley April with Kate Bretherton

Details of this walk to be announced shortly.

## Sustainable St Albans Festival 23rd & 24th May

The Society will be participating in SustFest20 with a River Monsters family day of kick sampling in Verulamium Park. This will be followed by a market stall in St Peter's Street on the Sunday to explain the Ver's plight to a wider audience.

For the latest details of all events see [www.riverver.co.uk/events-list](http://www.riverver.co.uk/events-list)

# Hedges Farm Visit

The Affinity Water led project to breathe life back in to the Ver between Sopwell and Park Street is now complete. Back in October, when the work was in progress, Affinity invited a small group from the Society to visit and see how the plan was unfolding.

Already the stock fencing to prevent the cattle from 'poaching' the banks was going in, together with the establishment of controlled drinking stations and crossing points. With the prospect of the cattle being excluded from the river, a narrower channel was being re-established with riffles, pools and a clean gravel bed.

Throughout the stretch it was plain to see significant tree work had been carried out to allow more light into the river. This promises to encourage chalk stream plants in the water and more marginal plants to thrive. Several backwater ponds had already been deepened to bring additional biodiversity to the water meadows.

Naturally there's a fair amount of disturbance to the river in the short term but as Sue Frearson reports this is where our Riverfly monitoring proves so useful. "Bruce Banfield-Taylor has been monitoring this stretch of river since 2014 so his data provides a base line to compare subsequent invertebrate samples against, after the improvements. The Riverfly trigger score for this site is 4 which Bruce's kick sample failed to beat in September and October but rose above in November due to an unusually large sample



of over 1,000 water shrimp. In December the score dropped back to 4 so it will be interesting to see how this develops in 2020."

We'll be keeping a more general eye on the area too – and will report back on how this stretch of the Ver looks as time goes by.

Photos, from above: The guilty party; Melissa Ahmet explains a new crossing point; In-stream work and fencing; A deeper marginal pond



# Kingfishers in Verulamium Park

It's pretty easy to spot them sitting above the river or flashing down the stream. A top tip is to look out for the photographers with long lenses trying to get the perfect shot! Apparently, there have been up to four individuals. Males have all black beaks, female birds have an orange lower mandible and juveniles have duller orange feet than adults. If you have never had a good view of a kingfisher apart from a blue flash as they fly away it is well worth a visit to Verulamium Park this winter. There are at least three kingfishers seen most days so if you walk along the causeway between the Ver and the Lake from St Michaels to the Fighting Cocks. Look closely at the bushes on the far bank you are almost bound to see one perched waiting to dive in and catch a stickleback. They are so accustomed to people walking nearby that you can just stand and watch them.



@iand.49



Black-throated Thrush – a rare bird in Britain

## Winter thrushes

With the hard winter weather still awaited, our winter visitors from mainland Europe seem to be hanging on which is not all that surprising when mid winter temperatures of up to 19C have been recorded in Norway.

Usually birds like redwings and fieldfares are abundant in the countryside and even visiting gardens. But I have seen very few so far this winter. Lapwing and golden plover flocks have been few and only for a day or two. Over wintering stonechats, a few snipe and teal have been seen on the Redbournbury water meadows

A black-throated thrush took up residence by the Hullabazoo children's farm at Whipsnade. This bird is a vagrant in the UK as it is normally found in Siberia but heads south to winter in the Middle East. It probably had trouble with its SatNav and landed in the UK. There were lots of cotoneaster berries around this area of the zoo and it spent each day feeding whilst it was being admired by birders from all over the UK. It is a spectacular bird much the same size as our blackbird but with a grey chest and jet black throat patch. I had never seen one anywhere before and it was a stunning bird. Legend has it that in days gone by the Ver used to flow all the way from Whipsnade, indeed today that area remains on the northern most edge of the Ver catchment. So the black-throated thrush just counts as a Ver Valley bird!

Photos: Alison Debenham, Giles Harrison, John Fisher and Ian Duffield

In **September** the Action Group returned to **Frogmore** where we tackled the Permissive Footpath which was overgrown and blocked "again" by a fallen tree. It was hard and prickly work but the volunteers persevered and the path was reopened. This footpath is special as it enables walkers to follow the course of the Ver looking down on the river where it runs through the valley.

### Pollarding willows

**Riverside Way** was the venue for the **October** session. Starting at the bottom by the bridge we warmed up on the trees that had been pollarded last year – it was amazing to see the amount of growth in just one year. We moved up the river and tackled some of the trees that had not been pollarded for five years, they were more challenging as the branches are so much thicker to cut with a hand saw. The thinnings were moved across the river to be stored for use as fill material for the deflectors.

### Largest turnout ever?

The 16th of **November** was a memorable day. The group met by the bridge on **Cottonmill Lane** where we were joined by volunteers from the Allotment Society and members of the public. In all 33 volunteers! Many more than we had anticipated. But we soon organized 3 groups working beside and in the river opening up the canopy and thinning the saplings. We also ran a litter pick so that everyone was fully employed. Many hands certainly let the light into the river.



Our efforts were appreciated – on the Sunday morning a little egret was seen fishing below the bridge in an area that was previously inaccessible.

The final session for 2019 was in **December** at the Chequers in Redbourn. We worked from the back of the pub to the confluence again opening the canopy and removing blockage from the channel. Afterwards we joined the committee and the bailiffs for a well-earned celebratory drink.



### SPRING PROGRAMME 2020

#### Sat 15th February, 10.00–12.00

*Frogmore Gravel Pits.* Details to be confirmed but we are aware of in-river obstructions to the flow including plastic bottles, footballs and natural debris that need clearing. It's a good time to trim bankside trees too.

#### Sat 21st March, 10.00-12.00

*Riverside Way, Bricket Wood tbc.* We are awaiting the conclusion of tree works and a meeting on repairing the in-stream flow deflectors to identify the priority work and meeting point for this session.

#### Sat 18th April, 10.00-12.00

*Venue and activities to be confirmed.*

See [www.riverver.co.uk](http://www.riverver.co.uk) for up to date details or contact Richard Wallis (see below).

### YOUR COMMITTEE

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#### 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@  
stalbens.gov.uk

Water Leaks (Affinity):  
0800 376 5325