



AGM

Notice of 44th Annual General Meeting

Tuesday 23rd February 2021 at 7pm

Online Zoom meeting (*the meeting at Redbourn Village hall is cancelled*).

St Michael's normally hosts our AGM
©Alison Debenham

Having postponed the AGM in October the most practical way to proceed is to hold an online meeting to review the past year and fulfil the constitutional obligations of the Society. The evening will feature reports from the Chairman and Officers with plenty of opportunity for questions and answers. There will be no guest speaker spot but Steve Brooks who was due to speak has been invited to deliver *The Ecology and Biology of Riverflies* at a future date.

If you wish to attend the AGM please use this link to ensure admission: <http://ow.ly/J3vb50D3gAu>

As per the Society's constitution "at each Annual General Meeting the officers and Executive Committee shall retire but may be eligible for re-election." The Secretary and Bailiff Co-ordinator are retiring from the Committee. All other Committee members are willing to stand for a further year.

Any nominations for Chairman or Committee are invited.

These should reach the Secretary, John Fisher, by Tuesday 16th February. Proposer and seconders will be required.

LATEST NEWS

Porridge Pot flows!

Many of the top sections of the Ver have had their first significant flow for many years, certainly the strongest since 2001 and some say the best for 50 years. It's not really surprising as following a wet summer, October was the wettest month of the year with 198mm of rain. Indeed, according to Rothamsted Research, our local weather station, 2020 was the second wettest year since records began in 1853. So for Ver aficionados, there's never been a better time to see the Ver flowing across Porridge Pot meadow.

Photo: Porridge Pot ©Peter Hill



SAVE THE DATES

Next Open Meetings:

Tuesday 15th June 2021

tbc

St Stephen Parish Centre, Bricket Wood AL2 3PJ or online. Guest speaker tbc

Thursday 21st October 2021

AGM

St Michael's Parish Centre or online. Guest speaker tbc

Tuesday 22nd February 2022

Redbourn Open Meeting 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.

The best of times

All of a sudden it feels like there's never been a better time to be chairman! The Ver is flowing from Flamstead to the confluence and there is also the prospect of iconic water voles returning to flourish in our precious chalk stream.

What's more, although nothing has yet changed to reduce the odds of a repeat of 2019's dry river bed in St Albans, Affinity Water are exploring the reduction/cessation of abstraction upstream of St Albans. Members will be the first to know if there is any definite news. It would be thrilling to announce the Ver's escape from the boom and bust flow cycle – compounded by abstraction – that features regular fish and aquatic insect kills, with rarely enough time between events for the environment to recover.

New skills

Just, because the river is currently full and overflowing, your committee and I will not be resting and will continue to press for change. In the meantime, I'd like to thank all of them for their support and hard work through a difficult 12 months. Double-guessing lockdown restrictions; sympathising



with self-isolating volunteers; searching for a delicate balance between flooded fields, allotments and a sparkling river; learning Zoom techniques and finding the mute button – these are all new skills that have had to be learnt.

Looking ahead to other issues in 2021, there's no time to relax! The Revitalising the Ver Project in Verulamium Park should be releasing plans in April for key stakeholders (including the VVS) to consider. Full public consultation is expected to be November. Road runoff remains a critical water quality issue, especially on the Red and through St Albans. We'll be redoubling our

efforts to accelerate this with the Environment Agency. Then there's the Government's national chalk streams initiative, the All Party Parliamentary Group (Chalk Streams), the Sewage Task Force and Water Resources South East (WRSE) to contend with. What was that I was saying about being a good time to be chairman?

Old friends and new members

And finally, I'd like to say a special goodbye to George Ashby, long time Society member who sadly died just before Christmas. A fellow Ver Valley birdwatcher, George tutored me in the gentle art of 'pishing' and finessed my appreciation of red wine. Especially noteworthy was his habit of gifting a one year VVS subscription to friends and encouraging them to renew the year after, a great example to all!



Top: Beautiful chalk stream but no fish
Left: Wet woodland habitat bounces back
©Alison Debenham
Road runoff, the next big challenge?

EVENTS PROGRAMME

The uncertainties generated by Covid-19 make planning an Events Programme a tricky business but we do intend to run outdoor activities as soon as conditions allow. One of the first might well be a couple of evening walks in late May to catch the spectacular mayfly returning to the river at Drop Lane to lay their eggs on a still, sunny evening. Several Zoom presentations are also being organised. Check the website for details.

Photos ©Melanie Woods & ©Peter White





Gradual improvement

Where and when possible members of the VVS Riverfly Team have continued monitoring along the Ver. After heavy rain, although the river on a few occasions looked deep and healthy, the numbers of caddis fly larvae, olive mayflies and freshwater shrimp in the Redbournbury Mill area fell below the EA trigger for further investigation. We await to hear from the EA to discover if they have found anything of concern, but fortunately our recent samples are more healthy.



Training Day

A number of our monitoring sites have fallen vacant as members moved away or no longer felt that they could continue. Fortunately, we have recruited four more people, who were trained at a special Zoom session in early December by Allen Beechey, Chiltern Chalk Streams Project Officer and Simon Stebbings (local Riverfly hub) and the next day, a very useful practical session at Riverside Way, Bricket Wood where Martin and I also learnt a lot. Our thanks to Allen and Simon for giving up their time to help us. Now we are waiting for the kit to arrive to get our newly qualified members up and running.



However, under the latest Covid Lockdown, it does not look as though we will be able to carry out Riverfly sampling, perhaps not until Easter.

Top, left to right: Practical training; Bullhead and stone loach; A wistful Allen Beechey
Left: Sampling net. Photos: ©Keith Reynolds

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

300 up!

As the new year starts we celebrate reaching the milestone of 300 paying members, a record number for the Society. Actually we have many more members as each of those memberships covers a household, so maybe

we should be celebrating 500 members or even more! A warm welcome to those who have joined since the last newsletter:

Faith Murphy, Sandra Gray, Gill Perry, Kim Scrivener, Holly Firmin, Moragh Ormiston, Laura Matthews, Ethan Mcgrory, Patrick Gill, Sally Scott, Claire Marles, John Smith, Lucy Bachmann, Margaret Charlston,

James Millers, Brent Sharples, Steve Pullinger, Alistair Poxon, Stephen Greenwood, Peter Carruthers, Frances Grant, Chay Hedger, Clive Burns, Andy Kimpton, Sally Clark, Edward Persse, Steve Williams and, Tony and Barbara Usher. I hope you will enjoy the society's events and it won't be too long before gatherings will be possible. Until then may you have many opportunities to enjoy our river.

High Flow in Autumn

Many of our very committed Bailiffs have managed to continue sending in reports through the autumn despite all the challenges due to Covid19 restrictions. Measuring the high flows has also been difficult in some stretches because, despite the heavy rainfall, the relatively warm weather resulted in much vegetation growth blocking the channel and causing water to flood adjacent land, especially in the southern parts of the valley.

During warmer days in October and early November some dragonflies (darters and hawkers) were seen and even a peacock butterfly. Some plants like water forget-me-not, ragwort, Michaelmas daisies and buttercups were flowering well into November to join the abundance of hedgerow berries which have now almost gone but cow parsley and marsh marigold were flowering in December!

Flooding near Westminster Lodge ©Alison Debenham; (right) Ver Fish ©Ernie Leahy



Reports of animals include muntjac, plenty of squirrels, lots of molehills, and among the fish, brown trout and bullheads.

Birds of a feather

A large variety of birds has been reported and considerable interest among birders has been caused by a hen harrier joining the usual birds of prey of the valley – kestrels, sparrowhawks, buzzards and red kites. The usual winter visitors of fieldfares, redwings, and siskins have been reported. All the common smaller birds have been seen including flocks of goldfinches,

some linnets, meadow pipits, a few stonechats, parakeets, some chiffchaffs (over-wintering?) and a Cetti's warbler heard. Of particular interest were a firecrest as well as a goldcrest, several grey wagtails and up to three kingfishers in Verulamium Park. The usual waterfowl have been joined by cormorants and gadwall.

End of an era

This will be my last Bailiffs' report as I will be stepping down as Co-ordinator at the February AGM after over 21 years. I am very glad to welcome Melanie Woods, who it is proposed takes over.



Cow Parsley and Marsh Marigold in December

LIST OF BAILIFFS

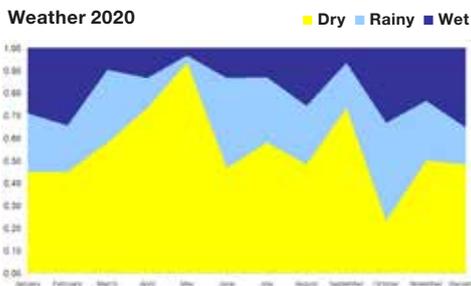
Below is the list of the team and their stretches. Please say hello if you see them when you are out and alert them if you notice any issues.

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 & Peter Hill	john.fisher@btconnect.com
12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)	Sue Rowe	members@riverver.co.uk suer1953@yahoo.co.uk

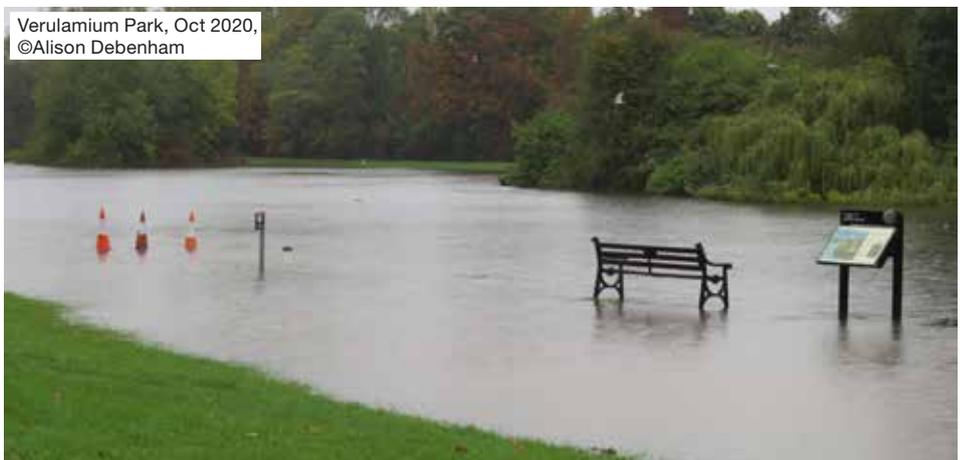
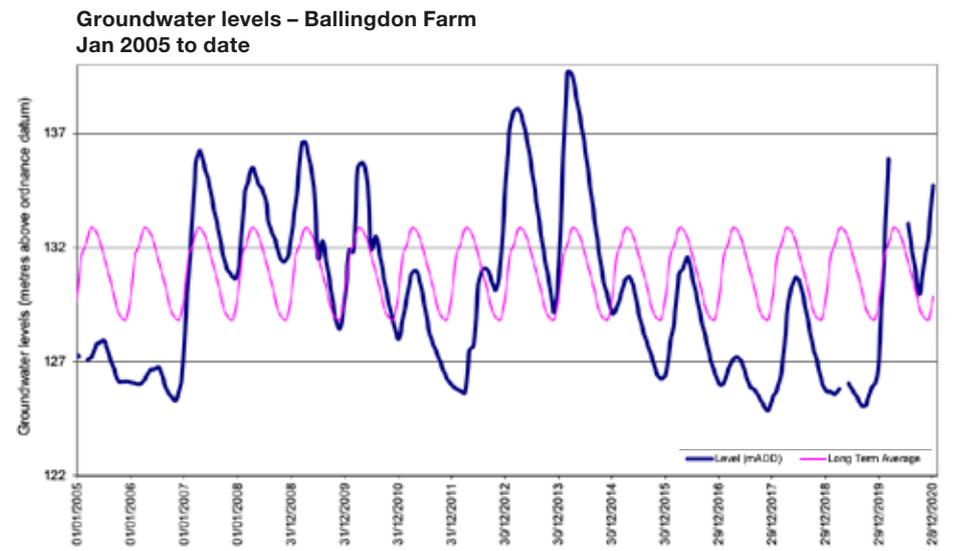
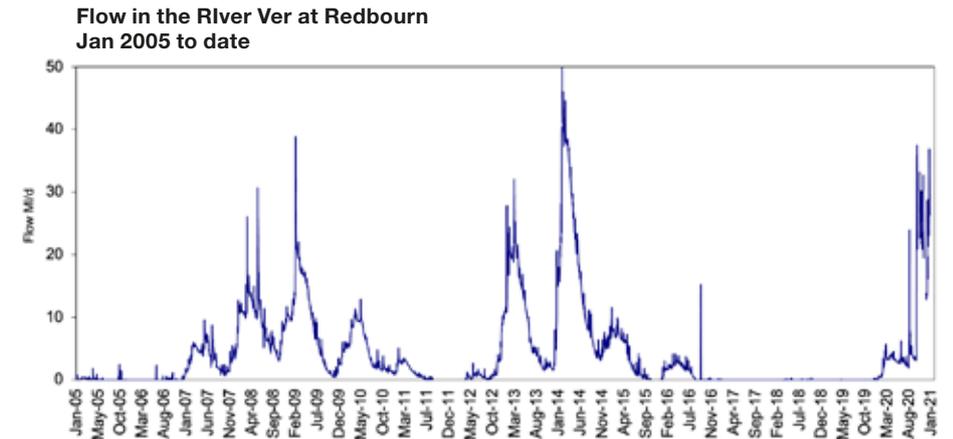
* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

Ver looking good

The year 2020 as a whole was the second wettest since records began in 1853 and was also sunniest and warmest since records began in the late 1880s. You can see that pattern in my subjective diagram of the rainfall this year. The head of the river is currently near Markyate but the channel is so overgrown it's difficult to be sure. Groundwater continued to improve from the start of October when the heavens opened the aquifer quickly responded. The second half of November had less rainfall but December also had a great deal of rain so the aquifer is now very healthy and it bodes well for the Ver to flow through the coming summer.



Months 2020	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Rothamstead)
October 2020	129.98 [130.93]	198.4 [+116.72]
November 2020	131.355 [130.91]	57.4 [-19.3]
December 2020	132.509 [130.56]	98.4 [+28.88]
Year 2020		1032.8 [299.82]
January 2021	134.763 [131.36]	Not yet available



Thanks to the Environment Agency and Affinity Water for supplying groundwater and river flow charts.

Voles on the Ver

Thanks to a number of local riparian owners (all members of the Society!), Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust and the Debs Foundation – a charitable trust that supports animal welfare and wildlife charities – a project is underway to reintroduce water voles to the Ver Valley. The prospect of improved flows and the fact that the river from Redbournbury to St Albans is fairly resilient – it even remained wet when the river downstream through St Albans ran dry in 2019 – encouraged us to support the scheme wholeheartedly.

Dense bankside vegetation

Around 150 water voles will be reintroduced to this stretch of the Ver in late spring as part of an ambitious HMWT programme to expand the territory of the animals in Hertfordshire. The habitat here provides the perfect conditions for water voles – dense bankside vegetation and clean water – but sadly water voles were last officially recorded here in 1987. John Fisher remembers regularly hearing the familiar ‘plop’ as they dropped into the water while out on family walks along the Ver in the 1970s. Tim Hill of HMWT points out that



Water vole
©Russell Savory

nationally water voles have suffered a population decrease of over 90% since the 1950s, especially due to habitat loss and predation by non-native American mink.

Ways to help

Society members can help with the introduction in many ways. Most notable will be the practical installation of 75 pens over a couple of days, once the voles arrive from the breeding centre in Devon in late May

or June. Supplementary feeding and pen removal are other likely tasks. There will be a Water Vole Survey training session in August to teach a team of members the signs that indicate the presence of voles so that signs of a successful reintroduction can be regularly monitored. Keep an eye on the website for opportunities to help.



EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Ver on film

In the last couple of years we have been hosting visits to the Ver for local school children and explaining

why chalk streams are special, what creatures live in the river and why water saving is important. This year that hasn't been possible but Society member Peter White kindly used his Riverfly and camera skills to put

together a short film to illustrate the delights of the Ver. We'll be using it as part of future presentations and you might like to enjoy it too.

You can watch the film here:

<https://vimeo.com/501035856>





Hen Harrier quartering the marshy ground at Redbournbury ©Phil Luckhurst

Hen harrier highlight

It is always exciting to me when we get a new bird along the Ver Valley and after the cattle egret in August it was wonderful when a hen harrier spent about ten days in the area between Shafford and the Veolia Plant in early December. Hen harriers are regular winter visitors in the north of the County near Royston, but this seems to be the first along the Ver Valley in 40 years. What next – maybe a glossy ibis or a purple heron in 2021?

Quartering by the Ver

The bird, initially identified as a ‘ringtail’ – females and immatures look similar at distance and their white rump and barred tail give rise to this nickname – was soon seen well enough to determine it was an adult female hen

harrier with a streaked brown breast on a white ground. The bird was seen quartering the reed beds along the Ver or perched in the willows by many birders as it was publicised on the Herts Bird Club website. Hen harriers are widely and illegally persecuted on the northern heather moorlands as they can be a threat to young grouse. Only a handful of pairs breed in England now so most hen harriers we get in the winter in southern England are from Europe. The best sightings I have had have always been either on the moors of Orkney or the Hebrides where you can see them hunting over the wide-open moors where they breed unhindered. The males, which are light grey and smaller than the females are the most spectacular flyers, but this female was amazing to watch in flight as it elegantly quartered the land looking for small bird or mammal prey.

THE BIG BIRD BOX BUILD

One for you, one for us!

Help the birds of the Ver Valley. The Society has been putting up nest boxes for the birds along the River Ver for many years (thanks mostly to John Fisher!). Many of the smaller boxes for tits and robins are in desperate need of replacement. Through February, we’re asking Society members and friends if they will help us assemble some new ones. What’s more, if you put one together, you are welcome to have another one to keep for just £10. That way we’ll recover some of our costs and get the job done!

Aspiring local joinery company, yoke-cnc.uk, have designed a simple

flatpack nest box in 15mm marine ply that only requires a few screws and tacks to assemble. Select from blue tit (25mm hole), great tit (28mm hole) and robin (open front) and the small birds of the Ver Valley will soon have plenty of boxes to choose from. Once we have the boxes back, we’ll start putting them up ready for the spring nesting season.

To take part check out full details on the website riverver.co.uk, message us on social media or email johnp@riverver.co.uk



On the bank again!

Well, the good news is that the Action Group was able to meet twice. In October at Frogmore for work in the channel and on the permissive footpath, albeit with our numbers limited to 2 teams of six. The same constraints applied in December when we ran a session at Sopwell

Nunnery Green where the trees overhanging the river below the school and by the kingfisher bank were opened up and the viewpoint at the end of the boardwalk was restored so that you can again see the river. But the biggest change was just north of the walkway where the tree that was slowly falling over was removed and you can now walk the pathway without ducking.

We were also able to run a small mid-week group in December, thanks to the help of Cliff, Chris, Lee, & Peter. The group were focused on clearing a narrow channel in the millstream south of the Veolia bridge ahead of the planned the water vole introduction.

Photos ©Lee Wood



WALK MAPS

New maps on the way

It's been 10 years since the Walk Maps were last updated and printed copies have been used up. During 2020 Isabel Crozier, in particular, has been working hard on updating the text and Melanie Woods among others has been taking new photos to give the maps a proper revamp. Thanks mainly to a budget contribution from the Chiltern Chalk Streams Project, work will begin



shortly to update all the artworks and produce a preliminary set of pdfs.



At that point your input would be greatly appreciated. We'll be asking for members and friends to walk the Walks to check that the new instructions work and to point out any spots where better signage would be useful to visitors. Once final adjustments are made, new maps will be posted online and we'll be bidding for funds to print new ones too. Details of how you can help will be posted on the website and our social media channels in the next couple of months.

YOUR COMMITTEE

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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