



Ver Valley Society NEWSLETTER

N^o 146
JUNE 2021



Society receives The Queens Award for Voluntary Service

Great news! The Ver Valley Society has been honoured with The Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, the highest award a voluntary group can receive in the UK.

It's a tremendous accolade and recognises just how passionately the Society works to improve and promote the River Ver, one of only 225 chalk streams in the world – for the benefit of the local community and beyond.

The members, who donate thousands of hours of time between them every year, couldn't be more deserving. Well done to our Bailiffs on the river, the Riverfly monitors, the many Action Group participants, walk leaders, event organisers, the Barn Owl team, bench refurbishers, walk maps team, bird box builders, newsletter contributors, everyone campaigning, and of course the Committee!

NEXT OPEN MEETING: TUESDAY 15th JUNE 2021

Zoom webinar – Tuesday 15th June 2021, 7.30pm
Speaker: Steve Brooks Natural History Museum Entomologist and Riverfly Partnership Chairman
The Ecology and Biology of Riverflies

Book your place to hear more about the invertebrates that live in the UK's rivers. We are delighted to welcome Steve Brooks to present a talk designed to be of general interest, so there will be something for all members as well as our Riverfly monitors. There's plenty of time for Q&A, so please bring your questions. Questions for the VVS committee will be taken at the end of the evening. See website for details or use this link to book: <http://ow.ly/LXyd50EPpom>

Steve Brooks (r) leading a Riverfly MasterClass on the Ver in 2019



SAVE THE DATES

Thursday 21st October 2021
AGM Online
Guest speaker tbc

Tuesday 22nd February 2022
Redbourn Village Hall,
AL3 7LW
Guest 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. We welcome donations towards the cost of refreshments, hall hire etc. Suggested £2 per person.

We're honoured!

What a privilege it is to be sitting in the Chairman's seat when the news breaks that the Society has received its best award ever – The Queen's Award for Voluntary Service. It will be an especially proud moment when Robert Voss CBE CStJ, Lord-Lieutenant of Hertfordshire presents an award crystal and certificate to the Society later this summer. It's fair to say we'll be receiving it not just be on behalf of the current committee and volunteers but for all those who have been giving freely of their time to revive the fortunes for the River Ver since 1976. And there's still much work to do!

In the meantime, a special thank you to St Albans Councillor, Frances Leonard who nominated us, Kate Swindells (Grow Community Sopwell) and Priti Hathiramani (Nature Walk Organiser & Photographer) who wrote letters of support, and to the many local organisations and individuals who were interviewed to assess our credentials.

Water quantity

The high groundwater and above average flow on the Ver and many other chalk streams appears to have given the Environment Agency and water companies the opportunity to pedal more slowly on the topic of abstraction reduction. Nonetheless, as we go to press, Affinity has announced that "...plans are underway to reduce extraction at sites on the Rivers Ver, Mimram, Upper Lea and Misbourne by 2024." Whether this refers to the existing 9 million litres a day reduction in 2024 that's long been agreed for St Albans (which will only benefit



Looking out for pollution



Sewerage System Failing

the very bottom of the Ver) or something incremental and more encouraging for the upper river, remains to be seen. I look forward to confirming it's the latter in the next newsletter!

Water quality

We've been pushing for action on the large quantity of polluting runoff that enters the Ver from storm drains. The toxic load of plastic from tyres, heavy metals and silt are even more damaging at times of low flow of course. At last, the Environment Agency has arranged a meeting of the relevant parties to discuss Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) that might intercept and reduce the impact of road runoff, particularly around the Verulamium Park section.

Sewage Fungus; Water Crowfoot an uplifting sight



Not only did our citizen science water testing help find sewage fungus in the Ver near Flamstead but we understand that Markyate residents have experienced sewage issues this winter. Down in Redbourn along Hemel Hempstead Road, the sewer is emptied regularly by tanker apparently as the pipe capacity can't cope. On occasions the foul water has been exiting the drains straight into the River Red. What's more, there's talk that the pipe from Redbourn to St Albans and beyond is struggling to carry the volume down to the treatment plant. Next stop for the Ver Valley Society is Thames Water...

In the meantime, despite its challenges, the Ver is looking beautiful – please get out and enjoy it while you can!

EVENTS PROGRAMME

There are some exciting events coming up but please check the website for latest dates and details. In July Dr Wendy Morrison is leading a Walk Through Time – in the footsteps of our Iron Age ancestors. August is the perfect time for another of our popular Bat Walks in Verulamium Park with Josh Kalms. Further ahead there are Water Vole Survey sessions and a Tree Walk with Kate Bretherton to look forward to in the autumn.

www.riverver.co.uk/events-list-2021

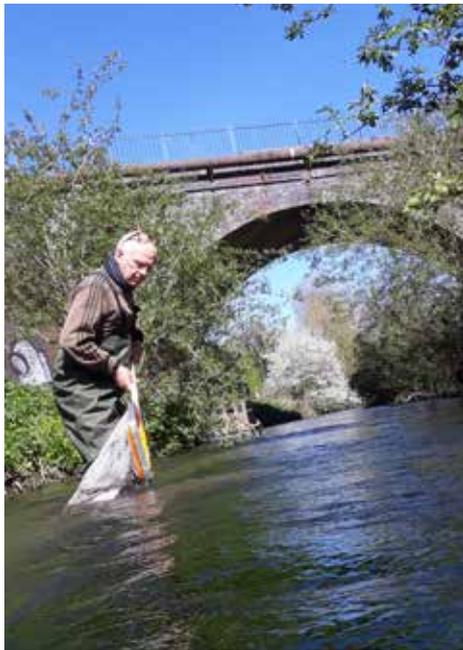


Iron Age ancestors © Chilterns Conservation Board/Phil Kenning; Bats in the Park © Alison Debenham



Challenging conditions

Our latest group of Riverfly volunteers were trained recently by Allen Beechey (Chiltern Chalk Streams Partnership) and Simon Stebbings (Riverfly Hub Co-ordinator) in two sessions. This means that we will have very good coverage of the Ver, from the Chequers in Redbourn down to the confluence in Bricket Wood. However, the river has not played ball, being exceptionally deep, rapid and flooded in places making access difficult and requiring waders to enable sampling. Hopefully we will be able to obtain results from all or most monitoring points in May.



Trigger point

The EA has given us trigger points for most sites. Falling below these may indicate a pollution problem and requires further sampling. So far this year the results that have been obtained show a healthy river, recovering slowly from the drought of 2019. I collate all the results sent into me before the end of the month, and then pass them on to the EA. So thank you team for the results I have had.

I am delighted that we have attracted keen new recruits, but it does mean that we have filled all the current sampling sites on the river. However, if you are interested in joining us please contact me so we can demonstrate Riverfly sampling and add you on a waiting list.

Left: Keith in the Ver at Sopwell for the first time
 Top: An Olive in the Sopwell sample.
 Above right: Large Cased Caddis from the River Red
 Right: An adult Blackfly which emerged from 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 usually indicates contamination of the water and the EA are informed. The VVS monitors 19 sites on the Ver.

MEMBERSHIP

by PETER HILL

Rolling Membership!

A very warm welcome to those who have joined since the last newsletter: Jane Ridge, Nick Dayton, Ian Devlin, Penny Williams, Malcolm Two, Henry Holland-Hibbert, Ian Pontefract, Thea Mein, Ambrose Killen, Mark Tutty, James Waller, Charles Mutter, Valerie Rodrigues, Anthony Gray

and Jo Brown. I hope you will enjoy being part of the society as it seeks to protect and promote our rare chalk stream.

At the last committee meeting it was agreed that in future membership will be for a year from the time a new member joins the society. It was felt this is fairer than the current September to September membership year.

Volunteers Welcome

Many hands make light work! If you have a few hours to spare each month we are looking for members who might take on: Bird Box Monitor; Pollution Officer; Bench Monitor; Web Master; VVS Walks Manager; Event's Coordinator. No committee meetings but just keeping an eye on things! Contact me at members@riverver.co.uk if you would like to help.

Heavy Flows

It's a great relief to start my first bailiff report with news that after heavy flows and Covid restrictions, Bailiff reporting has resumed.

My first task is to say a big 'thank you' to Catherine and Derrick Davies who have stepped down from their Bailiff and Riverfly Monitor roles after a number of years helping the Society. Welcome to Lee Wood and Joe Randall who have joined us to bailiff Section 5 and our newest section on the River Red, the only significant tributary of the Ver. River flow peaked in January, dropping across Feb to April as the springs slowed down and the standing water drained away. River levels remain above normal though, with Porridge Pot looking especially delightful.

The joys of spring

We're in the throes of birdsong with Cetti's Warblers, first seen in Britain in 1972, with singing males on four

Porridge Pot, Feb 2021 © John Fisher



sections of the Ver. There were Redwings and Fieldfares aplenty until the end of April. The latter known in Saxon as 'Fledware', for 'Traveller of the Fields'. Swallows and Martins are zipping across fields and hedgerows now. Wagtails are wading along the muddy river edges.

Across the fields Brown Hares have been seen bounding. Natural pest-control, Moles and Badgers have been aerating the earth. In the marshy mid-valley, a Great Crested Newt wandered, the first reported in many years. Darting Sticklebacks and dappled Brown Trout have been spotted enjoying the flow. All this and more noted by the bailiffs.



Sleeping Wood Anemones

Woodland wonders

Springtime splashes of ancient woodland indicators, remnants of the 2.5% of ancient woodland left in the whole of Britain, have made an appearance, the magical Wood Anemone bowing its head at sundown, pastel yellow Primrose, Speedwell or Gypsy's Weed, Wild Garlic and Arum (aka Cuckoo Pint with an 'i' as in mint) among others. I cannot leave out the nation's favourite, the English Bluebell!

With the wildflowers come the welcome sight of butterflies with Speckled Wood and Orange Tip on the wing.



Redwing in the Hedgerow © Melanie Woods



A warty Great Crested Newt



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 mellorwoods@gmail.com
4. New Barnes Mill to Sopwell Mill	Giles Harrison	gpharrison13@gmail.com
5. Sopwell Mill to Holywell Hill	Lee Wood	ember.designs@yahoo.co.uk
6. Holywell Hill to Bluehouse Hill	Vivien Gates	via mellorwoods@gmail.com
7. Bluehouse Hill to Bow Bridge	Roger Hall	via mellorwoods@gmail.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*	bm@hoggend.com
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
13. River Red	Joe Randall	via mellorwoods@gmail.com
		joe.w.randall@hotmail.co.uk

* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

Wet turns dry

As everyone will be aware, and can see from the table to the right, April with just 1.6 millimetres of rain was exceptionally dry. This followed two other dry spring months. Measured flows have been falling back but the groundwater continued to rise a little until the start of May when it began to fall. This reflects the 2-3 month time lag in winter rainfall penetrating to the aquifer during the very dry spring. With normal amounts of rain this summer the Ver should continue to be in a good state for the rest of this year.

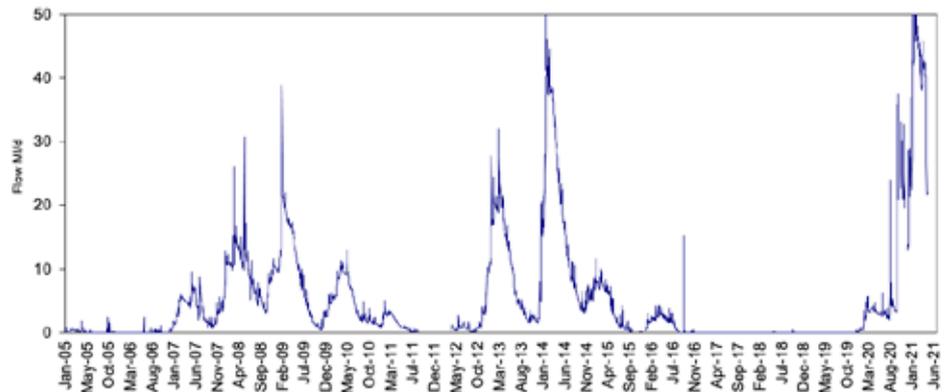


From top: Wet feet at the stepping stones in April; Across the path on Gorhambury 06.05.21; Good flow means good Ranunculus. Right: Verulamium Park still wet in May

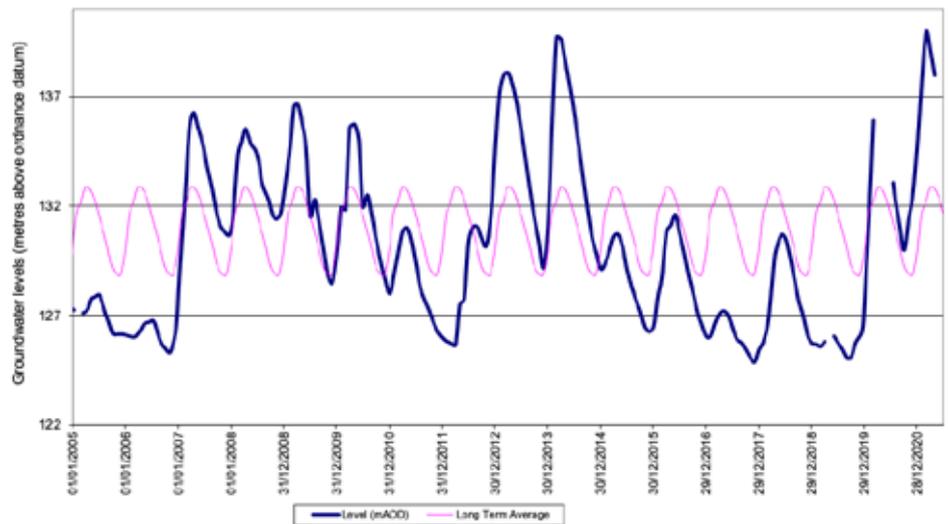
Thanks to the Environment Agency and Affinity Water for supplying groundwater and river flow charts.

Months 2021	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Rothamstead)
January	134.763 [131.36]	113.6 [+39.48]
February	138.985 [132.38]	45.8 [-11.15]
March	139.902 [132.79]	27.6 [-19.47]
April	139.997 [133.6]	1.6 [-52.40]
May	137.966 [134.1]	Not yet available

Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn Jan 2005 to date



Groundwater levels – Ballingdon Farm Jan 2005 to date



Verulamium Park

The planning has been going on in earnest to solve the issues of water quality in the Lake and improve the chalk stream characteristics of the River Ver through Verulamium Park. At last Outline Designs have been completed and these should be going to the riparian owners and other key stakeholders for comment about the time you are reading this. The comments will then be taken into account before wider public consultation towards the end of 2021.

It's a challenging project with many constraints. There's no extra water entering the Park – remember we have plenty of dry years that cause problems as well as this winter's flooding – but we have done our best to use our local knowledge to positively influence the designs. Will the local residents and herons agree?



Heron Moon
© Alison Debenham

Below: Sewage fungus;
A yellow River Red



Bow Bridge to Redbournbury

With surprising speed Affinity Water and their consultants Jacobs announced in February that they would be 'revitalising' this much-loved stretch of river and wetland. Of course nothing can proceed without stakeholder approval and rounds of consultation are underway with a final preferred option to go before stakeholders in July. The Society and local members have been considering the possibilities in earnest.

West Ford repairs would be popular



REPORTING POLLUTION

What you can do

There have been numerous reports of pollution in the Ver in the past few months – all sorts from uncharacteristic bubbles on the surface, to the river running yellow with silt and the discovery of sewage fungus.

Step 1. Act fast. Don't assume others have reported it!

Step 2. Take photographs and film of what you can see. Especially note any wildlife in distress, such as dead or dying fish.

Step 3. Call the Environment Agency Incident Line 0800 80 70 60

Step 4. Give details of what you saw and ask for the Reference Number

Step 5. Send a brief description and the reference number to the Ver Valley Society (Baillif Co-ordinator, Melanie Woods mellorwoods@gmail.com), so that the local bailiff can keep an eye on it.

Step 6. Call 03708 506506 ten days later for an update. The EA are unlikely to call you.

INVASIVE SPECIES

We can exterminate

The Society's application to Affinity Water to secure funds to tackle Invasive Non Native Species (INNS) in the Ver catchment in the next couple of years was successful. That means if you live near the river and have a problem with Giant Hogweed (note the hairy stem) or Japanese Knotweed (large shovel-



shaped leaves), we have funds to provide licenced treatment. We'll put up details and identification tips on the website. In the meantime, Bailiffs please keep an eye out for both species. Affinity has also allocated 20 volunteer hours to join our efforts in eradicating Himalayan Balsam, thank you!

For more information contact richard_wallis@btconnect.com



From left: Little Owl; Another Barn Owl box goes up; Little Owl nest recorded by our licenced team © John Fisher below: Little Ringed Plover © Fokin Oleg/Shutterstock

Owls on the up

After a poor year in 2020 with only one successful brood it is looking good for this year with definite active pairs at two of our boxes. There is also a little owl sitting on five eggs.

The recent dry weather has been helpful, and it will be critical that conditions are favourable when the young hatch in late May.

We have extended the project to include three new boxes in Flamstead and these boxes have been funded by the landowners.

We put our first two boxes up in 2004 and had our first brood in 2006. Since then, our boxes have hosted well over 100 young barn owls along with 8 little owls, 4 kestrels and a few stock doves.

Nesting Waders

The winter rainfall has led to the best flows in the Ver for about 20 years. In the winter of 2000/01, we had floods and huge pools appeared along the valley and it was a really great year for breeding waders, particularly around the pools just north of Luton Lane. Four pairs of little ringed plovers and four pairs of lapwings each raised broods. Little ringed plovers favour a stony patch of ground to nest, and we had this in 2001 as the flood water washed away the topsoil. Conditions aren't quite the same this year as there's more vegetation but let's hope for a repeat of 2001 with breeding waders and visits from

ringed plovers, greenshank, green sandpipers, common sandpiper, snipe, dunlin and redshanks. Other special birds were a blue headed yellow wagtail and white wagtail which are the continental sub species of our usual wagtails. It was a great year and a few of us spent many a happy summer evening leaning on the farm gate watching this wildlife spectacular.



NATURE NOTES

Water vole update

There's been a slight hold up in the supply chain! The latest news is that the voles will be arriving in August – a little later than originally scheduled. That'll give the 6 mink traps longer to work – they have been in since March with nothing detected so far.



Many thanks to all the members and friends who took part in our Big Bird Box Build in the spring. The result was a big win all round – the Society gained 30 boxes, those who took part kept 30 boxes all at a net cost to the Society of around £30. Half the boxes have been sited along the river and the remaining ones will be put up during Action Group sessions throughout the year.

Willow wands

With the easing of the Covid Regulations we've now held three sessions in 2021. The first in March was to undertake minor repairs to the spiling (interwoven willow fencing) that protects the bank immediately below the Redbournbury Mill wheel and to extend the height of the spiling to clear the new high water level. Willow wands were harvested from nearby trees and the team learnt how to weave them on the job. The results look good!

Digger surprise

In April we had two teams lined up to clear reeds adjacent to the Irish Weir – we arrived to discover that “a man with a digger” had got there first! You don't give up on a sunny day in the river, so we modified the plot by extending our activities working from the Irish weir down to the Veolia Bridge and beyond. It was heavy muddy work but by mid-day there was a definite change in the level and flow of water below the bridge. Meanwhile the footpath adjacent to



Veolia was cut back by Clifford and Chris to make it easier for walkers.

Finally, in May, two teams of six tackled overhanging trees that were debris traps in the river and created useful brush piles for invertebrates and reptiles on the bank.



Mill work © Giles Harrison



Summer 2021 Programme

COVID restrictions permitting

Sat 19th June, 10.00–12.00

Frogmore Gravel Pits tbc

We are aware of in-river obstructions to the flow including plastic bottles, footballs and natural debris that need clearing.

Sat 17th July, 10.00-12.00

Moor Mill, Bricket Wood tbc

Balsam bashing working in the grounds and south towards Riverside Way. Restorative drinks on the Chairman afterwards.

Sat 21st August tbc, 10.00-12.00

Sycamore Drive, Park Street AL2 2PJ tbc

Balsam bashing session removing this invasive species from the top of its range on the Ver.

See www.riverver.co.uk for latest details and if you'd like come along contact Richard Wallis (see below).



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