



OPEN MEETING – Tuesday 22nd February 2022 at 7pm



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Eels of History



A light-hearted look at the medieval eel economy of St Albans and beyond.

Guest speaker: **John Wyatt Greenlee** aka The Surprised Eel Historian.

John is a medieval historian with a PhD in Medieval Studies from Cornell University. He'll be joining us live from the USA to talk about one of his passions – the cultural history of eels in England from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries.

You'll discover there is a strong historic link between eels, the River Ver and St Albans but no more spoilers, you'll just have to come along for the full fascinating history.

Please book your place: <http://ow.ly/Kz5e50Hz5WA>
This event is FREE to all.

After John's talk we'll have short reports on the state of the Ver and up-to-date news on any other significant developments.

LATEST NEWS

Fork Donation

A year or so ago Dorothy Grummitt's family were in touch to say that Dorothy had kindly left a small sum to the Society to spend as we wish. At last, we've been able to put the money to good use by investing in two drag forks which are really useful for opening a clear channel in weedy areas and removing floating litter and debris. Here's Peter White with one of them on its first outing at Frogmore. The long handle is very useful to reach the tricky spots especially where the river is too silty or deep to wade.



SAVE THE DATES

Next Open Meetings:

Tuesday 14th June 2022 at St Stephen Parish Centre, Bricket Wood AL2 3PJ or via Zoom, details tbc

Thursday 20th October 2022 – AGM. St Michael's Parish Centre AL3 4SL or via Zoom, details tbc

The water voles have been seen through the winter, occasionally requiring release from the mink traps!



2021 was a wonderful year for the Society with water voles and the Queen's Award among the highlights. There's no time to rest on our laurels however, the Ver still needs our help.

In mid-January, as I write, the river is retreating down the Ver Valley and the forecast is set fair (it's good to put that in writing as it usually encourages a monsoon). A telling patch of mud is all that you'll find near Flamstead with just the marooned outflow from Markyate sewage works upstream of that. Could we be headed for a low flow summer? It's certainly possible if there's no significant rainfall in the next few months.

Drought concerns

If we do experience a dry summer or two, the truth is nothing has changed to make a substantial difference – the drought triggers haven't been amended (in Affinity Water's Drought Management Plan or in the EA's approach) so there will be no 'hosepipe' ban or abstraction regime change at the hint of low flows. High flows have merely been diverting attention from the issue. Likewise, as the level of the aquifer falls the incidence of groundwater ingress into the sewage system falls, allowing the sewage spills at Markyate and the squeeze on the pipe network to be too easily forgotten for another seven years.

Put flow first

Without water our chalk stream is nothing, as it has been too often over the last 40 years and more. Unless the Government get behind the Chalk Stream Restoration Strategy (CSRS) and the Water Resources South East (WRSE) initiatives and sanctions enough alternative supply to reduce Affinity's reliance on groundwater, the heavily abstracted Ver's future is tied to the current boom and bust cycle.



Chalk Stream luminaries visit the Ver ©Elaine King

Lobbying for action

The committee will make sure we are lobbying in the right places. Reminders to support the CSRS and comment on the WRSE plans will be sent to members at the appropriate time. We've been keeping the Ver in the spotlight with a walk on the river with the main players, including Affinity Water's new CEO Stuart Ledger; Charles Walker MP, Chair of the Chalkstreams APPG; and Charles Rangeley-Wilson (CSRS).

In the meantime, let's continue to keep the Ver to the fore through our commitment to citizen science, getting out and enjoying the view and sharing photos of the river on social media – both the good and the less favourable.



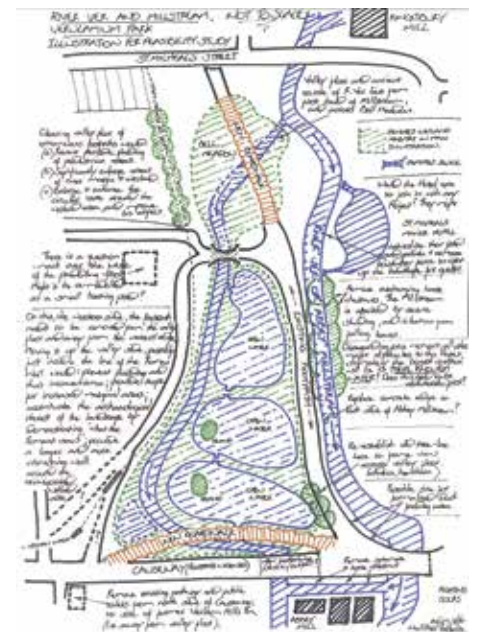
Disappearing Ver, Flamstead Jan 22 ©Sue Rowe



Chalk Stream Restoration Strategy launch

Verulamium Park

Progress continues slowly with the plans for the lake and the route of the new river channel alongside it still a movable feast. Eventually plans will go to stakeholders and thereafter the wider public, so everyone will have an opportunity to comment for sure. There's no prospect of any work on the Lake section starting before 2023. Any significant activity will be reported to members of course. We are coming up to 20 years since the Society contributed this potential plan!



VVS Plan for Verulamium in 2003



EVENTS PROGRAMME

2022 activities

We ended a difficult year a difficult year with a popular Ver Tree Walk and an enlightening Wood & Water talk from Mike Blackmore. As we

go to press the 2022 programme is being planned with riverside walks to see bats, mayfly, water voles and a Riverfly Masterclass for invertebrate enthusiasts. Keep an eye on the website for further details.

Olives up, Cased Caddis down.

VVS Riverfly Report Autumn 2021 (October – December)

Many, many thanks again to Sue Frearson, who stepped down in the autumn as our Riverfly Coordinator, for her long stint reporting our results to the Environment Agency, chasing our monitors for their results, allocating monitoring spots, organising training, responding to 'below trigger' scores and keeping everyone on their toes.

Looking back to 2021 and the autumn specifically, it was business as usual. At the bottom of the river the invertebrate counts remain healthy with good numbers of mayfly, Ephemera Danica in particular, which is promising for a spectacular display in May and June. At the top end of the catchment the silt and road runoff entering via the Red is reflected in the poor chalk stream insect counts. There were more pond/low flow species such as leeches, crane fly larvae and water beetles in evidence.



Healthy mayfly nymphs
©Peter White



Cased caddis yet to recover

Mixed samples

In the middle reaches we hope to have more results from the spots that dried out in 2019 and report back on the recovery of invertebrates or otherwise. Early indications are that while olives and freshwater shrimps are back in good numbers, the cased caddis populations have yet to return to previous levels. There are pockets of blue-winged olives and caseless caddis but there have been no reports of the elusive stonefly that's found locally on our near neighbour, the River Chess. Likewise, no flat-bodied mayfly (Heptageniidae), have been

recorded. Their wedge-shaped profile and flat legs showing just how well suited they are to surviving in faster flowing rivers without being washed away to become the food for waiting brown trout.



Heptageniid on the Derbyshire Dove



Silt on the Red



Too many leeches

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

Good going!

A warm welcome to our new members who joined since the last newsletter: Stephen Brooks, Clare Curtis, Sheridan Edwards, Elaine Rainsford, Catherine Wilmers, Ian Rosewell, Judith Kenyon, Pat Cowell, Alan Gardiner, Tim Hill, Laura Hinde, Mark Evans, Kurt Lawlor, Kelly Field, Philip

Neal, Paul Geary, Colin Humphrey, Peter Swingler, Stephen Bateson and Shirley Clark. I hope you will enjoy being an active part of the society in protecting, improving and promoting our rare chalk stream.

Membership is now at 340, standing the Society in good stead for the coming year.



Happy New Year and thank you to bailiffs who have managed their checks through challenging times.

Healthy flow continues, officially recorded as 145% of the long-term average in December making a rare year of high flows. However, contiguous flow now begins near Luton Lane, 5 miles short of the official source – showing just how quickly fortunes can change.

Water clarity has generally been good but standing, murky water with an oily sheen has been reported near Markyate where phosphate readings continue to be high. Other incidents included a bright green coloured Ver near the Alban Way after heavy rain.

Watercress invasion

As the river has retreated down the catchment, Fool's Watercress and reeds have grown extensively obscuring the river east of Redbourn but bailiffs found a few open spots to carry out their measurements. There



has been some clearance by riparian owners but the valley needs diverse habitat, mixed vegetation, natural die off and the occasional fallen tree left safely in situ for the most wildlife-friendly habitat.

Fungi are flourishing and meadows remaining boggy from Redbourn south. Will we witness a spring of vibrant flowers as we did a year ago?



Bottom left: No Flow Luton Lane ©John Fisher. Left: Bailiff Bob ©Melanie Woods. Below: Cress at Porridge Pot. Bottom: Fungi by the Ver.



Wildlife highlights

Chub and Brown Trout have been spotted and a Roach recorded upstream of River Hill in early autumn shows again how life can return when rivers flow. Water Voles were glimpsed near Gorhambury, elsewhere signs of Badger activity and with Moles working on turning the earth on the riverside, the Winter's scene in *The Wind in the Willows* springs to mind. Muntjac Deer, Brown Hare and Brown Rat have all made an appearance in reports.

Grey Wagtails often forage aquatic morsels in woody shallows but this autumn some have been seen on ploughed fields, not out of character when juicy ants might be on offer. Reedmace, which supports aquatic and semi-aquatic life, flowered out of season. It's a very hardy plant and there is evidence of starch grains being ground by humans 30,000 years ago – 20,000 years before England's chalk streams began to flow!

Wishing the Ver a clear, constant flow for wildlife and people through 2022 and beyond.

Haul of litter ©Jo Pritchard



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*	bmay@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.

Groundwater dipping

In November the aquifer dipped below the long-term average for the first time this year, probably due to the hot dry summer months and now in early January is well down at 3 metres below average. However, the above average rainfall in October may help with its recovery although it is not yet apparent. November was much drier, sunnier and colder than usual and December had only very slightly above average rainfall.

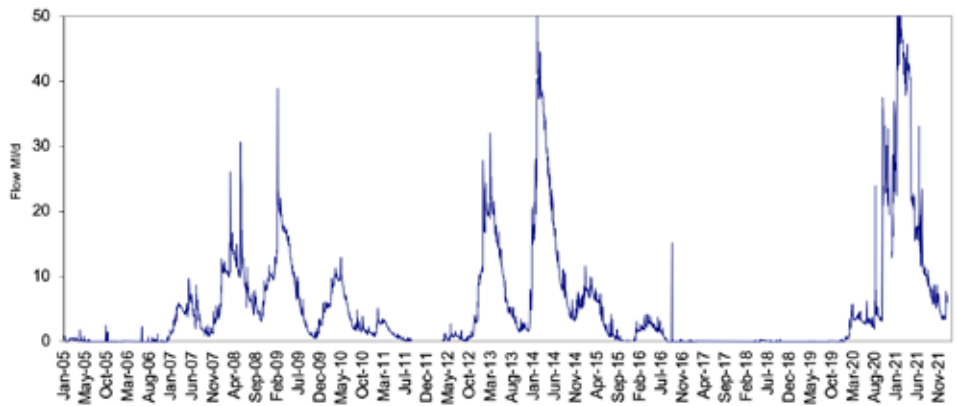
The year as a whole had 92% average rainfall, sunshine was down but temperatures slightly above average.

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

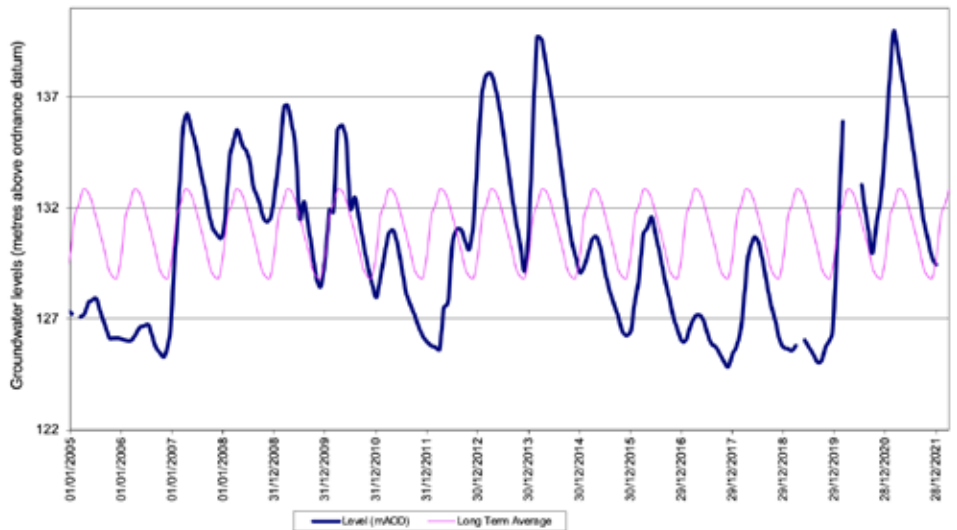


Months 2021/22	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Rothamstead)
September 2021	132.55 [130.87]	54.1 [-3.60]
October 2021	131.37 [130.93]	104.8 [+23.7]
November 2021	130.66 [130.91]	19.2 [-62.2]
December 2021	129.84 [130.56]	76.2 [+0.58]
January 2022	129.46 [132.54]	Not yet available

Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn Jan 2005 to date



Groundwater levels – Ballingdon Farm Jan 2005 to date



From top left: Wet meadows at Redbournbury Dec 21. Good flow at St Michael's Dec 21©Vivien Gates. Flooded Confluence Dec 21 ©Giles Harrison. Left: Wet woodland at Sopwell Jan 22 ©Melanie Woods.



Veteran Meadow Brown, Gatekeeper, Comma, Small Skipper, Banded Demoiselle. All images ©Alison Debenham

Butterflies Galore

The Society has been supporting the Wilder St Albans initiative. I volunteered (or should that be I was volunteered!) to monitor the small wildflower meadow near Sopwell Mill which the Society had helped to prepare a couple of years ago. With a Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust's butterfly identification course as training, I was ready to go.

At first sight it might seem a relatively unpromising and slightly scruffy area which has been allowed to go wild, but this riverside wildflower meadow is a wonderful habitat that is filled with a wide variety of plant, bird and insect life. It's still early days for the meadow but already a host of butterflies have been recorded. Do go out and have a look for yourself this summer!

It would be a real benefit to wildlife diversity if we had more areas like this. In addition to St Albans City &

District Council's efforts to set aside more areas like this, why not do a little bit yourself. If you are fortunate enough to have a lawn, the very least you can do is try 'No Mow May'. Pollinating insects find May one of the toughest months to find nectar and pollen; simply delaying your cut by a few weeks can be really beneficial. If you are really brave, hold off until August and see what wild flowers lurk in your garden and enjoy the insects they attract.



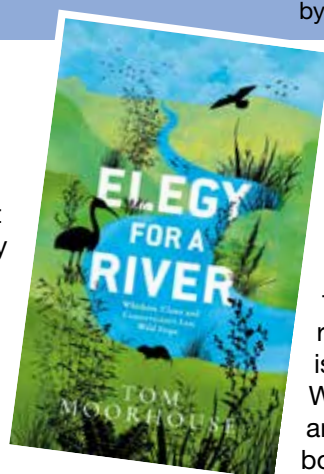
WATER VOLES

by JOE RANDALL

Read All About Them

Back in September, water voles were re-introduced into the River Ver, an occasion covered in our last newsletter and featured prominently on the BBC. If you were inspired by this momentous event, I can recommend the book 'Elegy for a River' by Tom Moorhouse.

Dr. Tom Moorhouse is a conservation research scientist based at Oxford University and this thoroughly entertaining book tells of his own trials and tribulations in re-introducing water voles to our rivers. As well as water voles, the book covers related topics such as invasive species and the environmental



challenges facing our local rivers. The book is available from Waterstones and all good booksellers. Incidentally,

Tom has also published a number of children's books based on the creatures from 'Wind in the Willows', which may be just the perfect introduction for younger VVS members.

WALK MAPS

The full set of walks and the River Ver trail have been revamped for everyone to enjoy, especially after a sterling effort from Alison Evans and Isabel Crozier to walk the routes and check the text, and Melanie Woods and guest photographers for their images.

Map downloads are FREE from our website riverver.co.uk/walks and if you'd like a printed set, they will be available at future Open Meetings or via the Membership Secretary.

Our thanks go to the Chilterns Conservation Board and the Chiltern Chalk Streams Project for a match-funded contribution to design costs and Veolia UK at Redbournbury for using their community fund to produce the 450 printed copies.





Winter Waders

Although lapwings, snipe and golden plovers have been seen along the valley again this winter, as far as I know green sandpipers are yet to put in an appearance. They are similar in size to snipe but with a shorter bill and distinctive black and white plumage, especially when seen in flight with the diagnostic white rump in bright winter sunshine. If they do turn up along the Ver they will find an undisturbed stretch like that stretch on the east of Redbourn you can view from the Nickey Line or from the Ver path behind Ver Road. A few years back a pair were seen here every day for about two months. They are winter visitors to the UK but can return as early as July as the females fly off early, leaving the raising of the young to the males. I was surprised to see some on the branches of trees when I went to Poland in April a few years back. They nest in tree holes which came as a shock to me at the time. Not what you expect for a wader.

Shrimp Diet

Their diet is freshwater shrimps, and it is reckoned they eat an astonishing 8,000 a day. There are millions of shrimps in chalk streams which is why the Ver, and other chalk streams are great over wintering sites for them. The best place to see them is the HMWT reserve at Lemsford which is a former watercress bed fed by springs alongside the Lea. Barry Trevis has been the warden for at least 40 years

and back in the day he was a work colleague of mine and knows more about these birds than anyone. He has colour ringed them for years and latterly has used satellite trackers. He tells me that most of the Lemsford birds breed in Northern Norway and he tracks some of them on their outward and return journeys. He told me once that the bird I was watching was on a factory roof in Amsterdam the day before and another one of the birds had returned for its tenth year. Most amazing is one of the colour ringed birds that was photographed by a birder in Santander and had been seen by Barry at Lemsford just 26 hours before. So that is about 1000 Km in a day!

If you see a green sandpiper with colour rings let me or Barry know as it aids his research. Ver birds could well be from Lemsford. He also colour rings little egrets which are a bit easier to record.



Ducks

The pools on the marshes between Redbournbury and Shafford are playing host to big numbers of ducks this winter. As usual teal are the predominant species with lesser numbers of mallard. Wigeon are quite rare along the Ver Valley, but a few have been seen, including this one with the Canada Geese. A welcome sight but not so sure about the Canada Geese as the flock has built up to over a hundred on some days. Another unusual sighting has been a goldeneye on Verulamium Lake. Although many winter in Hertfordshire they are usually seen at waters like Amwell, Tring and Stockers. This may be a first in recent years for the lake and maybe the Ver Valley. A few teal have also visited the Lake briefly.

Above, left: Green Sandpiper, left: Wigeon ©Steven Brown
Above right: Goldeneye, Preening Teal ©Alison Debenham
Below: Colour-ringed Little Egret ©John Fisher



Autumn 2021 has been notable because there were no Covid or other disruptions to our sessions.

September saw a return visit to the Gorhambury Estate for some sensitive tree pruning to lower the water level and reduce flooding on the footpath.

October took us to home ground at Frogmore where we cleared encroaching vegetation from the Permissive Footpath. Flooding earlier in the year had limited access to the path and the vegetation had run riot. The rain started just before 10 but this did not stop the volunteers from clearing the footpath which is now easily passable if a little muddy.

November was again at Frogmore where we had 3 teams working. One tackled the trees just above the ford to open the canopy and provide a sight line up the river from the bridge. The work was well appreciated by

passing walkers. The second team were at the bottom of the site where they stabilised a large branch that had fallen. If all goes to plan the new growth will grow vertically and the branch will remain attached to the tree. The third team worked on the west bank clearing dead wood and opening the canopy. This was on a steep slope using ropes to assist access – a first for the team.

In December the team returned to Redbourn and worked on a new site at the entrance to the village. This area was overgrown and the river was totally obscured. After much hard work and judicious pruning of the ivy, brash and trees the area was ready for some new spring growth. Just in time, the new manager had arrived at the Chequers and we were able to enjoy a socially distanced festive drink.

Photos ©Lee Wood



Spring 2021 Programme

COVID restrictions permitting

Sat 19th February, 10.00–12.00
Sopwell Nunnery Green Space.
Details tbc.

Sat 20th March, 10.00-12.00
Venue and tasks tbc.

Sat 16th April tbc, 10.00-12.00
Venue and tasks tbc.

See www.riverver.co.uk/current-year for latest details and if you'd like to come along please contact Richard Wallis in advance (see contact details below).



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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