



AGM: NOTICE OF 46th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING



Kate Heppell and helpers on the Chess.



At last we are back in St Michael's for the AGM!

Thursday 20th October 2022 at 7.30pm
St Michael's Parish Centre AL3 4SL

As per the Society's constitution at each AGM the Officers and Executive Committee shall retire but may be eligible for re-election.

Nominations are invited.

These should reach the Secretary, Joe Randall, by Thursday 13th October. Proposer and seconders from the membership will be required. Reports on the state of the Ver and up-to-date news will be followed by voting (members only) for the 2022/3 committee. After refreshments our guest speaker will have the floor.

Guest speaker: Professor Kate Heppell, *Queen Mary University of London/Chilterns Chalk Streams Project*
Evaluating ancient chalk streams with modern science

Come and take your seat for a fascinating insight into what sondes placed in a chalk stream can tell us about water quality. What's more, Kate will be explaining how that data can be useful to drive improvements in river ecosystem health. The Smarter Water Catchments initiative is leading the way on the River Chess. The River Ver could be next!

LATEST NEWS

Most Members Ever!

Our local community continues to demonstrate just how concerned they are for the River Ver. As we go to press the Society's membership stands at an all time high of 346. Whether it's enjoying the wildlife, wanting improvements in the flow or seeking to minimise pollution in our chalk stream, it's great to have such enthusiastic support for the river. During the summer one group of members made it quite clear that we'd like action to stop the sewage spills at Markyate Sewage Works.



SAVE THE DATES

Next Open Meetings:

Tuesday 21st February 2023 at Redbourn Village Hall, AL3 7LW, details tbc

Tuesday 20th June 2023 at St Stephen Parish Centre, Bricket Wood, AL2 3PJ, details tbc

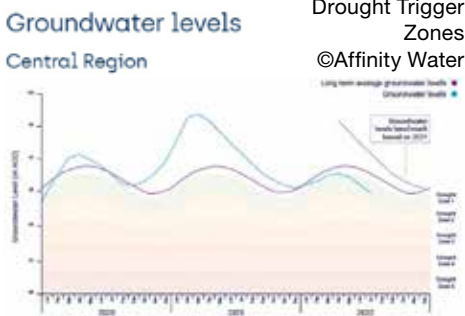
We are sad to announce that 'Podge' Fox our President died recently. Obituary p7.

It's been a difficult year for the River Ver.

The river receded quickly to just south of Redbourn – leaving over 10kms of dry river by early August. Unfortunately, this has become the norm in anything but the wettest of years. In the past the perennial head of the river was just south of Markyate, these days it's more than 4 miles further downstream.

Photos of the dry river bed soon attracted the interest of the media covering the Environment Agency's declaration of a drought. BBC London News reporter Tom Edwards made the trip to Redbourn to report on the situation and local newspapers and radio were quick to get in touch too.

It's not surprising that Ver dries up so frequently, this is one of the most heavily abstracted chalk stream catchments. The Environment Agency's Environmental Flow Indicator (EFI) identifies a deficit of 24 million litres a day.



as far as the Ver is concerned the drought triggers in Affinity Water's DMP are set too low to make any real difference. A hosepipe ban, for example, won't come into effect until after the Ver is worse than it was in 2019, at which point the river will have dried up through St Albans to Sopwell and beyond. The Plan promises plenty of environmental monitoring but precious little action.

What's more, it appears that although it's mandatory to have a DMP, there's no obligation to stick to it.

We are disappointed that Affinity Water have apparently done so little. It's a mirror of 2018 when it just took a dry winter to cause a disastrous summer for the river. It could all too easily happen again.

I've written to Affinity Water to express the Society's disappointment and ask what meaningful action they are taking to benefit the river. Sadly, no official response has yet been received. We have also made representations during the year as Affinity Water's new Drought Management Plan (2025-29) has been in development – especially on the point of the drought triggers being set in the wrong place for our river that's already short of flow.

Patience is a virtue

Getting the water back isn't going to happen quickly but, there is some prospect of Affinity Water adopting the Chalk Steams First initiative – or a variant of it – to take water from the bottom of catchments instead of the top. Additionally in our case, it might only take an innovative approach by the Environment Agency to swap the abstraction reduction planned in the city of St Albans in 2024 for a cessation of abstraction upstream to give the river the best chance. It's unlikely that the water will flow from the top of the valley but it would at least mean better flow from Redbourn south. Most tellingly, that would deliver more water under St Michael's bridge to benefit of the lake and the river through the city.

We have to be prepared to be in it for the long term and mobilise our membership and local citizens to put pressure on when the time is right.

An official drought

A drought was officially declared in Herts in August, and the Secretary of State for the Environment urged water companies to follow their Drought Management Plans (DMPs). Unfortunately, as we've discovered,



Verulamium Park

The lake section of the project is still under discussion at Project Board level, with no immediate announcement anticipated. In the meantime, the section from the lake outfall to just past Holywell Hill is being progressed with tree works to be discussed with riparian owners. Detailed channel modifications and landscaping proposals are being prepared. Work may start in 2023.



It might take three Society Chairmen to solve the Ver's woes! Andy Webb, Jane Gardiner and John Pritchard

Some good, some bad

After good invertebrate scores in the spring, with an excellent showing of Blue-winged Olives at most spots, conditions have deteriorated. The River Red and Redbournbury Mill sites have been too low to take a sample and now in September the river is running grey and brown with run off from roads and surrounding land. What's more, trigger breaches

were reported at Holywell Hill and Cottonmill Lane in August, with no countable insects found at the former location. Brown cloudy, warm water emanating from Verulamium Lake in the recent heatwave could be the cause. However, more likely is poor quality road runoff water, especially as 21mm of rain fell on 24th August after a long dry spell. The breach incident has been reported to the EA (Ref: 2095870). It remains to be seen if they investigate.

Among the positive signs were regular reports of Caseless Caddis nymphs in early summer but on the other hand there were widespread records of small Signal Crayfish. These grow into more damaging adults, undermining banks and eating precious fish eggs.



Caseless Caddis nymph



Signal Crayfish



Blue-winged Olive



The Ver, coloured by water from Verulamium Lake



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.

HISTORY

by JOHN PRITCHARD

Pre Mill surprise

A casual enquiry a few months ago from Les Oliver of Solihull led to a most interesting discovery. Investigating his family history, Les wondered if we had any information on Pre Mill, on the Gorhambury Estate, and its former millers. It transpired that he knew far more than we did, revealing that his ancestors had been millers on the site. These included John Greaves who in the late 1790s joined his uncle Joseph Greaves to help at Pre Mill and for a period lived in Pre Mill House. Twenty years and 11 children later, John returned to Warwickshire. Fascinatingly one relative, Edgar Flower, had even painted the scene in 1880s.



Pre Mill House and Mill by Edgar Flower ©Les Oliver & Family

It's interesting to see the barns and buildings alongside the mill site that there is no sign of today. The amount of water and the width of the Ver are a reminder of how mighty the river was in times past.

MEMBERSHIP

by PETER HILL

Welcome aboard!

Whilst the river level fell over the summer, our membership rose to 346. A warm welcome to: Kim Nguyen, Rosemary Jeffs, Catherine Walker, Nigel Woodhead, George Hodson, Alex Gillott, William Wolvey, Danielle Durant-Taylor, Matt Fisher, Isabel Crozier, Russell Monck, David Wormald, Pam Maisey, Mangala Patil Mead, Phil Fletcher, Ian and Angela Troughton and Vicky Robinson.



Our twelve Ver river Bailiffs have been busy along their individual sections not only recording the health of the river and its nature but also monitoring the state of paths, stiles, steps and pollution incidents – reporting them as appropriate.

Over a dry summer contiguous flow dropped below Redbourn, thankfully supported by local springs and shallow flow from the Red tributary. Water is often clear but reduced flow has caused silt and pollution particles to settle leaving only narrow, patchy gravel coated with brown algae.



Water Starwort

Stable Silt

The keystone species Water Crowfoot was less evident this year than usual, providing reduced forage opportunities and habitat for species including shrimps, snails and blackfly pollinators. Clumps of Water Starwort however stabilised silt creating sub-channels through which the river weaves and scours. Callitriche or “beautiful hair” is its Latin Genus name describing its fine underwater stems.



Purple Loosestrife



Female Beautiful Demoiselle

Tall Purple Loosestrife has been impressive along the river bank – a native plant that is preferable to see instead of the invasive Himalayan Balsam.

July brought Beautiful Demoiselles, yet to breed in Hertfordshire. Preferring slower flow and spending 2 years underwater as larvae, two males and a female were a good find in the middle reaches. In the lower

valley, one of the most genetically diverse vertebrates, Brown Trout were spotted where gravel is good and an occasional Kingfisher flashed by.

Many Bee Orchids, chalky soil lovers, appeared this year. Maybe encouraged by the high temperatures? Often flowering only once in their lifetime this natural masterpiece is also known as ‘Dumble Dor’ from old English meaning ‘Bumble Bee’.

As early Autumn rains are arriving, we all hope good flow and the nature of the river will return in 2023.



Bee Orchid ©Alison Debenham



Bailiff Sue Rowe ©Melanie Woods

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.

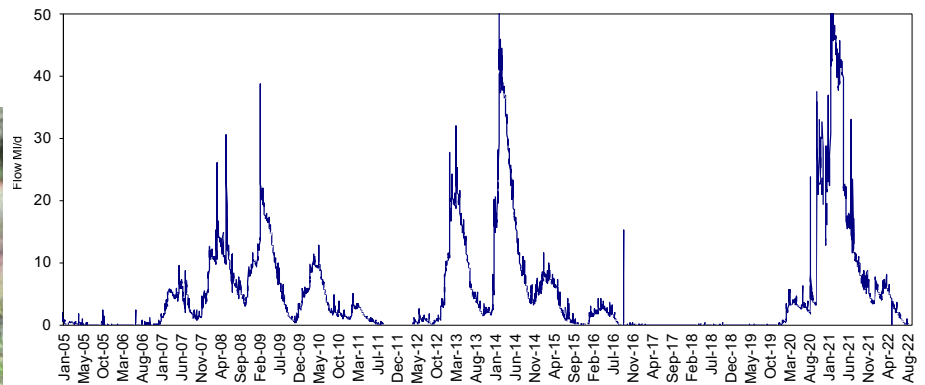
A very dry summer

Following a dry spring and with little significant summer rain, groundwater levels continued to fall slowly, remaining about 3 metres below the long-term average. Consequently, the springs on the upper river stopped flowing one by one – right down the valley to the southern edge of Redbourn. Heavy rain is falling in early September but we need an autumn of it to return the river to better health. It takes several months, of course, for the rain to soak through the chalk to reinvigorate the groundwater springs.

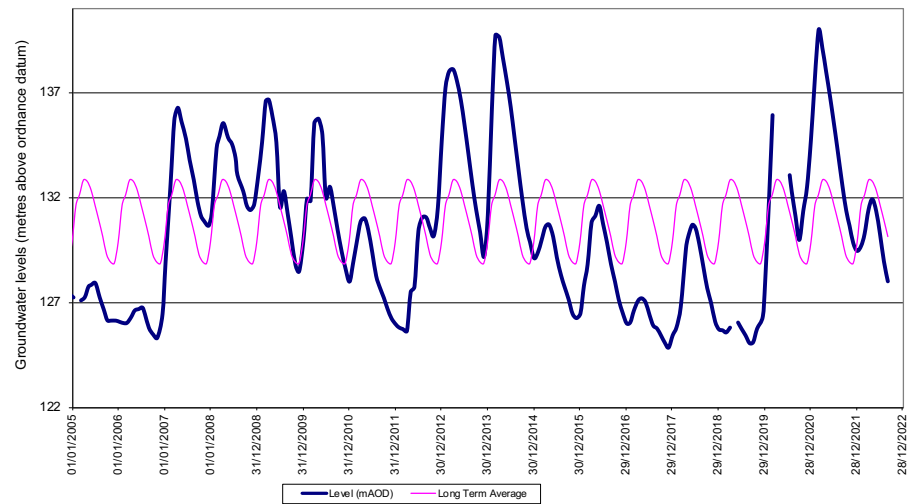


Months 2022	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Rothamstead)
June	131.36 [134.20]	43.8 [-11.0]
July	130.24 [133.23]	11.4 [-43.7]
August	128.94 [132.05]	41.4 [-30.6]
September	127.99 [130.35]	Not available yet

Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn Jan 2005 to date



Groundwater levels – Ballingdon Farm Jan 2005 to date



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

From top: Redbourn 08.22.
 Verulamium Park .07.22;
 Park Street Meadow 09.22
 ©Bruce Banfield-Taylor;
 Harpenden Lane 07.22
 ©John Fisher; New Barnes
 Mill, Sopwell 06.22
 ©Giles Harrison.

St Michael's Ford initiative

Our bid for a Herts Community Trust grant to revitalise the southern side of the ford was successful and we were awarded £3,440 towards the scheme. The project however, has taken an unexpected turn. Herts County Council has decided to take over the project and will be using its funds and Project Officer to plan and make the improvements. When the time comes, our volunteers are likely to be invited to be part of the installation team in conjunction with the Countryside Rights of Way team. Our grant has been returned as the monies are no longer required and our role in the project has radically changed. It's a slightly disappointing outcome with the Society no longer leading the project but we look forward to seeing the work in progress.



St Michael's Ford
September 2022



Water Quality Monitoring

Following our recent plea for monitors, many thanks to those who stepped up to participate. It's taken a little longer than anticipated to get the programme up and running but those who replied should now have received details. We'll be taking a quarterly sample, testing for Phosphates, Nitrates and Turbidity at ten sites in the River Ver and Red, beginning in October.



Looking for otters

Environment Agency visits

Many thanks to Maria Bailey, Colne Catchment Biodiversity Officer, who was out on the Ver in recent months. The first visit was to check on the presence of Red Azolla which had been reported at the site of the former Dolittle Mill near Redbournbury. It's a non-native invasive species that prefers slow moving water, so you never know where it might turn up in the Ver these days! It was previously reported back in 2009 when the EA released an Azolla eating weevil to reduce the infestation. It was a fairly

successful strategy but the Azolla has bounced back. Investigations are currently underway to see if more weevils or an alternative treatment might be appropriate.

This year a National Otter Survey is being conducted, the first for over ten years. Maria was surveying the Ver and asked for a little help checking around many of the river's bridges where otters often leave their fishy spraint. There have been occasional reports of otters in the past but sadly, no definitive signs were found in the likely spots this year.



Water Voles

Several Water Vole young have been spotted and there is evidence that the voles are successfully extending their territories beyond the introduction area. We've still no good photos of the voles by the river so reed stems, chewed at the characteristic 45-degree angle, are this month's chapter in our vole story. Some lucky volunteers, together with Josh Kalms, starred in vole update on C5 News. Less fortunate volunteers dug holes in the hard ground to put up the information board sourced by HMWT, paid for by the project's sponsors and with permission from Veolia Redbournbury!



EVENTS

Aside of the AGM and Action Group work parties our events have concluded for the year. A 2023 programme will be announced on the website and published in the February 2023 newsletter. As an early heads up, there's likely to be a litter pick on VVS Walk 3 or 8 in February and a guided geological Walk on the Chalk near Kensworth Quarry with Haydon Bailey in March.

**Peter ‘Podge’ Fox MBE
1939 – 2022**

Ver Valley Society President

With great sadness I have to report that our President died on 19th August 2022.

I had a sixty-year friendship with Podge and spent many happy hours with him walking the paths around Redbourn and in particular along his beloved Ver. It was Podge who recruited me to join the Society in the late nineties and a few years later gently persuaded me to join the committee. An ever-ready smile and gentle persuasion are my lasting memories of this great man. It was before my time, but I am quite sure Podge was involved with the campaign to switch off the Friars Wash Pumping Station in 1993. Campaigning to further reduce abstraction continues to this day but this was the first major success for the VVS. It was Podge who dreamt up the early mantra of “Keep the Ver Flowing.”



The photo was taken in June 2006 when we had the first brood of young barn owls after the Ver Valley Society had put up the first two nest boxes. Podge (on the left) was a great support to me in getting the project off the ground – we have now had over 120 fledged from our ten boxes. It was a bit of a pipe dream then, hence the smiles of success.

Podge was Secretary of the VVS before me and was on the committee for over 20 years before becoming President. Podge, like his father, was born and bred in Redbourn and his contributions to the community are too many to list here. He was captain of the football team, chairman of the Parish Council and founder member, trustee, and long-time chairman of the Redbourn Care Group (now Community Group). It was his increasing commitment to the RCG that led me first to help and then take over as Secretary of the VVS. Podge was awarded an MBE for his services to the Redbourn Community, very well deserved, but he always said it was really for the RCG as a whole.

Podge was married to his lovely wife June for nearly sixty years. They had a daughter Latisha and a son Paul, who sadly predeceased him, six grandchildren and three great grandchildren. We will all miss him but especially June and his family.

BIRD NOTES

by JOHN FISHER

Peregrines

For the first time peregrines have nested on St Albans Cathedral and successfully fledged a sole chick. It was named Artemis by a public vote organised by the Cathedral and HMWT. With Boudicca for the falcon and Alban for the tiercel. They proved quite an attraction and normally once sites are used successfully the birds return year after year. The fledgling is also known as TZW from its colour ring digits. Hopefully, a webcam can be organised for next year and the publicity will be a great boost for the city. We should get even more peregrine sightings along the valley this winter. This year there were four successful nests in the county and a total of eleven chicks were colour ringed.

Thanks to Barry Trevis who constructed and fitted the nest tray on the cathedral.



Hérons and Egrets

There were seven heron nests and an amazing ten little egret nests (a record) on the island. Ringing proved difficult as the majority of the nests were high up in the hawthorns. One of the colour ringed little egrets made an appearance on Countryfile recently when they filmed on the Mimram. A pair of mute swans with seven cygnets were successful parents in the Park too.



Barn Owl at Redbournbury

Barn Owls

Only one box was used, and it was a late brood with three young fledging in late August. They were not quite as showy as the pair last year, but the adults and the noisy young were seen on several evenings. By the time you read this the young will have dispersed, hopefully not too far away as we have a lot of boxes awaiting tenants. Pierre and I will be checking the boxes at the end of September for late broods, but this has only happened once before in nearly twenty years.

Far left: Peregrine Chick ©Barry Trevis
left: Mute Swan and cygnets ©Alison Debenham

I fear I spoke too soon in my last report on the impact of Covid on our activities. We had to cancel the July session because I was in isolation with Covid and our other team leaders were unavailable. We rely on 3 team leaders and clearly, we need more! The same applies to qualified first-aiders.

Normally in May we hope to start pulling Balsam but most plants were only just through the ground. Therefore, we split the team into three. We had 2 members distributing leaflets to all of the properties in Park Street that backed onto the river identifying the Non-Native Invasive Species and asking them to report them. The action was successful in that we have had, and are still getting, reports of Balsam from the residents. The second team cleared the balsam from the leat at Park Street. The rest of the volunteers cut back the Permissive Path –they did a good job as, aided by the lack of rain, the path has remained open through the summer.

June was one of our most challenging sessions – the task was simple to replace or re-instate Right of Way posts on Walks 3, 5 & 7. In addition to having to walk to the locations carrying tools and posts the ground was rock hard! It took a lot of effort and some impolite words to break the dry, chalk crust and to dig down deep enough to set the posts. The geology lesson was useful! All the posts were reset and have been duly labelled.

In August the team under the leadership of Bruce and Peter tackled the Himalayan Balsam at Moor Mill where some very tall balsam was pulled.



The team enjoyed the traditional drink afterwards at the Mill.

Autumn 2022 Programme

Sat 22nd October, 10.00–12.00
Drop Lane AL2 3TX: Willow pollarding.

Sat 19th November, 10.00–12.00
Sopwell Mill Open Space: Dead-hedging.

Sat 17th December, 10.00–12.00
Redbourn. And afterwards in the Chequers Inn.

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

FIRST AIDERS: to run our work parties it's a requirement that we have a first aider present. If you are a qualified first aider and could join us for 2 hours on an occasional Saturday, we'd be delighted if you would contact Richard. You don't even have to participate in the physical work, just be available in case a first aid incident occurs.



YOUR COMMITTEE

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Vice Chairman & Action Group Co-ordinator

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Riverfly Co-ordinator

John Pritchard

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01727 761878
mfrearson@ntlworld.com

Committee Member

Lee Wood
07879 496220

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 Water):
0800 376 5325