



Ver Valley Society NEWSLETTER

N° 152
JUNE 2023

OPEN MEETING

Tuesday 20th June at 7.45pm
at **St Stephen Parish Centre, Bricket Wood AL2 3PJ**
(In-person meeting). All Welcome at this FREE event.

A Talk on the Chalk Recent and Ongoing Geological Work in the Ver Valley

Guest speaker: **Dr Haydon Bailey**,
Chair of Hertfordshire Geological
Society

For our June meeting, we welcome Haydon who is an expert on the chalk landscape of Hertfordshire and has a particular interest in the Ver Valley. What's more, there has been a great deal of recent investigation into the

geology of the Chilterns and the chalk aquifer. It's a fascinating topic which greatly influences the River Ver and Haydon will reveal all!

The evening will open with short reports on the state of the Ver including the quality of its water and the wildlife that inhabits the river corridor. After a short break for refreshments, we'll hand over to our guest speaker.

(Please note we are starting at the slightly later time of 7.45pm but future meetings will be at the usual time of 7.30pm.)

Haydon Bailey in the field



LATEST NEWS

High Vis

Our volunteers are now sporting bright blue Ver Valley Society vests that'll not only make sure we stay safe but also let everyone know that we are out in the community doing our best for the river.

The vests will be available at no charge to Action Group volunteers, the Ver Bailiff team, Riverfly Kick-samplers and Water Quality monitors. However, if anyone would like to contribute £7.50 towards their vest, it would be most welcome.

Thanks again to Matt Bigg and the St Albans Sixer, who provided some of the funds we invested in this new gear!

© Lee Wood



SAVE THE DATES

Next Open Meetings:

Thursday 19th October 2023 –
AGM. St Michael's Parish Centre
AL3 4SL, details tbc

Thursday 22nd February 2024 –
Redbourn Village Hall, AL3 7LW,
details tbc

A bright start to 2023 – Periwinkle at Frogmore
©Lee Wood



It's refreshing to report that the Ver has been flowing well from Verlam End since mid-February. That makes for a much healthier river downstream with robust flow all the way to the Colne. It might just see us through the summer.

Headwater Abstraction

Thank you to the 75 Members who wrote to Defra in support of Affinity Water's abstraction reduction plans at Friars Wash, Redbourn and Kensworth. If these cuts come to pass, we might regularly have flows similar to those of this spring. A statement of response will be published by Affinity on the 15 May, the final plan in Autumn 2023.

Sewage at Markyate

A meeting with Thames Water in February saw us edging a little closer to action but please don't hold your breath. Groundwater infiltration seems to be the primary cause of problems at Markyate Sewage Treatment Works (STW). We've been advised that for an investigation of the pipework to take place, it requires groundwater levels to be between 110.3m to 110.5m AOD – that way cameras and the like can see where the ingress is occurring and look to remedy the situation by lining pipework for example.

Currently the level is 109.7 and probably on the way down until next

winter. It's a tough target as the window may only occur a couple of times every 7 years and the last time it only lasted for a few weeks. We'll be adding checking the level to the local Bailiff's monthly report in the hope of being prepared and ready to nudge Thames Water.

More Sewage

Caddington STW also operates in the Ver catchment but when it spills it discharges, not to the river but into a borehole – so ultimately contributing its payload to the aquifer. What's more we've only recently become aware of another sewage works in the Ver Valley, at Studham. This should have an Event Duration Monitor (EDM) monitor fitted in 2023 to record its performance but like Caddington, it discharges effluent and spills to a borehole.



Very high Nitrate levels downstream of Markyate STW

Visiting Markyate Sewage Works with Cllr Ed Moore



Meeting the PM in the company of Claire de Silva, Conservative Party Spokesperson for St Albans

The Politics Game

Sewage spills and healthy rivers and seas are likely to be a big vote-winner at the next general election and all the political parties are taking considerable interest in the topic. Parties of all colours have been in touch locally to ask for our advice and opinions.

The Society has no political allegiances but an invitation to visit Number 10 as a local 'Community Champion' was an opportunity not to be missed. It turned out to be a very useful reception. There was the photocall with Rishi Sunak; time spent talking with Rebecca Pow, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, who is launching the Chalk Streams Implementation Plan in June, and an opportunity to talk to one of our local MPs, Bim Afolami. I trust I did my bit to keep the River Ver and chalk streams in the ear of those in power.

Typically, a collective noun for Rooks is a 'Parliament'. The visit to Markyate revealed an active rookery in the Ver Valley and enabled me to report 64 nests to the Herts Bird Club's county survey.



Not a member?
It's only £8 a year to join.

Full details at riverver.co.uk/join-us

With above average flows persisting thorough the spring, results have tended to improve. In fact, reflecting the better flow, a rare Stonefly was found, the first our volunteers have recorded in a couple of decades of sampling. Well done Clive Pickering at Redbournbury fishery who followed his March find with another one in April. (Apparently the EA team has recorded a few since 2005, so they are present in very low numbers.)



A carefully constructed Caddis case

Elsewhere at Bow Bridge, Melissa Kane spotted a Cased Caddis with carefully aligned vegetation and Olive

nymph numbers are on the up, especially as they grow larger and are easier to count as the summer months approach!



Very poor results persist at Hoylwell Hill where insect numbers have been limited to just a single shrimp in some months. On the Red in Redbourn poor water quality is suspected of causing a low count and there are copious amounts of filamentous algae (high nutrient levels) to deal with.

We should have four new Riverfly monitors trained up in early May and be able to cover a few vacant spots on the river. Joe Mellen has volunteered to help me with co-ordinating results and getting the submissions from paper to online submission. Daniella Fecht is looking at historical Riverfly data to see if there are any statistical trends.



(left) one of the abundant Olives (above) an unhelpful net of algae

WATER QUALITY MONITORING

by JOHN PRITCHARD

Many thanks to Alan Winn, Melissa Kane and Tom Sayer who are monitoring at the Ver/ Colne confluence, Drop Lane and Flamstead respectively – that makes our full complement of ten. The results are best described as patchy – varying from very good to very poor ecological status. Markyate and Frogmore are consistently the worst with the other spots changing with each quarterly sample. As we gather more data, a more robust interpretation should be possible.



St Michaels looking clear in January ©Margaret Harris

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

A warm welcome to the 25 new members who have joined since the last newsletter: Daniela Fecht, John Shaw, Peter Tatton, Geoff Bunce, David Hutchinson, Melissa Kane, Cathy Comfort, Paul McMahon, Keith Vinton, Dot Smith, Helen Edwards, Paul McDonald, Sylvia Ruck, Betty Redgrave, Brian Ellis, Hilary Blake, Christine Schell, Colin James, Caroline Evans, Debra Powell, Richard Witter, Liz Ensor, Stephanie Reynard, Jennifer Bradstock and Ros Mansell.

We hope that you will enjoy the Society’s events and with your fellow members support the actions to improve the Ver and its environment. We now have 365 members, one for every day of the year.

We have received a membership payment from J Thorne for whom we don’t have contact details. If you happen to know who it might be, please get in touch.

After an unsure start, flow crept up to Verlam End in April after the March downpours. Porridge Pot flows well but upstream at River Hill the channel holds mainly polluted standing water. Clear water and patchy gravel is often reported after rain ceases and sediment settles.

At the Ver-Red confluence run-off flows from the M1 and Maylands estate. The M1 settling ponds reed beds act as natural filters but the Red is still transformed into a muddy torrent and outfall pipes discharge sediment which is carried as far as the old Dolittle Mill site on the Ver.

Bailiffs noted other anomalies, for example cloudy, oily and green tinged water and the extreme effects of road run-off. Brown algae blooms. Fragilities in the river ecosystem are often noticed only when the balance is upset

Broken gates, stiles and fallen trees were reported and some Bailiffs removed rubbish and debris from the river.



River Red and Section 11 Bailiffs



Nature notes: A few Brown Trout reside with Roach and Chub as small colonies of Water-crowfoot and Water-starwort return, providing food for invertebrates and consequently fish. In April old cones still hung from riverside Alders. The roots prevent bank erosion and have nodules which fix nitrogen; Alder wood, which strengthens when damp, was once carved for mill workers' clogs. The oldest wooden shoe found c1230 is made of Alder! The spirit of these trees is depicted in Goethe's poem 'Who's Riding so late through night, so wild?'

Vivid Scarlet Elf Cups dot mature mossy carpets under damp woody debris. As the temperature rises so do their clouds of spores. Beltane King



Cup or Publican's Cloak, brightens slow shady margins. Butterbur flowers early on mud edges but their gigantic leaves appear later in March. Hedges dotted with colourful Periwinkle and Red Deadnettle, provide vital links to other valley habitats.



Top: Alder cones, Hazel catkins, Elf Cup. Photos ©Melanie Woods, Chris Newman, Cathy Walker, Lee Wood

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 Verlam End	John Fisher & Peter Hill	john.fisher@btconnect.com
		members@riverver.co.uk
12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)	Sue Rowe	via mellorwoods@gmail.com
13. River Red	Joe Randall	joe.w.randall@hotmail.co.uk

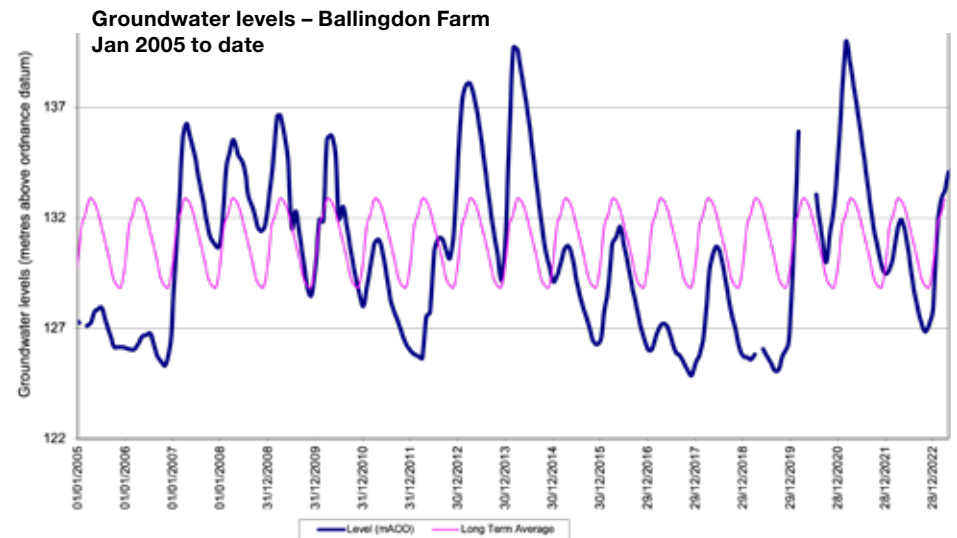
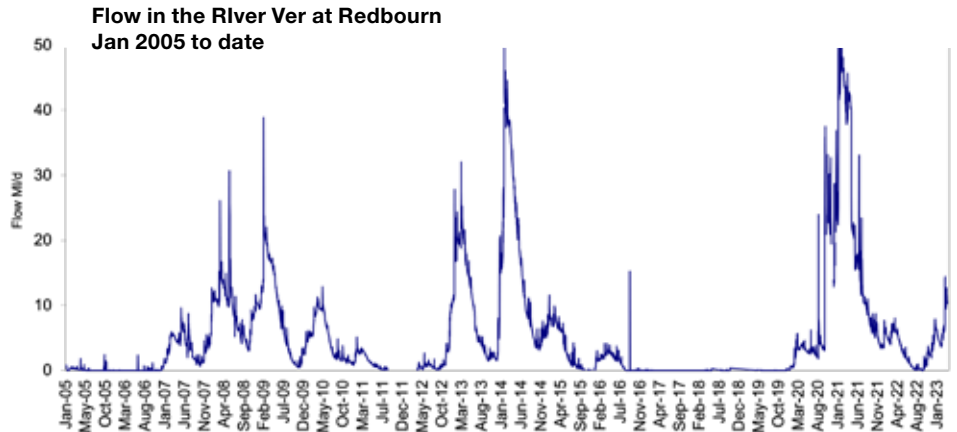
* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

Yoyo weather

The rainfall in the local area has certainly been up and down over the past few months. From a very dry February with only 5.7mm of rain, March brought copious amounts of precipitation at 249% of the long-term average. April again brought more than average and the Ver is flowing well as a result.

The aquifer has been rising but still remains just below the long-term average. As usual, the Ver's end of summer fate could go either way, depending on the next 3 months. There's no resilience any more and the river always seems to have us on the edge of our seats!

Months 2023	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [\pm average] (figures from Rothamstead)
February	131.36 [134.76]	5.7 [-51.3]
March	132.76 [135.58]	117.2 [+70.1]
April	133.03 [135.71]	
May		Not available yet



From top: Flow near Flamstead March 23 Volunteers discover the Ver at Verlam End 15.04.23; Water in the millstream at Shafford 08.04.23 ©Melanie Woods

Redbourn Litter Pick

One of the first outings for the new high vis vests was the Redbourn Litterpick in February. 22 Members and locals turned up and over 40 bags of rubbish were collected from the route of Ver Valley Walk 4. Seamlessly organised by Cathy Walker, the rubbish and recycling were collected by Veolia Environmental who provided bags and litterpick sticks.



River Limpet

An unusual but pleasing find in early April, was a River Limpet. It adheres to stones in the river and is a good indicator of better water quality but with a shell of only a couple of millimetres across, it's easily overlooked. Note the backward-pointing apex to the shell. River Limpets are rarely found on the Ver but have a reputation for surviving pollution before the population recovers and bounces back. Keep a look out, we'd love to hear of more!



School Success

Thanks to our volunteers we were able to work with Laura Silverstone from the Chiltern Chalk Streams Project, to put on a morning of River Ver invertebrates and chalk stream learning for 90 local schoolchildren.



©Lee Wood



Vole News

VVS volunteers have been along the Ver under the watchful eye of Josh Kalms, surveying for water vole signs. Initial findings are that the population has wintered well with plenty of evidence of healthy eating discovered. Take a walk along the Ver on a summer's evening and you might hear just the sound of munching coming from the reeds!

Below: Vole Feeding Platform. ©Peter White; (left) Paul & Gianna surveying



FOCUS ON THE VER

JOE RANDALL

Take part in our exciting 2023 Photographic Competition

All you'll need is a digital camera or phone camera and your imagination. The subject is of course the River Ver. What's more, the competition is for Society members only. So, David Bailey and friends need not apply.

In June, we will be posting full details on the website of how to enter and the T&Cs. Closing date for entries: 29th December 2023. **Good luck!**

River Red photos are allowed too! ©Joe Randall



No rare birds to report this spring but the summer migrants have been passing through, albeit a bit limited and late due to the cold and wet weather. Swallows, Sand Martins and House Martins have all been seen along with a few Wheatears.



Wheatears only spend a few days in the South before travelling on to their northern breeding territories, but it is always good to see them along the Valley. This year several have been spotted feeding around the sheep on the Gorhambury Estate, as well as in fields beside Hill Farm Lane. As we go to press, I received a report of a Common Tern passing through Frogmore fishing lakes.

Warbler species arriving include Blackcaps, Common Whitethroats, Sedge, Reed and Willow Warbler.



Peregrine nesting spot

The Peregrines on St Albans Cathedral now have three eggs and the female is sitting tight, intense on the incubation which takes about a month. The male or tiercel can often be seen on the ridge of the nave or against the brickwork of the tower. The nesting tray is behind a parapet but you can watch the nest on the live cam www.stalbanscathedral.org/peregrine-live-cam. By the time you read this there should be live youngsters being fed prey caught by the adults.

Hérons

Hérons are nesting once again on the islands in Verulamium Lake along with Little Egrets. I will report in the next newsletter after the youngsters have been ringed. The trend has been less Herons and more Little Egrets in recent years but not many Egrets have been seen this year – so we shall see!

Little Owl ©Paul Foster

Little Owls

One bird which seems seriously threatened locally is the Little Owl. They have used a VVS next box for the last four years, but they have either abandoned it after laying eggs or the youngsters have suffered predation when they have left the box before they can fly properly. This year there are no signs that the box will be used. Just a few years ago I could regularly see a roosting bird and they seemed faithful to favourite sites for lengthy periods like this one, which sat in the split of an oak. I have checked all the favourite spots this year and I did not see one until I went to Dorset!



EVENTS

Agreeing the events calendar hasn't been a smooth ride this year. With the newsletter having quite a long production time, it's best to check riverver.co.uk/events-list-2023 to see details of events as soon as they are confirmed.

However, we will be supporting Sustainable St Albans Festival with a stall in St Albans Cathedral on June 10th, having a midweek tour of Redbournbury Mill with cake in July, a Bat Walk in Verulamium Park in August, a Tree Walk with Kate Bretherton in October and a Quiz Night at the Goat in November.



January saw the volunteers complete the pollarding of the willows at Sopwell where, for the first time, we used a collapsible ladder to reach the very high crown. Meanwhile the wet team were tackling a blockage under the bridge leading to Sopwell Mill. This had caused local flooding and water was backed up towards Cotton Mill Lane. Eventually, the worst of the problem was cleared and the water level rapidly dropped.

February and the group returned to Gorhambury where in addition to clearing overhanging branches from the Ver we had a large team raising the footpath above the known wet spot. Turf spits were dug nearby and ferried to the footpath in wheelbarrows. It was very heavy and muddy work but everyone looked both happy and relieved when the job was done.

March was Frogmore, where the bankside team stooled the trees growing alongside the river on the centre section of the permitted path. This will let more light into the river and this year walkers will be able to

see the river before the trees re-grow. Downstream, the in-channel team cleared blockages and cut-back encroaching willow from the river bed.

April was a change in that we had two teams in different locations. One working in the river at Frogmore where they cut back overhanging branches and removed encroaching trees below the concrete bridge. The other team were in Redbourn where they had to hike a mile from the golf course car park to the gateway at the bottom of Dunstable Road. Walkers had complained that they could not find the gate – well they will now, as the hedge has been cut back to give a clear sight line. After all that work it was then a mile back again.

We also ran two mid-week sessions in March. One pollarded the willows at Redbournbury Mill and we then used much of the material to reinforce the willow spiling in the Mill tailrace. In the second session, we opened up the channel by the Irish Weir to increase the water flow towards Shafford Mill and keep the water voles happy during the summer months.

Summer 2023 Programme

The Summer Programme will be full of Balsam Bashing in the Park Street to the Confluence area as yet, we don't know where the balsam will emerge and be at its worst. See www.riverver.co.uk/current-year for latest details and if you'd like to sign up for email updates, please contact Melanie Woods (see contact details below). Action Group sessions are 10am – 12 noon on the third Saturday of each month. Sat 17th June, Sat 15th July, Sat 19th August & Sat 16th September.



Photos ©Lee Wood & Melanie Woods



YOUR COMMITTEE

Chairman & Communications

John Pritchard
01727 835957
johnp@riverver.co.uk

Vice Chairman & Action Group Co-ordinator

Richard Wallis
01582 794332
richard_wallis@btconnect.com

Bailiff Co-ordinator

Melanie Woods
07983 569736
mellorwoods@gmail.com

Riverfly Co-ordinator

John Pritchard

Secretary

Joe Randall
32 Peakes Place,
Granville Road,
St Albans, AL1 5AY
01727 569335
joe.w.randall@hotmail.co.uk

Membership Secretary

Peter Hill, 7 West Common,
Redbourn, AL3 7DF
01582 793785
members@riverver.co.uk

Treasurer

Rachel Young
58 Castle Road,
St Albans, AL1 5DG
01727 868919 (*eve/wkends only*)
treasurer@riverver.co.uk

Planning Officer

Martin Frearson
4 Allandale,
St Albans, AL3 4NG
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