



Ver Valley Society NEWSLETTER

N° 154
FEBRUARY 2024

OPEN MEETING

Thursday 22nd February 2024 at 7.30pm

Redbourn Village Hall, AL3 7LW. All welcome at this FREE event.

UK weed biocontrol initiatives on waterbodies

Focusing on Floating pennywort, Azolla and Himalayan balsam

Guest speaker: Djamila (Djami) Djeddour Senior Researcher, CABI*

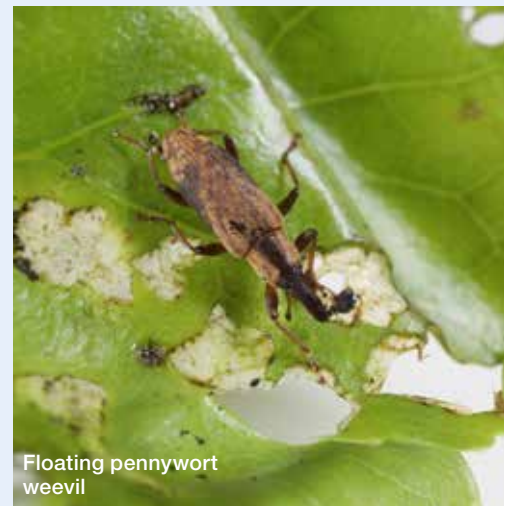
Biocontrol is a well-established approach to weed management worldwide and has the potential to play an important role in protecting aquatic and riparian habitats, where chemical and mechanical control options are impractical or prove to be prohibitively expensive. On the River Ver the invasive non-native water fern Azolla filiculoides is being

successfully managed through *Stenopelmus rufinasus*, a weevil native to the Americas.

We welcome Djami and look forward to an overview of CABI's UK biocontrol projects and hearing more on the highlights of the aquatic initiative to date.

The evening will open with short reports on the state of the Ver's water and the wildlife. After a short break for refreshments, we'll hand over to our guest speaker.

*CABI is a not-for-profit international organisation providing science-based solutions to pests and disease problems across the world (www.cabi.org). The Invasive Species Management team at CABI in Egham, Surrey have been funded by Defra and other partners since 2011 to investigate the scope of biological control (biocontrol) of invasive, non-native aquatic and riparian plant species in the UK.



Floating pennywort weevil

SAVE THE DATES

Next Open Meetings:

Tuesday 18th June 2024
at St Stephen Parish Centre,
Bricket Wood, AL2 3PJ, details tbc

Thursday 24th October 2024 AGM
St Michael's Parish Centre AL3 4SL,
details tbc

LATEST NEWS

Bird Boxes are Back!

Thanks to the kind folk at Yoke CNC and their computer-aided cutting system, a whole new batch of self-assembly bird boxes are being produced. Not only will we bring



some to the February Open Meeting for you to buy, at very reasonable prices! But the



money raised will also pay for a good number that we can put up along the Ver. Constructing those should also keep the midweek volunteers busy for a month or two.

Green Fingers

Also, at the February Open Meeting will be small envelopes of Ver Valley sourced, Purple Loosestrife seeds to take away. We are encouraging members to grow them in the spring and we'll collect the germinated seedlings in June, to plant along the Ver during Action Group sessions.



This is what we want!



Mel collecting seeds
©Karen Woods

Abstraction Anticipation It's all about the Data

With good luck and a favourable wind (preferably a wet westerly) by the time we all gather for the February Open Meeting, the new Secretary of State for the Environment, Steve Barclay, will have signed off Affinity Water's Water Resources Management Plan and with it, the next round of headwater abstraction reductions for the Ver.

The Society is once again upping its game, and we'd like your help. A new citizen science initiative – Mud Spotter – enables us to plot and quantify all the nasty outfalls that deliver agricultural run-off, road run-off and other pollution to the Ver, especially when it rains. Once quantified, we can begin the process of finding solutions and reducing the amount of polluting water the river receives. Members Cathy Walker and Paul Foster are being trained as

our own trainers (by Chiltern Chalk Streams) and if you are happy to step out in the pouring rain to look for pollution, they would be delighted to have your assistance as spotters!

We are also undertaking water quality testing in some of the worst polluted spots on the Ver to quantify exactly how damaging run-off might be. With generous advice from Jo Bradley, who visited in the summer, and with useful some groundwork by Joe Mellen, we'll be submitting samples for laboratory analysis in the coming months.



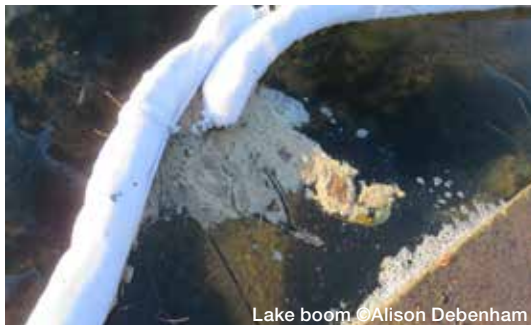
Changes in the Park in 2024?
©Alison Debenham

Verulamium Park Project

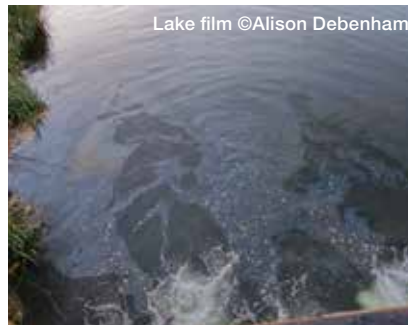
Work on Reach 1 (Lake and adjacent River Ver) appears to have stalled at present. It's not entirely surprising in light of the tight finances at both the EA and SADC. Apparently, the aim is for in-channel work and ecological enhancements on Reaches 2&3 (Lake outlet to Cottonmill Allotments) to be completed during 2024. More definitive news will be shared, if we receive any.



Richard Witter hands over a cheque for £1,000



Lake boom ©Alison Debenham



Lake film ©Alison Debenham

Pollution in the Park

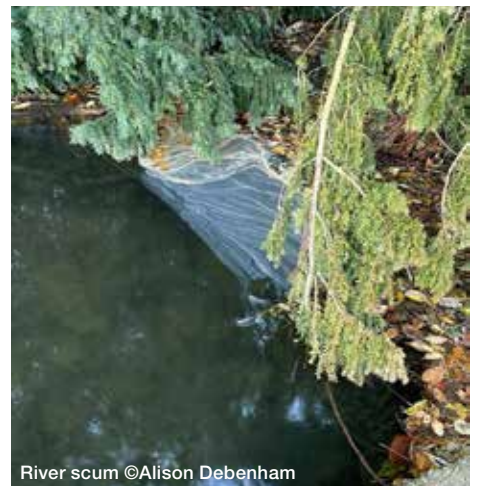
The perils of stormwater drains and their ghastly load was graphically demonstrated in December, when someone emptied a drum of catering oil into a street drain (or some similar occurrence) on the Batchwood housing estate. The result was an oily film on the river flowing under St Michael's Bridge and on, into Verulamium Park and the Lake. Fortunately, with some prompt action from Thames Water and natural dispersal over a week, no lasting harm was done. It reveals just how quickly and easily our chalk stream can suffer.



Storm drain ©Joe Mellen

Generous Donations

Our work, especially water quality investigations have been boosted by a number of generous donors during the autumn. Richard Witter and friends ran the length of the Ver to raise £1,000; Scott Clayton persuaded his company, Troy Asset Management to support the Society with £1,750 and an anonymous member contributed a further £250 towards our 'sterling work'. Thank you to all three donors and we will spend the monies wisely.



River scum ©Alison Debenham

The Riverfly Partnership (the national Riverfly organisation) has expanded its resources during 2023 with the appointment of two project officers and a long-awaited new online submission system. Our team began switching over from our paper-based method during the autumn and it's expected all of our 20 monitors will be up to speed by the end of January. The Riverfly Partnership is focusing on recruiting new kick-samplers around the

country but with 10 years under our belt, the River Ver team is looking for help to make the most of the data we have already collected.

The wet autumn has seen an improvement in records through the city – most of the urban pollution is likely to have been flushed through for the time being. Nathan Budd has recorded his highest scores in Verulamium Park with cased and caseless caddis featuring well. Clive



Max at Redbournbury Mill

Pickering's Holywell Hill numbers too have been above the all-important 'trigger level' for a number of months, reversing the below trigger scores earlier

in the year. The Redbournbury Fishery continues to score well with hundreds of olives in each sample. Nearby at Dolittle and Redbournbury Mill numbers are not quite so encouraging.

Anecdotally, the majority of our cased caddis records appear to be almost entirely the very small 2mm gravel cased variety. Cased caddis are a good barometer of river health and our kick-samplers will be keeping a close eye out to see if we really have lost some of the larger examples and those using vegetation as their case.



High water at Nathan's sampling spot in Verulamium Park. Jan 2024

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.



2mm Micro Caddis 12mm empty case

WATER QUALITY MONITORING

by JOHN PRITCHARD



River Hill, Flamstead

At River Hill near Flamstead, Tom Sayer continues to record results that indicate a river of poor ecological status with high Nitrate levels to blame. Steve Preece has joined the monitoring team, sampling in Frogmore beside Watling Street for the first time during December. Steve's first sample scored too highly on Phosphates, again indicating poor ecological status. Elsewhere on the river, water quality has been excellent. Late news: Neil Leverton and Joe Randall report that the high water in



Nik casts a shadow at Hyde Lane

early January has led to high Nitrate levels on both the Red and Ver in Redbourn.

MEMBERSHIP

by PETER HILL

A warm welcome to the new members who have joined since the previous newsletter: Candy Whittomer, Rick Mobbs, Sandra Hone, Gloria Charter, Ian Holt, Mr and Mrs Liam Barrett, Michael Curtis and Martin Whitworth. I hope you will enjoy the Society's events and are able to join your fellow members in supporting the activities to improve the Ver and its environment. Thank you to all our members, now numbering over 370 households.



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

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

Thank you to VVS Bailiffs for their continued monitoring of our precious chalk stream in 2023. I'm pleased to report that Brian Ellis is taking on the vacant Park Street section and begins reporting in 2024.

In December flow reached its highest since May 2023 with a whopping 1198 l/s in mid-valley at Gorhambury. Continuous flow, small but significant, began below Luton Lane bridge. Flow from there into summer looks promising. As we move into January, there is now crystal clear flow further upstream, just about continuous from the area between Flamstead and Markyate.



Oily Boating Lake ©Alison Debenham

Oily spill

Superficially, the river isn't in bad shape with robust flow around 150% of the long-term average. The bailiffs report a few exceptions with substantial pollution in standing water at Chequers Hill, Flamstead. There was an oily spill via a surface water drain into Verulamium Lake in December and a few possible minor pollution incidents elsewhere.



South of Luton Lane ©John Fisher



Chequers Hill ©Cathy Comfort

Below St Albans City the Ver has been spilling into the water meadows above New Barnes Mill, a peaceful haven for wildlife. Human construction shapes much of the course but small natural meanders form as the river weaves and scours through instream vegetation, useful for wildlife shelter and predation.



Five Degrees

Bailiffs now monitor the chalk stream temperature, usually a steady 10-12°C. There are always variations in a semi-urban chalk stream but monitoring could indicate damaging effects of climate change or influxes from human activity.

One indicator of warmer winters are the many flowering plants along the river banks but it's reassuring to see more seasonal plants such as Spindle which hosts overwintering Blackfly and berries for Blackcaps.

Spindle



Bristly Ox-tongue



Frosty Ver ©Giles Harrison

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	Brian Ellis	brianparkstreet@aol.com
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	Neil Leverton	neil.leverton@gmail.com
11. Chequers to Verlam End	John Fisher & Peter Hill	john.fisher2023@outlook.com
		members@riverver.co.uk
12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)	Cathy & Phil Comfort	phil_cathy_comfort@yahoo.co.uk
13. River Red	Joe Randall	joe.w.randall@hotmail.co.uk

* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

It's been wet!

The autumn of 2023 has been very wet and groundwater levels are now on the rise at quite a fast rate. The rain in early January, as we go to press, also augurs well for above average groundwater levels and good flow from spring into summer. It'll be another couple of months before plants and trees begin to take a large proportion of any falling rain. In the meantime, rain falling on the 'unconstrained chalk' i.e. where chalk layers are at the surface, will continue to be of great benefit to the aquifer.

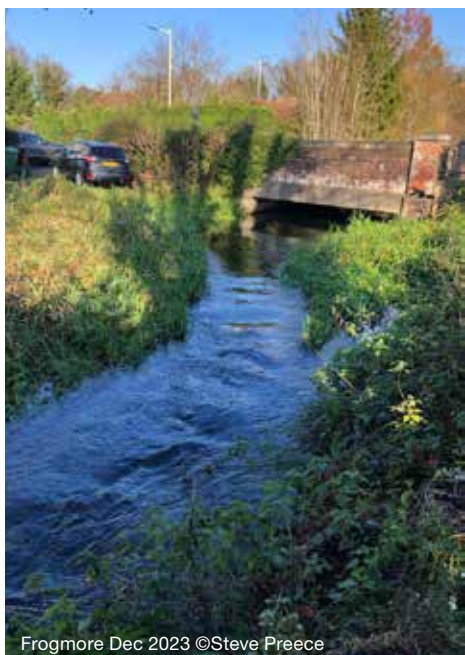
We are grateful to the Environment Agency and Affinity Water for supplying groundwater and river flow charts.



Luton Lane Jan 2024



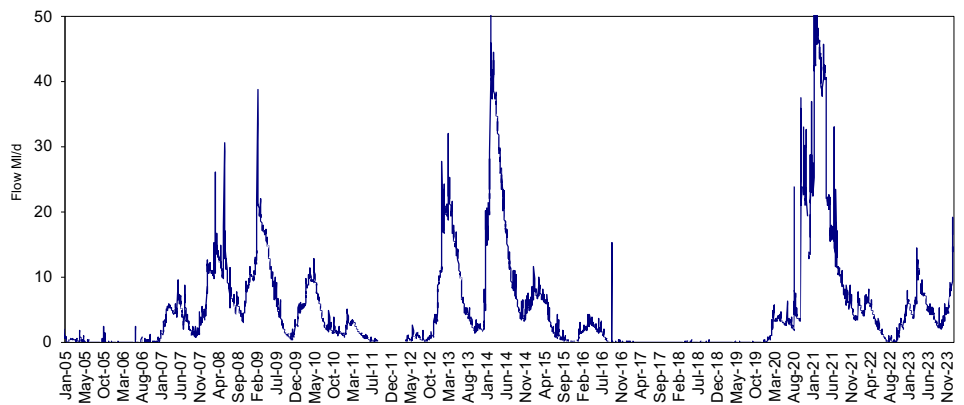
Bow Bridge Jan 2024



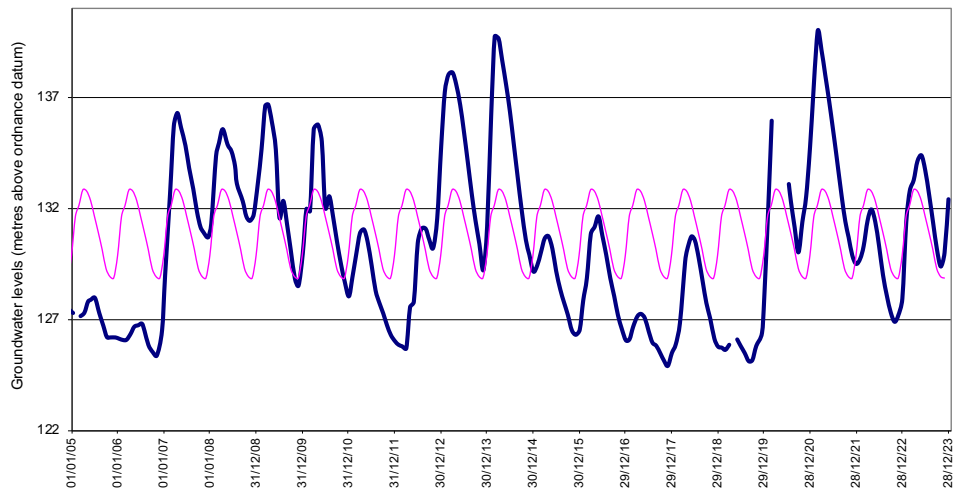
Frogmore Dec 2023 ©Steve Preece

Months 2023	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Rothamstead)
October	130.14 [130.35]	100.9 [+19.5]
November	129.32 [130.47]	75.6 [-5.6]
December	129.96 [130.61]	101.3 [+25.7]
January 2024	132.37 [132.54]	Not available yet

Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn Jan 2005 to date



Groundwater levels – Ballingdon Farm Jan 2005 to date



St Michaels Bridge Jan 2024 ©Joe Mellen



Drop Lane Jan 2024 ©Alan Winn

The Next Generation

In collaboration with Laura from the Chiltern Chalk Streams Project we had a fun afternoon in October entertaining the children of Abbey Primary School on the River Ver. Thanks to our volunteers, Cathy and Angela, for helping them get wet and discover the invertebrates of a chalk stream!

School Visit ©Cathy Walker



In November we were delighted to provide a guided tour of the Ver for the pupils of Whitefriars School in Harrow and their international visitors from Taiwan.

School Trip ©Paul Connelly



Bruce & Peter planting David's memorial tree © Chris Newman

David Newman

In memory of David Newman, who was one of the younger members of the Action Group volunteers, the Society donated a memorial tree to be positioned near the River Ver. In December, members of David's family and the Society planted a native Rowan at Riverside Way, close to the Bailey bridge, in a tranquil spot where there is room for it to flourish.



The Ver in Pictures

Local photographer **Ricky Barnett** spent last summer taking photos along the Ver, from top to bottom. He's kindly offered the Society use of the photos in

Dick Downs

We were all saddened to hear of the death of Dick Downs at the end of summer. Dick was bailiff for the Park Street section for many years and his regular reports of the goings-on between Frogmore and Moor Mill were really helpful to successive bailiff coordinators in staying up to speed on the area. Dick was also a regular attendee at many of the Action Group work parties and a long-standing Riverfly monitor too. Our best wishes go to his family and friends. The Society will miss Dick's generous contributions.



Dick Downs ©Melanie Woods



publicity material too. If you would like to see more of Ricky's Ver collection, have a look at this gallery: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10160057366144677&type=3>

MEMBERS' COMPETITION

JOE RANDALL



Many congratulations to our three winning members in the VVS photography competition. The overall winner was **Alison Debenham** for her image of Water Crowfoot on the Ver (above). Many thanks to Ye Olde Fighting Cocks who donated a Lunch for 2 as the first prize.



Cathy Walker is off for tea at the Inn on the Park for her 'Reflections at Drop Lane' (above, middle). In third place is **Bill Free** who will be visiting Redbournbury Mill to collect his prize of local produce. Many thanks to all our entrants and generous prize givers.



Now we are in mid-winter you can expect to see a lot of winter migrants from Scandinavia who flock to the somewhat warmer conditions of the UK. Some of these like Redwings and Fieldfares you can get in your garden, especially if you have berry trees like Rowan or Cotoneaster. Usually, I get up to 10 Redwings in my garden on the berry bushes where they feast for a few days until the bushes are bare. A Redwing is very similar to the more familiar Song Thrush, but it has a pale stripe above the eye and a red patch under each wing.

Waxwing ©John Fisher



Waxwings

Another winter visitor to our shores is the Bohemian Waxwing. This winter there has been an amazing influx and they have

been reported in just about every county in Eastern England including Hertfordshire where they been seen in Harpenden, St Albans, Berkhamsted and Stevenage. I have only seen Waxwings once in the Ver Valley and that was 10 years ago in a tree by the Waitrose in King Harry Lane. Supermarket car parks and new housing estates are often the best places to look as pyracantha bushes are popularly planted and provide a go-to meal for these exotic birds.

Black Redstart ©Steven Brown



Peregrines

Most of you will have heard about the Peregrines but the Cathedral has hosted another rather special bird this winter, a

Black Redstart which has favoured the nave roof, or the big oak close the tower. This bird is a female so not as smart as the male but still has the distinctive red beneath the tail which you can see when it flies. Try walking up the hill from the Fighting Cocks



and look for movement against the tower or the roof. The Peregrines are back on territory around the Abbey so you may catch sight of one of the pair while looking for the Redstart. The Kingfisher is being seen regularly perched on the trees along the banks of the Ver in the Park so three great birds are possible in one trip.

Golden Plovers

We do not get the large flocks of Golden Plovers on the fields by Punch Bowl Lane we used to get years ago. Ernie Leahy and I used to see up to 1000 birds some years feeding on the winter stubble. Now we seem to get smaller flocks and they seem to pass through rather than feed up. Look out for flocks wheeling over the A5183. In bright low winter sunshine, they are a spectacular sight as they turn in unison showing the contrasting upper wings and pale



Top: Redwing ©John Fisher
above: Golden Plover flock ©Steven Brown

undersides. If you do see a flock, look out for a larger bird in the chase, as it may be a Peregrine Falcon looking for its dinner.

I am always pleased to hear about sightings. Please note my new email is john.fisher2023@outlook.com Telephone still 01582 792843 or 07845 152570

EVENTS

Two dates for your diary! We'll be running a number of events throughout 2024 – members and non-members welcome. The first will be a Litterpick on Sunday 25th Feb, somewhere on a Ver Valley Walk

– keep an eye on social media and the website for details. On Saturday 13th April, Mel and Cathy are leading a Guided Walk at the Ver/Colne Confluence near Bricket Wood.

Redbourn Litterpick 2023





December near Redbourn

2023 was our busiest year on record with 16 formal sessions where the volunteers have worked some 489 hours. In addition, there have been six diverse midweek mini sessions ranging from willow spiling at Redbournbury Mill to litter picking, where we amassed another 98 hours of volunteering.

September and October We had two consecutive sessions in at Frogmore with teams working on the Permissive Footpath and in the river. During the summer the path had become very overgrown but it was reopened after the team's work in September. Further work was undertaken in October to improve the access at both ends of the path. The blackberry bushes which have constrained the southern end of the path for years have now been pared right back.

On the centre section of the footpath the trees on the eastern river bank had extended the canopy so that it covered 80% of the river significantly reducing the light level. In the first session the team were able to open up much of the canopy, immediately

improving the light level. In October the work was completed and some of the many underwater obstructions were removed. It was a challenging task!

November The Action Group was at Drop Lane tackling two different tasks. The wet team were working on the Colne! They were north of the confluence and south of the second ford on the footpath – the one that regularly floods. The aim was to clear debris that had built up over the years to limit flooding on the footpath. It was messy, heavy and awkward work but there is now a new island built from the debris with a better flow through the section.

Meanwhile the bankside team were pollarding the willows at the southern end of Drop Lane. It was an interesting session and some of the willow wands were taken away to be repurposed in a sculpture.



As we go to press, the Spring 2024 Programme venues have yet to be announced. The Saturday Action Group sessions will be on Sat 17th February 2024, Sat 16th March 2024 Sat 20th April 2024 and Sat 18th May 2024. 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). We are running an increasing number of short midweek sessions that usually end in coffee and cake – email Melanie if you'd like to be involved.

December By tradition the work party and the Bailiffs meet in Redbourn for a seasonal drink. However, before they get their reward some work has to be done! This year there were 3 main groups who had different tasks. One group concentrated on the footpath leading from the Chequers Pub to Redbourn where fallen trees were either already making walking difficult These were cleared and for the first time in years there is a clear view down the pathway.

The other two groups tackled the area where the Ver crosses under the Redbourn Road and the next section at the rear of the industrial estate. After the work you can now see under the bridges and the bankside is ready for spring growth. Where the river leaves the industrial estate work was done to reduce the risk of flooding, bird boxes were put up and you can actually see the outlet from the redundant water cress bed. A great improvement.



Photos © Melanie Woods

YOUR COMMITTEE

Chairman & Communications

John Pritchard
01727 835957
johnp@riverver.co.uk

Vice Chairman & Bailiff Co-ordinator

Richard Wallis
01582 794332
richard_wallis@btconnect.com

Action Group Co-ordinator

Melanie Woods
07983 569736
mellorwoods@gmail.com

Riverfly Co-ordinator

John Pritchard

Secretary

Cathy Walker 07789173516
cathywelsby@yahoo.co.uk

Membership Secretary

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

Events Manager

Lee Wood
07879 496220

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

Joe Randall 01727 569335
joew.randall@hotmail.co.uk

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