



# Ver Valley Society NEWSLETTER

N° 155  
JUNE 2024

## OPEN MEETING

Tuesday 18th June 2024 at 7.45pm

St Stephen Parish Centre, Bricket Wood, AL2 3PJ. FREE event - all welcome.

### Can a rust fungus control Himalayan balsam on the River Ver and beyond?

Guest speaker: **Kate Pollard** Project Scientist, CABI\*



Himalayan balsam, one of the UK's most invasive non-native species, dominates stretches of the River Ver and surrounding wetlands in the Bricket Wood area. We have been enthusiastically pulling it for years but the plant persists. Kate is part of a team that has been exploring the potential of a rust fungus as an effective method of biocontrol to counter Himalayan balsam's success in the UK.

We look forward to hearing more of CABI's approach in the use of fungal pathogens and perhaps the news that we will be able to hang up our balsam bashing boots in the near future.

\*CABI is a not-for-profit international organisation providing science-based solutions to pests and disease problems across the world ([www.cabi.org](http://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.



Photos ©CABI

## LATEST NEWS

### Record River Levels!

This spring, the Ver has been running at 'exceptionally high' for many weeks. Reliable records have been kept since 1956, and 2024 flows are the second highest in all that time – only topped by those of 2001. The river has been flowing for almost its full length, from upstream of Markyate Cell.

Redbourn, April 2024



Verulamium Lake, April 2024

### Sewage Heartbreak

Frustratingly, the return of the Ver in its upper reaches has also brought over 1200 hours of continuous sewage spills. The Markyate sewage works simply can't cope with the surrounding high groundwater and has been releasing a constant stream of sewage. The river has become a sight of bank-to-bank sewage fungus, smothering the life out of our 'high priority habitat status' chalk stream.



## SAVE THE DATES

### Next Open Meetings:

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

**Thursday 27th February 2025**  
Redbourn Village Hall AL3 7LW, details tbc

## Abstraction latest

There's still no news on Affinity Water's Water Resources Management Plan being signed off for the 2025-9 period. Within it are proposed abstraction reductions for the head of the Ver Valley. Latest rumours are for a sign off in June – so watch our website for any updates.

## Sewage spills

In the meantime the main focus has become water quality. As we go to press, the sewage works at Markyate has been spilling continuously for 1200 hours and rising. The result has been bank-to-bank sewage fungus in the Flamstead area with the river all but ecologically dead as a chalk stream there.

We know that phosphate levels are well over recommended levels downstream as far as Redbournbury Mill – thanks to VVS member Tom Sayer's diligent work. Such a high level of nutrients has led to rapid growth of bright green filamentous algae, depriving the river of life-giving oxygen. This is especially evident at Luton Lane near Redbourn but is also easily spotted at Redbournbury too.

Groundwater levels have been high and the main cause of the spills appears to be groundwater infiltration. The water gets into the sewage pipes and exceeds the capacity of the works, which causes continuous untreated discharges. What's more, the site itself is flooded.



Sewage fungus at Flamstead



Polluted water at River Hill

## Forty years of waiting

Thames Water's Groundwater Impacted System Management Plan (GISMP) doesn't seem fit for purpose. The window for the investigation came and went within a fortnight and predictably, as the Chiltern streams all tend to be awash at the same time, there were insufficient resources to investigate. The Misbourne especially, and the Chess, Colne and Bulbourne have been suffering equally horribly. Work is supposedly scheduled to increase capacity at Markyate by 40% by the end of 2026. Pinch your nose and don't hold your breath.

It's not difficult to conclude that there's been too little investigation and investment over many, many years. Especially as we uncovered a similar situation in 2021 and face the prospect of more frequent high groundwater levels as the climate changes. I'm reminded of the quote from local resident Mr Timberlake in 1987 "...on misty mornings the smell along the river is terrible and the banks are white with deposit. I walk this stretch every day and no longer see the voles,... and kingfishers that I used to see".



Filamentous Algae at Luton Lane



Phil and Cathy presentation

A big thank you to Phil & Cathy Comfort who presented a sewage update at Flamstead's Annual Parish Meeting, to Councillors Ed Moore (Harpenden North & Rural) and Jane Timmis (Watling) who have been chasing their contacts and the long-suffering local landowners & tenants who have been working to find a solution. We trust that the Environment Agency is treating this as a Category 1 incident and demanding a permanent solution.



BBC London News

## Beyond sewage

While I have spent my spring dabbling in sewage it's refreshing to report our Road Run Off water testing team led by Joe Mellen, plus the Mudspotter Team led by Paul Foster and Cathy Walker are poised for action. They are ready to begin analysing the effects of road runoff, ahead of the Society looking for long-term solutions to the worst of the sites.



High groundwater and a wet spring produced a massive lake in Kensworth quarry in April. Haydon Bailey of the Hertfordshire Geological Society commented, "It shows how impermeable the New Pit chalk is at that level and how it needs open fractures for lateral drainage."

Photo: Kensworth Quarry ©George Moreton

The high water levels have generally had a beneficial effect on the invertebrate counts in the River Ver. However, the water has been too high for kick-sampling at some of the 19 sites the volunteers visit each month. No low score trigger breaches have been recorded in 2024.

Ed Haworth had a pleasant surprise in his March sample when a single Mayfly nymph was present in his kick-sample at Prae Close, near the Waffle House. That's the furthest up the Ver a Mayfly has been reported. Is it a sign that this enigmatic insect is steadily making its way up the valley, or is the rumour of a remnant population on the Gorhambury Estate true?



Park Street Damselfly ©Steve Preece

Fly-tip challenge

Luton Lane, north of Redbourn is our most upstream sampling spot. For years at a time, the winterbourne river here has no water in it. Finally, after a few months of water in spring 2023 and again at the start of 2024 some Cased Caddis were recorded. There was not just one but nineteen in total. How did they get there, where have they been hiding? It's a mystery!



Luton Lane Cased Caddis

In April it got even better with Olives and Caseless Caddis in the mix - despite a fly-tipped bed and long green tresses of filamentous algae, encouraged by high nutrient levels smothering the river's vegetation.

Many thanks to all our volunteers for their monthly records, from Bill Wolvey who gets out on the first of every month to those who need the occasional reminder to send their results in!

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.

**WATER QUALITY MONITORING**

by JOHN PRITCHARD

River Hill, Flamstead is undoubtedly the worst spot on the river. Half a mile below Markyate sewage works is really the primary driver of this. Thanks to



Tom Sayer who has been recording high nitrates and phosphates in pretty horrid conditions. He also notes that the high phosphate levels are present well downstream at Luton Lane. The majority of the river is revealing results that are of 'good ecological status' but down at Hyde Lane in Frogmore the river is only achieving 'moderate ecological status' because of high nitrate levels and high turbidity on the day of sampling.

Left: Unhealthy Nitrate levels at Flamstead ©Phil Comfort; Right: 'Good' recorded at Sopwell, ©Cathy Walker



**MEMBERSHIP**

by PETER HILL

A warm welcome to the many new members who have joined since the previous newsletter taking the society to a record high of 375 paying memberships: Marie Taylor, Judith O'Byrne, Imogen De La Bere, Helen Veitch, Mark Shephard, Steve Middleditch, Debbie Watkin, John Rogers, Sarah Perryman, Charlotte

Reilly, Harriet Manby, Jeremy Peet, James Gurney, Paul Minihane, Matthew Brennan, Billy Pither, Tina Alder, Elaine Moxom and Angela Barker. 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.



**Not a member?**

It's only £8 a year to join.

Full details at [riverver.co.uk/join-us](http://riverver.co.uk/join-us)

Our Bailiffs have had a challenging time over the last 3 months. The water levels remain high and several of our usual “measuring points” for water levels, flow rate, and temperature have been flooded and, in some cases, are inaccessible.

The one consistent report is that the volume of water has swept the river bed and there are large areas with good clean gravel. In total contrast at Markyate whilst we welcome the flow of water through the area the outfall from the sewage works is terrible. Tankers have been seen on site and improvement plans are mooted for 2026 but that of course does nothing to restore the fields and bankside.

### Water, water, everywhere!

It is interesting to see that once the aquifer was saturated – new ponds and mini lakes appeared down the river. Immediately below the M1 crossing a new lake appeared below Verlam End, which is very popular with the bird life. Another good example is the ponding at the southern end of Verulamium Park.



For those who enjoy walking up and down the river, most of the pathways are accessible but there are a few places, like Gorhambury, where you really need wellies at the northern end.



Otter spraint

Gorhambury, April 2024

The footpath across

Sopwell Meadow is also flooded and in some areas it's over welly deep! The fishing lakes in Park Street are flooded and the riverside footpath is underwater. But with care you can enjoy a slow walk!

After all that gloom there are some benefits, mammals including foxes and hares have been spotted frequently and otter spraint has been seen too – note the fish bones. On Gorhambury, if you are quiet and patient you can see the moles on the footpath. Hopefully, by the time you read this the water level will have dropped and we will return to normal.

Left: Paul Foster ©Lee Wood



Wood Anemone



### 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	Vacant	
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.

# Aquifer replenished

The spring of 2024 has seen very wet weather with rainfall well above average. Groundwater levels at the top of the catchment rose to a high point in mid April (c139.7mAOD) and are now falling as the rain has eased and the trees and plants begin to stir. The river should enjoy a healthy summer but nothing involving the Ver is ever completely certain!

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

Months 2024	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [ $\pm$ average] (figures from Rothamstead)
<b>February 2024</b>	136.46 [134.76]	130.0 [+73.0]
<b>March</b>	138.93 (135.58)	90.0 [+42.9]
<b>April</b>	139.36 [135.71]	67.4 (+13.2)
<b>May</b>	139.14 (135.30)	Not available yet



Good flow just south of Markyate, March 2024



A lake at Verlam End, March 2024 ©John Fisher

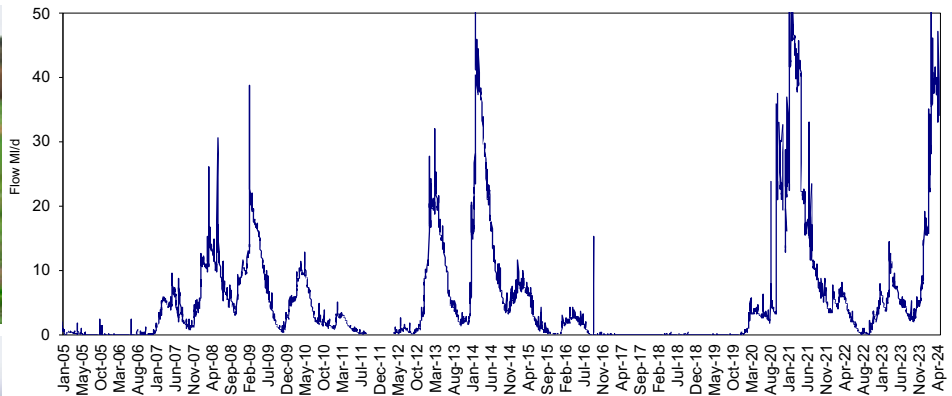


Redbournbury West Ford, April 2024

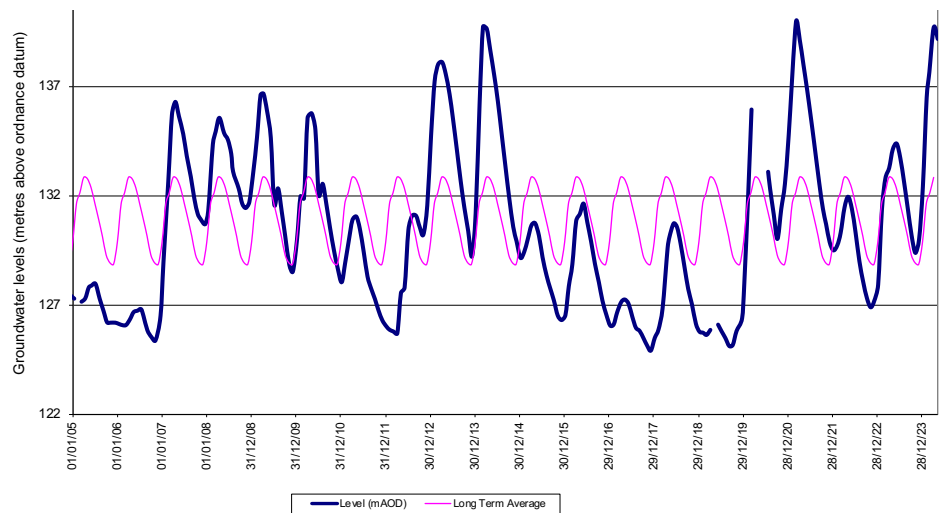


Bell Meadow in Verulamium Park, April 2024 ©Alison Debenham

Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn January 2005 to date



Groundwater levels – Ballingdon Farm January 2005 to date



Drop Lane, April 2024 ©Alan Winn

## Midweek Marvels

One feature of 2024 has been the quiet rise of our midweek activities which generally involve 2 hour sessions incorporating coffee and cake. There's no set day or location but gradually the projects have evolved. We paid a flying visit to St Mary's Church in Kensworth to pick litter from the start of Ver Valley Walk 1. Hedge and tree whips have been planted on two occasions to contribute in a small way to restoring nature.



In February a team of six removed a blockage just below the bridge on Cottonmill Lane. It was quite tricky because of the volume of water that had backed up towards Verulamium Park, but it was completed successfully. The largest object removed was a plastic road barrier – still in working order.



## Where does all the water go?

The Hertfordshire Geological Society is hosting an event, organised by Haydon Bailey, with a fascinating array of speakers. The event in Hatfield on Saturday 20th July will be looking specifically at the chalk aquifer, including the Ver Valley, and how and where the water goes. Tickets are £5 and further details are here: [www.hertsgeolsoc.org.uk/event/hgs-conference-water-table-ii/](http://www.hertsgeolsoc.org.uk/event/hgs-conference-water-table-ii/)

## Bird Box Bonanza

Thank you to all the generous members who attended the Redbourn Open Meeting and invested in a box for their local feathered friends. We sold 35 boxes, leaving 25 to put up along the Ver whenever we have a working party in a suitable area. There was enough change to buy another handy ladder to help the volunteers put the boxes in the right place. A big thank you to Wendy at Inn on the Park, who lent us the café's function room to assemble all the boxes. And thanks again to Yoke CNC for all their work and materials to get the project off the ground.

Similarly the wader brigade visited Sopwell Mill Farm in April, to remove litter and logs obstructing the flow under the road bridge. All in all over 100



hours of mid-week volunteer time has been directed at the Ver and its valley already this year. If you would like to join in, please send Melanie an email [mellorwoods@gmail.com](mailto:mellorwoods@gmail.com).



## EVENTS

In April, Mel and Cathy led a successful walk in the area in the confluence with the Colne, In the autumn, they will be leading another at the opposite end of the river, around the source at Kensworth. Please keep an eye on the website and our social media activity for the latest news and to

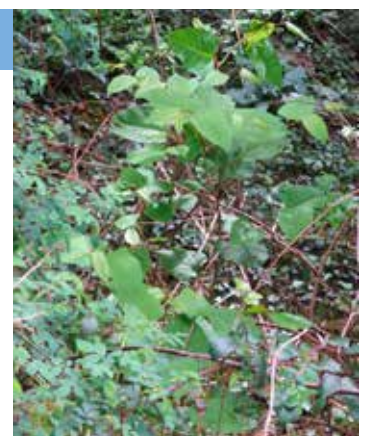
book for these free activities. There will be a Bat Walk in Verulamium Park on Friday 23rd August and a few ad hoc get-togethers, depending on the weather. In the next newsletter, we'll reveal the venue for the November Pub Quiz and how you can join us for a fine social evening.



## Invasive Non-native Species

The main invasive species in the Ver Valley are mainly by the Ver downstream from Park Street. However, recently several stands of Japanese knotweed have been spotted and treated in Redbourn – by the River Red and the Nickey Line.

The Society is in receipt of some funds (INNS grant) from Affinity Water to support the pulling of Himalayan balsam and the use of professional chemical treatments for Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogweed.



Please contact Richard Wallis (details on p8) if you believe you have seen any of these on your property or in the local vicinity. The VVS can then confirm the identity of the plant and organise appropriate action.

We have had a good run of interesting birds this spring and probably the most surprising was a Ring Ouzel which landed in our Chairman's Shafford garden in late April. Ring Ouzels breed in the northern uplands of the UK and are known as the "Northern Blackbird." Every year a few break off on their migration north and spend a few days in the Chiltern Hills, and Ivinghoe Beacon always gets a few every year. This was probably only the third one in the Ver Valley, following one on the Redbournbury Water Meadows about 10 years ago and one three years ago on the horse paddocks near Doolittle.

### Egrets, we've had a few

Peter Hill and I are the bailiffs for the Ver from Redbourn up to Junction 9 of the M1 (Friars Wash). This year the flow is the best we have had since 2001 and it makes a fabulous change as for extended periods the Ver north of Redbourn is a dry riverbed. Whenever there is flow the bird life improves as Grey Herons, Little Egrets and Grey Wagtails soon discover the new feeding areas. I have even seen a Kingfisher perched on the M1 embankment. At Verlam End, just south of Junction 9, I saw what I initially thought was a Little Egret perched on the handrail of the footbridge, but it was a wonderful surprise when I trained my binoculars on it to discover it had a yellow bill and I realised it was only the second ever Cattle Egret I have seen along the Ver Valley. It stayed around for quite a while enabling me to take a few pictures before it flew down to the edge of the big lake that has formed just south of Verlam End.

Cattle Egrets are colonising the UK now rather like the Little Egrets did a couple of decades ago and they will be seen a lot more. There are vast numbers on the



Cattle Egret ©Rupert Evershed

Waxwing in April ©Steven Brown



Somerset Levels and this month there are about 40 at Fen Drayton near Cambridge. Little Egrets have black bills and yellow feet whereas Cattle Egrets have a dull yellow bill and flesh-coloured feet and legs – see my picture of the Verlam End bird. They are of a comparable size to Little Egrets, so it is worth checking out these big white birds. A much larger white bird is the Great White Egret. This is as big as a Heron, has a bright yellow bill and black legs and feet. There was one on the Redbournbury Water Meadows a few years back and recently one on Gorhambury.

Ring Ouzel



### Waxwing wonder

Both the Ring Ouzel and the Cattle Egret were one-day birds, but we have had a huge influx of Waxwings this winter and many have taken up temporary residence in Hertfordshire. Stretching it a bit for the Ver Valley but a flock of about 25 were seen daily for a couple of weeks in trees opposite Morrisons in Hatfield Road. A better claim as a Ver Valley bird was another flock of about 20 which were seen in King Harry Lane by Waitrose over 10 years ago.



The Water Voles are proving to be a real success story. It is now nearly 3 years since 150 were released and as the typical life span of small mammals is only about 12 months, so any Water Vole seen now will be second or third generation. Speaking of new feeding opportunities, Grey Herons can be seen stalking the banks in search of a Water Vole snack!

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

Above: Water Vole; below: Heron





The weather scuppered our attempts to find somewhere for the Action Group to work in **January**. The river level and flow was too high for in-channel work and the bankside was just wet and greasy – not a good place to work. Likewise in **May**, with continuing high flows and sodden ground, the first “balsam bash” of the season was cancelled with regret.

**Drop Lane** was our scheduled venue for the **February** working party. The task was to selectively thin the branches overhanging the river to improve the light level. Whilst the river remained very high, the flow on the lower section was slower so we were able to go ahead. The in-channel team were supported by a bankside party doing the brush stacking together with litter picking group. Some 20 volunteers participated.



In **March** we returned to Drop Lane to do some thinning work this time at the top of Drop Lane. The water flow in the central section, just above the concrete weir was still too fast to work but we were able to thin the top end. In addition to the river work, we had a team doing selective thinning on the loop path off to the side of the main footpath. A total of 19 volunteers participated.



In **April** three small groups comprising over 20 members worked on willows in the river at Hyde Lane, completed a wide sweep of the area picking litter and opened the permissive path which enjoys good views of the river.

The summer programme venues have yet to be announced. However, it is certain that activity will revolve around pulling invasive Himalayan balsam in the Park Street area. The Saturday Action Group sessions will be on Sat 15th June 2024, Sat 20th July 2024, Sat 17th August 2024 and Sat 21st September 2024. See [www.riverver.co.uk/current-year](http://www.riverver.co.uk/current-year) for latest details and sign up for email updates by contacting contact Melanie Woods (see details below).



## YOUR COMMITTEE

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John Pritchard

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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](mailto:wastemanagementservices@stalbens.gov.uk)

Water Leaks (Affinity Water):  
0800 376 5325