



Ver Valley Society NEWSLETTER

OPEN MEETING

Thursday 27th February at 7.30pm

Redbourn Village Hall, AL3 7LW. FREE event - all welcome.

Conservation on the Chilterns Chalk

Guest speakers:

Nick Marriner & Melinda Dresser
from Chilterns National Landscape

There's something for everyone and there's sure to be plenty of advice on how to give our local wildlife a helping hand. Nick and Melinda will share their experience setting up and delivering landscape scale conservation projects across the Central Chilterns, and more latterly the North Chilterns. Covering the establishment of farmer clusters, they will highlight the work supporting inspiring farmers to create and manage habitat across their farms – from chalk grassland restoration to hedgerow planting, soil health and everything in between.

Nick will also talk about the 'Tracking the Impact' project, his work with a team of 200+ volunteers carrying out bird, butterfly and plant surveys to track the impact of the work in conjunction with the BTO, Butterfly Conservation, Plantlife and BMERC.

As usual, there will be a brief report on the state of the river, topical Ver Valley news and plenty of time for any questions from the floor.



Cluster farm hedge ©Nick Marriner. Conservation grazing with Galloways ©Nick Marriner. Adonis Blue ©Allen Beechey

LATEST NEWS

More Records Broken

Monthly river levels have set new heights through the autumn with the highest mean monthly records since records began in 1956. Luton Lane and Redbourn Golf Club were under water after the 22nd September downpour. What's more, groundwater levels have been exceptionally high, five metres above average, with the wettest part of winter still to come.



Sewage: Never-ending Story

The discharges at Markyate Sewage Treatment Works only stopped for a month or so in August and started all over again in September. Sadly, as we go to press in mid-January the latest sewage discharge has racked up over 900 hours and still going with a yearly total of over 4000 hours reported for 2024. This inevitably raises nitrate and phosphate levels in the Ver, which are detrimental to a chalk stream's delicate ecological state. See page 2 for more on Markyate.



SAVE THE DATES: FUTURE OPEN MEETINGS

Tues 17th June

St Stephen Parish Centre, Bricket Wood,
AL2 3PJ. Details tbc

Tues 21st October

AGM Cottonmill Community Centre
AL1 2EF. Details tbc

Go with the flow

It's always a pleasure to be writing when there's contiguous flow from Markyate Cell, upstream of Markyate and river flow in December was the highest December flow since 1956, when records began. Likewise, groundwater levels at Ballingdon Farm at the head of the valley were at their highest end of December level since records began in 1975.

Quite probably the River Ver enjoyed better flows before these 'modern' records began and it's refreshing to see that generally, the river is coping well with the exceptional flow. A wet beginning to 2025 could of course change all that and the current Groundwater Flood Alert for the Trowley Bottom area near Flamstead, might yet herald more testing times.

Frustrating though it might be, to have several flooded footpaths and field edges, the river's wildlife – notably Otters and Stoneflies – is enjoying the additional flow of chalk groundwater.



Drier times

No doubt, the Ver will swing back to lower flows as it has done cyclically in times past (see the ups and downs on p5). The management of local water resources in times of drought remains a contentious matter but is easily forgotten when the Ver is so high. However, abstraction reductions are still in Affinity Water's 2025-29 (AMP8) plans and we await more on this in due course, now that Ofwat has approved their budget.

It'll be of most benefit to the upper Colne, apparently, but Affinity Water have confirmed that the annual abstraction from the aquifer near Westminster Lodge will drop by half – to 9 million litres a day for the year from March 31st 2025.

Above: Otter evidence;
below: March for Clean Water



Flooded Gorhambury path Jan 2025

Unwanted Sewage Record

Thames Water's performance at Markyate STW (Sewage Treatment Works) for 2024 concluded with over 4000 hours of sewage discharges. Unfortunately, as I write, 990 hours of continuous sewage has been released into the Ver since mid-December and is still ongoing in mid-January.

Thames Water has some work scheduled for 2025/6 to provide a small increase in capacity and a separate new storm outfall pipe is being installed too. These will make a small difference, especially in heavy rain but are unlikely to solve the issues the works has with high groundwater.

Of greater benefit would be sewer lining which is still only under consideration for the 2025-9 WINEP (Water Industry National Environmental Programme). We will be keeping up the pressure on the EA and Thames Water to implement that with the help of the local MP.

March for Clean Water

It seems a long time ago but thank you to all our members and friends who came to St Albans City station and to Westminster to show how much we care about our rivers, lakes and seas. Thank you too to the Ver's MPs, Daisy Cooper and Victoria Collins who came to wave us off on the day. It looks like we could be on a long rocky road to persuade the current Government to give rivers and the wider environment the protection and investment our Society would most appreciate.

Book your seats!

In addition to sewage discharges, the Ver receives plenty of nasty road runoff that pollutes the delicate chalk stream groundwater. Our testing programme is attempting to quantify exactly what's going on but it doesn't come cheap. To that end, we're running a fundraising event to boost our water testing budget. The Abbey Theatre has kindly donated a **Henrik Ibsen *An Enemy of the People*** 'charity performance' in May, when the Society can retain monies from ticket sales to members and friends.

Please book your seats today!

See p6 for full details.



Thank you
Richard;
Welcome Andy!

Special Thanks

And finally, a big thank you to Richard Wallis who has been juggling Action Group and Bailiff Coordinator roles over the past 12 months, after holding the former post since 2017. At last, Andy Gardiner, combined with a big hand from Lee Wood is taking the helm to organise our volunteering on the river for the foreseeable future. It would be useful to have someone looking after the Action Group tools and keeping them in good condition. Could that be you?



Fryth Mead
storm drain,
it's horrid!

There have been no trigger breaches in the autumn period and generally scores have been good – a considerable improvement from the summer. A Mayfly nymph was recorded by Clive Pickering at Holywell Hill in November, a site first. A few are now appearing regularly in Ed Haworth's Prae Close sample. This is the furthest upstream that Mayfly have been recorded on the Ver, to date.

The continued high water table has meant regular samples have been possible at Luton Lane, which is the nearest to the head of the Ver Valley that we conduct Riverfly sampling. Cased Caddis, Olives, Caseless Caddis and Gammarus have all recolonised the area, which was bone dry for a good few years until March 2023. What's more, eleven Stonefly were recorded in December. On chalk streams, Stoneflies are well known to reappear in 'winterbourne' sections when the water returns. However, they remain a rare invertebrate on the Ver with only a few recorded in the past, notably at Redbournbury Fishery. We've certainly not had a double-figure count before.

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.



©Keith Reynolds

The photo shows the largest one, with a body of around 10mm excluding tails and antennae. The others were considerably smaller. Allen Beechey at Chiltern Chalk Streams suggests that Stonefly often do well until the Gammarus arrive (indeed there was only one Freshwater Shrimp in the sample) and thereafter appear to be out-competed. It remains to be seen whether the resumption of sewage discharges upstream will affect these promising results.



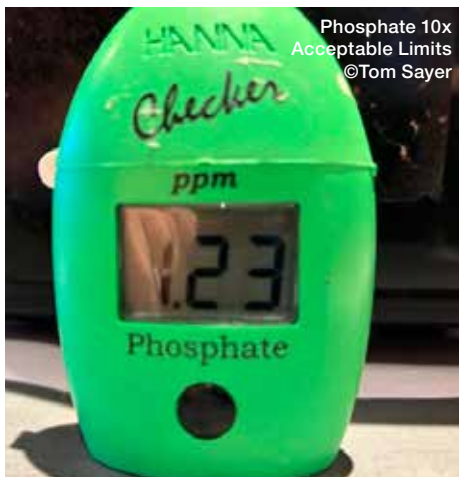
WATER QUALITY MONITORING

by JOHN PRITCHARD

We are now up to 13 quarterly monitoring points on the Ver, including Matt Fisher who has started sampling on the Colne at London Colney. Most points have achieved 'moderate ecological status' with high Nitrate levels responsible for this below par status. River Hill, below Markyate sewage works remains our worst point but Hyde Lane at Frogmore is another high Nitrate hotspot. We have a vacancy for a volunteer to take quarterly samples at Drop Lane, near Colney Street. If you'd like to take this on, please email johnp@riverver.co.uk

MudSpotter

Three volunteers are continuing to get wet while recording silty flows in heavy rain! When we have more data, we'll report back. The separate water and silt sampling programme is underway and our first results have just arrived. Preliminary results indicate a high incidence of heavy metals and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) which is not good for chalk stream health. A detailed update will be ready for the next newsletter.



We have strong flows of water on the full length of the river from Markyate down, for many months. Several Bailiffs have reported that this has created a clear channel in areas of abundant Watercress. Generally, the cress creates good cover for invertebrates and fish in low flow sections of the river. It also serves to keep the water cool in summer conditions. However, when flows return, it's easily parted by the water exposing clean gravel and giving a wider range of a chalk stream's inhabitants a chance to shine.



Water Cress parted at Porridge Pot,
©John Fisher and Redbourn (above)



Otter Spot

Animal magic

In the middle reaches, several Bailiffs have reported spots where Otter spraint has been deposited through the autumn – note the fishbones! Another mammal enjoying the river corridor is the Grey Squirrel. A ray of winter sunshine is just the excuse for a stretch on a favourite oak.

At Hyde Lane, Bailiff Brian Ellis and other locals were slightly concerned by a mysterious orange growth in the river beside the footbridge. In fact, it's no cause for alarm. This phenomenon is occasionally spotted on the Ver and is naturally occurring, iron-oxide bacteria. It can be due to rotting vegetation but often old iron items, like pipes from human activity, is the trigger.

Springs sprung

Despite the persistent high water, most of the Bailiffs have been able to report regularly over the last few months. John Fisher spotted the rare sight of springs running above the river level at the top of his stretch near M1 J9. It just goes to



Sunning Squirrels



Iron Oxide Bacteria,
©Alan Winn

show high groundwater levels are already this winter.

The fenced off, flooded area at the St Michael's end of Verulamium Park (Bell Meadow) has limited Vivien's reports but rumours of a boardwalk may mean a resumption of normal service before long.

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*	richard_wallis@btconnect.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	richard_wallis@btconnect.com
7. Bluehouse Hill to Bow Bridge	Roger Hall	rogerphall@hotmail.com
8. Bow Bridge to Redbournbury	John Pritchard*	johnp@riverver.co.uk
9. Redbournbury to Dolittle	Rhona Macdonald & Gareth Pountain	rhonajmacd@virginmedia.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.

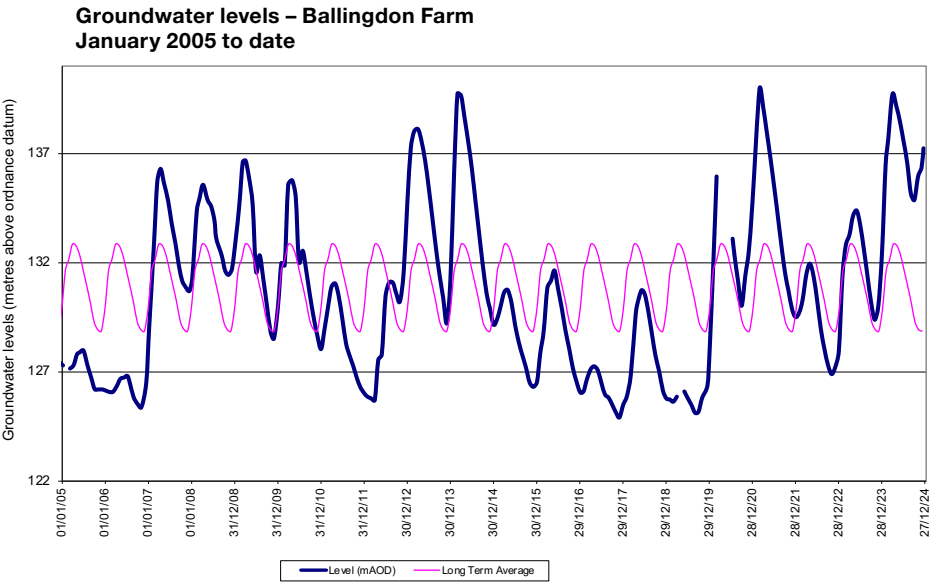
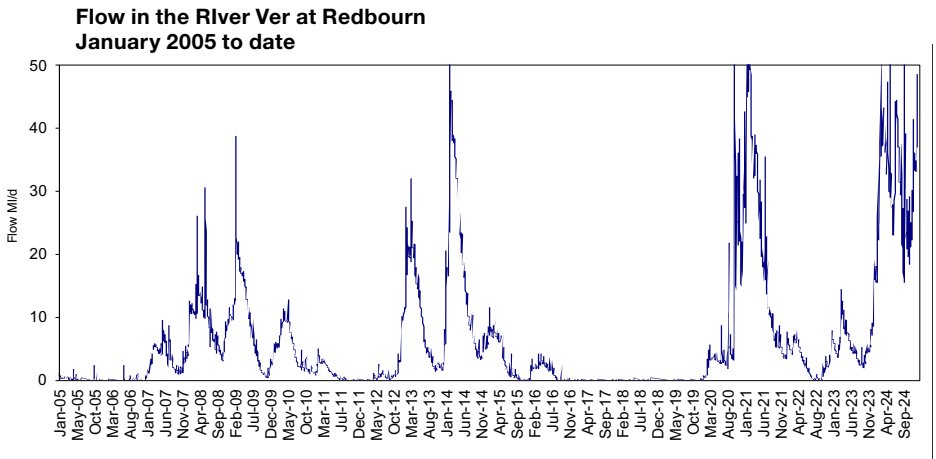
Higher and Higher

Just after we went to press with the September newsletter, the heavens opened, especially on Markyate! Normally, after falling all summer, it's more usual for groundwater to begin rising again in January. This time it started to climb from late September. What's more, these high monthly levels were almost all records for the time of year and mean December river flow was the highest since records began in 1956. Although autumn rainfall has been a below average, this should set the Ver up for a healthy summer in 2025 and if the late winter/early spring is wet, we might see flooded fields and more records broken.

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



Months	Groundwater measurement at Ballingdon Farm, mAOD [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Rothamstead)
October 2024	134.82 [130.47]	62.0 [-19.3]
November 2024	135.90 [130.43]	66.7 [-14.5]
December 2024	136.35 [130.61]	68.1 [-7.5]
January 2025	137.72 [132.54]	Not available yet



From top, left: River Hill, Dec 2024; Verlam End flood pools, Oct 2024 ©John Fisher; Dolittle Jan 2025 ©Bill Wolvey; Redbournbury, Jan 2025; Verulamium Park Jan 2025, ©Alison Debenham

An Enemy of the People

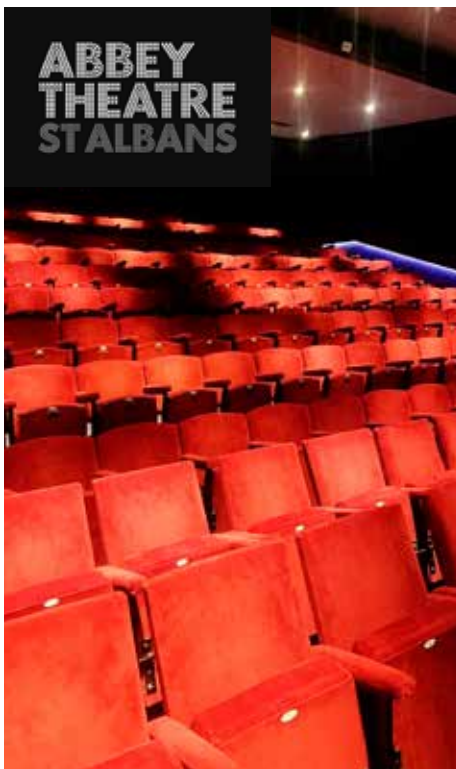
by Henrik Ibsen

A Ver Valley Society special performance at the **Abbey Theatre, St Albans** on **Thursday, 15th May, 7:30 – 10:15pm.** (Tickets £15 plus booking fee)

This is the BIG ONE! There will be a special performance of this topical play with receipts going to support the Society's River Ver water testing programme (each accredited laboratory test costs us almost £200). Please come along and bring your friends. It'll be a great VVS social occasion. The bar will be open during the interval and afterwards until 11pm.

Political intrigue, PR spin, whistle-blowing and divided opinions, all over poor water quality – the storyline couldn't be more apt!

Please don't delay, book your tickets today. Book here: <https://bit.ly/3PwKPh7>



HENRIK IBSEN'S AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

A version by **Rebecca Lenkiawicz** from a literal translation by **Charlotte Barslund.**

A COMPANY OF TEN production

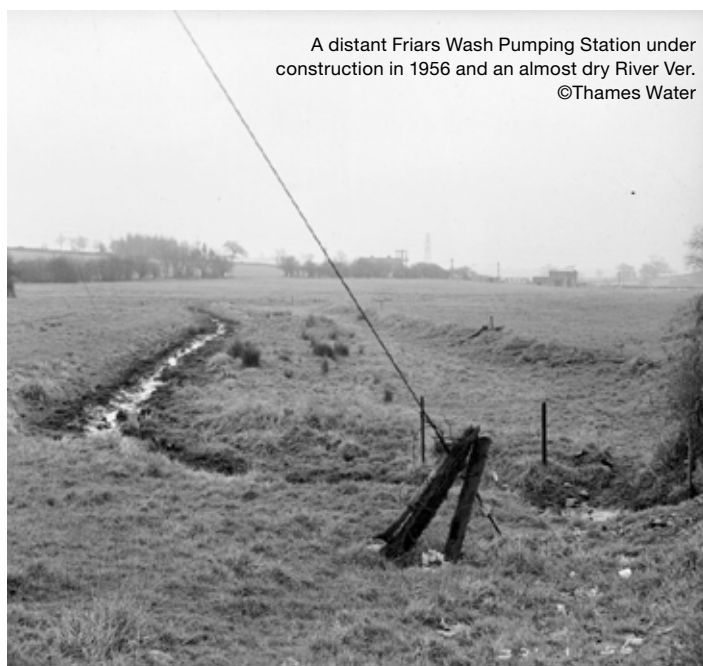
In this contemporary take on Ibsen's play, Dr Teresa Stockmann, a passionate and dedicated medical officer, discovers that the town's famed spa water is contaminated. Initially celebrated for revealing the truth to the community, Teresa soon faces fierce opposition from her brother, the mayor and other influential townsfolk who put money ahead of public health.

It's an emotive topic and apparently some swearing should be expected.

Abstraction and the River Ver

Andy Webb, former chairman of the Ver Valley Society (2003-2013), recently completed a fascinating review of abstraction in the Ver catchment, from pre-Roman times to the present day. Whether simply by drawing water directly from the river, digging wells or drilling boreholes, abstraction for drinking water has shaped the River Ver as we know it today. You'll find the 5-part article on the website at <https://www.riverver.co.uk/river-ver-and-abstraction/>

River Ver enthusiasts are reminded that St Albans Library hosts a wonderful archive of material related to our chalk stream. Drop in and take a look!



Testing times

Our plan to use citizen science to take on the large corporations received a significant setback over the festive period. Tom Sayer's all-important Phosphate testing stick, ready for deployment below Markyate sewage works, was sabotaged by a mouse. As yet the culprit remains at large!

Chalk stream celebrations

The Hertfordshire Natural History Society's 150th anniversary exhibition 'Wild about Hertfordshire', opens at St Albans Museum in March. Exhibits include a celebration of the geology and wildlife of Hertfordshire's chalk streams and a display from the HNHS collection of rare botany books (dating from the 15th century!). Work from local photographers will feature, including past winners of the 'Bird Photograph of the Year' competition. There will be wildlife talks and trails as well as quizzes, dressing up and other activities designed for children and families.

It's all happening from **Friday 21 March to Sunday 6 July** (10am to 4pm daily).

See more at www.hnhs.org



Herts chalk geology
©Melanie Woods



Everyone seems to be noticing the lack of small birds this winter which I think is down to their poor breeding last summer. I have had tit boxes in my garden for years and the last few years I have had a camera so I can see how they are doing. This year a pair made a mossy nest and then laid just six eggs which hatched but they all perished during that wet July, as the adults were unable to find the caterpillars essential for their development. If this is typical it would explain why we are not seeing so many birds this winter. Climate change is a problem as the seasons become blurred and the hatching of caterpillars is no longer always in sync with the hatching of young birds.

Encouraging owls

The Ver Valley Barn Owl project has been running for 20 years and I have had to refurbish a couple of boxes this winter. These along with a new box are going to be put up shortly and with quite a few sightings this winter I hope we can have a better year in 2025. Hopefully, the Barn Owl in James Gurney's picture will find a mate and use one of our boxes. We will be back to six boxes in the valley in 2025.

Wonderful waterfowl

Relatively unusual sightings have been a pair of Shelduck on the lake in Gorhambury by Pre-Mill and two pairs of Shoveler on the lake by Verlam End. I have never seen so many pools along the



Barn Owl ©James Gurney

valley after this wettest of autumns. Last autumn was interesting for some exotic birds. A pair of South African Shelduck in September and a Black Necked Swan in October were seen on Verulamium Lake. Neither of these are accepted as British Birds and were "escapes" from wildfowl collections. Black Necked Swans are from South America and there is a clue where the non-native Shelduck come from! I have seen a few Ruddy Shelduck which is a European species in the UK, including a single bird once along the Ver, but these would have been possible vagrants from Eastern Europe.

LATEST NEWS:

As we go to print, two Hertfordshire rarities have turned up in St Albans. A Yellow-browed Warbler has been seen enjoying the insects along the River Ver and around Verulamium Lake. Normally these small warblers live in Siberia and overwinter in southeast Asia, with some choosing southern Europe. It just shows that the natural warmth of a chalk stream makes it very attractive, especially in winter.

Another bird that flies south for the winter is the Black Redstart. For the second year a female has chosen the Cathedral as its winter home. It appears to have a liking for hibernating ladybirds and spends more time inside the building than out!

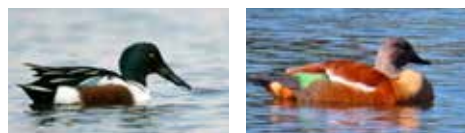
I am always pleased to hear about sightings.

john.fisher2023@outlook.com

Tel: 01582 792843 or 07845 152570



Black Redstart
©Rose Newbold



Above: Shoveler ©John Fisher; South African Shelduck ©Alison Debenham



Shelduck on Gorhambury pool



Black-necked Swan
©Michael Barrett



Yellow-browed Warbler ©Stuart Fox

MEMBERSHIP

by PETER HILL

A warm welcome to the new members who have joined recently: David Leishman, Sarah MacLaren, Charlie Kassel, Sandra Gray, Helen Gillett, Ed Hennessy, Catherine Nixon, Simon Armitage, Sue Walsh, Kathleen Gherardi and Helen Culverhouse.

May you enjoy your membership and we look forward to seeing you at the Society's events.



Not a member?

It's only £8 a year to join.

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



What can I say? Despite all the rain and the high water levels, our volunteers on the monthly Action Group and the Mid-Week volunteers have supported 19 working parties and contributed 563 hours of work in 2024 – our most ever!

Drop Lane was the venue in **September** where the volunteers tackled the overhanging branches that shaded out the river just below the footbridge. Working on the west bank we were able to open the canopy and improve the light level on the river.

In **October** we had a mid-week session at **Redbournbury Mill** with 9 volunteers where they made in-channel repairs to the riverside spilling below the Mill wheel,



completed a check of the bird boxes and started to remove the branches from a fallen tree that was laying in the mill pond.

After postponing October's main session, in **November** we had 24 volunteers at **Sopwell** working in two teams. The first team pruned the shading shrubs along both banks, either side of the Alban Way footpath. By lunchtime they had finished the work and the cuttings were neatly stacked. Now, the walkers on the Alban Way can see the river running under the bridge. The second team worked at Sopwell Mill Farm clearing the debris that had built up in the river by the road bridge.

December: As has become our tradition, the year ended for the working party at the Chequers near **Redbourn** where we had 3 teams. The first group started behind the Chequers, where a significant channel blockage was unclogged and some of the brash that had fallen from overhead was removed. After so many dry years, the river is certainly a picture there at present.

Our second team continued the work started last year working on the

The Saturday Action Group sessions will be on Sat 15th February, Sat 15th March, Sat 19th April and Sat 17th May, with venues announced nearer the time. See www.riverver.co.uk/current-year for latest details and sign up for email updates on Saturday and midweek activity by contacting Andy Gardiner (see details below).



encroaching vegetation on the footpath into Redbourn, to make the path safer and easier to walk and cycle.

Finally, we had a small team thinning the overhead canopy and bankside scrub where the Ver leaves The Park and goes under the Nickey Line. The volunteers then joined the Bailiffs in the Chequers to get warm and enjoy a welcome festive drink.



YOUR COMMITTEE

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Vice Chairman & Bailiff Co-ordinator

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Riverfly Co-ordinator

John Pritchard

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joe.w.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