



Ver Valley Society NEWSLETTER

OPEN MEETING

Tuesday 17th June at 7.30pm

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

Amorous Amphibians

Behavioural Ecology and the Flamstead Toad Patrol Report



Guest speaker:
Dr Julie Battersby
Newt, Frog and Toad Expert

member of both the Beds and Herts Amphibian & Reptile Groups and a Toad Patrol Coordinator.

It will be a delight to learn more about some of the Ver's most secretive inhabitants from a local expert with plenty of inside information. Dr Julie Battersby not only studied the behaviour of Smooth and Palmate Newts at the Open University but is now a

Julie's talk covers the behavioural ecology of the amphibians, especially those that breed in the River Ver at Flamstead. What's more, fresh from a taxing couple of months on the lookout for toads, she'll be revealing details of their unstoppable



migration in the breeding season and why we don't have Frog Patrols!

There will be a short report on the current state of the river, notable wildlife, the latest Ver Valley news and plenty of time for any questions from the floor.



Pics: ©Julie Battersby

LATEST NEWS

A great night out!

Thank you to everyone who came to see An Enemy of the People and to the Abbey Theatre for gifting us a fund-raising night. It helped generate over £2500 to put some sparkle back into the Ver. The funds will go a long way to helping us keep a detailed eye on water quality, using laboratory testing and investigating longer-term solutions to the most acute issues.



Markyate: making headlines

When the official national sewage discharge figures for 2024 were published in March, the BBC knew where to come to frame the story – the River Ver. Correspondent Jonah Fisher walked the banks and could see the sorry state of the Ver for himself. It wasn't really the tale the Ver Valley Society wanted to be telling but thanks to our citizen scientists, the dire situation gained national attention and we trust, accelerated future investment by Thames Water.



SAVE THE DATES: FUTURE OPEN MEETINGS

Tues 21st October

AGM Cottonmill Community Centre
AL1 2EF. Details tbc

Thurs 26th February 2026

Redbourn Village Hall. Details tbc.

Ups and downs

The Ver is a feisty river and it's always difficult to predict what might happen next! It's pleasing to report that contiguous flow is still beginning upstream of Markyate Cell, which is a very rare occurrence. However, with several months of no real rainfall during the latter part of the prime aquifer recharge period of early spring, the river could be heading for leaner times. Hold tight for the inevitable roller coaster ride.

The system is creaking

There's something terribly wrong with the system when Markyate STW (Sewage Treatment (sic) Works) can release 3383 hours of sewage in 2024 straight into the River Ver. And then do it again in 2025 with a continuous 3200 hours to mid-May and still going. Often Markyate has been the only works discharging on the whole Thames Water estate.

It's even worse when you consider there hasn't been significant rain for over two months – which might just have provided a valid reason. It's accepted that groundwater is high but the Environment Agency has confirmed that this is no excuse "...all day dry spills – no matter how small – are now classified as pollution incidents." EA Press Release (27/03/25)



It's the apparent lack of urgency to sort the issue that's perhaps the most alarming. With the discharge figures we have seen and the environmental conditions on the ground, one might have expected some early action and the local MP, Parish Councils and landowners provided with answers.

Our enquiries to Thames Water have revealed that some work is planned later this year to line the sewer pipes upstream of Markyate STW. And some construction work at Markyate is scheduled for the autumn/winter to improve performance in 'wet weather conditions'. Whether this work will be enough to make a significant difference, only time will tell.



Sewage scare

The situation at Markyate has sparked a whole raft of enquiries and it's good to have willing volunteers and the equipment to provide at least some answers. At River Hill, Flamstead E. coli levels were twenty times the lowest safe bathing limit with 20,000 colonies per 100mL. Downstream at Luton Lane and in St Albans we could find little evidence of E. coli. Remember these results are only indicative of what

might be happening at one point in time and cannot be used as any guarantee of water quality.

Is this sewage? That's a popular question too. Most often it relates to algae where the hot sunny weather and warm water encourages the algae to grow quickly. The algae releases oxygen during the day which encourages pieces to break off and float to the surface. These are easily mistaken for raw sewage but fortunately are nothing of the sort.



Beautiful day

No matter what the challenges, there should always be time to stop and enjoy the wildlife along the Ver. In 2020, Beautiful Demoiselles were first spotted on our river when they didn't even breed in Herts. This year as I enjoyed a quiet stroll, I counted six or more together in early May. It seems pretty certain that over the past 5 years, they have now

colonised the Ver. Especially as all the males had brown wings that only last for a short time after emergence, before they turn a beautiful deep blue. They are similar to the more familiar Banded Demoiselle – the male Banded has a blue thumbprint on its wings and the female clear wings, whereas the female Beautiful retains her brown ones. I hope you find something beautiful in June!





Alan Winn sampling near the Chequers, Redbourn

Generally, invertebrate scores along the Ver have been well above the trigger levels. No doubt the long dry spell has meant mostly clean groundwater predominates in the river – excellent water quality for insect larvae.

We welcome two new surveyors who have just completed their Riverfly course. Congratulations to Charlie Kassel and Pippa Sinfield who will be allocated sampling spots shortly. It also feels as if

Peter T, Ed and Nathan have just started too... after several years their locations have been given official trigger scores! They now have a target to beat every month.

Our good run of Stonefly records continues with more found at Luton Lane through the spring. A first record for Drop Lane was recorded too. With so much water about in February, there was an opportunity to sample at Verlam End,



Verlam End



Cased Caddis using shells

our furthest upstream sample ever. The river channel was dry there in November 2023 but it only took a flow of water for the past 18 months for Cased Caddis, Olives, Freshwater Shrimps and some coveted Stonefly to recolonise.

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

In our most recent rounds of testing, only the Ver at Bow Bridge was rated as 'good ecological status'. All other thirteen monitoring points scored poor or moderate ecological status. The main culprit is the level of nitrates in the river. This is generally attributed to agricultural fertilisers, and just as likely from years ago as from fertiliser applied last week. Groundwater itself is high in Nitrate*, see this sample from a tap near St Albans. With tap water coming from the same aquifer as the river, it's no wonder that the river has high levels too. Sewage can also be a contributory factor to the Ver's high level and of course there is a ready source near Markyate, at the head of the valley.

In the last quarter Joe and Carl have been taking samples of road runoff in



Clear water sample at St Michaels



Sampling dirty water on the Red

wet weather for lab analysis. The long dry March weather has also afforded a good opportunity to sample the base groundwater induced flow that'll help establish the level of pollution rain introduces into the Ver and enable solutions to be discussed.

Many thanks to an anonymous member who saw the recent BBC News coverage and was so enraged by the situation at Markyate that they kindly donated an Ammonia tester. It's good to have an extra weapon in our armoury that will to allow us to check another determinant of a river's ecological status.

MudSpotter

It hasn't rained much in the past three months but when it has, our volunteers have been on hand to log how much polluted water is pouring into the Ver and Red. Thanks to Paul, Joe M and Steve for getting wet.

**The current drinking water standard is 50 mg/L*

The Society has probably the oldest river 'Friends' group, dating back to 1976. And our bailiff team (often known as 'River Wardens' in younger groups have been keeping a weather eye on the Ver for nearly 50 years. It's a popular task and presently we have a full complement. One minor adjustment this month, after 13 years Giles Harrison has moved from Section 4 New Barnes Mill to pastures new – well downstream to Section 1 below Moor Mill! Welcome to Steve Larkworthy who joins the team on Section 4 and a very fond farewell to Sue and Martin Frearson who are hanging up their boots after many years covering the Moor Mill section.

It seems a distant memory in the end of April sunshine but despite the heavy rainfall over the winter months most of our bailiffs have been able to report on the state of the river. Even when the report is "cannot access, water too deep" it does tell us what is actually happening on every stretch of the Ver.

Wellies packed way

Most of the UK is now familiar with the state of the river at Flamsted but few know that at the top of the next stretch – the footpath through Verlam End (just below M1 J9) the Ver was out of its bank and the footpath was under water and inaccessible. This very rarely happens.



The water levels have now fallen back from the February high with footpaths again accessible without wellies. Now's the perfect time to enjoy the new life in the valley.



Warm weather wildlife

The warm weather has brought a flurry of wildlife reports from the bailiffs. Water Voles have been particularly active and a quiet 20 minutes by the river can sometimes bring the reward of a cautious vole emerging from the vegetation to nibble on a favourite plant. Butterflies have had a good early start to the season and Small Coppers have been spotted on the farmland of Walk 4. Back along the river Large Red Damselflies are to be found resting on the nettles.

Signal Crayfish sightings have been received from up and down the river. We'd be delighted if there was a way to control



this invasive crustacean. They undermine the banks of the river and eat the eggs of our native fish; mind you a large Chub or passing Otter won't refuse one as a tasty meal.



Top, main pic: Stitchwort; above left: Celery-leaved Buttercup; above right: Cuckoo Flower;

Far left: Verlam End Bridge March 2025 ©John Fisher; Large Red Damselfly; Signal Crayfish; Small Copper ©Rupert Evershed

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	Giles Harrison	gpharrison13@gmail.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	Steve Larkworthy	steve@larkworthy.me.uk
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
12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)	Cathy & Phil Comfort	members@riverver.co.uk phil_cathy_comfort@yahoo.co.uk
13. River Red	Joe Randall	joe.w.randall@hotmail.co.uk

* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

On the way down

Ten weeks of dry weather from late February to early May has seen groundwater begin to fall although they remain well above the long term average. River levels are dropping too but they have been remarkably resilient with flow recorded starting upstream of Markyate Cell for many weeks. Here, a rarely seen lake collected in the Ver’s channel behind the flood prevention bund thanks to the river rather than any rain. There appears to be plenty of water in the aquifer to assure healthy flow through the summer but no doubt, come autumn, we’ll all be on the edge of our seats waiting for the winter recharge once again.

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)
February 2025	138.47 [134.76]	51.3 [-5.6]
March	138.61 [135.58]	6.3 [-40.8]
April	138.29 [135.71]	27.7 [-26.3]
May	137.39 [135.30]	Not available yet

Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn
January 2005 to date

Groundwater levels – Ballingdon Farm
January 2005 to date



Photos from top left: Markyate Cell ©Bob Norrish March 2025; Belle Meadow April 2024; Verulamium Park May 2025 ©Lee Wood; Watling Street, Frogmore April 2025 ©Steve Preece; Moor Mill April 2025 [couldn’t find Ver from the Alban Way ©Giles Harrison Feb 2025;]

Moorhen stops play!

The midweek volunteers have been out in force through the spring. In March at Redbournbury Mill, a willow in the tailrace was the target of pollarding, with some of the cut willow earmarked for artwork to be displayed at St Albans Cathedral. A second visit to the Mill in April wasn't quite so successful. Intending to remove some brash under a bridge our wader clad team discovered a Moorhen's nest on the floating debris and had to beat a hasty retreat.



Where were you in 1993?

Someone probably had a great night out back in the day and tossed their litter from Watling Street onto the banks of the Ver. And over 30 years later, a Hofmeister lager can and a Walkers crisp packet, both dating from the 1993, emerged from the undergrowth to be properly binned once and for all.



Water Vole ©Richard Restell

Vole paradise?

It's been an excellent spring for the Ver's Water Voles. The settled weather has doubtless encouraged early breeding success and a quiet 15 minutes by the water in April was often rewarded with the sight of several voles sneaking out of the bankside cover for a tasty snack. Richard Restell has been out with his camera to capture some stunning shots.

Schools programme

Thanks to our volunteers, under the guidance of Lee Wood, who have already entertained well over 100 St Albans school children in 2025. With the help of Laura from Chiltern Chalk Stream Project, fascinating sessions have provided a great insight into the local geography and the invertebrate life in the Ver.



©Lee Wood

Butterflies and Bats

Please keep your eyes on the website. We are planning a guided trip to the chalk



Marbled White
©Allen Beechey

grassland at the head of the Ver to look for chalk-specific butterflies and help with some conservation work. We'll announce a date for our popular summer bat walk in Verulamium Park too.



Chalk Bournes Project

An interesting research project is underway on a number of local chalk streams, including the Ver. Funded by Affinity Water and led by UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (UKCEH), with the Open University, it aims to explore many aspects of intermittent sections of chalk streams and the importance of these ever-changing sections to the river. New techniques such as drones with thermal capabilities are being combined with good old foot-slogging fieldwork to help better understand the flow regimes and marginal habitat.

In recent years, a fairly rare bird has been recorded at various sites in Redbournbury Water Meadows. It is the Grasshopper Warbler, an amazing bird which flies from tropical Africa to breed in Europe every April. When they arrive, they call from deep in sedge and only occasionally perch in the open on a bush. The call has been likened to the ratchet of a fishing reel or a grasshopper. They have to be pretty close for my aged ears but younger folk and the Merlin App pick them up. It is possible that they have bred as they stay deep in the sedge and their behaviour is very much like a mouse, as there is no need for them to fly once they have secured a mate and are nesting.

Owl delight

The dry spring has benefitted our Barn Owls by facilitating easy hunting. Overnight rain renders hunting impossible since the downy feathers of Barn Owls quickly become waterlogged. A pair near Redbournbury have been seen hunting in broad daylight and have proved a big attraction to local photographers. They have been particularly good - keeping their distance from the nest box and taking pictures from a gateway. I hope



their respect for this protected species continues.

The VVS Barn Owl project started in 2004 when the first two boxes were put up. A few of the boxes need replacing as they have deteriorated beyond repair. Three are arriving this autumn so that the success can continue. Pierre Cowlard, my essential helper, and I will begin checking boxes in mid-June and if we have successful broods, we should be ringing the young in July.

Grey days

I have had a delightful Grey Wagtail visiting our garden pond for the last four winters, but he always leaves in the Spring. A pair have been seen regularly by Pre Mill, and it looks like they have a nest nearby. Other good places to look for Grey Wagtails are Redbournbury Mill and Shafford Mill.

The Grey Herons on the lake are now down to about five pairs and as the trees get bigger it is now difficult to ring the young. The Little Egrets had a disastrous year in 2024 after being washed out with the July rains. There are about ten pairs around this year and the young from two nests have already ringed. Obviously, the dry weather has suited them.

Kestrel recovery

Kestrels, which seem to have struggled in recent years, seem to be doing much better this year. They have used VVS boxes a few times, but they still prefer tree holes, unlike Barn Owls which could be renamed the Box Owl as it is thought as many as 70% use boxes nowadays.



Peregrine update

There was sad news when the Peregrines eggs were destroyed on St Albans Abbey in April. As I write, the Hertfordshire Wildlife Crime Unit is still investigating the damage to the eggs as it could be a criminal matter. However, after the pair was seen mating again, they now have a second clutch of eggs which is being incubated. The Abbey have tightened up their security and, as they are an experienced pair, I reckon it will be a win for nature with young fledglings seen again soon.



I am always pleased to hear about sightings.
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MEMBERSHIP

by PETER HILL

The society continues to grow. Thank you to the new members who have joined since the last Newsletter: David Ring, Hari Bhambra, Charles Butler, Clive Pickering, Emily Spry, Rupert Evershed, Pauline Willis, Selim Cellek, Alison Moss, Treena Greany, Wendy Edwards, Andrew Gush, Kitty Sullivan, Peter Dooley, Betta Morgan, Jennifer Edie, Chris Xinari, Pam Lidford and David Firby. I hope you will enjoy the society's events and support its activities which help keep the Ver as a wonderful local asset.



Not a member?

It's only £8 a year to join.

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



The **New Year** saw our new co-ordinator Andy Gardiner start the steep learning curve to get him up and running the Action Group! His launch event was in the **Cottonmill Lane Allotments** where, with the support of members, we were able to access both banks of the Ver. The primary task was to cut-back the in-channel trees adjacent to the swimming club to control bankside erosion before the weir was removed. Some of willows on the bankside were pollarded, where the aim is to have trees at different stages of development as this is better for the wildlife.

The wet weather and the high water levels made the **February** working party planning pretty complex but Andy rose to the occasion. At **Hyde Lane** a small in-channel team went south to trim fallen trees that were causing bank erosion and an in-channel team went north pollarding willow. There were also teams pruning



back vegetation obstructing the paths, installing bird boxes and litter-picking.

March took the group back to **Frogmore** where we had 24 volunteers attending. The in-channel team removed fallen trees above the bridge leading to the permissive path. They did an excellent job restoring the lower section in quite deep water and used the cut material as in-fill. A tree that had fallen that had fallen across the path was cut up and removed by our second team, whilst the third team cut-back the brambles to make walking the footpath a less challenging experience!

The Saturday Action Group sessions will be on Sat 21st June, Sat 19th July, Sat 16th August and Sat 20th September, with venues announced nearer the time. Sign up for email invitations to Saturday and/or midweek activity by contacting Andy Gardiner (see details below). More details are at www.riverver.co.uk/current-year



April saw us on a stretch of the river that has not been worked previously. This is the left bank north of Smug Oak Lane working the west bank around **Moor Mill**. Working northwards overhanging branches were cut back to open the canopy; in-channel

encroaching willow was pushed back to stop bank erosion in several spots around the mill. Our litter pickers had a bumper harvest courtesy of the footpath at the rear of the site.



Having completed the handover, I would like to thank the hundreds of Ver Valley Society volunteers who have supported me during my 8 years as Action Group Co-ordinator.

YOUR COMMITTEE

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Riverfly Co-ordinator

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@stalban.gov.uk

Water Leaks (Affinity Water):
0800 376 5325