



# Ver Valley Society NEWSLETTER

## OPEN MEETING

Thursday 26th February at 7.30pm

Redbourn Village Hall AL3 7LW. FREE event – all welcome.



### The Hidden Life of Winterbournes

**Guest speaker:**  
**Charlotte Hawkins**  
Environment Agency,  
Freshwater Ecologist

Now you see it, now you don't! This could be the description of the River Ver around Redbourn as its flow and starting point vary from year to year. Believe it or not, this ever-changing state is just the sort of place some creatures prefer.

After ten years monitoring Hertfordshire's rivers, Charlotte highlights the value of intermittent streams, the wildlife they nurture, and how citizen science – including the new CrowdWater app – can help communities track changes and protect hidden habitats. Please join us as our guest speaker reveals *The Hidden Life of Winterbournes*.

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



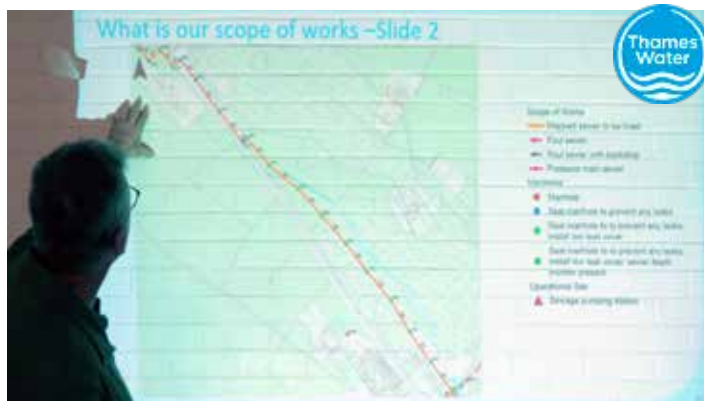
The winterbourne Ver at Porridge Pot  
©Peter Hill

## SAVE THE DATES: NEXT OPEN MEETINGS

**Tues 16th June 2026**  
St Stephen Parish Centre, Bricket Wood.  
Details tbc.

**Tues 20th October 2026 AGM**  
Lower Hall, Dagnall Street Baptist  
Church AL3 5EE. Details tbc.

## LATEST NEWS



VVS Bailiff Phil inspects the sewer lining plan

### Sewage success

Thames Water has begun work on the critical phase of work in Markyate – lining 7kms of pipes and sealing manholes upstream of the sewage treatment works. This will prevent a great deal of groundwater from entering the sewer, inundating the works and leading to the lengthy sewage discharges directly

into the Ver. It's a comprehensive storm overflow programme that extends 4km down the Ver Valley from Kensworth Lynch, through Markyate to the sewage works, south of the village. The fact that this work is happening is

due in no small measure to the attention the Ver Valley Society has generated and the pressure Victoria Collins MP has brought to bear too. However, we'll only find out just how effective the work has been in the next high groundwater year. Thanks should also go to the residents of Markyate who are enduring six months of work in the village, in order that the programme can be completed.

### Broken Benches

You may have noticed some of the interpretive oak benches along the Ver, although ageing gracefully as intended, are in need of repair or replacement. The benches were originally funded from a Heritage Lottery Grant in 2010, plus monies from other parties including Herts County Council who ultimately own them. We are working with HCC to organise a programme to ensure there are benches along the Ver for decades to come. See p6 and visit the VVS website to see how you might help!





1976  
50  
2026

## 50 Years

What a privilege to be the incumbent Chair as the Ver Valley Society celebrates the 50th Anniversary of its foundation. It's sobering to note that it's taken all of those 50 years for significant abstraction reductions to come about and give the Ver a chance of a better future. We are also living with a legacy that considers our rivers are drains and the most efficient way to get pollution to the sea. It's a tall order, but I hope that our increased efforts to improve water quality in the river will not take another 50 years to bear fruit.

In the meantime, there are plenty of reasons to celebrate and activities are in hand to mark our golden jubilee! I invite you to participate whenever you can.



## Chalk Stream Challenge

Over the past few years, the Society has been increasing its support for young people, to help expand their knowledge and enjoyment of the River Ver. However, we receive many more requests than we have volunteer days available. It's very fitting that, in 2026, we are launching the Chalk Stream Challenge to enable individuals and groups to discover the Ver and care about it for generations to come. There will be a walk map and trail taking 1-2 hours exploring the Ver and its surroundings. In addition, we will have



## The Ver in 2026

As I sit penning this piece, it's pouring down but it needs to! The Ver catchment in 2025 was notably dry and the autumn rains, although occasionally significant, delivered a below average performance.

One way or another, the flow of our rivers will always be linked to consumer demand for water. The Society's work is never done.

With an eye to the future, it was useful to host a walk along the lower Ver in December, with members of the Environment Agency's local team. It's always handy to discuss the challenges and opportunities the river faces and contemplate possible improvements.



## Citizen science

In the spirit of collaboration, this autumn VVS volunteers have been peering into the river looking for Brown Trout redds (the clean gravel depressions where trout lay their eggs), to supplement EA knowledge. They are not easy to photograph but we managed some blurry examples. We'll be out next spawning season to extend our knowledge.

## Success breeds success

More initiatives coming! Thanks to the Society's success in recent years, not least in developing a significant pool of volunteers who will turn their hand to any number of river habitat tasks, we have attracted support from many quarters. Recently, several benefactors have contributed useful sums which have allowed us to invest in better equipment and investigate more ambitious projects along the Ver. In the fullness of time, some of the mystery benefactors may be happy to come forward but for now must remain tantalisingly anonymous!

River Dipping kits to loan out to allow supervised groups to explore the river itself. Thanks go to Lee for collaborating with the Chilterns Chalk Stream Project to sort out the dozen artworks and logistics. Launch details will be announced on our website in a few weeks.

## Planning plea

And finally, there's a great deal of proposed development in the Ver valley, especially around Redbourn, that may affect the river directly or indirectly. If you have some planning expertise and would like to join the team to bat on behalf of the Ver, please get in touch. We'd love to have some extra help.



Results for the autumn period were generally good along the whole river. Even the one spot at Redbournbury Mill which had been below par improved to the trigger level by December, reports Max.

Mayfly (Ephemera Danica) were the subject of the best news in late 2025. In the past couple of years, Prae Close, in St Albans, has become the upstream limit where nymphs have occurred in a kick sample. These sizable insects are poor flyers and although the females fly a short way upstream to lay their eggs, they tend to remain close to where they hatched. It was remarkable when Pippa reported a first ever Mayfly nymph in her sample at Luton Lane (4.5 miles upstream of Prae Close) and then Alan found another first example behind the Chequers Inn at Redbourn, in November. What's more as we go to press, Bill has just logged Dolittle's first ever Mayfly nymph, just south of Redbourn. Numbers are on the rise at the urban sampling points in St Albans too. They are certainly more numerous on the Ver now than at any time



Mayfly nymph at Dolittle ©Bill Wolvey  
Top: Mayfly

since sampling began in 2012. Look out for the large adults on the wing, along the river at the end of May!

Pippa's Luton Lane joy quickly turned to disappointment, when the river disappeared there in December. It is a winterbourne section that in the past



No flow at Luton Lane ©Pippa Sinfield

70 years has suffered from extended dry periods that can last for several years. The final closure of Friars Wash pumping station with no more 'emergency' abstraction might just reduce the dry periods to the occasional year, once again.

Max testing at Redbournbury

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

Ten FreshWater Watch samples were taken on the Ver in October with only two (Sopwell and New Barnes Mill) achieving 'Good Ecological Status'. River Hill and Luton Lane both suffered from high nitrate and phosphate loadings to condemn them to 'Poor Ecological Status'. In Verulamium Park, a high nitrate reading led to another 'Poor'. In contrast, our support for monitoring on the upper Colne produced two 'Good Ecological Status' scores in London Colney.



## E. coli testing

There have been concerns from many quarters about the high levels of E. coli detected in the Ver, especially in the Flamstead area when sewage has been discharged directly into the river. In Verulamium Park too, parents and dog owners have been worried about playing in the river and there's nothing like social media to add fuel to the fire. In order to offer some factual support, the Society will be regularly testing the river for E. coli from Easter 2026. Thanks to a generous



donation, we will be deploying an ALERT One unit, which will give quick results and remove the two-week wait for lab scores to come back. Although the results cannot give a categoric 'all clear' they will, at least, give river users a guide to water quality at a fixed point in time, at a chosen site. In addition to our monitoring programme, it should be possible to test more widely on demand for c£25 a time, which will cover the cost of consumables.

Above left: E. coli analyser ©ALERT One

In contrast to a year ago, when the Ver ran along its whole length from Kensworth Lynch, this January the head of the river is currently the ponds and springs at the north end of Redbourn golf course. There is also a ponded section below the treated effluent outfall at Markyate Sewage Treatment Works but around it, the natural flow has gone. Indeed, Bailiffs John and Peter report that the river disappeared at Verlam End in October and the flow under the bridge at Luton Lane dried up in November.

### Pollution patrol

The Society's Bailiffs have been keeping eyes and ears on the Ver since the 1970s. Many groups have formed on other rivers in the past 50 years and River Wardens seems to be the title accorded these days. No matter what the name, it's the observations that count. Steve Larkworthy reported dead fish, probably roach, on his section to the EA in October. Fortunately, it proved to be an isolated incident and no further issues have arisen.



Another visible issue that occurs from time to time – the latest incident reported by Steve in December – is orange water coming from an outfall pipe directly into the river. Often this is from 'dewatering' where a trench or foundations are being pumped out to a street drain to allow building work to take place. The silt and sediment then empty directly into the river, which is not good for its health – smothering fish eggs and invertebrates.



Settlement tanks should be employed to ensure that only clean water is discharged. This particular event turned out to be very small-scale and short-lived but any concerns should be phoned to the EA's pollution hotline on 0800 807060.



From left: Ivy; Hawthorn; Hazel

### Fruit and nut

The frost-free spring of 2025 and the warm summer encouraged a bumper crop of berries which have been noted by many of our Bailiffs. Plump sloes, haws and ivy have been a prime source of winter food, especially for Fieldfares and Redwings. And the circle continues, with the pink female flowers of Hazel and the male catkins already showing along the river near Redbournbury.



Bailiff Peter taking water temperature ©Melanie Woods

### 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.

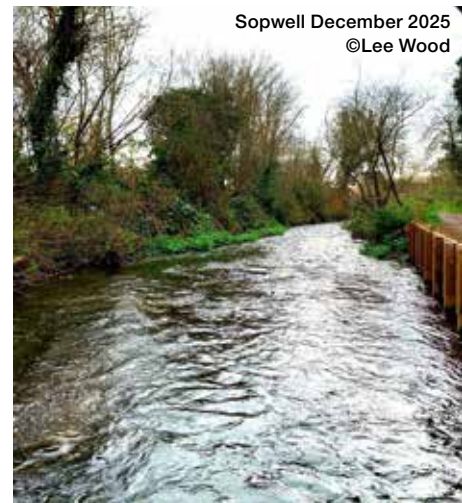
1. R Colne to Moor Mill	Giles Harrison	gpharrison13@gmail.com
2. Moor Mill to Burydell Lane	Brian Ellis*	brianparkstreet@aol.com
3. Burydell Lane to New Barnes Mill	Bruce Banfield-Taylor*	richard_wallis@btconnect.com
4. New Barnes Mill to Sopwell Mill	Steve Larkworthy	steve@larkworthy.me.uk
5. Sopwell 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	Joe Randall	joe.w.randall@hotmail.co.uk
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.

# A dry year recorded

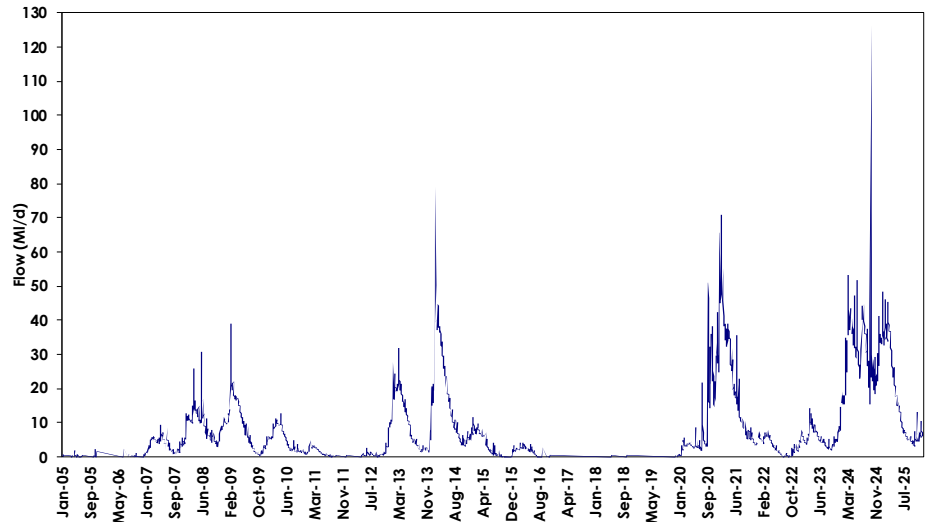
The autumn period saw much better weather in the in the Ver Valley but the year as a whole saw rainfall at only 75% of the long-term average. Groundwater continued to fall steadily, despite one or two notable wet days in November and December. The aquifer is now almost 10 metres below January's level last year – meaning the springs that drive the river start much further down the valley. There are only two months or so remaining when, if it rains, the aquifer recharges well. It could be a tough year.

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

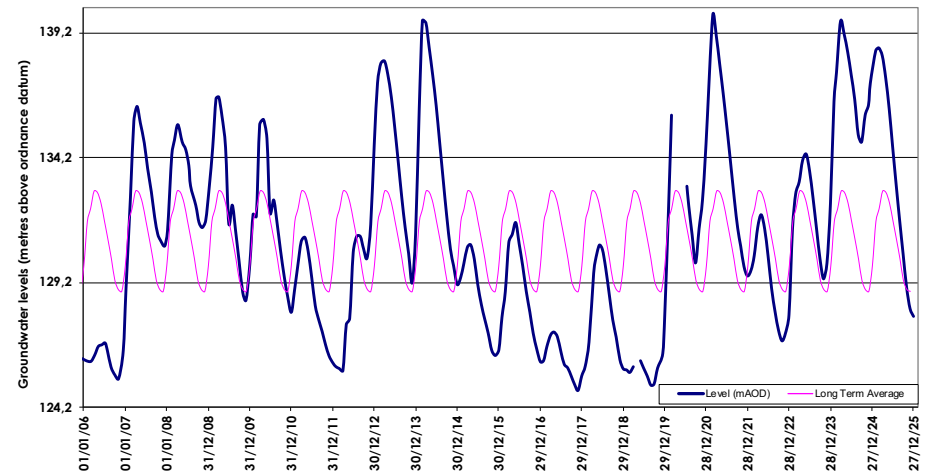


Months	Groundwater measurement at Ballingdon Farm, mAOD [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Rothamstead)
October 2025	130.34 [130.47]	57.3 [-24.0]
November	129.03 [130.43]	90.1 [8.9]
December	128.15 [130.43]	70.6 [-4.9]
January 2026	127.84 [132.54]	Not available yet

Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn January 2005 to date



Groundwater levels – Ballingdon Farm January 2006 to date



## Ver Valley Walking Festival

To celebrate our 50th Anniversary there will be an opportunity to walk all eight of the Ver Valley walks in June. What's more, they will all be guided to add a little history to the trip. On Super Sunday (21st June) you can choose to walk the River Ver Trail from the source at Kensworth or the Confluence at Bricket Wood to Verulamium Park where we will be hosting a River Dipping and Picnic in the Park. The brainchild of former society chairman, Andy Webb the Festival, spanning 16th-26th June, will have something for everyone. More details will be announced after Easter.



## A Walk on the Chalk

Take the chance of a walk on the chalk of Dunstable Downs, led by Haydon

Bailey, Chairman of the Herts Geological Society. You'll tour the edges of the massive Kensworth quarry, at the top of the Ver Valley. This gives a good perspective of the scrambled layers of soft chalk, hard chalk, nodular beds and

marl seams that the rain has to permeate before it emerges as springs to feed the River Ver. Put Saturday 21st March in your diary and look out for booking details on the VVS website, very soon.

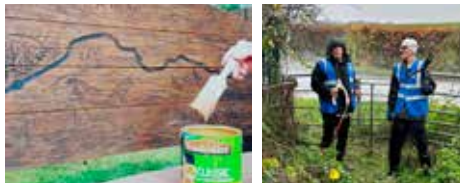
Haydon & Walk on the Chalk ©Melanie Woods

## Otter signs

The above average river flow over the past two years has seen a resurgence of wildlife along the river. Fish have certainly enjoyed the conditions with sizable Brown Trout, Chub and even Carp all spotted by Bailiffs, up and down the Ver.



Deeper water and a relative abundance of fish has seen more regular signs of Otters in a number of areas with fish bones and scales easily identifiable. Though, despite all the evidence, no one has actually seen an Otter yet!



## The Flying Squads

The Flying Squad, led by Julian Green and Andy Webb, is already tackling overgrown and littered sections of the eight River Ver Trails, ensuring paths stay clear and enjoyable year-round. Six missions have been completed, with more planned for spring 2026.

The Benches Task Force, guided by Mel Woods, will work as required, refurbishing the eight benches and information boards along the river. Training is provided and no experience necessary. Hands-on work starts shortly. To join either group, please contact Andy Gardiner.

Above: Benches ©Melanie Woods  
Flying Squad ©Andy Gardiner

## 100 Black Poplars

Native Black Poplars are a majestic tree but sadly one of Britain's rarest. They are native to Hertfordshire, but are rare here too, found in the wetlands and along the county's chalk streams. Nicholas Buxton, the High Sheriff of Hertfordshire, is leading a campaign to reintroduce 100 Black Poplars during his year of office. If you know of any suitable sites, please email [black.poplars2025@gmail.com](mailto:black.poplars2025@gmail.com) for more information.



## It's Christmas!

A big thanks to Lee, Angela and Mel for creatively decorating our chalk stream entry in the St Saviour's Christmas Tree Festival!

Christmas Tree ©Lee Wood



### Tasty trout

The state of the River Ver has a very noticeable effect on the bird life of the Ver valley. Long periods of healthy groundwater flow produce plenty of insects in the river and sustains many more fish. This doesn't escape the patient Grey Herons who stalk the shallow gravel looking for spawning Brown Trout. The equally patient Richard Restell (@ukwildver on Instagram) captured some remarkable shots in Verulamium Park, showing just how successful a heron can be.

### Dartford crossing

Another county rarity that spent a fortnight in the Ver Valley, close to the Ver on the Gorhambury Estate, was a Dartford Warbler. They don't breed in Herts, mainly because they prefer heathland and gorse at nesting time and the county has almost no habitat of that type. Several were recorded in Herts in autumn 2025 but in most years not even one crosses into the county. The Gorhambury Dartford Warbler spent most of its time skulking in a hedgerow but did make a few appearances on top of the bushes to show off its distinctive cocked tail and red eye-ring.



Top left: Grey Heron; below Yellow-browed Warbler, Goldcrest all ©Richard Restell; Above: Dartford Warbler; Above right: John Fisher ©Melanie Woods



### 20 years in the hot seat!

After 70 newsletters and nearly 40,000 words on birds, **John Fisher** has finally decided to put his *Bird Notes* pen down. We owe him a great deal of thanks for the many fascinating articles, interesting insights and encyclopaedic knowledge of Ver valley birds. John has walked the fields around Redbourn since long before the barbed wire fences restricted the roaming. He's also seen the birds disappear as the river disappeared. And seen many of them come back as the water has returned! Many, many thanks John, for your exceptionally long stint which has informed and entertained us all. *John P*

### Warm water

As all lovers of chalk streams should know, these special rivers are fed principally by groundwater, which emerges from underground springs at a steady 10-12°C all year round. This means more insect life than in the surrounding countryside, especially in winter. One bird taking full advantage was a rare Yellow-browed Warbler that made an appearance on the Ver in Verulamium Park for the second winter running. It was joined by a posse of equally small Goldcrests, a Firecrest and Chiffchaffs as they all sought to make it through the colder months.



### MEMBERSHIP

by PETER HILL

**A warm welcome to the new members who have joined since the last Newsletter:** Julie Fewlass, Katie Wright, Andrew McIntyre, Emma Prayer, Andrew Howarth, Joanne Dee, Emily Theobald, Jason Amiss, Brian Hodgson, Al Green, Penny Bennetts, Christopher Spry, Jason Flynn, Andrea Stannard, Nigel Ellis, Catherine Brown, Rosalie Callway, Alex Hryciuk, Rachael Andrews and Liz Charman. May you enjoy supporting the society's activities to enhance 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)

The final quarter of 2025 showcased an extraordinary effort from our volunteers, who dedicated their time to improving the ecology and environmental health of the River Ver.

**September** focused on the historic **Sopwell Nunnery** section. The team trimmed fast growing willows, cleared rubbish, and collected purple loosestrife seeds for future pollinator friendly planting.

In **October** our mid week volunteers joined the **Friends of Verulamium Park** for a litter pick between Cottonmill Lane and Abbey Mill, removing bottles, cans, tennis balls, and even roadwork barriers from the Ver. At **Redbournbury Mill**, the team wove willow spiling to protect the tailrace bank from erosion. Weekend volunteers tackled in-channel urban litter between the Alban Way and **Sopwell Mill**, uncovering unusual items including a picnic chair, a handbag containing a bullhead fish, and a glass angel. They also thinned willow canopy and encountered several non-native signal crayfish.

**November** brought a surge of activity. With over a thousand bulbs—snake’s head fritillaries, snowdrops, bluebells, and wood anemones—planted in the new meadow opposite **Westminster Lodge**. Further visits saw more willow pollarding, blockage clearing, bird box installation, and the planting of 600 wild daffodil and 260 wild garlic bulbs. A dead hedge was built to protect a new gravel riffle, offering potential spawning habitat for brown trout.

Fifteen mid-week volunteers also joined **Chiltern Rangers** CIC and **Butterfly Conservation** to plant cowslips near **Studham**, a future habitat for the rare Duke of Burgundy butterfly, and tackling invasive dogwood on a chalk down meadow.



November ended with two visits to the **Gorhambury Estate** to improve flow in the mill leat to Kingsbury Mill.

Closing the Year in **December**, our final working party at **Redbourn** included pathway clearing, litter removal, installing bat and bird boxes, coppicing hazel and planting saplings, followed by festive drinks at the Chequers Inn.

The **Saturday Action Group** sessions will be on **Sat 21st February**, **Sat 21st March** and **Sat 18th April**, with venues announced nearer the time. Sign up for email invitations to Saturday and/or midweek activity by contacting Andy Gardiner (see below). More details [www.riverver.co.uk/current-year](http://www.riverver.co.uk/current-year)



In 2025, our volunteers attended over 50 working sessions – an inspiring achievement to protect and enhance the River Ver. Thank you to everyone involved.



**YOUR COMMITTEE**

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**Vice Chairman & Events Manager**  
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**Riverfly Co-ordinator**  
John Pritchard

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kim.scrivener@gmail.com

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**Committee Member**  
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joe.w.randall@hotmail.co.uk

**Society Archivist** Andy Webb

**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  
<https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/fly-tipping>

Water Leaks (Affinity Water):  
0800 376 5325