

AGM: NOTICE OF 50TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Tuesday 20th October at 7.30pm

Lower Hall Dagnall Street Baptist Church AL3 5EE
NB. NEW VENUE. Free event – all welcome.

Reading the Riverbed for Redds

Guest speaker: Martin van Heerden
EA Fisheries Technical Specialist
Hertfordshire & North London

The brown trout is an iconic chalk stream species that colonised the UK's rivers after the last ice age 10,000 years ago. Despite all the challenges of low flows, flooding, warm water and pollution, a population survives in the River Ver to this day.



Martin, a long-time fisheries expert from the EA's local team, and angling enthusiast, is going to explain the brown trout's habits and life cycle, to help us better understand this fascinating species. He'll also explain how to look out for their redds – the 'nests' they create

in the river's clean gravel where each season's eggs are laid to hatch into the next generation of *Salmo trutta*.

In part two, there will be brief reports, the latest Ver Valley news and then voting by Society members for the 2026/7 committee. As per the Society's constitution at each AGM the Officers and Executive Committee shall retire but may be eligible for re-election. Nominations are invited. These should reach the Secretary, Kim Scrivener, by Tuesday 13th October. Proposer and seconders from the membership will be required.

©Martin van Heerden and Wild Trout Trust

SAVE THE DATES: NEXT OPEN MEETINGS

Thurs 25th February 2027
Redbourn Village Hall
AL3 7LW

Tues 15th June 2027
Bricket Wood, St Stephen Parish
Centre AL2 3PJ

LATEST NEWS



Flash drought!

What a summer it has been in 2026, with a 'Flash drought' being called and a TUBs introduced – a hosepipe ban in old money. As the weather cools down, it's hard to remember those uncomfortably hot days of June, July and August. The Ver has certainly shrunk in length and flow fallen significantly. The look of the countryside though, is a timely reminder that although the fields may be brown, the Ver and its immediate surroundings are an important green refuge for wildlife in challenging times.



Owl recovery

The summer's dry conditions have proved ideal for the voles which are the essential foodstuff for Barn Owls and the owls have enjoyed their best ever summer since the Ver Valley Society Barn Owl Project was established over 20 years ago.

We had our first ever brood of six in a box near Shafford and broods of four and five at boxes near Verlam End. This has been followed by three more late summer broods in the valley. Last year, there were no owls raised at all, so this latest success has certainly cheered our hard-working volunteer team of leader John Fisher, Steve Larkworthy and Pierre Cowlard.

Barn Owl ©Richard Restell @ukwildver

One of a kind

We found a unicorn in Andy when he took up the challenge of organising the Action Group and finding tasks for our many enthusiastic volunteers that benefit the Ver and its environment. As fate would have it, Andy recently found his own unicorn floating down the river!



The class of '76

I would like to think that our founding fathers, and the likes of the redoubtable Peggy Pollock, former VVS Chair and a champion of the River Ver, in the 1980s, would have been proud of what the Ver Valley Society has become at fifty. Conceived mainly to campaign for abstraction reductions and deliver what every river needs – water, the VVS has become a multi-talented community affair! It's wonderful to see 30+ volunteers turn up on a Saturday and others join in midweek to improve many things in the valley, from the riverine habitat to distant footpaths up on the chalk. Add to that a legion of citizen scientists counting invertebrates and assessing water quality and you have a thriving society who are passionate about their local chalk stream. And of course, there are the bailiffs who are the backbone of the society, keeping an eye on 'their' section of the Ver just as they have done since the very beginning. Thank you one and all!



Peggy Pollock and dignitaries, Friar's Wash 'switch off' in 1993



Improving the network

Supply and demand

It's a little ironic, but our Hertfordshire rivers and the environment should be grateful that improvements to the area's pipework can't come fast enough to match peak demand. By official reckoning, there is plenty of water in the ground with boreholes across the region remaining at 'normal' all summer. It transpires that

the main driver of the hosepipe ban is additional customer demand (up 20% according to Affinity Water) putting strain on the supply network. It's not because any critical 'drought triggers' had been reached. In other words, if the pipe network was better, abstraction would be going full bore and the environment would have had much less water to support it throughout the hottest parts of summer.

St Saviour's success

We are indebted to Father Richard and the good folk of St Saviour's Church in St Albans for encouraging the Society to support young people and mental wellbeing in our activities along the Ver. We have been the recipients of a very generous £3,000, to spend in supporting these causes over the next few years. The donation was funded by the very successful St Saviour's Beer & Fizz Festival in the summer, an event that our volunteers were only too happy to attend!



Richard



Joe

Committee changes

Two stalwarts of the committee are standing down and won't be seeking re-election at the AGM. Richard Wallis and Joe Randall have been great servants to the Society over the past 20 years and leave large waders to fill. I offer them both a huge 'thank you' from the Society for all their efforts. Richard was Action Group Co-ordinator for many years before taking on the challenge of Bailiff Co-ordinator and still has half the Society's tools in his garage! Joe stepped up as Secretary in our hour of need and served us very well, not least ensuring all our meeting venues were booked and paid for and we knew the code to get in, sometimes! Gentlemen, enjoy your retirement.

One to watch

More news to follow in the New Year but the Chiltern Chalk Streams Project has been granted £15k to develop a Ver Story Map that will lead to an Action Plan – a wishlist of projects to improve the Ver. We will be doing all in our power to ensure that the list is comprised of projects from £5k to £500k, to provide opportunities for all those foundations, businesses and individuals who approach us wanting to help the Society and the Ver.



Father Richard takes the stage

Help!

It takes ever more effort to promote the Ver and hatch plans to improve its condition. If you'd like to become more involved in organising citizen science activity, could run an event, have planning experience, fancy being the Bailiff Co-ordinator or simply want to find out what being a committee member entails, please get in touch via johnp@riverver.co.uk.

The dry summer has left the Luton Lane site dry and Alan only just managed to take a sample at the Chequers in Redbourn in August. The Red is looking like the next to go, with zero recorded on the gauge in late August and early September.

Generally, invertebrate scores have been lower through July and August with most sites seeing a reduction in numbers. There is a natural tendency for scores to be lower in late summer when many invertebrates have hatched and their new offspring remain small. Nonetheless, the downward trend seems a little more significant than that. In a really hot spell, Lee could only manage to match the trigger score by the Alban Way in Sopwell and Charlie Kassell's spot near the Frogmore Home Park survived a below trigger score in July but came bouncing back in August.

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.

One redeeming feature is that without rain, the water that remains in the river is entirely from the groundwater aquifer – the best quality water of all. In the last drought in 2019, numbers held up well while the river shrank to a thin ribbon. It would appear that the invertebrates concentrated in that last remaining water (hence the high scores) before succumbing when the Ver stopped flowing. On that occasion the temperatures weren't as extreme as this time around and the remaining insects probably survived longer into the drought conditions.

That's not the entire story though. Some invertebrates lay their eggs that survive in the wet substrate until the returning rain gives the river new life. That aside, it's reckoned that it takes about 5 years for invertebrates to repopulate a dry river and our experience would bear that out.



WATER QUALITY MONITORING

The July testing on the Ver revealed an even count of moderate and poor ecological status gradings. A high nitrate count was responsible for the lower scores. In fact, the results were an improvement over the April records but with no rain in July, the river was back to its chalk groundwater base with no additional pollution from road runoff or misconnections to contend with.



River Hill sample for E. coli testing

E. coli monitoring

E. coli monitoring is up and running. Our chosen spot for regular monthly monitoring was in the Ver just below Verulamium Lake. After results that were well within bathing standard guidelines, once the hot weather came, the scores became less favourable. A little to our surprise, the test results rose to levels where E. coli was five times the bathing standard limit. We kept SADC informed and have posted live results on the Society's website. SADC were content to rely on their long-standing, "The Council advises against bathing or swimming in any rivers or lakes", rather than issue any new instruction. Of note, a dry weather test at River Hill, Flamstead where the river is entirely treated effluent from Markyate sewage works, returned another poor result, 5 times the 'safe' bathing limit.

Top: Redbourn Chequers Inn, August 2026 ©Alan Winn. Redbourn Ver almost dry, August 2026. Sopwell, appearances deceive, September 2026 ©Lee Wood. Cased Caddis come in all shapes and sizes.



Chequers, Flamstead, Aug 2026



Bow Bridge, July 2026



Beautiful Demoiselle

In the last newsletter, I wrote of a possible summer drought. On the face of it we now have one! Strictly speaking, the Ver's flow remains 'Normal' and groundwater is not far from average but the record hot summer has certainly been reflected in the bailiffs' reports.



Hummingbird Hawkmoth



Chub

Disappearing river

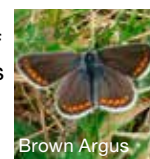
Phil & Cathy at the top of the Ver have had no water to look at, except below the sewage works at Markyate. John & Peter have reported a river disappearing rapidly with the head of the river now in Redbourn as I write, in early September. Rhona and Gareth have only ankle-deep water to measure at Dolittle and all the bailiffs downstream are reporting 'low flows' at their measuring points. Bailiffs have noted that in more natural sections of the Ver, lower flow velocity allows the plants to thrive and push the water into narrower channels, maintaining some clean gravel to the benefit of the river's inhabitants.

And finally... I have very much enjoyed reading each bailiff's report as it has come in and keeping tabs on our special chalk stream. However, the time has come for me to step aside and enjoy reading the

Record temperatures

While the very hot summer may have made bailiff walks a labour of love, the lower water has made spotting fish a little easier. Chub are much more resilient to temperature changes than Brown Trout and have been recorded on the hunt for food on several stretches.

The insects along the river corridor have been thriving too. Interesting moths and butterflies have been recorded in better numbers than in most years. Excellent numbers of demoiselles and dragonflies have been reported over the river and adjoining land.



Brown Argus

newsletter Bailiff Report penned by a new author! Thank you volunteers for your many contributions and making my task so much easier and I look forward to my successor being revealed very soon.

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*	johnp@riverver.co.uk
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	johnp@riverver.co.uk
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	Vacant	johnp@riverver.co.uk
11. Chequers to Verlam End	John Fisher & Peter Hill	john.fisher2023@outlook.com
		members@riverver.co.uk
		phil_cathy_comfort@yahoo.co.uk
12. Flamstead to Markyate (and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)	Cathy & Phil Comfort	
13. River Red	Vacant	johnp@riverver.co.uk

* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

Record dry July

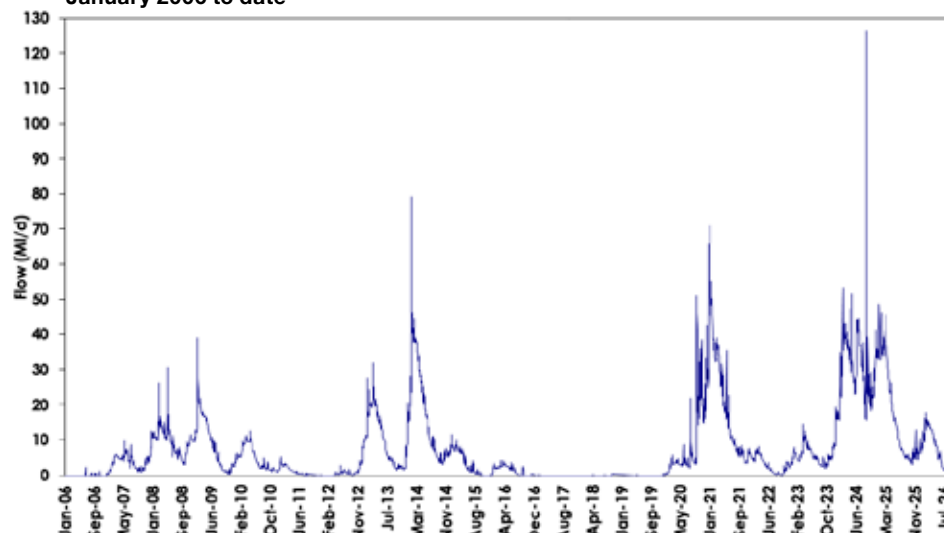
It's been a hot summer with rainfall well below average. Especially noteworthy was July, the driest on record for England, with only 2.2mm of rain recorded locally at Rothamsted. All the good work delivered by the exceptionally wet January and February was readily undone by high temperatures and weeks without significant rain, prompting a 'flash drought' to be declared. Nevertheless, groundwater remains less than a metre below average and it'll be another nail-biting autumn and winter to see if heavy rain arrives and guarantees the Ver a resplendent 2027.

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

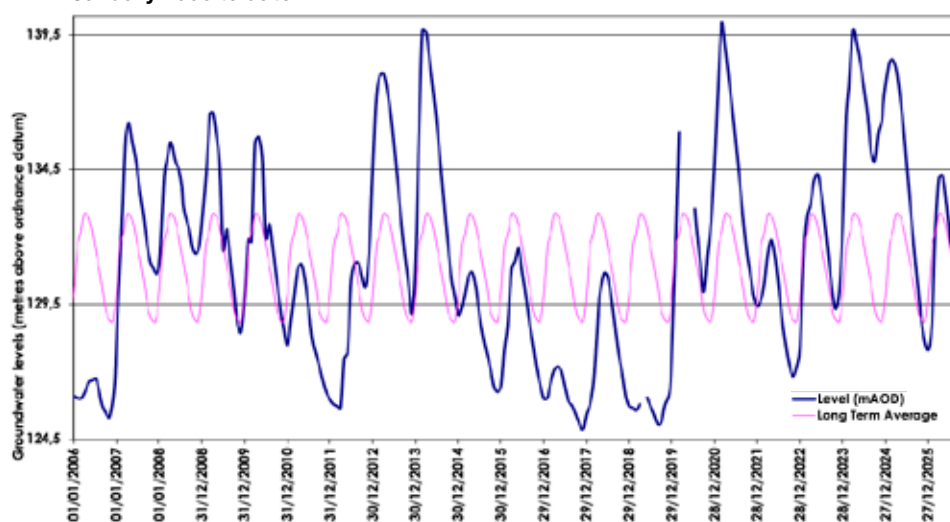


Months	Groundwater measurement at Ballingdon Farm, mAOD [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Rothamsted)
June 2026	133.43 [134.20]	76.0 [+21.2]
July	132.21 [133.23]	1.6 [-53.9]
August	130.83 [132.05]	24.8 [-47.2]
September	129.41 [130.35]	Not available yet

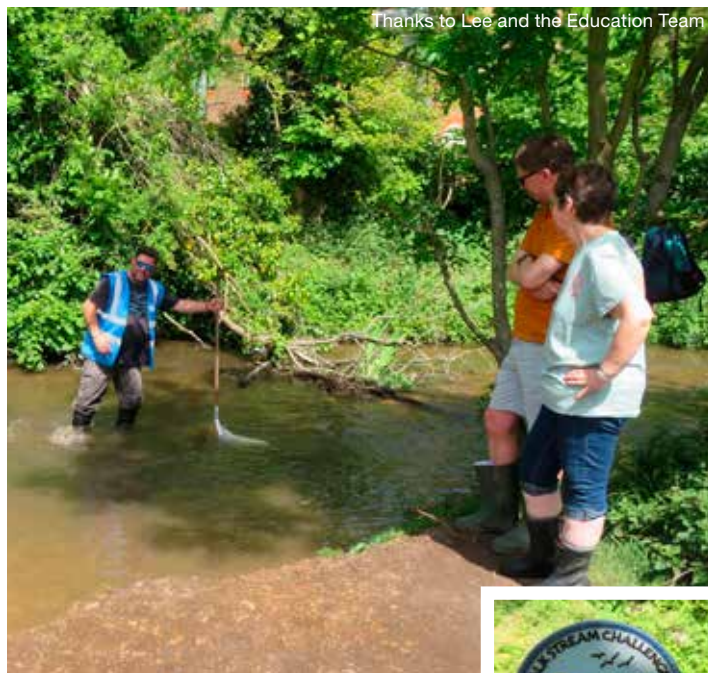
Flow in the River Ver at Redbourn
January 2006 to date



Groundwater levels – Ballingdon Farm
January 2006 to date



From top left: Waterend Lane August 2026 ©Peter Hill; St Michael's Bridge, St Albans, August 2026; Frogmore, August 2026 ©Charlie Kassel; Hyde Lane, July 2026 ©Nik Taylor-Pugh; Drop Lane August 2026 ©Giles Harrison.



Thanks to Lee and the Education Team

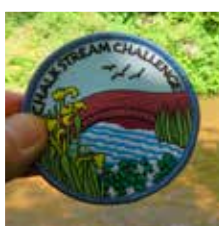
Ver Valley Walking Festival

The end of June was extremely hot and we were forced to cancel many of our planned walks in the Ver Valley. That wasn't before Andy Webb had time to paddle in the Ver near Redbournbury and share his knowledge of the river. Andy has kindly agreed to lead a rescheduled Three Bury's Walk on Sunday 25th October. It's FREE and open to members and non-members. If you would like to join the walk please book via this page on our website <https://www.riverver.co.uk/events-list-2026/>

Trout in the Classroom

With help from Laura at the Chilterns Chalk Stream Project we are embarking on a new venture at the end of the year when we'll be providing trout eggs to four St Albans schools. These will grow into small Brown Trout to be released into the Ver in the spring. We need four 90 litre fish tanks to hold the growing fish, that's larger than the ones we use for shows. Do you have one sitting unused that could be donated to the project?

Trout Fry ©Allen Beechey



End of term report

A big thank you to Lee and the team of volunteers who have inspired young people from schools, scouts, guides and more on visits to the Ver this year. Since January, over 500 children have learnt more about their local chalk stream and the creatures that inhabit it. What's more, many of them have taken the Chalk Stream Challenge and can now proudly sport the colourful badge. There are more visits lined up for the autumn term too! To increase the number of young people who can become involved a successful afternoon was spent training youth leaders on how to use the loan kits we now have available.



Andy Webb in June ©Penny Bennetts

Other Events

Come and say 'hello' at the Community Showcase, St Albans Cathedral on **Saturday 24th October**. The VVS has a display among the 50+ other local good causes making new local friends.

50th Anniversary **VVS Pub Quiz** will be at the Lower Red Lion in **November** – watch the VVS website for the date and how to book your table!

Redbournbury bench appeal

A final push please! Thanks to some fantastically generous donations, we've raised £4,000 to fund a replacement bench, there's just a final few hundred pounds to raise. Please dig deep and help us make the final amount.

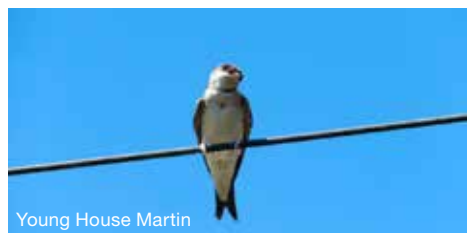




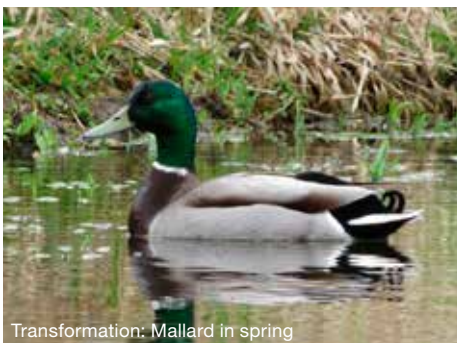
Drab brown drake Mallard in summer

The late, great Bill Oddie once remarked that the end of summer into the autumn period is a confusing time for birdwatchers and I must admit, I agreed with him. Of course, there's the excitement of migrating birds – never knowing what you might find – tinged with a wistfulness at the departure of birds like 'our' Swifts and Swallows, and the enjoyment of witnessing the successes of breeding birds (hopefully!). But actually, and this is where Bill Oddie had a knack for putting his finger on experiences common to all, it can be a very confusing time!

In the first place, young birds swamp the scene with squeaky calls and less than adult plumage, confusing both the ears and eyes at the same time. Juvenile Robins are brown all-over with no red breast in sight and their calls, together with the incessant pleading of baby Wrens can convince you that some other species is at play, maybe a Spotted Flycatcher or something rarer. Immature Willow Warblers are a beautiful bright yellow all over, again suggesting you are looking at something much more unusual.

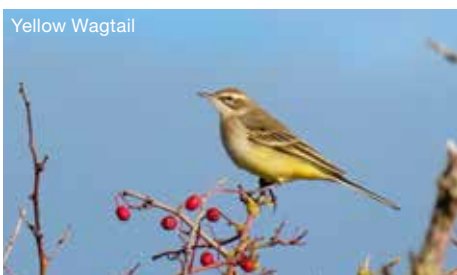


Young House Martin



Transformation: Mallard in spring

Added to this the fact that many birds are in moult and undergoing a full plumage overhaul. Most notable are the ducks that enter a period known as their 'eclipse plumage' when the males lose their resplendent breeding feathers in exchange for a drab brown and quite frankly scruffy appearance. Scanning Verulamium Lake or Gorhambury Pool you'd be forgiven for assuming all the Mallards were females or that other completely different species had joined them.



Yellow Wagtail

Of course, there is a third level of confusion on offer – the simple fact that different birds are turning up and a surprise may indeed pop up in front of you as migrating birds stop off on their journey south. Common Sandpipers that have bred as far north as Scandinavia have been seen at Gorhambury Pool on several dates this August while another upland bird popped up atop a hedge at the same site on 9th August – a Whinchat. The River Ver provides a natural funnel for birds on the move, giving birds rich feeding opportunities both along the river bank and in the adjacent riverain habitats. Checking these areas can be rewarding but, be warned, it can be confusing!

Ver Valley 2026 Summer Highlights

- House Martin – Shafford Cottages: 59 active nests in June, one of the largest colonies in the UK
- Barn Owl – Ver Valley: successful breeding season 3 early broods and 3 late summer broods
- Yellow Wagtail – near Shafford Mill: 160+ roosting near in early August
- Cuckoo – Gorhambury: juvenile in July and August
- Little Ringed Plover – Gorhambury: 2 on 1st July
- Common Sandpiper – Gorhambury: 1 regularly August and September
- Common Sandpiper – Frogmore Lakes: 1 on 4th August
- Green Sandpiper – Gorhambury: 1 on 24th August
- Whinchat – Gorhambury: 1 on 9th August; Frogmore Lakes: 1 on 14th August; Shafford Farm: 1 on 16th & 21st August
- Mediterranean Gull – Gorhambury: adult on 15th August
- Spotted Flycatcher – Gorhambury: 3 on 11th August & 4 on 18th August
- Common Redstart – Gorhambury: 1 on 4th September



Migrating Common Sandpiper

MEMBERSHIP

by PETER HILL

A warm welcome and thank you to the new members who have joined since the last Newsletter:

Jacqueline Mills, Jason Booker, David Holloway, Nicola Griffiths, Jo Tatlock, Matt Borgatti, Brigid Smith, Ardesir Mirhashem, Martin Taylor, Fran Fullerton, Oliver Blowey, Catherine Manthorpe, Julie Vance, Michael Roscoe, Brian Williams, Carol Shaw, Andrew Wright, Oliver McWilliams, Rebecca Baker, Daisy Dingwall, Ben Slater, Jon Dennison, Sara Phillips, David Kemp, Lucy Shuker and Glenn Tweedie. May you enjoy being part of the society and participating in its activities to enhance the Ver and its environment.



Not a member?

Only £7 a year to join by standing order.

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

The Action Group work this summer has centred on removing Himalayan Balsam, maintaining the Ver Valley walking trails, surveying for Water Voles, translocation of Water Crowfoot, and giving some loving care to the Ver Valley benches.

Himalayan Balsam is an invasive nonnative plant listed as a controlled species under the Countryside and Wildlife Act. It out competes native plants that feed and sustain the wider chalk stream food web, removing essential plants that insects need to feed and reproduce, leaving bare, fragile soil that erodes once the balsam dies back. EA guidance is to remove Himalayan Balsam wherever possible to control its spread.

Only the lower Ver from Park Street to the confluence is contaminated. Even so, from May to August our volunteers, supported by impressive corporate Balsam Bashers from **AMD** and the **RSK Group**, have spent over 500 hours helping to control this ecologically harmful plant.



There are eight **Ver Valley walking trails** covering the whole river from source to confluence. Our midweek volunteers worked hard to keep paths clear, ensure signage was correct and up to date, and remove litter to keep the walks enjoyable.

A team of trained volunteers carried out 22 **Water Vole surveys** from Redbourn down to the confluence at Bricket Wood. Water Voles have now reached the confluence, 7.5 miles as the vole swims, from their original reintroduction site north of St Albans in 2021: an incredible success story. Thank you to all the riparian owners who granted access for surveying.

In June, we trialled the **translocation of Water Crowfoot (*Ranunculus*)** from an area of abundance to a downstream reach almost devoid of this signature chalk stream plant. Different planting techniques were tested and are being monitored for use in possible future transplanting. Thanks to the EA and HCC Countryside Rights of Way for their support.

The Saturday Action Group sessions will be on Sat 17th October, Sat 21st November and Sat 19th December, 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 are at www.riverver.co.uk/current-year



The **Ver Valley benches** task force continued their work, refurbishing benches and information signs. It's amazing what a bit of love and care can do.

Thank you once again to all our **Action Group volunteers** who brave brambles, nettles and the summer heat to help protect our River Ver.



YOUR COMMITTEE

Chairman & Communications

John Pritchard
01727 835957
johnp@riverver.co.uk

Vice Chairman & Events Manager

Lee Wood 07879 496220

Bailiff Co-ordinator

Richard Wallis
01582 794332
rjwallis104@gmail.com
Retiring October 2026

Action Group Co-ordinator

Andy Gardiner
gardiner@gardiner.plus.com

Riverfly Co-ordinator

John Pritchard

Secretary

Kim Scrivener
kim.scrivener@gmail.com

Membership Secretary

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

Treasurer

Rachel Young
01727 868919
treasurer@riverver.co.uk

Planning Officer

Martin Frearson
01727 761878
mfrearson@ntlworld.com

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