



# Ver Valley Society

## NEWSLETTER

*Published quarterly for members of the Ver Valley Society*

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[www.riverver.co.uk](http://www.riverver.co.uk)

President: Peter Fox, MBE

## OPEN MEETING

**TUESDAY 25<sup>th</sup> April 2017 -7.30 pm**

**ST STEPHENS PARISH CENTRE**

Station Road, Bricket Wood, AL2 3PJ

## Speaker: **George Horne** **EA Fisheries Officer**

George is an Environment Agency Fisheries Technical Officer covering the Hertfordshire and North London Area with 10 years' experience working in Fisheries management.

His career was sparked from a lifelong love for angling and all things fisheries and biodiversity related.

*His talk will cover fish of the River Ver with an emphasis on Brown Trout.*



**River Ver Archive: St Albans Central Library (Local History Reference Section)**  
**Over 1,000 pages of information**

## Chairman's Report

Jane Gardiner

I regret having to report that the Ver is in a poor state for this time of year when it should be very healthy. This is due to a dry year in 2016 with 9% less rain than average and also this winter not having much rain to recharge the aquifer, although some recharge can usually occur until May so more rain soon would be very welcome! (see my Bailiffs' report for recent figures). With the flows low, silt is building in many places and vegetation will soon be causing blockages in the channel.

May I remind everyone that the Committee has decided not to hold an Open Meeting in late July this year or in the future. This year however we will send out a shortened Newsletter in July and also that month John Fisher will be leading an orchid walk in Redbourn (details elsewhere). The October Meeting/AGM will be as usual but in future we will have three meetings each year spaced at four-monthly intervals in February, June and October each preceded by a Newsletter.

The gravel needed at the approach to the east ford bridge at Redbournbury has now been replaced and also the steps up to the VVS seat there now have hard-core in place courtesy of John Fisher and Peter Hill.

We have received Affinity Water's Strategic Environmental Scoping Document for the draft of their next Water Resources Management Plan. This was a very long document to which Martin Frearson replied on our behalf indicating we are generally happy with Affinity's plans and look forward to the implementation of the planned further abstraction reductions in 2021 and 2024.

Verulamium Park. The installation of a new gas main right across the Park may cause some disruption but should not impinge on the river. The refurbishment of the footbridge at the entrance from Holywell Hill have now been completed to a very good standard.

Paul Foster commented on our behalf to SADC/EA about the Action Plan for the Park (see his note). However we eagerly await the final plans of EA and Affinity of their restoration project for the Ver through St Albans which was due to be published this spring. However at the Verulamium Park Forum held at the Council offices on Tues March 14th it was made clear that hydrological studies still continue and the actual publication date may not be until early summer. After that financial issues will have to be addressed and tenders obtained from contractors so any actual work may well not occur until next year. The portfolio holder Cllr.Chichester-Miles has now set up an all party Verulam Lakes working party. In the meantime Veolia Waste Management intend to remove a further 30 tonnes of silt from the top end of the large lake in April and to improve water quality some floating reed beds may be tried but these can only be temporary measures.

## Social Media Update

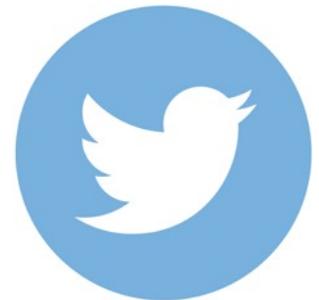
John Pritchard



The Society's new Facebook and Twitter pages have just been launched for members and to help us reach a wider audience. You'll find up-to-the-minute news, information and photos supporting our efforts to promote and protect the precious River Ver.

You don't have to be signed up to Facebook or Twitter to see what's going on, just go to . . .

**[facebook.com/VerValleySoc](https://facebook.com/VerValleySoc)** and  
**[twitter.com/VerValleySoc](https://twitter.com/VerValleySoc)**



## Membership

John Pritchard

A very warm welcome to those who made it a New Year's resolution to join the Ver Valley Society. We look forward to seeing Graeme and Judith Roberson, Rick and Sheila Smyth and David Evans along the river bank in the coming weeks.

A number of members have been in touch with me to check whether their membership payment is due. If you are having similar thoughts, rest assured, there's no need worry. Unless you pay by standing order, we will be in touch with you well before your membership expires, just to make sure that you continue to enjoy the benefits of the Ver Valley Society!

Don't forget, if you have friends who'd like to join the society it's only £7 per year by standing order or £36 for a five-year membership. A membership form with all the details can be downloaded from **[riverver.co.uk](http://riverver.co.uk)** or email me at **[members@riverver.co.uk](mailto:members@riverver.co.uk)**

I am pleased to welcome Roger Hall as a new member of our Bailiffing Team. Roger will be replacing John Bell as the Bailiff through Gorhambury; John felt unable to carry on due to the pressure of his other commitments but we thank him very much for what he has been able to do in the past.

Sadly the river is not in a good state for this time of year. Flows are very low although with little vegetation growth as yet what flow there is can be measured easily. As you can see from the table below the aquifer is still over six metres below average, although it has increased a little over February. Last year as a whole and this winter have been drier than average so unless the second half of March and early April have high rainfall to recharge the ground-water we must expect the Ver to be in a sorry state this summer.

Month 2016	Groundwater level at Ballingdon Farm in metres <i>[Long-term average]</i> (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres <i>[± average]</i> (figures from Chris Hall at Rothamsted)
December	126.53 [130.56]	26.2 [-43.28]
January	126.02 [131.36]	70.2 [+0.2]
February	126.07 [132.38]	38.7 [-11.4]
March	126.62 [132.79]	<i>Not yet available</i>

It now seems spring is really underway. The hazel catkins and snowdrops are almost over and replaced by some spectacular blackthorn and pussy willow displays in the hedges and lesser celandines on the banks with butterbur just beginning to show on the river margins.

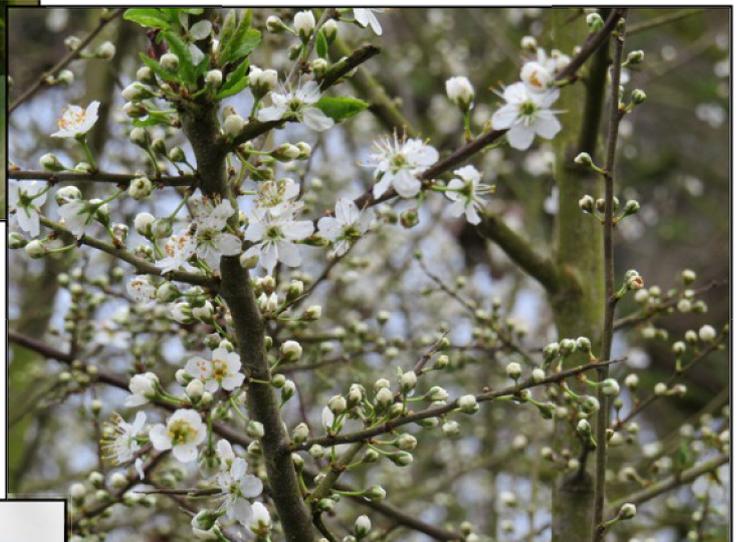


*Lesser celandines (Wordsworth's favourite flower).*

Among mammals a few hares have been noted, mole activity is very apparent, the occasional muntjac is seen as well of course as a fox or squirrel. Fish are rarely seen over the winter but the occasional bullhead is found by those Bailiffs doing river-fly monitoring. We hope a few more people can be trained to do this valuable monitoring this year.

Birds naturally are becoming very active with nesting

getting underway. Some nice recent sightings include a water rail, some redpoll, linnet, two green sandpiper, goldcrest, an over-wintering chiffchaff and several kingfishers including quite a tame one in Verulamium Park. Some winter migrants remain with siskin, fieldfares, golden plover and snipe still being seen. Little egret can



*Above: Blackthorn in flower.*

*Left: Pussy willow*



no longer count as winter visitors since they now breed in Verulamium after the herons. Teal, gadwall and tufted duck are still joining our usual water-fowl and the occasional report of a little grebe is received. Red kites are doing tumbling displays over Gorhambury and all the other usual birds are regularly reported.

After a couple of years with below average rainfall the Ver has been dry above and through Redbourn for some time. Further downstream around Redbournbury the flows are still reasonable and a green sandpiper has often been seen feeding along the river margins which have also attracted a few snipe, but nothing like the numbers we get when we have a hard winter and the ground is frozen. Since chalk streams are pretty much at a year round constant temperature the snipe can use their long beaks to delve into the unfrozen edges of the river.

It is not often that I get to see a water rail along the Ver although I suspect they are often there but unseen. It is a very wary bird and they slip into the reedy edges of the river as you approach. However this bird favoured a stretch of water just downstream from a bridge and using my car as a hide I was able to park on the bridge and watch the elusive water rail undetected. I even managed to get a few photographs of this bird as it fed on invertebrates hiding in the water crowfoot in mid stream. I have only seen water rails on the Ver a handful of times so this was a real treat but after three or four days it was gone.

A pair of stonechat has over wintered on the water meadows near Shafford. Stonechat always sit up on the top of small bushes or reeds so are easy to watch and most times when I walked the area they were clearly visible. The opposite of water rails!

Another bonus this winter is that a little owl was once again using a big oak as its regular perch. This oak has a huge split in a diagonal branch and the owl sits in the split, sometimes with just its head showing but other times sitting out in the morning sun. A little owl was practically resident in this oak a couple of years ago and I was convinced it would nest there but as the breeding season came along it vanished and I had not see this oak used again for nearly two years. Little owls are like this; they have a favoured perch which they use practically every day and then they relocate and it is tricky to find out where they have gone.



*Water Rail – [John Fisher].*

In the winter of 2003 I saw my first ever Redbourn little egret perched high over the Ver in Porridge Pot meadow. They were already an established breeding species along the south coast benefiting from climate change which encouraged them to venture over the English Channel. Gradually over the next ten years they became a regular along the Ver first just as winter visitors and then throughout the year. The big breakthrough came in 2014 when a pair nested on an island in Verulamium Park and successfully raised a brood of four. In 2015 and 2016 two pairs bred and as they breed later than the herons they may well use the same nests as the herons after their young have flown. We had just one great white egret on the Ver in November 2013 but they are now being seen every winter in Hertfordshire so maybe they will breed locally soon.



We have not had any prolonged visits from golden plovers in this mild winter but a huge flock, probably numbering over 1000 birds, stayed for a few days on the stubble fields on the west side of the A5183. They were really impressive when they took to sky flying in tight formation and then settling again on the ground. These would be birds migrating up to their northern breeding territories and stopping off to rest and feed, before continuing their journey.

St Albans RSPB are organising a "Heron Watch" on Saturdays and Sundays from 18 March through to May 14. If you go along between 11.00 am and 3.00 pm volunteers will show you the nesting herons through telescopes. On the later dates you may also see the egrets.

If you have any interesting bird sightings I would be pleased to hear from you on 01582 792843 or email [john.fisher@btclick.com](mailto:john.fisher@btclick.com).

*Little Egret at Doolittle Mill – [Paul Foster]*

At the beginning of the year, St Albans City and District Council published a Green Spaces Action Plan (GAP) for Verulamium Park which sets out the principles of management and improvements of the Park. The plan outlines the vision, aims and objectives for the park for the next five years until 2022. It makes an assessment of the Park's strengths and weaknesses, and identifies the actions that need to be implemented.

The Ver Valley Society was one of the organisations that was asked to comment on the section concerning the river, which we have done, and are largely supportive of all the suggestions they have made. The one big issue pervading all of the work on this section of the Ver is what they are going to do about the condition of the Lake itself. The Society has seen previous reports and numerous plans which have come and gone, without any real progress. The lake is not only important from an ecological point of view, but is a significant amenity for the public which should be made more use of. We realise that the solution is not a simple one, nor will it be cheap, but we are encouraged that SADC are supportive, and that the EA has funding to achieve the desired outcome, and we agree that the lake should be treated as a priority. Whilst this question is outside of the scope of this report, it is vital to all the subsequent plans being made.

If you wish to view the full document, it can be accessed here <http://www.stalbans.gov.uk/leisure-and-culture/parks-and-greenspace/parks/verulamium-park/VPMP.aspx>, it's a very large document, and the section concerning the River Ver starts at page 130. This was put together by the Environment Agency for SADC.

*Heron Watch at Verulamium Lake Day One –[Dan Fletcher]*



## Future Open Meetings

John Fisher

- **Sunday 25th June 2017 at 10.00am**

We will not be holding an Open Meeting in July this year. However we are leading an Orchid Walk jointly with the Friends of the Nickey Line in June. See separate article

- **Tuesday 24th October 2017 at 7.30 pm**

At Michaels Parish Centre – Our AGM followed by David Johnson the HMWT Living Rivers Officer (t.b.c).

- **Tuesday 27th February 2018 at 7.30 pm**

At Redbourn Village Hall – speaker to be arranged.

- **Tuesday 5th June 2018 at 7.30 pm**

At Bricket Wood – speaker to be arranged

### **Very Important**

All meetings are free entrance to members and non members - If you are coming to one of our meetings please check our newsletter or the web page a few days prior to the meeting in case of any late changes. If you require directions to any of the venues please contact a committee member. (See contacts page). Although our meetings are free entry to members and non members we welcome donations towards the cost of refreshments, hall hire etc. Suggested £2 pp

The January task at Sopwell Nunnery Meadows, near New Mills was very well attended, when our fifteen volunteers removed debris, dead and overhanging trees, to allow more light to reach the river. It was good to welcome Pamela Sutton, Clifford Mullet and John Pritchard to the Action Group, on a lovely sunny morning.

Our visit to Frogmore Pits on the 18th February was more complicated on such a large site. Bruce Banfield Taylor led a group where chest waders had to be worn to remove some fallen willows at the south end near the M25. Chris Newman cleared the permissive footpath of bramble going north above the river, whilst another group tackled the bramble and young woody material along the new permissive footpath from the Hyde Lane ford along the river. They also collected

*Right: Pam, Bruce and Dick removing a fallen tree at Frogmore Pits. [Sue Frearson]*



a bag of dumped beer cans along the path. Peter White and Martin cleared the fallen willow and rubbish near the Hyde Lane Bridge.

A start was made on removing the large fallen crack willows and the straw bales, some submerged, were removed from near the ford as they were no longer trapping silt. Fortunately the Hyde Lane carpark has now been restored, but the ford is not going to be reinstated.

*Below: Clearance of fallen trees near the Hyde Lane ford Frogmore. [Sue Frearson]*



I had a subsequent meeting with Michael Charlton, the Restoration Manager for Tarmac who thanked the VVS volunteers for all the work that we had done at Frogmore Pits and looks forward to the team working on site in future.

At the time of writing, we are all looking forward to working at a new site near Shafford in March, owned by Graham White. We should be able to help with the removal of blackthorn, fallen willows and possibly the reeds blocking the channel.

## Ver Valley Action Group Programme

Sue Frearson

### Spring/Summer 2017

When possible we will meet the **third Saturday** of the month and I will send out reminders with the Project Safety Plan the week before the activity. Please confirm by email [sue.frearson@which.net](mailto:sue.frearson@which.net) if you will be coming by the Tuesday before, so that I can borrow sufficient tools from the CMS on the Wednesday. **The summer programme will be provisional, subject to the development of Himalayan Balsam.**

- **Saturday 22nd April 2017:**  
10.00-12.00 Frogmore Pits (Parking at Hyde Lane carpark / Moor Mill Lane). The battle with the Himalayan Balsam will start with us hoeing up any seedlings. For those with waders the dead or fallen willows will need to be cleared from Hyde Lane Ford, south through the steep sided valley running south towards the M25.
- **Saturday 20th May 2017:**  
10.00-12.00 Frogmore Pits (Parking at Hyde Lane carpark / Moor Mill Lane). Clearance of the Permissive footpaths of Bramble, woody overgrowth and Himalayan Balsam will continue. Further work on the removal of debris, dead wood and fallen trees along the steep-sided valley from Hyde Lane Ford south towards the M25 will continue.
- **Saturday 17th June 2017**  
10.00-12.00 Two walks! Frogmore Pits along the new Permissive footpath from Hyde Lane car park, to the Radlett Road Bridge, removing Himalayan Balsam. **OR** park at the Moor Mill car park/ Drop Lane car park to walk south along the VVS Ver Trail removing Himalayan Balsam along the river banks towards the confluence with the Colne beyond the stepping stones in Drop Lane.
- **Saturday 15th July 2017**  
10.00 – 12.00 The grounds of Moor Mill to remove Himalayan Balsam, both banks of the Ver and the Mill stream.  
12.00 Onwards a thank you drink at Moor Mill.



**FRIENDS OF THE NICKEY LINE  
&  
THE VER VALLEY SOCIETY**

**“Come and see the Orchids”**

**Sunday 25 June 2017 - 10.00 am**

*Friends of the Nickey Line and the Ver Valley Society are once again holding a joint walk to view orchids at two sites.*

Starting at the car park on Redbourn Common, this five-mile circular walk will visit a bee orchid site on the Nickey Line near the M1 Bridge, and also visit the chalk slopes on the side of Harpenden Hill. Where we hope to see pyramidal orchids, fragrant orchids as well as bee orchids.

**For more information contact Roger on  
01582 763560  
Or John Fisher on 01582 792843**



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John Cadisch, John Fisher, Sue Frearson,  
Martin Frearson and Jane Gardiner

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**Membership Secretary**

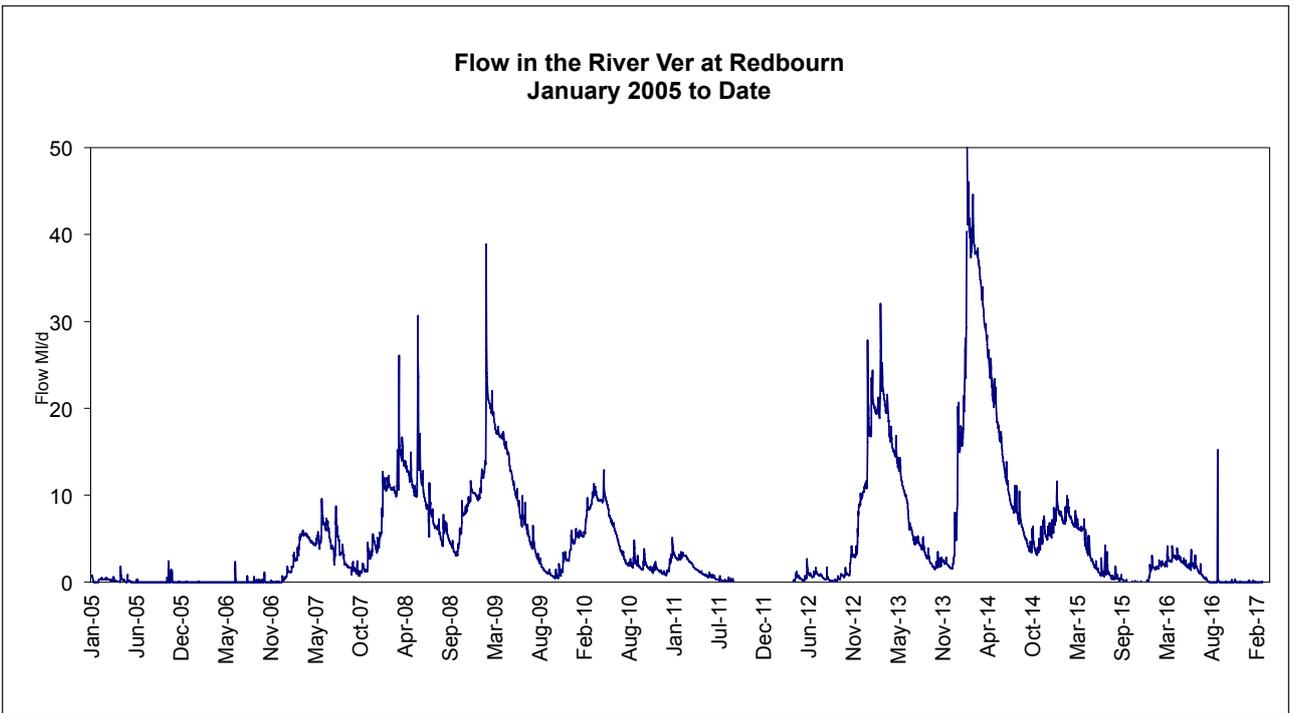
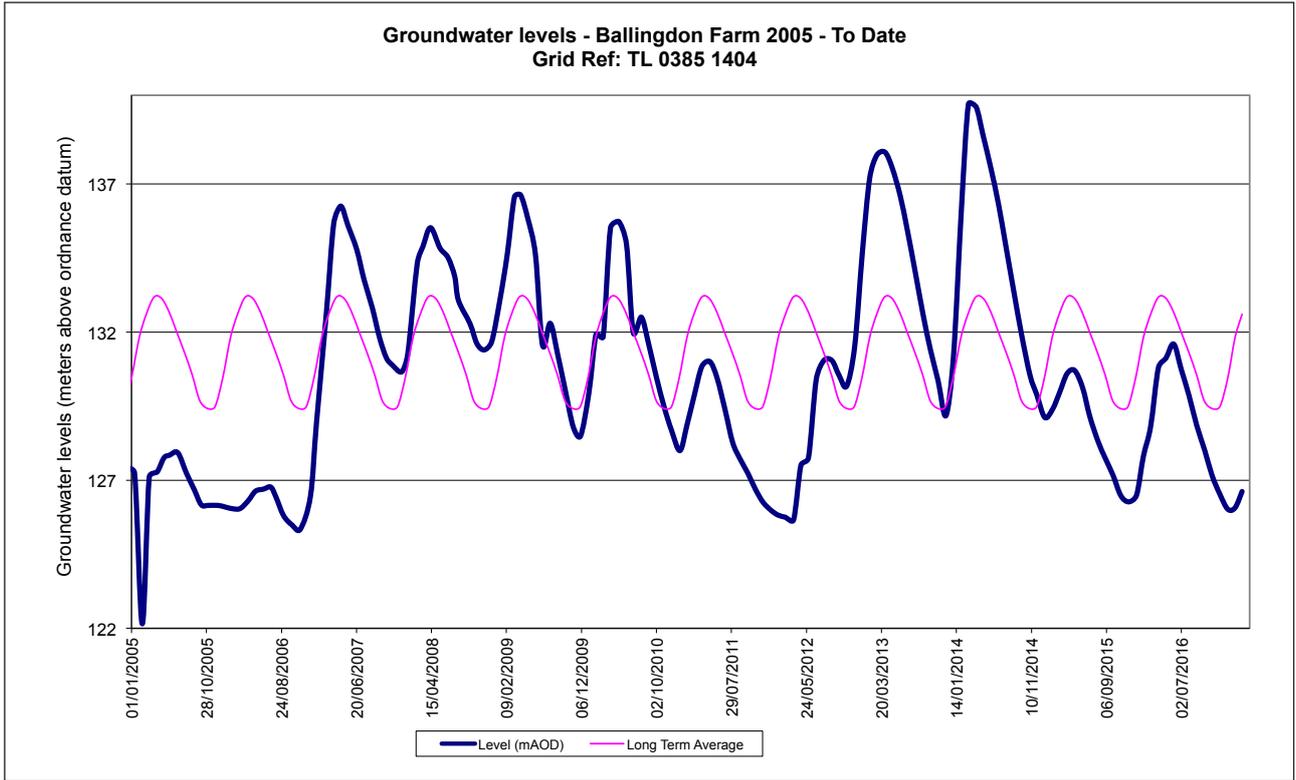
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**Newsletter Layout**

John Trew

**HOTLINES**

EA Incident Hotline: 0800 807060  
("Report all environmental incidents")  
EA Floodline: 0845 988 1188  
Cleaner St Albans/Fly tipping reports:  
01727 809019 (Veolia)  
[email: a.cleanerdistrict@stalbans.gov.uk](mailto:a.cleanerdistrict@stalbans.gov.uk)  
Water Leaks (Affinity):  
0800 376 5325



*We are grateful to Affinity Water for supplying periodic ground water and flow charts and to Veolia Environmental Services for printing and distributing these Newsletters.*