

The River Ver and Abstraction by Andy Webb, August 2024

Chapter 4: Meanderings

"Rivers and the inhabitants of the watery element were made for wise men to contemplate, and fools to pass by without consideration."

Izaak Walton, an old proverb

Consolidation of the various smaller water undertakings in the lower Colne catchment, supplying south Hertfordshire and west Middlesex, occurred gradually from their inception from the mid-19th century, until finally, in 1959, the St Albans Water Co was absorbed too. In 1989 all of the larger nationalised water suppliers were privatised, and although the Colne and Lee Valley companies had always retained their independence, further consolidation followed when these two suppliers agreed to merge to become the Three Valleys Water Co in 1991. In time Three Valleys would also acquire smaller suppliers Tendring (in Suffolk), Dover Water, and North Surrey Water, the single company being part of the international Vivendi group.

In the early 2000s ownership passed to French company Veolia. Ten years later, following a decision to refocus their business towards waste collection and recycling, Veolia sold the water supply business to Affinity Water, owners being a number of investment funds and banks. Thames Water Co continued to provide sewerage treatment in the bulk of the supply area, i.e. all of Hertfordshire, parts of north-west London, west London, Buckinghamshire, parts of Surrey, and part of Essex.



Dried-up river, Shafford Mill, late 1980s

The River Ver dried up completely, down to Park Street, in 1976 and 1977; the years prior and after were little better. Redbourn, or below, became the perennial source - little more than half its length. Consternation and continued campaigning remained, indeed increased.

The "Thames Conservancy" of the 1950s had, by the early 1970s, evolved into the "Thames Water Authority" (TWA), a Government watchdog with a slightly extended remit to advise Government departments and other bodies of the overall state of rivers and watercourses in the region. This would in turn become the National Rivers Authority (NRA) on privatisation of the various water companies in 1989, and then the Environment Agency (EA) in 1996, funded by the Department of Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).

Amazingly, Thames Water Authority and St Albans City & District Council were still arguing with Lee Valley Water over compensation water for the river and lakes through Verulamium through the 1970s, due in part to a legal and access dispute between the company and the Earl of Verulam (Gorhambury Estates). The pipeline from Bow Bridge PS had still not been laid. The droughts of 1976 and 1977 brought the situation to a head; the pipeline and exit at St Michael's Bridge being completed, it was brought into operation intermittently through the 1980s and 1990s when flow in the Ver diminished to a particularly low level.

In December 1978, Richard Thrale, chairman of the (still newly-formed) action group the Ver Valley Society, stated: "what we are saying is that Luton should look south to the River Thames, or north to the [Ouse Valley] reservoirs, but leave the Ver alone". Prescient indeed. What goes around comes around, as we shall soon see.

Early in 1980 Thames Water Authority finally gave official recognition that excessive abstraction had seriously affected water levels in the Ver valley, which had in turn led to a catastrophic decline in the flow of the River Ver, and indeed many other chalk streams in the south-east, and that alternative supplies needed to be found.

To the relief and delight of many, the TWA admitted that "too many licences to extract water were granted in the 1950s". But it also stated that its hands were tied because existing licences were maintained "in perpetuity" by the 1963 Water Resources Act, and could not be revoked. The Thames Conservancy and Thames Water Authority had been left to "carry the can" - almost literally, because by then a canful was all that was left of the River Ver!

Although a moral breakthrough in the campaign to save the Ver, it wasn't until the end of 1986 that TWA announced that it had commissioned consultancy William Halcrow and Partners to study low flow in the river (and in five other rivers), and to formulate options for improvement. This was significant, and a budget of £150,000 was stated. A Preliminary Report was due to be delivered by May 1987 and a Final Report by December of the same year.

Mention should be made of Dr Ted Hollis, Lecturer in Geography at University College London, who by chance resided in Redbourn, and who became a crucial technical adviser to the Ver Valley

Society, representing it at all the subsequent discussions of options provided in the Final Halcrow Report when it was eventually released in May 1988.

Five options were put forward by Halcrow; an earlier proposal to build a new sewerage treatment works on the eastern side of Hemel Hempstead to discharge into the valley of the River Red (the "Reedbourne") and thus into the Ver was not included.

Initially, Halcrow and TWA favoured Option D - to create a new borehole in Bricket Wood and "backpump" the resulting water via a new pipeline back up the Ver valley to discharge back into the river north of Redbourn. However, the option favoured by all local conservationists and restorationists was Option C, as it was the only one that would see a natural restoration of the chalk aquifer. This involved complete closure of Friars Wash, to be replaced by water from Grafham reservoir (possibly augmented by more from the Thames and Colne Valley reservoirs). Although this was seen as the best solution by all parties, TWA and Lee Valley Water claimed it was unaffordable. It should be mentioned here that monies had been ringfenced by TWA for any resulting project prior to the Final Report from Halcrow.

It was stated that to install new pipework from Grafham to Luton, plus the necessary ring-main and associated works around Luton and Dunstable, would use the entire budget set aside for all remedial works on all six of the rivers included in the Final Report.

All local interest groups in the Ver valley backed the Ver Valley Society's stance, and its desire to see Option C implemented: St Albans Council; Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust; the CPRE; local parish councils etc. etc. St Albans MP Peter Lilley raised the issue in the House of Commons during an Adjournment Debate in January 1987, and continued to back the campaign behind the scenes in Parliament. All were vociferous in their support of Option C.

In early 1989 mention began to be made of behind-the-scenes discussion of a compromise solution. The VVS (in the form of Dr Hollis), the TWA and Lee Valley Water suggested that Friars Wash might be retained as an emergency "standby" basis in times of high demand or failure of the other supplies. And in order to keep the pipes "sweet" Friars Wash would continue to operate daily at a much reduced rate, i.e. 1 million litres of water per day. In addition, the costs of Option C against Option D were vigorously contested by the VVS. They were, they argued, much the same.

Later in 1989 the National Rivers Authority (NRA) came into being, in a new environmental oversight and improvement role, along with OFWAT to govern the practices of the newly privatised water companies, both of them acting on behalf of central government. Amalgamation of the Colne and Lee Valley businesses occurred in the summer of 1991.

In early 1990 the NRA (Thames Region, based in Reading) announced that the River Ver and other rivers were to be given priority nationally in what had become known as "Alleviation of Low Flow" (ALF) schemes. The five rivers were:

- River Ver, Hertfordshire

- River Pang, Berkshire
- River Wey, Hampshire & Surrey
- River Misbourne, Buckinghamshire
- Letcombe Brook, Oxfordshire

Finally, in September 1991, the NRA announced that its preferred option, after all, was to place Friars Wash PS on standby basis only, and lay new mainswater pipelines from the Ouse Valley and around Luton, to supply the town. The project was to be funded jointly by the NRA and Three Valleys Water Co.

Naturally, planning and construction of such an undertaking was hugely complex, intrusive and expensive. Pipelaying across Luton began in February 1992. On 26th May 1993, nearly forty years after a similar ceremony to switch "on" the electric pumps of Friars Wash PS, they were officially and ceremonially turned "off", to equal (if not greater) fanfare. This was heralded as the first successful implementation of an ALF scheme in the country.

Once again, the "little" River Ver had shown its greater significance.

For References, Source Material and Acknowledgements: see Section 6 on the website.



Former offices/HQ of St Albans Waterworks Co, Holywell Hill (built 1908), now a Nursery School



The Old Pumphouse, Stonecross



Dried-up river, Shafford Mill, late 1980s



Top/Settling Lake, Verulamium Park, drained and desilted, dry Summer/Autumn (2nd October 2005)



New water pipes at The Cricketers, junction of Stonecross, Harpenden Road, Avenue Road, St Peter's Street, Summer 2022



Sinking of a modern borehole/well in the 21st century, near St Albans



Friars Wash Pumping Station, River Ver, August 1994