



# Ver Valley Society NEWSLETTER

No. 156  
OCTOBER 2024

## AGM: NOTICE OF 48TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING



## NEW DATE, NEW VENUE

**Tuesday 22nd October 2024 at 7.30pm**

Cottonmill Community Centre, Old Oak, St Albans AL1 2EF. FREE event – all welcome.

**Guest speaker: Richard Witter.**  
VVS Member and Wine Expert

**Sustainability & Conservation in the  
Wine Industry plus informal wine tasting**



In a change to our usual format, we are using Richard's knowledge and the importance of water to growing wine as an opportunity to taste several wines before voting at the AGM!

Richard will talk us through environmental concerns and pressures facing the wine industry, followed by an informal tasting of three wines under the theme of 'Rivers'. Non-alcoholic refreshments will also be served, of course.

There will be brief reports, the latest Ver Valley news and then voting by Society members for the 2024/5 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, Cathy Welsby, by Monday 14th October. Proposer and seconders from the membership will be required.



## LATEST NEWS



### March for Clean Water

Join us, and a whole host of well-known environmental groups, on Sunday 3rd November on a family-friendly march in London to Parliament Square.

We'll be meeting at St Albans City Station at 9.30am to head to the big city. Dress in blue, bring a banner or simply walk with us in a show of strength from all those who love their lakes, rivers and oceans.

It's the perfect opportunity to show the new Government that we'd like more of a commitment to improve the quality of the water environment. See website for more details [www.riverver.co.uk](http://www.riverver.co.uk)

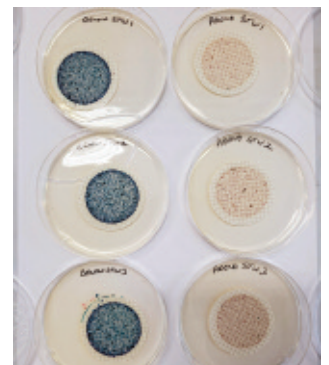
**\*NB.** Unfortunately the printed edition of the newsletter carries the former, incorrect date of the March.

### Sewage discharge finally stops

When groundwater finally fell in mid-July, the discharges at Markyate sewage works eventually stopped. In total, 2,600 hours of sewage spilled from the outfall.

The high nitrate levels downstream and E. coli in the Ver near Flamstead are testament to the issues the discharges cause in our fragile chalk stream. Scandalously, there are many other rivers with similar

issues but we are working hard to get improvements promoted up Thames Water's capital investment priority list.



● E. coli recorded in May at 6x bathing water standard ©Brunel University

## SAVE THE DATES

**Next Open Meetings:** ● **Thurs 27th February 2025** – Redbourn Village Hall AL3 7LW, details tbc  
● **Tues 17th June** – St Stephen Parish Centre, Bricket Wood, details tbc

## All change



- I don't do protests...



The state of our rivers played no small part in the result of the summer election and with one new local MP and a new party in control, what will it mean for the Ver?

There are already signs that the new Labour government are making the right noises but aren't going to be investing heavily to enable swift improvements to river health.

Equally there's no indication that they will encourage enforcement of existing law on polluters to encourage compliance. I don't often do protests but I will be going to London for the March for Clean Water on 3rd November. I encourage you to join me, as it will set the tone for the next 5 years of this government.

The water quality of Lake Windemere, the Herefordshire Wye and the Thames – three of our finest waterbodies – remains shockingly poor. Sewage and excessive nutrients from chicken farming (on the Wye) are widely recognised as the key factors but water companies, government agencies, relevant councils and the farming community are dragging their feet in enacting solutions.

If these internationally renowned sites are being failed, what chance the rest of us? See you at St Albans City station, 9.30am on Sunday 3rd November.

## Harpenden &amp; Berkhamsted



This new local constituency covers much of the upper Ver and it is good news that a keen advocate for chalk streams, Victoria Collins (LibDem), was voted in as the first MP. Not only did Victoria cover the topic in her maiden speech, and has written to Thames Water about sewage, but also invited me to appear with her on ITV London News expressing our concerns about water quality.

## Abstraction latest



- Completely shutting down?

Change of government; more delays. Affinity Water's Water Resources Management Plan, and Ver abstraction reductions, have yet to be signed off for the 2025-9 period. We are hoping for a happy Christmas! In the meantime, Affinity Water's 9 million litres a day abstraction reduction at the foot of Holywell Hill is scheduled to happen by the end of the year. Apparently, the Ver won't be a major beneficiary. The geology is such that most of any river improvement will be seen on the upper Colne.

## Sewage shocker



● Chairman of Herts County Council, Terry Douris and Watling Councillor, Jane Timmis visit Markyate STW

The sewage discharge at Markyate finally stopped at 2,600 hours in mid-July. It'll be all too easy for the sewage fungus, E. coli and excessive nutrients to be forgotten.

However, this has been going on for forty years! Now is not the time to stop. There's more local support than ever to persuade Thames Water and the Environment Agency to take some real steps to solve the problem. It won't be quick, especially with Thames Water's uncertain financial future, but thanks to, Victoria Collins MP, local councillors, Markyate Parish Council, Flamstead Parish Council and local riparian owners there are more voices pressing for investment.

## Cyclical Ver

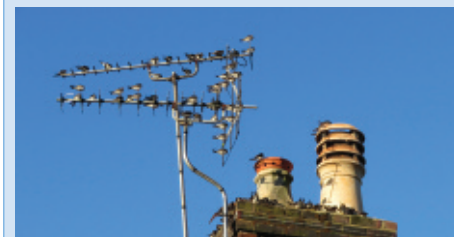


- A healthy August flow

It's good to see the river in such high flow through the summer months and this has generally been good for the flora and fauna of the valley. However, it's important to sit back and take a long-term view. In the past few months, records were broken for summer flows but you only need to look at the charts on page 5 to see that it's all very cyclical, although not easy to predict! This year's sparkling headwaters (above Markyate!) can be soon followed by a dry river channel; frustratingly flooded footpaths can quickly become next year's dusty tracks. The ebb and flow of it all is definitely something to enjoy, rather than irritatingly fight.

And finally thank you to those members who volunteered to assist following our plea for more help, particularly Mike Pearson (Webmaster). We still have a few roles to fill, especially Bailiff Co-ordinator. If you have a few hours to spare and could help with planning and organisational tasks, please get in touch!

The Ver Valley is a migration highway, especially for hirundines (the swallow family). As we go to press and the seasons change, I look out of the window to see 200 House Martins on the rooftops at first light. They are mostly migrating youngsters who have stayed overnight and are now trying to warm up before continuing their journey to Africa.



The high river flows have continued and generally the summer invertebrate scores have been good, up and down the valley.

However, as August unfolded, a number of sites have only managed their 'trigger score' – one step away from being brought to the attention of the EA.

The high levels of nutrients in the river have led to low levels of dissolved oxygen in the water and consequently dead and dying invertebrates have appeared in the sampling trays at Luton Lane (Markyate sewage discharges won't have helped) and in St Albans at Cottonmill.



● Caddis pupa



● Dead Caseless Caddis ©Paul Foster

Various stages of caddis fly larvae have been observed through the summer months, including the fascinating pupal stage that comes between the familiar stick/stone home of the cased caddis and its emergence into an adult flying along the river. Near Hedges Farm, Bruce had his first mayfly nymph in 10 years.

It's time to say a very big thank you to Sue and Martin Frearson who are hanging up their Riverfly nets for the very last time. Not only did Sue and Martin lead the Society into the Riverfly programme in 2012 but they have also monitored the Drop Lane site monthly for the last decade – recording the best invertebrate scores on the Ver.

We are indebted to them for their hard work and shaping the VVS Riverfly team into the crew it is today.

Welcome to Brian and Lee who have recently qualified as Riverfly monitors. You should see them kick-sampling at Drop Lane and Sopwell in the coming months.

● **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 is informed. The VVS monitors 19 sites on the Ver.**



● Martin kick-sampling ©Melanie Woods.



● Martin & Sue at work

Water Quality Monitoring



A dozen VVS volunteers are now taking samples every quarter. River Hill, Flamstead remains a location with high enough nitrate levels to be accorded 'poor ecological status'. At Luton Lane levels are also high. The majority of the middle river, remains at 'good ecological status'. However, Sopwell is only achieving 'moderate ecological status' because of high nitrate levels. Hyde Lane has been brought to the attention of the EA, as it appears to have persistent issues and recently returned another 'poor' score.



● Luton Lane



● Joe's sampling kit

Mudspotter

This initiative is now up and running with Steve Coppard and Paul Foster recording water conditions on the River Red and Joe Mellen monitoring the storm drain at Fryth Mead. Joe's also ready with the water sampling kit to collect samples for analysis of the road runoff pollutants entering the river at several spots.



● Moles are back

The moles of Gorhambury are back! These local fortune tellers can reveal the river conditions before Roger the local bailiff even looks at the Ver on his stretch!

Their presence means that groundwater has dropped and the permissive path by the river on Gorhambury is again dry and walkable, much like the rest of the footpaths up and down the valley at last.

The exceptional flows mean most of our bailiffs are reporting clear water and gravel beds and whilst there are some areas of silt, it is less than in previous years.

The fast river flows have certainly done their job and most of the river looks like a



● Flow from Markyate Cell, Aug 2024

respectable chalk stream to be proud of. Phil & Cathy report that the Markyate to Flamstead section has had a small but welcome summer flow. That is something not often seen these days.

The bailiffs have reported a poor summer for butterflies and insects in general. Many of the usual species have been sighted but in much lower numbers than most years.

Speckled Wood, Comma and Gatekeeper all did relatively well, whereas Common Blue, Marbled White and Painted Lady were much harder to find. Dragonflies and damselflies had a better summer with many species spotted along the river.



● Sopwell Bailiff's delight ©Lee Wood

Banded Demoiselles, a Migrant Hawker and Willow Emerald were all recorded.

Gareth and Rhona have volunteered to manage Section 9 – Redbournbury Mill to Doolittle Mill and we now have coverage on all of our river sections.

As many of you will know, the Society's bailiffs conduct a monthly walk along their section recording river flow, pollution, wildlife and any footpath issues they come across.

Having local 'eyes and ears' along all 27 kilometres of the Ver gives the Society a wonderful insight into the river's health and many challenges.



● Migrant Hawker



● Banded Demoiselle



● Common Blue

## LIST OF BAILIFF

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.

### Section

1. R Colne to Moor Mill
2. Moor Mill to Burydell Lane
3. Burydell Lane to New Barnes Mill
4. New Barnes Mill to Sopwell Mill
5. Sopwell Mill to Holywell Hill
6. Holywell Hill to Bluehouse Hill
7. Bluehouse Hill to Bow Bridge
8. Bow Bridge to Redbournbury
9. Redbournbury to Dolittle
10. Dolittle to Redbourn Bypass
11. Chequers to Verlam End
12. Flamstead to Markyate  
(and Kensworth Lynch occasionally)
13. River Red

### Name of Bailiff

- Sue and Martin Frearson  
 Brian Ellis\*  
 Bruce Banfield-Taylor\*  
 Giles Harrison  
 Lee Wood\*  
 Vivien Gates  
 Roger Hall  
 John Pritchard\*  
 Rhona Macdonald & Gareth Pountain  
 Neil Leverton  
 John Fisher & Peter Hill
- Cathy & Phil Comfort  
 Joe Randall

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\* indicates those who are also Riverfly monitors.

## Records broken

The wet early months of 2024 ensured high groundwater levels throughout the summer. Consequently, river levels were recorded as 'Exceptionally High' for the whole period.

From mid-May to early August, the Ver's flow at Hansteads (Colney Street) was the highest recorded for the corresponding time of year – beating all others since records began in 1956. Groundwater levels were also among the highest recorded in summer, matching 2001 levels, the year generally recognised with the highest groundwater in modern times.



● Harpendenbury Farm, Aug 2024 ©Lee Wood

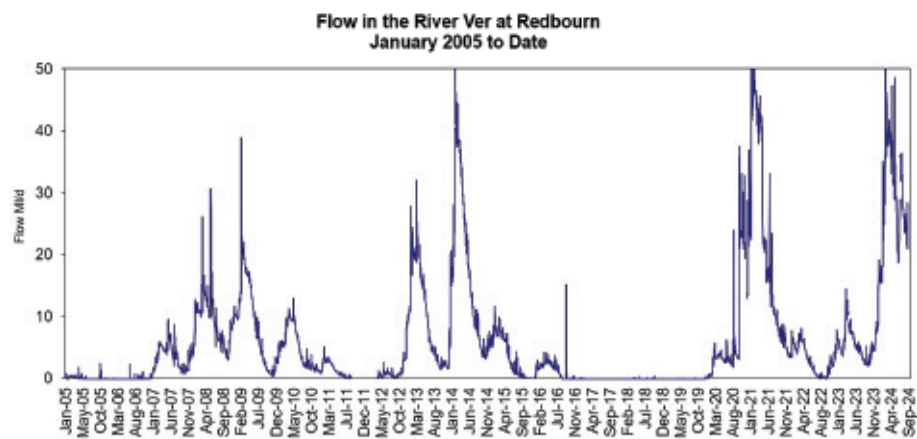
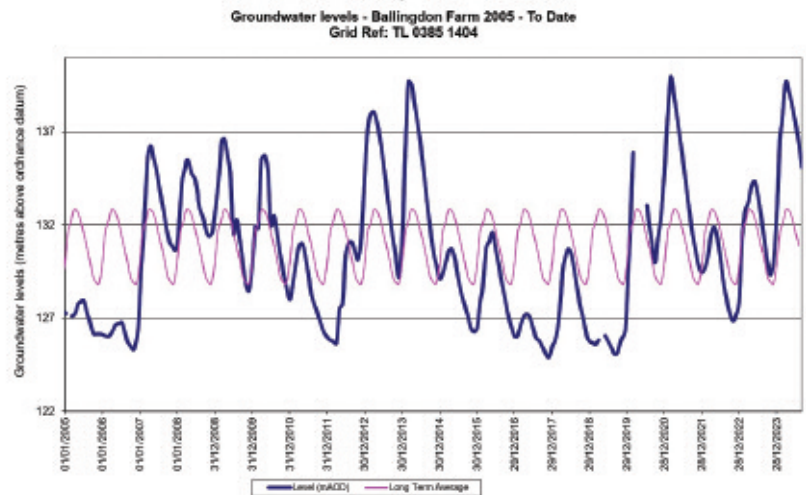


● Frogmore Bridge July 2024 ©Steve Preece



● Drop Lane stepping stones, August 2024.

Months 2024	Groundwater measurement at Ballingdon Farm, mAOD [Long-term average] (figures from EA)	Rainfall in millimetres [± average] (figures from Rothamsted)
June	138.43 [134.20]	21.5 [-33.3]
July	137.54 [133.23]	91.0 [+35.5]
August	136.55 [132.05]	23.2 [-48.8]
September	135.13 [130.35]	Not available yet



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



● Clean gravel, Redbournbury, August 2024



● Hedges Farm, July 2024



● Verulamium Park August 2024

## School Visits



It was a rewarding summer term of visits to the Ver by local schools to learn more about the geography and inhabitants of the city's chalk stream. Led by Laura from Chiltern Chalk Streams, who liaised with the schools and led the walks, 250 schoolchildren were thoroughly entertained. Thirteen Society volunteers kick-sampled, sorted invertebrates, encouraged children and recaptured escaping fish while putting in over 60 hours of effort. Thank you everyone! If you would like to help in the autumn term or next year, please get in touch with John P.



## Quiz Night

The Lower Red Lion Sunday 24th November 2024. Back by popular demand! It'll be a night of fun, food and tricky questions. It's £40 for a team of four which includes a cheese platter for the table. Prizes to be announced and any profits go to the Society. Open to members and non-members alike but please book your table – watch the VVS website for news and our Eventbrite page for tickets to be announced  
[www.eventbrite.com/o/ver-valley-society-73016169263](http://www.eventbrite.com/o/ver-valley-society-73016169263)



## Community Showcase

St Albans Cathedral Saturday 12th October 2024, 11am-3pm. We've been invited to show off our work in the Cathedral, together with over 50 other local charities and community groups. If you are in the vicinity, please come and say "Hello".



## Midweek Madness

Now that summer is over, we'll be running more midweek volunteer sessions. It'll mainly be two hours of light work with coffee and cake involved as often as possible. If you'd like to receive invitations via email, please email Lee to be included.



Here's one of the sessions from Markyate, back in June - trimming the hedge for the Parish Council, which is also on the route of the River Ver Trail.

## Flood Wardens

The Environment Agency is planning to restart their Flood Warden scheme across Herts and North London to ensure there is local knowledge and co-ordination available should serious flooding threaten.

## Old Rubbish

Paul Foster fished out a fascinating find from the Ver recently. It turned out to be a Sainsbury's drink can from about 1970! It's been sitting in the river for well over 50 years.

If you were ever in doubt about how long litter persists in the environment, it's the perfect proof. Priced as 9d in old money (decimalisation was in 1971) and before the use of ring pulls, it sports distinctive graphics from the 1960s and 70s.

Who ignored the 'No Litter Please' message and tossed it in the river, back in the day?



● Flood Warden Required? ©Joe Mellen

We won't be adding this responsibility to the VVS Bailiffs' role but if you are interested in hearing more, please ask John P for details.

## St Albans Library



● The River Ver Section

River Ver enthusiasts are reminded that St Albans Library hosts a wonderful archive of material related to our chalk stream. Much of it was collected by former VVS Chairman, Andy Webb. One folder, for example, tells the fascinating tale of VVS founder member, Eddie Butcher. Born in 1901 in Culver Road, St Albans, the last of eleven children. His father insisted that he learned two trades, so that he would never be out of work. He made bricks in the summer and sunk wells, dug cesspits, drains and channels, and cleaned out ponds and moats in winter.

## Save the Date

Thursday 15th May 2025, Abbey Theatre, St Albans. Exclusive VVS 'Charity Night' performance of Henrik Ibsen's An Enemy of the People. It's a tale of a water pollution scandal, political intrigue and suppression of the story. Sounds familiar?! More details in January.



● Ver Valley Barn Owl ©James Gurney

Unfortunately, our Barn Owls have had a poor year with only one successful nest box which yielded two youngsters. There was a succession of rainy nights in July just as the young needed regular feeds and the rain would have prevented the owls from hunting.

One nest had one young and 2 eggs on the last day of May but when we returned in early July the box had been deserted. However, two non VVS boxes which we monitor near Flamstead and Piccotts End were successful with two and single. It is now 20 years since we put up our first box and we have now ringed over 130 young from our boxes.

### Peregrine project

A real success was the St Albans Abbey Peregrines who bred for the third year running and this year three youngsters fledged. It looks like we will be seeing these spectacular birds around our valley on a regular basis now.

They were filmed by the BBC for the One Show so maybe you saw them with Barry Trevis, the project leader and ringer, with Hamsa Yassin of Countryfile.



● Cathedral Peregrine ©Barry Trevis

There's an interesting update on the single chick (named Artemis) ringed/colour-ringed at St Albans Cathedral in 2022 - it was seen at Winterton-on-Sea, Norfolk in May this year.

It was not possible to ring any of the Egrets or Grey Herons on Verulamium Island as they now nest so high that the ringers can no longer reach them safely. It is thought there were about four Egret nests and seven Heron nests, but they also were severely affected by the rainy conditions in the early summer, and many would have failed.

### Fantastic Flycatcher



● Pied Flycatcher ©Rupert Evershed

A good late summer find was a juvenile Pied Flycatcher which John Pritchard found near Pre-Mill in Gorhambury. These birds are summer migrants which breed far to the west or north of our region but a few pass through Hertfordshire on their migration.

The male is a striking black and white bird but the Ver bird, being a bird that fledged earlier in this summer, was mainly brown with a white wing patch and the characteristic dark eye of all flycatchers. It was only present for a day before continuing its journey back to West Africa. It was the first one I had seen in the Ver Valley, but my late friend Ernie Leahy did see one along the Ver behind the Chequers pub at Redbourn, a few years back.

I am always pleased to hear about sightings. [john.fisher2023@outlook.com](mailto:john.fisher2023@outlook.com)  
Tel: 01582 792843 or 07845 152570



● Pied Flycatcher ©John Pritchard

### MEMBERSHIP

By Peter Hill

**Our membership continues to increase with 20 new members since the previous newsletter taking us to another new record high of 387.**

A warm welcome to Rosie Rogers, Janet Southwood, Pamela Lambert, Ruth Wakeman, Karen Stanley, Lena Coombes, Jill Bartlett, Darren Voisey, Maria Goldsmith, Darren West, Brian and Joanne Martin, Vicki Tilley, Julian Green, Christine Neill, Alicia Instone, Carl Slater, Joyce Day, Caroline Cowling, Amanda Yorwerth and Jesus Pastor Marin. May you enjoy your membership and hopefully join with your fellow members to support the society's activities in improving 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)

We had planned that following the wet winter life would return to normal and Himalayan Balsam would be our challenge during the summer months. It was but, not in the way expected.

In June we returned to Sopwell Mill Farm to continue our work on removing the brash blockages under the access bridge to the farm and tackled the bushes restricting the water flow.

It was a bright morning and we had a mixed team working in the channel and on bankside breaking down the woody material and stacking it in the shrubbery. The tenants were delighted with our work. A good positive outcome.

Our Himalayan Balsam surveys identified that there was very little Himalayan Balsam on Ross's small holding – Bruce and I cleared it in a couple of hours.

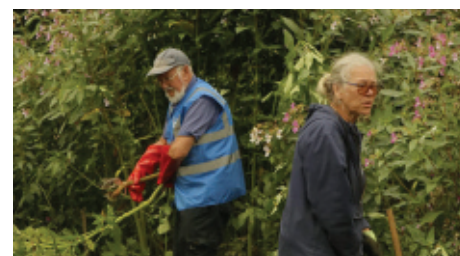


In early July we hosted some corporate volunteers from AMD who had “an away day” pulling balsam on Drop Lane down to the confluence. They enjoyed themselves, contributed to our funds and we observed that there was less balsam than in previous years – perhaps cold wet winters are the solution to Himalayan Balsam?

Moor Mill in July was the groups next challenge. You could see the balsam as you drove up – I’m convinced that it was the biggest bank of balsam in the county!

The floods had formed a new bank and the balsam was growing in this bank. It was a tremendous all-round effort but the site was left balsam free and there was just time for a celebratory drink.

In August some of the group met at the southern end of Redbourn Golf Club where the river was backing up, posing a risk of local flooding. The channel was choked with vegetation.



The team teased open a channel from the bottom of the golf course, past the Tithe Barn, to the field above Porridge Pot. It was very heavy work on a hot day but the results - the river flowing again made it all worthwhile.



**AUTUMN 2024**

The autumn programme venues have yet to be announced. The Saturday Action Group sessions will be on Sat 19th October 2024, Sat 16th November 2024 and Sat 21st December 2024 which will include festive drinks afterwards at the Chequers Inn, Redbourn. See [www.riverver.co.uk/current-year](http://www.riverver.co.uk/current-year) for latest details and sign up for email updates by contacting Lee Wood (see details below).

**YOUR COMMITTEE**

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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@stalbens.gov.uk

Water Leaks (Affinity Water):  
0800 376 5325