

# THE RIVER VER

## A MEANDER THROUGH TIME

Jacqui Banfield-Taylor

Based on the original notes of Ted Banfield

This first major and comprehensive work on the River Ver reveals a fascinating story from source to confluence and prehistory to the twenty-first century of a chalk stream that has shaped not only the local landscape but the lives of its people past and present.

Chalk streams are scarce and fragile ecosystems: of the 163 chalk streams in the world, all but two are in the UK. From its source at Kensworth Lynch in the foothills of the Chilterns, the River Ver when in full flow meanders south along its valley for around 24km through Markyate, Flamstead, Redbourn, St Albans, Park Street and Bricket Wood where it meets the River Colne.

With a foreword by the renowned television presenter and wildlife photographer Chris Packham, the book tells of the Ver's long and interesting history, including geology and archaeology, milling and watercress growing and problems with abstraction, along with abstraction and flow charts and comprehensive records and details of a selection of local flora and fauna. Included is a fascinating list of bygone words, many local, connected with rivers and water. There are wonderful personal memories and experiences sprinkled throughout the book of people who have lived, worked and played on or near the river, helping to bring the past to us here in the present, all complemented with over 300 photographs, images and maps, many never before seen in public, and some going back more than 250 years.

*The River Ver: A Meander Through Time* makes it clear how valuable and important our chalk streams are and how vital it is to raise their profile and that of the rich diversity of wildlife they support. This beautifully written and illustrated book will encourage readers to take an interest in exploring and caring for this superlative resource and its surroundings and help to give the River Ver its rightful importance now and for future generations.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jacqui Banfield-Taylor has spent most of her life living near the River Ver in St Albans where she was born and raised until moving to Bricket Wood with her husband Bruce – a Park Street boy!

The daughter of the local author and historian Ted Banfield, she was brought up to appreciate, care for and love the countryside, its flora and fauna and its waterways especially the River Ver where many happy hours have been spent with her family, friends and dogs!

She was a contributor to her father's books including writing, photography and research and writes regularly for the local village magazine.

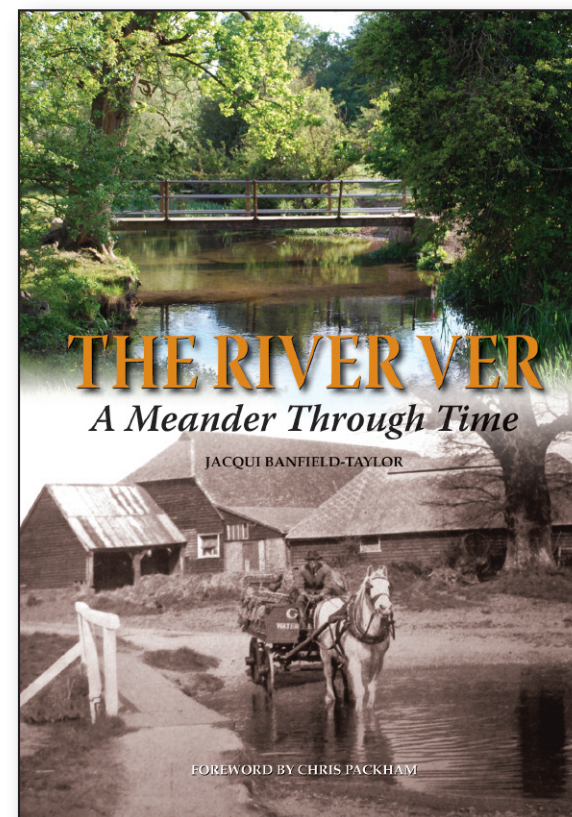
Her interests are many and varied and include walking, painting, reading, writing, theatre, photography – she has had work published in national magazines – early British and domestic history, local history and visiting, photographing and researching old churches and ruins.

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# THE RIVER VER



Above: Family tiddling at Redbournbury 1930s.

Left: Mr Quick who worked the watercress beds from Harpenden Lane northwards to the Osiers.

Right: The adorable water vole.



The river after passing under Watling Street 2009.

## Chapter Five Dolittle Mill to Kingsbury Mill

*Can you tell me of a country, full of streams, and fields, and mills,  
Where silver waters flow within the hollows of its hills;  
A land of meadows green, and lanes, which show the traveller's eye,  
And make him lengthen out his way, nor wish to hurry by?  
Between the Roman Roads of Hert' by Rev Abbot J. Delour*

After passing Dolittle Mill House the river flows under Watling Street. In Barlow "Travellers Tales", it states that large boats had to be dragged across the fords at Frogmore End and the ford between Kingsbury and Redbourn; this could be where the river crosses Watling Street near Dolittle Mill or at Shalford. It is not known if these large boats were propelled by oarsmen or towed from the banks. But it raises the question of how big our river was in the past.

The river in this area of Redbourn was described by Sir William Beach Thomas in his 1950 book on Hertfordshire as

One of the few streams that remain pure, keeps much of its old charms and exercises its old attractions, is the Ver which runs through the valley from which St Albans climbs up the steep northern slope. It is a beautiful trout stream, in which the fish grow to four pounds or more, and along its course, not least within the confines of Verulam or ex-Verulam property, are to be seen at intervals beds that one would not expect in such surroundings. Both a stilt and an oyster catcher have been shot thereabouts by sportsmen in search of snipe and duck, which reside in the valley. These shy birds the golden plover come almost into the suburbs of St Albans.

Many people are drawn to the banks of our rivers by angling and Redbournbury Fisheries situated by the river off Beesmead Lane is no exception. Founded in 1987, it covers 7 acres of land on the site of the old watercress beds and includes well stocked lakes with coarse and game fish and a stretch of the river which has been improved with the help of English Nature and the Environment Agency. These improvements include: narrowing channels to improve water flow and movement of sediment which in turn will benefit water life including conditions for spawning.

Several types of fish have already been seen in the river including brown trout, rudd and millers thumb and perch such as roach, freshwater shrimp, bream, loach and numerous dragonflies.

Many birds also frequent the area including the tufted duck, migrating bitterns, green woodpeckers, barn owls and the beautiful kingfisher.

Indeed Dame Juliana Barbers in her 1496 book *Traveller's guide to the river Angles*, was well aware of the delights of angling and how close it brings man to nature and his surroundings.

And if the angler take forth, surely there is there no sun merrier than he is in his sport.

As an angler I wholeheartedly agree!

The kingfisher (Alcedo atthis) is one of the most beautiful birds of the British countryside with its brilliant blue and red plumage it is synonymous with our rivers and waterways and to see one is always a thrill. There is little difference between male and female – the colour of the lower mandible is all black on the male's bill and black with red on the female

DOLITTLE MILL TO KINGSBURY MILL

The river after passing under Watling Street 2009. (JBT)

and they both make a shrill whistle "chi-koosee". With 5000-8000 breeding pairs in the UK, in late April they usually excavate a tunnel in a bank next to slow flowing water where they both take turns incubating their six-seven eggs and feeding the young which fledge in around twenty-five days.

Their fast and low flight means they are often gone in a colourful flash. Hunting from riverside perches and occasionally hovering over water they feed mainly on fish and aquatic insects. They are currently amber listed and are at risk from habitat degradation, pollution and hard winters.

The following memories of the area around Redbournbury are from Geoff Wade.

Reaching the turning point of my ramble I cross the river by a rickety plank, acting as a footbridge – frequently water holes swim away in silent escape, only visible by a broad bar wave, but one soft brown little chap sitting at his post and lazily nibbling a freshly gathered reed – bream failure. The bed of a shallow stretch of water is a mosaic of clearly marked stones in many shades, small shoals of minnows, their tails fanning gently, long stationary against the current. Fresh water shrimps or "lee biter", swim with an undulant sideway motion, while a brown and white mottled fish, a miller's thumb, or, "bull head", lies motionless between two stones, depending on its amazing camouflage for protection. Anemone-looking snails cling to existing undergrowth trunks of water crocuses, whose yellow-centred, snow-white flowers stand out brightly, barely above the water's surface.

The mill stream behind Redbournbury Mill. (JBT)

Redbournbury Mill early 1900s. The newly installed steam engine is housed in the shed on the right with the enclosed belt drive crossing the tall race to the mill. (GWN)

After passing under Watling Street the river goes many ways as it snakes across the water meadows until coming to Waterend Lane where it crosses the ford above Redbournbury Mill.

I love the brimming water that swims  
Their quiet meadows round the mill.  
The sheep pool above the dam,  
The pool beneath it never still.

Redbournbury Mill mid 1900s. (JBT)

Jimmy Sanson, local cress grower with Tom Burchmore one of his workers near the cress beds near of Redbournbury Farm – now Redbournbury Fisheries 1933. (GWN)



Cress packers, the ford at Waterend Lane 1870.