



# River Ver



## Chalk Stream

CHALLENGE WALK

**Route Length:** 1.4 miles (2.3km)

**Terrain:** Easy walking mostly on good paths some of which can be muddy after rain, especially from the scrape to the rewilding area (numbers 4 to 7 on the map). Good walking footwear is advised.



**Start:** St Michael's Bridge.

**Finish:** Verulamium Lake bridge

**Parking:** Verulamium Museum (AL3 4SW) or Westminster Lodge (AL1 2DL)

**Food & Drink:** Inn on the Park, family friendly café. Ye Olde Fighting Cocks, "The oldest pub in England". Westminster Lodge, café serving a variety of food and drinks

**Facilities:** Museum Car Park and Westminster Lodge.

**Local Transport:** There are various bus services to St Albans from Watford, Hemel Hempstead, Luton and London Colney.

St Albans is also served by direct trains from London St Pancras International on the Thameslink line to St Albans City (2miles) and from Watford on the Abbey Flier line to St Albans Abbey station (500m).





## STARTING POINT: ST MICHAEL'S BRIDGE

### 1: St Michael's Bridge

Here is our first sight of the river. It's already been flowing for over 10km before it comes under the bridge. Before the bridge was built in 1765, this spot was still a place where people and animals crossed the river to reach the city centre. Can you see the gently sloping sides of the old ford that made it easy to cross the river?



Now's a good time to have your River Spotter sheet handy and begin to tick off some of the sights. Walk away from the bridge and turn into Verulamium Park.

Walk along the footpath towards the Lake. After several hundred metres, you'll arrive by the river again.

### 2: Mill Stream

Do you notice anything unusual about the river? It now has a concrete edge! Chalk streams should have natural edges where wild plants can grow and where many insects and small mammals like to live. In Verulamium Park, many of the seeds of the plants that should be growing by the Ver, instead get washed into the lake and grow along its edges. Look carefully and you might spot water mint, purple loosestrife and sedge grass. Use your Chalk Stream Plants Spotter to help you.

In the past, before electricity, water was used to power waterwheels which turned millstones to grind wheat into flour for bread.

To direct the River Ver towards a mill, it was often moved into artificial channels with steep banks and became slow moving, silty and warm – the exact opposite of what a chalk stream should be!

Continue along the path between the mill stream and the lake. Have your Bird Spotter sheet handy as there should be plenty to see, including Little Egrets which nest on the lake's main island.

### 3: Abbey Mills

Through the trees, you should be able to make out the buildings of the Abbey Mills - that these days are converted to homes.



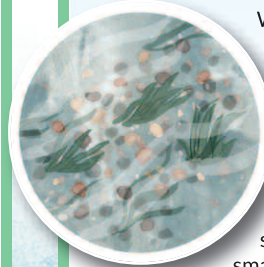
For nearly a thousand years all the water from the Ver turned a large waterwheel here. The Abbey Mills were important corn mills, when the Abbey was at the height of its power in the Middle Ages, grinding grain into food for people and livestock. The Abbey's brewery was once here too. No doubt using the Ver's clean water as the main ingredient for the beer.

Behind you, on the mill stream, there's just a chance that you might spot a brown trout or the blue flash of a kingfisher as it dives to catch a small fish in the Ver.

### 4: Clean Gravel

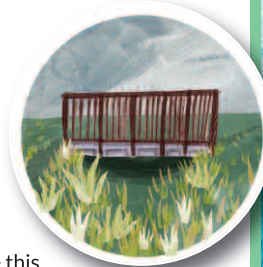
Walk southwest along the ancient causeway and turn left down the steps and walk downstream for 100 metres.

Here you should see the river looking much more like a chalk stream. It has plenty of energy, flowing quickly and this washes the silt away, leaving clean gravel on the bottom of the river, creating the perfect habitat for small invertebrates like mayfly and places for small fish to hide.



### 5: The Scrape

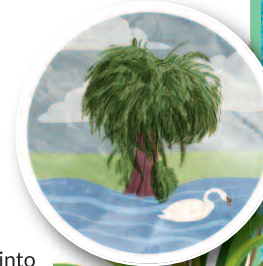
Next stop is the little bridge that might look as if it's in a dry field! The Ver, like other chalk streams, has different amounts of flow at different times of the year. It's usually very full in winter and spring and much lower in the summer and autumn. At the wettest times, the Ver can come over its banks. The Scrape is designed to safely capture this extra flow and create a natural wetland, increasing biodiversity. Can you spot any colourful wild flowers among the grass?



### 6: Willow Trees

Walk on to the second little bridge over The Scrape and look towards the river. Willow trees like to be near water and it helps them grow quickly, up to two metres a year. In the past, before plastics were invented, the flexible stems of the willow were harvested and woven into baskets to carry food, made into lobster pots and woven into fence panels. Trimming willow trees is known as 'pollarding' and this encourages plenty of new stems to grow.

Can you see a pollarded willow tree near here?



### 7: New Trees

Head off towards the Athletics Track to the right of Westminster Lodge. Walk up the hill, past the track (on your right) and onto the old golf course.



This area is being rewilded. Look at the leaves and see if you can identify some of the newly planted native species from holly and hornbeam to oak and hazel. Trees and hedges are very good for the environment.

They filter out pollution and can slow the flow of heavy rain and sediment into rivers.

### 8: Roman Wall

Cross the causeway and head for the remains of the old Roman wall, a reminder of the large city of Verulamium that stood here nearly 2,000 years ago.



It's quite likely that the River Ver chalk stream was the reason that the Romans established a city here, especially as the river was larger then. It is believed that boats could sail to the city from the sea! What's more, the River Ver would have been a good source of drinking water.

Today, millions of litres a day were abstracted from far below ground near here for the thirsty residents of St Albans to drink. Even water below the ground influences how well rivers above ground flow. Please remember to save water when you can!

### 9: The Lake

The last stop on the walk is the bridge between the lakes. Here the chalk stream water from the Ver flows under your feet to fill Verulamium Lake.

Take a final look around and see if you can spot any more birds or plants from your Spotter sheets.



## FINISHING POINT: VERULAMIUM LAKE BRIDGE

