

## **Introduction: Prior to the formation of the Upper Lea Valley Group**

The following are cuttings about the ULVG from local newspapers:

- "... that the Lea Valley between Pickford Bridge and the foot of Piggottshill Lane should be maintained as an open space becoming an essential amenity to the Batford area ...". [from the *Herts Advertiser* 6 February 1953, an outline of proposals submitted to the Minister of Housing and Local Government]
- "What the Common and Rothamsted are to Harpenden, the valley might be to Batford." [from a report by Batford Labour Group, of which the Architect Mr Pat Wilson was a member]
- "Harpenden Urban District Council plan a footpath from opposite the Gibraltar Public House to near the river bridge at Crabtree Lane." [from an article in the *Herts Advertiser* of 22 December 1961]
- "Proposals for a public path running north to south from Cooters End Land to Leasey Bridge Lane along the old railway line." [from the *Herts Advertiser* of 5 March 1971]

However Pat Wilson's grand idea was for a footpath that would begin at the source of the River Lea in Luton and continue right through to London.

In a later report in the *Herts Advertiser* newspaper, without a date, there is confirmation that Hertfordshire County Council had paid £500 to British Rail to buy land leading from the Harpenden Boundary to Leasey Bridge Lane, Wheathampstead. The report goes on to state that Harpenden Urban District Council had already acquired a length of the same line in its district and part of the line in Wheathampstead for a footpath and bridleway. This would have been the seed of the "through walk" from Luton to London.

In 1971 several extensive surveys of the area were carried out by members of a group, led by Mr Wilson, and comprising interested local individuals.

1972 saw the publication of a paper by a group of interested individuals calling itself "Harpenden Society and Harpenden Design Group"; this was a detailed document entitled "The Lea Valley in Harpenden" and set out a comprehensive plan for what was needed in the Harpenden Lea Valley.

In the *Harpenden Free Press* of 16 May 1972, a public meeting was advertised which was to be held at All Saints Hall where the proposals in the paper by the Harpenden Society and Harpenden Design Group would be put forward.

After the meeting the *Free Press* reported that it was attended by some 100 people. Pat Wilson had chaired it and spoke, imploring residents to "use their hands and heads in making the Lea Valley a beautiful area". He said, "We need people who can cut grass, clear away nettles and scrubland, dig paths and plant trees."

***This was the basis for the Upper Lea Valley Group being formed.***

## Early activities of the ULVG

From its early days, and mainly for insurance purposes, the Group was affiliated to the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (now The Conservation Volunteers) and to comply with its insurance requirements, the Group had to keep a note of attendances at its work parties. Records were kept from the very first work party of 29 July 1972; most work party sessions lasted about three hours.

A full page spread in the *Harpenden Free Press* of 7 November 1972 is headlined "Upper Lea Valley Group start the ball rolling". The article goes on to report how the Lea Valley in Harpenden had for some years been regarded as an eyesore with unkempt riverbanks, general rubbish, and the polluted river and that a group of Harpenden people were carrying out extensive work in the area with the main objective being to preserve the countryside. It notes that there had been consultations with the County Landscape Officer, the Footpaths Association, and the local Council.

The labour, apart from a few specialist jobs, was carried out by local volunteers who initially worked every other Saturday afternoon and the following morning and latterly monthly, throughout the year.

At the formation of the Group, all the tools and materials used were provided by Harpenden Urban District Council. When Harpenden became part of the newly formed St Albans City and District Council, that authority became the supporters.

An unused shop at 91 Lower Luton Road, to be used as its headquarters, was rented from the District Council for a peppercorn rent. ULVG committee meetings were held there, and tools were locked away in a back room. The windows were used for display purposes.

To one side of the HQ was a small plot of land which was for many years used as a tree nursery and from there and other sources, over the years many hundreds of shrubs and trees were planted all over the area tended by the Group.



*The Headquarters of the Upper Lea Valley Group. 1973-2017*

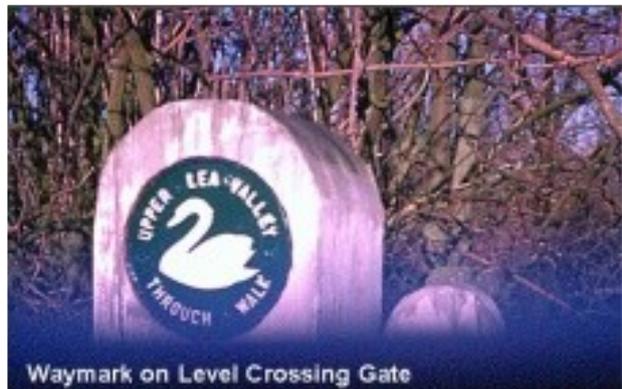
## Larger tasks undertaken by members of the Group

Over a long period, negotiations were on-going with various landowners, including British Rail and a local farmer, to release land to allow a public path to connect Bedfordshire to Harpenden and to the parish of Wheathampstead. After a great deal of physical work, the first part of the path became a reality on the 31 March 1974 when it was officially opened by Cllr. Ian Fulton (the final chairman of Harpenden's



Urban District Council). The opening ceremony was performed at Westfield Road by Mr Fulton cutting a piece of barbed wire. He then led many members of the public on the almost two mile route to Leasey Bridge Lane where refreshments were served.

The path, at that time called the Upper Lea Valley Through Walk, was the first major project by the Group members. This then was the first section of what later was to become the Lea Valley Walk; a 50 mile long-distance path between Leagrave near Luton and Limehouse in London. The route was waymarked with the symbol of a white swan on a green background. The design was by one of the Group's members who, before presenting it to the Group, had contacted Buckingham Palace to ensure that the use of a swan symbol could lawfully be used in signage. The initial metal way-markers were cast at St George's School from scrap metal.

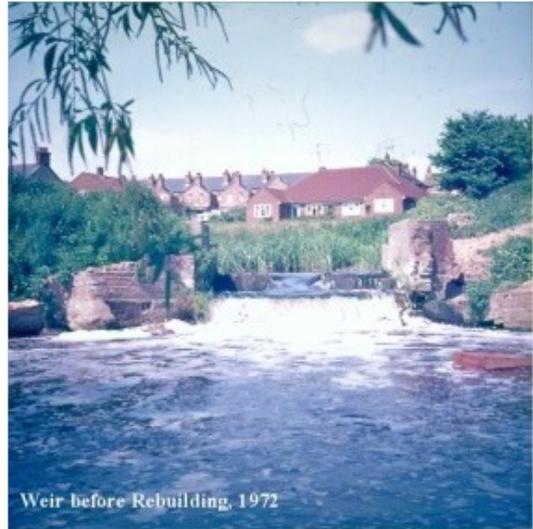


In 1977 members of the Group produced and published a six-fold black and white guide, entitled "Harpenden Upper Lea Valley Guide". It included a map of the route, photographs and an explanation of the area, its landscape, natural history, local history et cetera. The guide proved very popular.

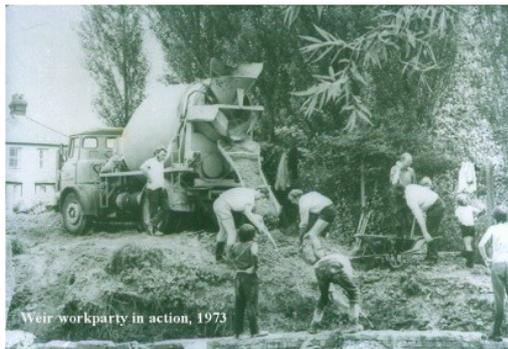
Quite soon after physical tasks had begun, it was realised that some other wheeled transport to augment the wheelbarrows would be useful and a member made a pull-along trolley that ran on four motor scooter wheels; it served the Group well. Later, came the offer of a dumper truck and this was even more useful.

The biggest project undertaken by the ULVG was the repair of the weir. After years of neglect the retaining walls had collapsed and plans were drawn up for their repair.

The first retaining wall tackled was on the right, looking upstream. This was relatively easy as the existing foundations could be used. The opposite wall presented more of a problem as no foundation was visible therefore the river needed to be diverted to inspect what had to be done. This was achieved by opening the original sluice for Batford watermill. Having done this, a dam was built at the weir and the river then flowed, via the disused watercress beds, into the main river at the bend.



A machine was then brought in to dig out the new foundations for the second wall. As the only access route for material was on the right-hand



side of the river, a chute of corrugated iron was constructed to facilitate the transfer of the ready-mix cement from the lorries to the foundation. The second new wall was then built.

The dam and the overspill of the river remained in place while the repair work on the weir was carried out. All the brickwork on the walls was done by a local retired professional bricklayer, while the labouring was undertaken by the

volunteers.

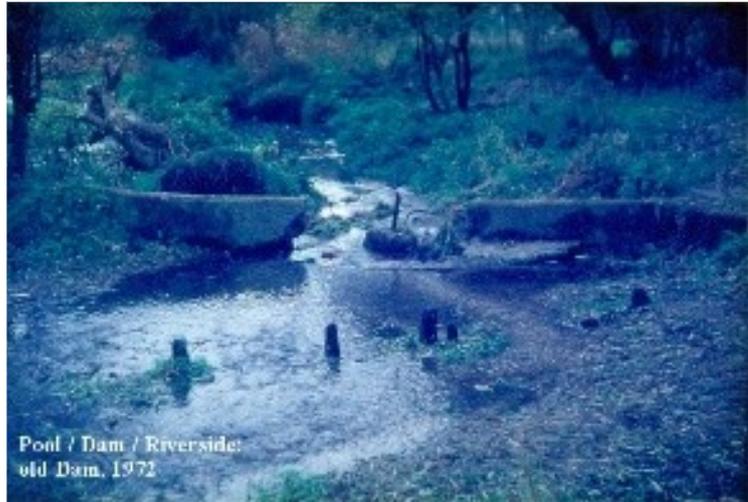
After the walls were completed and before the river was allowed to flow freely again, the stepping stones below the weir were built. All the bricks used were sourced locally and are "Luton Greys" to blend with older structures in the area.



There was an "opening ceremony" on Sunday 3 November 1974 and despite the rain, it attracted a crowd of onlookers to witness the water gushing through the new structure.

Having broken through the riverbank to enable the river to be diverted while the work was done at the main weir, a temporary barrier was put across the opening when the weir was opened. This remained in place until such time as a final decision was made as to how the opening in the bank should be reconstructed.

Five deep freshwater springs once fed commercial watercress beds in Batford. The cress beds ceased commercial operation sometime in the 1950's and they fell into disrepair. However, the springs continue to flow and merge to form a stream that runs alongside the Lea Valley Walk from just south of All Saints Church and eventually join the river via a dam which would once have retained the freshwater for the cress beds. Here was another idea to improve the neglected look of the area, the construction of a freshwater pool.



Pool / Dam / Riverside  
old Dam, 1972

The digging out of this pool would have been too much work by hand, so a man and a machine were hired to level it and create the pool area and,



with the professional help of the bricklayer, the old broken dam was replaced. By 1975 the work was completed and gradually the stream water filled the pool. Once the work on the actual pool was finished it seemed appropriate to make a footpath around it and leading off this, a small footbridge was constructed leading to the overspill weir on the left and the main weir to the right. Latterly the pool silted

over somewhat, and reeds and other water plants covered much of the water.

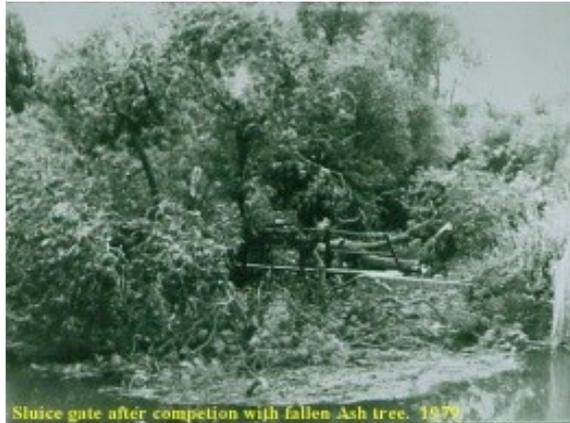
The next project was to try to reinstate the original sluice. A permit from Thames Water specified the dimensions and levels needed for rebuilding the foundations and the Water Authority informed the Group that a suitable mechanism was available at Hertford and gave its permission for volunteers to dismantle it and reinstate it at Batford where the artisans at the local forge designed and produced the support structure for the sluice gate. The metal pieces were then



Members of Upper Lea Valley Group  
rebuilding "sluice", Nov. 1978.

taken from the forge on the ULVG's dumper to the worksite and fitted together like a giant "Meccano Set". The addition of a footbridge would allow access to the mechanism at any time. This project was completed in 1979.

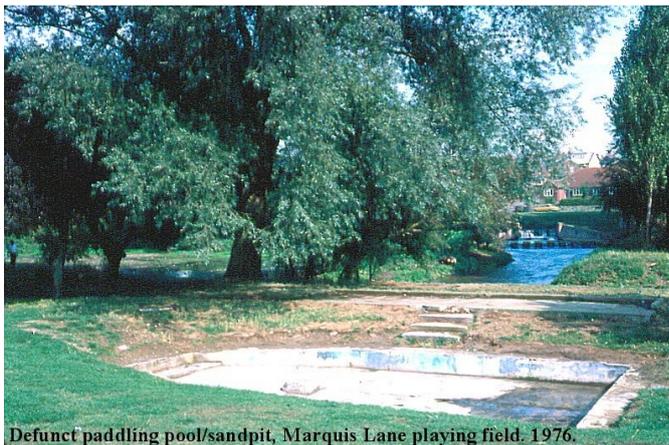
However only a matter of a few months after completion a large tree that had stood quite near the structure was blown over by a strong wind and landed on the metalwork buckling it badly, so it had to go back to Batford forge for repair.



In 1977, after the council had erected a new footbridge over the river at the ford, members of the Group took it upon themselves to complete the improvement of that area by replacing the fencing and mounting a seat onto the railing.

Other projects that had not been initially factored into the plan were tackled. One of these was the dilemma of what to do about the unsightly disused learners' pool in the playing field. This had been paid for by public subscription and opened in May 1954, but it only remained open for two years as it became polluted from Luton sewerage works.

It was drained and made into a sandpit, but this too proved unsuccessful mainly due to dog fouling. The sand was then removed by the Council leaving an ugly



concrete shell.



The Group tried to reinstate the water supply to the pool but unfortunately the freshwater quality was unsuitable as it was again contaminated from the river. After

consulting with local people and the Council the base was broken up by the volunteers and the area filled with soil and grassed over.

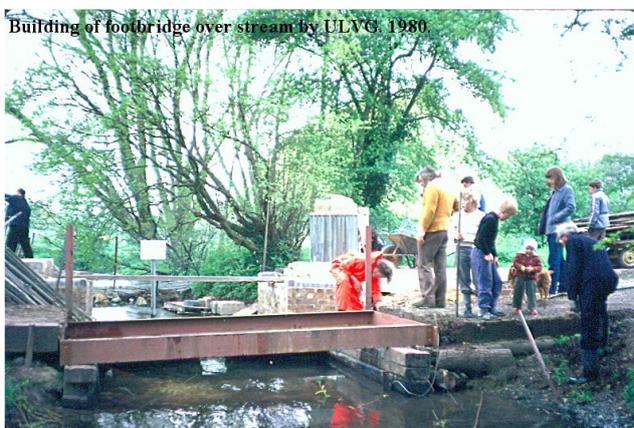
Another project was that of completely replacing the playing field footbridge which takes the footpath from Station Road to Lower Luton Road via the "cress stream".



Members of the Group required the new bridge to be sufficiently wide and strong to allow their dumper truck to use it and an application was made for permission for the volunteers to do the necessary work.

Pedestrians had to be allowed to continue to use the footpath throughout the work,

so the original bridge had to remain in place. The first idea was to build a temporary bridge of scaffolding next to the old bridge, but this proved too expensive. It was then decided to build the new bridge over the stream alongside the original bridge while that remained in use.



When the new bridge was complete, the footpath was temporarily diverted over the new bridge and the outmoded one shut to the public and dismantled. Work then began on new brick abutments etc and when the preparatory work was complete, the whole footpath was closed off for a day and the new bridge was manhandled a few metres upstream and secured into the position of the original bridge. This work was

done during 1980.

## Other ULVG Activities

Occasionally there were sub-groups of volunteers. For a short time, there was a mid-week afternoon work party comprising mainly women who did lighter tasks. There was also a group of retired men who worked in the yard at the back of the HQ and their main undertaking was that of casting concrete posts which were then used as the uprights for the post and rail boundary fencing at the headquarters, as well as by the bridge near the ford.

While the volunteers enjoyed the challenge of the bigger projects there were always general upkeep and conservation jobs needing attention, these included: the planting of trees and shrubs as well as their care, grass cutting, keeping streams clear, footpath maintenance, litter picking, et cetera. Plus this, the fact that there was a certain amount of maintenance required on the HQ building. One atypical task undertaken, with funds from the Hertfordshire Playing Fields Association, was the erection of a new children's swing in the playground. Also, at its committee meetings, members kept a watchful eye on local planning applications and commented as thought necessary.

As a Group, one of the few social events was the annual New Year's Day BBQ. A different spot within the area was chosen each year and a bonfire lit. A Calor gas stove was set up, sausages fried, and mulled wine served to members and friends. This was always a pleasant morning comprising mainly of chat with just a little very light work carried out - simply to keep the bonfire going!



### Batford Springs Volunteers

By 1985 the area had become known as “Batford Springs” and in 1995 St Albans City and District published a paper entitled “Local Nature Reserve Management Plan, Batford Springs”; the area was declared a Local Nature Reserve. The volunteers voted in 2010 to change the name to “Batford Springs Volunteers” and the “Upper Lea Valley Group” ceased to exist. In 1992 a plaque was erected outside All Saints Church which sums up the work done by the Upper Lea Valley Group.

