

**FORTHCOMING HLHS MEETINGS AND EVENTS - WHAT'S IN STORE?**

**Tue 5<sup>th</sup> Mar 2019**

'Opulent Heavitree' - Joint meeting with Interwoven / Heavitree Squilometre

**Sat 11<sup>th</sup> May 2019 (10am start)**

'Following the Northbrook': a walk led by Terry Bound, see below for more details.

**Tue 4<sup>th</sup> Jun 2019**

'From Exeter to Heavitree by Tram' - Dr Julia Neville

**Sat 6<sup>th</sup> Jul or Sat 13<sup>th</sup> Jul 2019**

Provisional dates for our Boundary Walk

**Tue 3<sup>rd</sup> Sep 2019**

AGM followed by a talk on 'The History of the Ludwell Valley' - Laurie Fentimen (Ludwell Life)

**Tue 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec 2019**

'Expanding Heavitree: the story of Regent Square and John J F Ellis – Sally Robinson

*All meetings, apart from the walks, start at 7.30pm and are held in the Rifford Room at Heavitree Parish Church.*

**Join us on a new walk: 'Following the Northbrook' on Sat 11<sup>th</sup> May**



On Sat 11<sup>th</sup> May, Terry Bound will be leading a walk following the Northbrook (Heavitree's own river!) from its source to the confluence with the River Exe.

The walk is about 4½ miles and is over a mix of hard and soft terrain.

We will meet at the top of Pennsylvania Road at its junction with Stoke Valley Road, hoping to start at 10am.

What you bring food-wise is

your choice; we may stop halfway down the route for a snack. Everyone is welcome to add their own anecdote to any comments made along the way.

There is no time-scale as we will walk at the pace of the slowest.

Any further information from Terry Bound 07800 972812

**Mobs, Crowds and Outcasts in Exeter: Todd Gray**

Our meeting in December was a packed one, as the popular historian, and recently-named Freeman of the City, Todd Gray, came to talk about his new book, 'Not One of Us'. Todd began by explaining how this work differs from a lot of his other research: it is not nostalgic, nor is it purely academic; it comes from his own interest in what makes certain people become 'different' and apart from the crowd.

He says: "I have become intrigued to understand how society lionised some people while others were reviled, attacked or even killed."

Todd's book tells the stories of 146 individuals who lived in Exeter but stood out from the crowd, whether through choice, circumstance, or simply the way they were. At our meeting he told us some of their stories, and what made them 'not one of us'.



### **Insanity:**

Sadly, having mental health problems often led to people being ostracized from society. Where you ended up depended on how much money you had. If you were wealthy, you could pay for your own private care in Wonford (previously St Thomas Lunatic Asylum). In the early 1800s, the penniless insane languished in gaols, workhouses etc. From 1845, the City of Exeter sent people to the Devon County Lunatic Asylum in Exminster. In 1886, its equivalent, the Exeter City Asylum, was opened, and remained until the 1980s, known as 'Digby'.

### **Suffragettes:**

In 1913, Emmeline Pankhurst, the famous suffragette, was incarcerated in Exeter Prison for three days. She had returned from America, where she had embarrassed the British government, and was arrested in Plymouth. During her time in Exeter she maintained a hunger strike. Her presence in the city caused crowds of people to gather outside the prison. Some of these were her supporters, but many more were men and boys looking to cause trouble.

### **Violet van der Elst:**

This woman discovered a type of shaving cream that did not require a brush; she became a multi-millionaire (with a penchant for 'younger male assistants') in the 1930s. She was a prominent campaigner against the death-penalty, coming to Exeter to protest about the sentencing of Charlotte Bryant, who was accused of having murdered her husband (although her loose morals certainly had an influence on her treatment). Sadly, she could not prevent her execution, but van der Elst's presence in Exeter drew huge crowds and generally quite a bit of sympathy.

### **Tommy Aesop Osborne and Long Charlie:**

These men were typical 'street characters': men who inhabited the streets in a very public way. Tommy was only about four feet tall, he wore a large box-hat and a big coat with pockets containing the books that he used to sell.

In contrast, Charlie stood around six feet tall, but was thin and gaunt. He had walked to London in the manner of Dick Whittington but had not made his fortune. On his return he made many attempts at running businesses – becoming a barber, in the army, running a peep show and selling matches. He was well known in Exeter, as a figure of fun, and was regularly taunted by boys and young men.



**The Three Witches of 1682:** Hundreds of people were paying for the deaths of these three women from Bideford, who had confessed to witchcraft. Even the judge didn't seem to think they were guilty, stressing instead

what pathetic and wretched creatures they were. It is likely that they were suffering from dementia. The crowd wanted blood, and the women were the last to be hanged for witchcraft in the country. They were brought to Heavitree to be hanged.

### **Skimmington Rides:**

John Cooke was a saddler in the early 1800s and a very keen conservative. He would regularly place notices about the day's news, with his own commentaries, on the wall of his shop on Fore Street. He was known for being a keen patriot, making inflammatory remarks and for defaming a woman whilst drunk.

He built himself a house at the top of Pennsylvania Hill, which he called 'Waterloo', and married his third wife when he was in his fifties. Theirs was a tempestuous marriage, and the public were well-aware of the details of their affairs. They concluded him to be drunk and violent, and her to be a shrew, and gave them a 'Skimmington Ride'. This commenced at an inn in Exeter and involved a huge procession of men, musicians and horses with effigies of the couple being paraded all over town for hours. The idea was to mock them and humiliate them publicly. Apparently up to 20,000 people were marching! This happened up to the 1880s in Exeter, and a Skimmington Ride even took place in 1905 in Okehampton!

### **Royal Visits:**

These appealed to all classes of people, and every royal visit has generated adulation and respect amongst the people. Somerset's capital, Taunton, did not receive a royal visit at all between 1685 and 1987, but Exeter has a long history of such visitors. A good example of this was when the hugely popular Prince of Wales visited in 1920. As many as 50,000 people were there to watch him unveil the memorial cross to those who died in the war.



### **Statues:**

Sadly, there has not yet been a statue of a woman erected in Exeter, but there have been many of men. General Buller was the only man in Exeter's history to unveil his own statue, in 1905! Buller was a controversial figure who the people of Exeter felt was a scapegoat of the government: they adored him and raised the money for his statue. Having to erect it embarrassed the local government, but he was so popular in Devon that they had little choice. The crowds were so huge that commentators said they had 'never seen anything like it' in their lifetimes. The statue still stands, on New North Road.

### **The First Airman:**

Monsieur St Croix amazed the people of Exeter, when in 1786 he flew his hot air

balloon from Castle Yard, passing over Exeter and for ten miles, before landing and returning to Exeter on horseback, for a ball at the hotel in Cathedral Yard, and fireworks at the castle.

### Exeter's First Aeroplanes:

In 1911, thousands of people gathered in Whipton, to see the first aeroplanes they had ever seen land on one of the stops on the Daily Mail Circuit of Britain Air Race. The first two planes to land were flown by French airman, who became instant heroes.



### HMS Exeter:

This is an example of ordinary men who were turned into heroes. The crew of the HMS Exeter paraded through the streets of Exeter, accompanied by thousands of triumphant Exonians, at the start of the war. After a victory against a German ship, the eighty men and eight officers of the ship returned to Exeter – their welcome was

enthusiastic to say the least. The crowd was 15 to 20 people deep, and the men were even asked for autographs. The men themselves couldn't believe that they had suddenly become so important.

### Thomas Benet and Agnes Prest:

The monument on Denmark Road depicts Thomas Benet nailing his anti-Catholic Church scrolls onto the door of Exeter Cathedral. His reformist, religious beliefs made him 'not one of



us', leading to his utmost abuse by the Catholic Church in retaliation. He was burnt at the stake in Livery Dole in 1531, and the public treated him particularly savagely. Part of the stake that he was burnt on was found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but later destroyed. It seemed hypocritical to be remembering the death of a man, who objected to relics and saw them as blasphemous, by retaining such a relic.

Several years later, Agnes Prest, a married woman who had become disheartened by Catholicism, was also burnt at the stake, at Southernhay.

### Burning of Effigies:

The young men of Exeter used the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot to burn effigies of people they considered 'not one of us'. There were big bonfire parties in front of the cathedral, with costumes, fireworks, tar barrels and much rowdiness. There were even injuries and deaths. Exeter Bishop Phillpotts was an unpopular man, known for making the type of comments that would make you flinch (a sort of

Donald Trump figure). His effigy was burnt in front of his cathedral. Practically every year someone from the clergy's effigy would be burnt. Reverend Charles Rookes got his servant pregnant whilst his wife was at home in Eggesford, and an effigy of him was duly burnt. Other unpopular locals were singled out too, until in 1854 the city authorities put a stop to the practice.

### The Salvation Army:

The Salvation Army arrived in Exeter in the early 1880s. It wasn't long before people started to object to them. They were particularly offensively attacked in Exeter. People mainly objected to them because they preached for abstinence from alcohol and tobacco. Publicans, resenting that they were turning Exeter men away from drink, would pay poor men and teenagers to attack them in the street. The 'Skeleton Army', an opposition to the Salvation Army, quickly grew, and there was a clear collusion between the police, council and publicans. The mayor himself was a publican. The violent clashes continued for ten years, and it was only by the end of 1884 that things calmed down, and people perhaps started to realise that family life could have improved with a little less drunkenness involved!

### Female Convicts:

For hundreds of years, women had been arrested for prostitution; in some cases, they were even banished from the city and not allowed back – this could mean death. In the 1600s there was a new way of punishing women – sending them overseas to the US or Australia. In 1789, five women were convicted at Rougement Castle of stealing clothing or

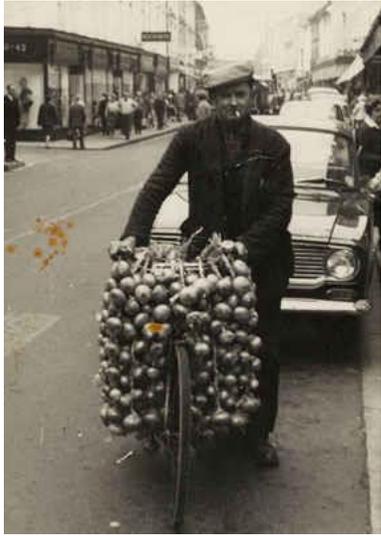


food; they were sent on a ship with 221 other female prisoners on the Lady Juliana, to Sydney. The ship was described as a 'floating brothel'. Male crew members were permitted to each take a woman as a 'wife' for the duration of the voyage. The captain also took the ship to various ports and sold the women along the way, making his fortune. On arrival in Australia, many of the women were pregnant, including two of the Exeter convicts. Many died.

### Execution and Human Bookbinding:

The people of Exeter enjoyed an execution; they regularly drew huge crowds and were regarded as a good day out. Food and drink were for sale and people would let out a cheer when the felons died. In 1829, George Cudmore's wife was poisoned, and he was found guilty of her murder (though his lover was not). As was common practice, his body was sent to the RD&E for dissection, however what followed when they had finished with it, was even more gruesome. His skin was used to cover a book of Milton's poetry.

### Onion Johnnies:



In the 1870s, Brittany was poor, but the pink onions grown there were better than those from England. Around this time, French onion sellers started coming to Exeter to sell to the locals. They made up one of Exeter's largest ethnic communities and were known for their charm. The same onion boys, who started selling in the 1870s, were selling as old men in the 1930s.

### Christine Millie:

Christine Millie should have been known as two people; they were a pair of sisters and conjoined twins, who sang and recited poetry. Born as slaves in the American South, they were sold to a museum as infants, and spent the rest of their lives being exhibited. They came to Exeter as a kind of upmarket freakshow and appeared at the Victoria

Hall. They would have been unlike anybody Exonians had ever seen before.

### The Alphington Ponies:

This pair of sisters set themselves apart from the crowd, by dressing like twins in brightly coloured, identical clothes, rouging themselves like dolls, showing more ankle than was acceptable at the time and by speaking to no-one. They drifted around Exeter, standing out from the crowd and drawing the attention of everyone with their strangeness.

### Cannibalism:

In 1884, four men were shipwrecked, and left in a small rowing boat, with no food or water. They managed to catch a turtle, but after this were left twenty days without food or water. They decided to kill the cabin boy, so that the rest of them might survive. The trial fascinated everyone in Exeter and across the country. They were prosecuted at Rougement, but really the Exeter public were on their side. They were sentenced but were later let off.



### Blackface:

Thomas Dartmouth Rice performed in blackface, and the Exeter audiences loved his impression of a dumb plantation slave in the 1840s. His performances were described as grotesque and ludicrous, but apparently, he was not very funny without his blackface. A few years later, real black people, who were former slaves,

performing in slave clothes, visited Exeter theatres.

In 1925, The Kentucky Minstrels, two popular American comedians, were thrown out of The Bude Hotel (at the end of the High Street, by Paris Street), for being black. When one of the men challenged this in court, the judge replied that there was no basis of racism!

Even in 1942, black-American soldiers serving in England in WWII were segregated, with blacks on one side of the River Exe, and whites on the other.

### Bloomers:

In the 1850s, two American women came to Exeter, and gave lectures on why bloomers were much better than skirts. People were agog at this scandal – bloomers were not considered at all appropriate for ladies. No Exeter ladies seem to have taken up wearing bloomers after this, although interestingly, female inmates at the County Lunatic Asylum in Exminster were given material to make their own bloomers for a 'Bloomer Ball', held there at the end of the year. Apparently, it was less inappropriate for those with mental health problems to dress in this way.



### The New Forest Shakers:

In 1875, Mrs Girling and her New Forest Shakers arrived in Exeter for two days of appearances. Their events drew large crowds (perhaps partly because they were reputed to dance naked at times). Although Mrs Girling gave a very reasonable lecture on her beliefs, when the attractive girls began to dance on stage, the crowds were whipped into a frenzy. Whilst many young men were enthralled, Exeter was scandalised, with many claiming that they were blasphemous.

### The Hunger Marches:

In the 1930s, fifteen men came up from Cornwall on a march to protest that they couldn't feed their families because their wages were too low. What was interesting was how closely they were being monitored by the police. There were informants everywhere, as they were thought by the government to be a threat. Similar marches were held a couple of years later.

### Italians in WWII:

In 1940, Mussolini declared war on the United Kingdom, and Italian residents became 'not one of us'. The police rounded up several Italians; shops and people were attacked.

### Elsie Knocker:

This locally-born character had humble beginnings, but, after escaping an abusive marriage, spent four years on the front-line, in an ambulance unit, 4ft from the trenches. She was credited with saving hundreds of lives and was a great heroine. She also liked racing motorcycles, spoke three languages and married a very rich husband. Sadly, he left her, and she became impoverished and desperate to make

money for her son. She remembered her happiest times were during the war-years and afterwards was almost treated as an embarrassment. We now remember her as a heroine.

All of the aforementioned characters were people who were slightly different from 'us' but through looking at them we are able to see the changes in society, and in our own city, that have occurred over the last few hundred years.

## Heavitree Post Boxes



Heavitree is extremely lucky to have a complete range of post boxes, from the outset of the postal system to the present day. It's another part of our heritage that deserves not to be forgotten.

Before post boxes, sending letters could be difficult. Lady Patterson of 4 Baring Place wrote in her diary on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1832: "I did not know how to convey my letter to Exeter, as the servants were so busy, so gave it to the butcher's boy. I hope he will take care of it".

The first post box to be set up in the United Kingdom was in Carlisle in 1853. Boxes started to spread across the country during the rest of Queen Victoria's reign. Having distinctive VR markings, we are lucky to have some of these in Heavitree including, for example, at Regents Park.

In Victorian times boxes were cleared seven times a day on weekdays and twice a day on Sundays.

Edward VII only reigned for nine years (1901-10) but again he is well represented in Heavitree. A good example is outside Livery Dole almshouses. The boxes are marked ER with a small VII by the lettering.



We also have several George V (1910-36) boxes locally. The boxes from his reign just have GR. This causes some confusion as some of these were also used when George VI (1936-52) came to the throne. Later VI was added to the GR on boxes. There is a good example of one of these in School Lane, just off Topsham Road.

In between the two Georges, we had the extremely short reign of Edward VIII (1936). Only about 160 post boxes were produced with his lettering and numerals, but we do have one in Heavitree! It stands at the corner of Peryam Crescent and Woodwater Lane – a real rarity.



We now, of course, have the distinctive ER II markings on the boxes set up during the reign of our current Queen.

Keep an eye out as you walk around Heavitree and check in whose reign each post box was erected.

Martin Weiler



### **Non History Society Events:**

Alternate Fridays 10-12 - Heavitree Friendly Library - St Michael's Church. All welcome for books, tea, coffee cake and storytime.

Wed 6<sup>th</sup> Mar – Exeter Civic Society – Visit to Mount Dinham Almshouses

Sat 16<sup>th</sup> Mar – Friends of Higher Cemetery – Shapland and Ladell. A talk by Michael Parrott

Fri 22<sup>nd</sup> Mar – Exeter History Society – 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Newsletter. At St Katherine's Priory. Members only

Wed 10<sup>th</sup> Apr – Exeter History Society – Forty Years of Local History. A talk by Peter Thomas

Sat 13<sup>th</sup> Apr – Friends of Higher Cemetery - Making Stained Glass. A talk by Rev Andrew Johnson

Wed 8<sup>th</sup> May – Exeter History Society – Explore the Quay and its History. Walk

Sat 11<sup>th</sup> May – Friends of Higher Cemetery – Railways in Exeter. A talk by Richard Westlake

Wed 12<sup>th</sup> Jun – Exeter History Society – The Green Lanes of Devon. A talk by Valerie Besley

Wed 12<sup>th</sup> Jun – Friends of Higher Cemetery - Woman & Her World. A walk in the cemetery, led by Rachel Parrott

*If you know of any events that you think members might appreciate, please contact me and I will include them in this section.*

*This Newsletter was published by the Heavitree Local History Society*

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