

Northbrook Walk - Joining the Bridges – Polsloe Bridge to Heavitree Bridge

On Saturday 12th July 2025, Martin Weiler led a really enjoyable walk through Heavitree. These are the main points of interest that he covered:

Polsloe Bridge Station

The 11 mile branch line to Exmouth was opened in 1861, but it was only with the growth of housing in the Polsloe area that Polsloe Bridge Station was opened in 1907. A photo passed round on the walk showed the station in 1910 with the parapet of the river bridge below. Is this the bridge the station was named after or was it the Railway bridge? There were 20 trains to Exmouth a day at that time. The long platforms on either side of the two tracks were rebuilt in 1927 using concrete components cast at the concrete workshop at Exmouth Junction yard (now Morrisons superstore). On 4th February 1973 the line was singled and the platform on the Whipton side was taken out of use. It and its old stairway are still there although very overgrown. Around 130,000 passengers a year use the station now. The public conveniences here were closed a few years ago alongside many others across the city. The building is currently on sale for £17,500.

Green Circle

The route from Polsloe Bridge to Heavitree Bridge follows part of the Exeter Green Circle, a 12 mile walking loop around Exeter created from 2002. The route is available online and by following the distinctive round signs.

Decontamination Centre

The Whipton decontamination centre was one of three major centres set up in Exeter in late 1944 / early 1945 to prepare to decontaminate people if they were affected by chemical gas bombs.

This building was purpose built in reinforced brick with a flat overhanging concrete roof. Of particular note are the heavy doors. It consisted of an outside stripping shed, an inside undressing room a washing or shower room and a dressing room.

Thankfully the centre was never used for the purpose it was built. For many years a printer was based here and since then a series of small businesses including one preparing pre-packed meals and a fitness centre. An information board that revealed the hidden secret of the building has recently been removed.

Northbrook

Just beyond the decontamination centre we get a glimpse of Heavitree's very own river – The Northbrook which winds its way for around four and a half miles to the River Exe by the Crematorium. This stretch is part of a tributary, also known as the Mincinglake Stream, which rises near the hillfort on Stoke Hill. We will soon pass its confluence with the other great arm of the river, the Whipton Brook. Although many parts of the river are now piped underground you can see a good open stretch along the side of Hamlin Lane Playing Fields. Devon Wildlife have a project to re-naturalise other sections of the watercourse.

Hamlin Lane Playing Fields

Here we have another of Heavitree's green spaces. There are more allotments here and a series of football pitches now operated by Stoke Hill Football Club, but from a sporting-heritage point-of-view it is probably cycling that is most associated with the park. After the Second World War Speedway and its offshoot cycle speedway became very popular. One of the cycle speedway teams that emerged were the Exeter Aces based on Marsh Barton. Formed in 1963 they moved to Hamlin Gardens in the 1970s and while here raced in the English League between 1974 and 1976. This was the top League in the sport, so big names rode here in the mid-seventies. The Aces have now moved back to Marsh Barton where they ride on the Crofton Wheels Centre, their original home track.

Still on a cycling theme the park is also home to the Hamlin Lane Cycle pad. This provides a real road layout with junctions and roundabouts for children to practice on their bikes in a traffic free area. Devon Country Council operates the facility.

The area is also known by some as the JLC Playing fields. It is thought that this simply stood for Joint Liaison Committee, but does anyone know for certain?

Post-war Housing

There was a massive need for the speedy provision of short-term housing for families bombed out during the Second World War. A key solution was prefabricated bungalows. These bungalows really caught people's imagination as they had a quick build time and modern, innovative interiors. There were around a dozen different designs, but a common theme was the reuse of war materials including parts from the aircraft industry. This saved on traditional building materials like timber which were in short supply.

The area beyond Hamlin Lane Playing Fields, around Vaughan Road, was one of the zones where these new building techniques were carried out.

One of the most unusual type of bungalows were the Uni-Secos, imports from the USA. These were timber built and only meant to be a short-term solution lasting about 10 years. Exeter's survived for about 20 years including some in Vaughan Road and the surrounding area. The first bungalows opened in August 1945. Some locals were worried that embers from the steam trains running along the Exmouth line might be a fire risk but nothing untoward happened.

These bungalows had a living room, kitchen, bathroom and two bedrooms. They were set in generous sized gardens. Anderson Shelters were often converted to garden sheds. The kitchen and bathrooms were felt to be revolutionary, luxury even, having built in units and complete with cookers, copper for washing and a fridge.

In time more substantial houses were built and this area around Vaughan Road has some very good examples of what are known as Cornish Units, a type of precast reinforced concrete housing. These were built between 1946 and the 1960s and were quick and easy to build in a time of labour and housing shortages.

Thirties Housing

If you leave Vaughan Road and turn up Whipton Lane and then almost immediately turn right up Whiteway Drive, you will come across a good example of Thirties domestic architecture. Numbers 2-16 were built in the early 1930s for TB Kite, a local firm of builders. The layout of the houses with a garage space placed at the front was a novelty at the time and showed the increasing importance of the motor car.

Confluence with the Whipton Brook

At the junction of Vaughan Road and Vaughan Rise the Mincinglake arm of the Northbrook joins with the other major arm, the Whipton Brook (also known by locals as 'The Dyke') which rises on Beacon Heath. The Northbrook has many local names; further downstream it is known as 'The Panny'. Just before Vaughan Road joins Sweetbrier Lane it loses its natural course and is covered over allowing housing to be built over it.

Heavitree Bridge

At the end of Sweetbrier Lane, we arrive at the traffic lights and crossroads – an area still known as Heavitree Bridge. Even the bus stops take this name. There was a small community based in the area – Birchy Barton Farm, cottages and even a pub, The Bridge Inn, until the landlord committed suicide in 1866. Flooding was a regular occurrence around the bridge; it was removed and the stream covered over in 1932 as part of the widening of the road to Gallows Corner.

You can still see a few of the cottages from the old days. The fact they are called Brook Cottages is a reminder of the stream below ground. One of the cottages, Brookdale, was to house a religious building – The Oratory of Our Lady Theotokos. This is part of the Liberal Catholic Church – an independent and autonomous movement with a headquarters in Utrecht in Holland.

Quarry Lane

As we climb Quarry Lane we start to get an idea of the scale of quarrying on either side of the road. And at the end of a grassed area in Britten Drive off Coates Road you come face to face with an old quarry face. It is humbling to think of the scale of activities that took place around here as thousands of blocks of the striking stone (known as 'bullock's blood and gravel') were quarried over so many centuries and still adorn our city. The stone originated some 280 million years ago when the whole area was an arid desert. The red sand was mixed with rock and pebble fragments during dramatic flash floods to give the distinctive stone we see today.