

Northbrook Walk - Polsloe Bridge to Wonford Community Centre

On Saturday 16th May 2026, Martin Weiler led another Northbrook walk through Heavitree.

The focus of the day's walk was the Northbrook River which could be said to be Heavitree's river as its catchment lay totally within the old Heavitree Parish boundary. From its various sources, particularly on Stoke Hill and Beacon Heath, it winds its way for around four and a half miles to the River Exe by the Crematorium.

The stretch by Polsloe Bridge station was part of a major tributary, also known as the Mincinglake Stream, which rose near the hillfort on Stoke Hill. We soon passed its confluence with the other great arm of the river, which rose on Beacon Heath and was known as the Whipton Brook or more locally as 'The Dyke'.

Although many parts of the river were by then piped underground, we could see a good open stretch along the side of Hamlin Lane Playing Fields and further on in Wonford. Devon Wildlife has a project to re-naturalise sections of the watercourse and Heavitree Local History Society is working with local people and groups on a project to raise awareness of the river and encourage walking alongside it.

If anyone had any memories or photos of the Northbrook they were invited to share them with us.

Points of interest along the way:

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 a previous 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 has been bought and converted for business use and is now up for let.

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.

Hamlin Lane Playing Fields

Here we had another of Heavitree's green spaces. There were more allotments here and a series of football pitches then operated by Stoke Hill Football Club. From a sporting heritage point of view however it was probably cycling that was 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 was the Exeter Aces based on Marsh Barton. Formed in 1963 they moved to Hamlin Gardens in the 1970s and while there raced in the English League between 1974 and 1976. This was the top League in the sport so big names rode there in the mid-seventies. The Aces later 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 provided a real road

layout with junctions and roundabouts for children to practise on their bikes in a traffic-free area. Devon County 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 or Junior Learning Centre. Lots of points raised by walkers here. One of our members had found a newspaper cutting from the Western Times (29th Feb 1924) that referred to the JOC or Juvenile Organisations Committee. This was a body set up to raise money to provide recreation facilities in Exeter. The newspaper reported that the JOC 'is endeavouring to organise games, to get playing fields, to provide Summer Camps and generally assist in the recreational side of Exeter on behalf of those boys and girls who in the ordinary way would not have the opportunity to enjoy that recreation'. The JOC held a lottery to raise the funds and a lucky woman in Dawlish won first prize of a motor car.

Other walkers reminisced about uses the land had been put to. One remembered Green Goddess fire engines being parked here; another buses. There was the thought that it had once been a rubbish tip with recollections of broken glass being churned up. Certainly one walker recalled food waste being collected for pig swill on the site.

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 left Vaughan Road and turned up Whipton Lane and then almost immediately turned right up Whiteway Drive, you came 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 arrived at the traffic lights and crossroads – an area still known as Heavitree Bridge. Even the bus stops took this name. There had been 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 had been a regular occurrence around the bridge, and 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 and the fact they are called Brook Cottages is a reminder of the stream below ground. One of the cottages, Brookdale, used 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

If you explore Quarry Lane, you start to get an idea of the scale of quarrying on either side of the road. At the end of a grassed area in Britten Drive off Coates Road you come face to face with an old quarry face. It was humbling to think of the scale of activities that had taken place around there as thousands of blocks of the striking stone (known as ‘bullock’s blood and gravel’) were quarried over so many centuries and still adorned 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. Many buildings in Heavitree and Exeter were built of this ‘Heavitree stone’.

Burnthouse Lane

After leaving Heavitree Bridge we entered the Burnthouse Lane housing estate. It started to be built in 1928 to replace the slums of the old West Quarter. It was an ambitious project by the City Council partly driven by the ethos of the Garden City movement (places like Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City). It was named after Burnthouse Lane which ran through the 90 acres of farmland acquired for the estate. The designer was City Architect John Bennett who created a spacious plan with curved streets and cul-de-sacs. Within 4 years 2500 people had been rehoused.

St Loyes Chapel

On our right as we walked down Rifford Road we saw the ruins of St Loyes Chapel. It was first recorded in 1387 and was likely to have been consecrated the year before. It is dedicated to St Loye, a 7th century French goldsmith who became Bishop of Noyau and was adopted as the patron saint of metal workers. Worship probably ended or declined with the Reformation and by 1607 part of the building was used as a house. By 1785 it was used as a stable. In the 1890s an attempt was made to restore the Chapel but this failed. We still have the ruins today – another surviving example of the use of Heavitree stone. One of the walkers’ mother used to talk about coming to an annual service at the chapel.

The remerging Northbrook

The Northbrook had been mainly underground since Vaughan Road/Sweetbrier Lane, but at this point it emerges into the open just off Lethbridge Road. It flows on through Ludwell Valley Park in Wonford. Locals there called the stream ‘The Panny’. There were various theories for this name. One of the most common was that it came from the Hindi for water (pani). Cavalry soldiers stationed at the nearby barracks off Topsham Road were said to have recently returned from India and taken their horses down to drink from the stream.

In the 19th century and earlier the stream would have been clean and full of fish. Wonford gets its name from the local river. It appears as Wynford in a 937 Anglo Saxon charter and is thought to mean ‘white, fair or holy stream’.