Heavitree Local History Society

Newsletter No. 98 **Sep 2025**

FORTHCOMING HLHS MEETINGS AND EVENTS

Unless indicated below, meetings are held at Heavitree United Reformed Church, on the second Wed of Mar, Jun, Sep & Dec, commencing at 7:30pm.

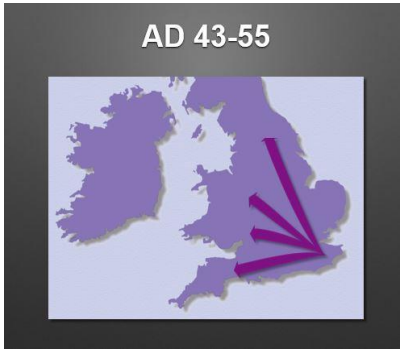
Wed 10th Sep 2025
'Researching Family History: Stories from Heavitree'
Sue Bond, Research Coordinator, Devon Family History Society. The Society, which is based at the Tree House in King Street, Exeter, promotes the study of genealogy and history, especially of Devon families and places. The talk will focus on aspects of Heavitree.
AGM

Sun 12th Oct 2025 2pm – a stroll around the centre of Heavitree with a special focus on the 1920s. Meeting place: Outside the Park Cafe in Heavitree Pleasure Grounds. The event is being held as part of 'A Festival of Devon in the 1920s'.

Wed 10th Dec 2025
'Exeter Civic Society and our Work in Exeter'
Keith Lewis, Chair of Exeter Civic Society

Wed 11th Mar 2026
'The lost rivers of Exeter and Heavitree'
John Davidson

Wed 10th Jun 2026
'Devon in the 1920s: Shadows and Sunshine'
Julia Neville



Roman Exeter and Life in its Neighbouring Areas – John Salvatore

The Romans invaded Britain in AD 43, in four legions, which spread across the country. Legion II Augusta was chosen to campaign along the South West coast. They took the Isle of Wight and moved right down into the South West. Legion II Augusta had come from Strasbourg, then in Germania, and their commander was Vespasian. Because he later became emperor, all his past and deeds were recorded in Roman histories, which gives us details about the military campaigns.

We often hear that the Romans never got down into Cornwall, but this is not true. There is good archaeological evidence that they campaigned right into the 'toe' of the South West. A fort was recently discovered at Callistock. The legion may have taken its time to get into the far South West – they spent a lot of time in Dorset but by the 50s they were certainly campaigning down into 'the toe'.

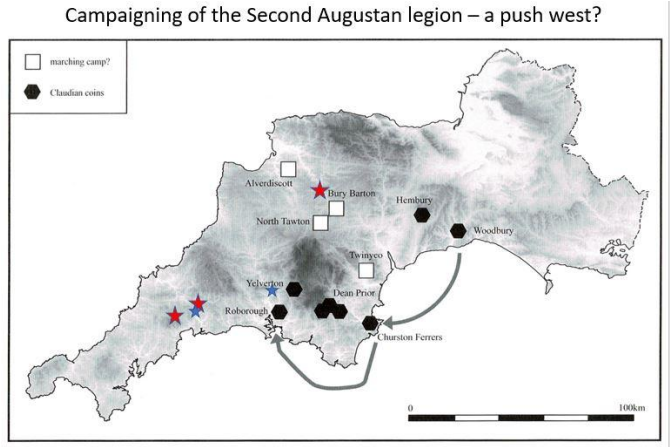


Fig. 3.3 Possible evidence for Claudian activity in the wider South-West (drawn by Stephen Rippon)

Rippon, S. and Holbrook, N (eds). 2021, *Roman and Medieval Exeter and Their Hinterlands: from Isca to Excester*. Oxford: Oxbow

There is no evidence of major battles between the Romans and the Iron Age tribes of the South-West, collectively known as the Dumnonii. Legion II Augusta was an elite force of more than

6000 well-disciplined troops – there was unlikely to have been any cohesive opposing force.

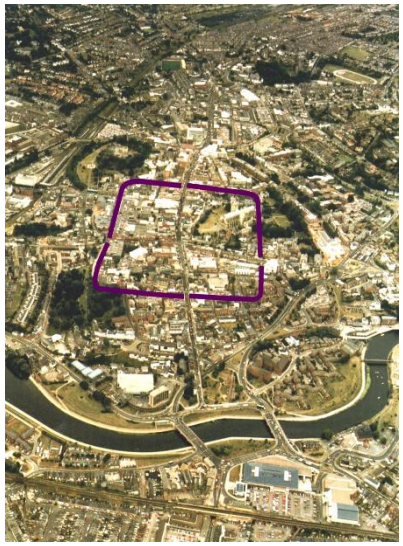
The legionaries wore state-of-the-art armour, segmented to allow free movement, and were incredibly well disciplined. Facing any barbarians, they would've been a force to be reckoned with.

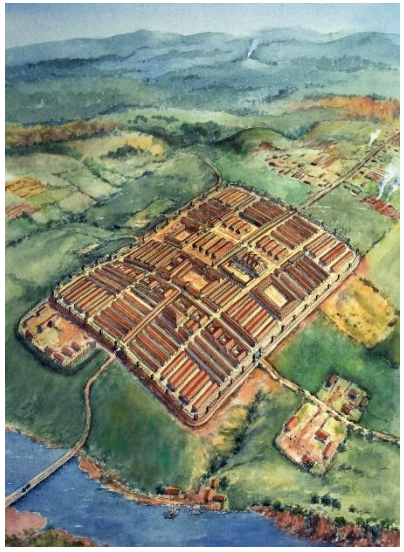
When moving into the South West, once an area was placated/ occupied, the legion needed to find a base, so they would place a reserve of troops there, ready for the event of any uprising. For this they chose Exeter, an ideal access point at that time – located just above the tidal reach, with a supply of fresh water.

There was no previous large Iron Age settlement here; the area was probably only occupied by typical Iron Age settlements of the South West: round houses bound by enclosures and dispersed around the countryside. There was probably no overall leadership, maybe just some localized groups or a series of chiefdoms.

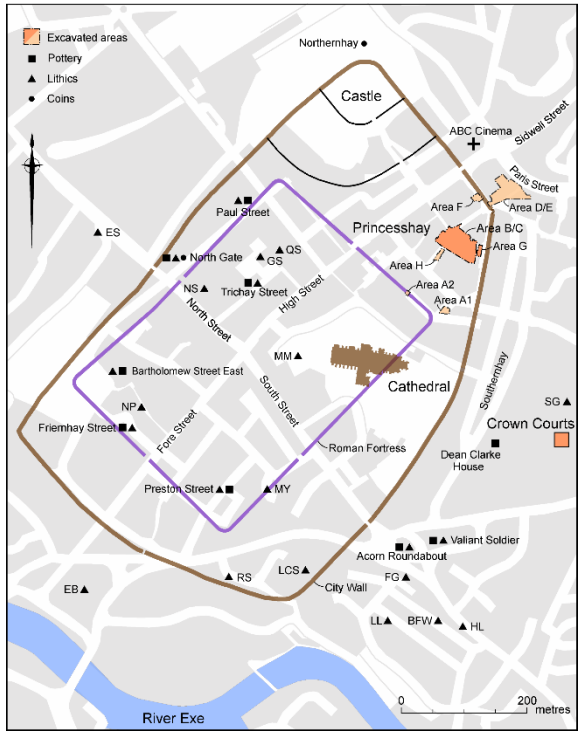
Excavations on Topsham Road (itself a Roman Road leading from the fortress to where Aldi now is), Millbrook area, actually found remains of a late Iron Age settlement, with evidence to show that the Romans had taken it over for their own use. Whoever was living there would have been moved along and perhaps resettled, so the Romans could use the house for their military objectives.

Having decided on (what is now) Exeter as the site for this leg of the invasion, the Romans cleared an area in the centre and constructed their fortress. These were all wooden buildings, except for one (the bathhouse). There was predominantly housing for 6000 troops, and also a hospital, granaries, a workshop for repairing weapons etc. It was basically a square in the countryside, defended by a ditch and ramparts.





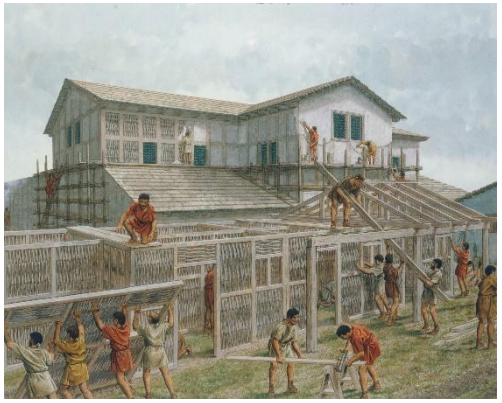
Arriving at what is now the High Street/Fore Street junction, they would have set up their surveying tool, the groma, to measure right angles, straight lines and divide the area up in blocks, with the headquarters set in the central building where all the major roads would meet. The city wall was added later, around AD200. Initially there would have been ramparts made from wood dug into trenches. There is still evidence of these trenches/impressions of posts, for example in Bartholemew Street.

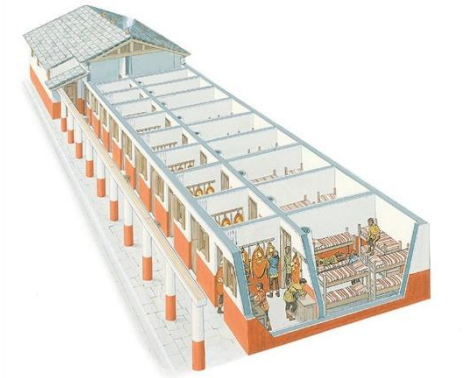


The barracks would have been a long building with smaller rooms at the front for equipment and then a bunk bed system, of about 8 beds per room. Not

all would be used at the same time as some would be on duty while others rested.

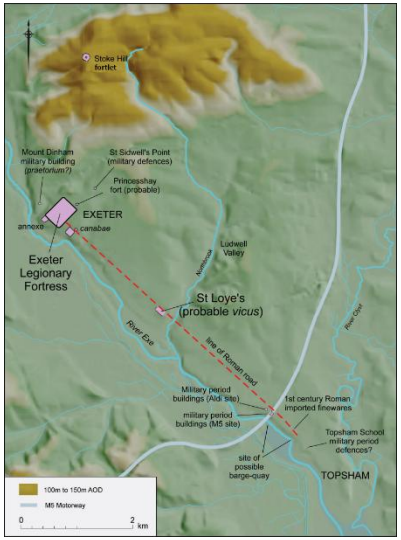
The plan for Roman fortresses was fairly consistent, with its Principia (headquarters), barracks and straight roads. This Peter Connolly painting

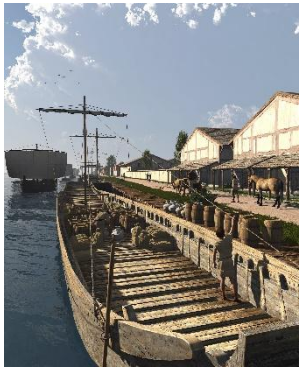




shows the construction of a Principia of considerable height and two storeys - the buildings were made of timber and wattle, plastered over and painted to look like stone.

The map below shows the Deliveroo HQ of the time – St Loyes. The fortress in the centre of the settlement led down to where Topsham Aldi now stands. Here were Roman miliary warehouses. In the 1st century the tidal reach of the Exe came to about here, and the road would have been constructed at this time. Goods would come in and be offloaded and taken to Exeter or St Loyes, then dispatched on to other sites. There would have been a quay area and barges loading and unloading into warehouses.





Under the cathedral lies the remains of the only stone-built building: the bathhouse. Built in AD60, it was intended to have been the bathhouse for troops for a considerable period. This shows they would've expected the legion to be here for centuries. It

would have been opulent with coloured mosaics, glassware and Purbeck marble basins. The stone would have been the dark purplish volcanic stone excavated from the quarry at

Rougement. The Romans were the earliest stone builders in Britain, and the bathhouse would've been unlike anything seen before in the area.

Beyond these military sites in Heavitree, indigenous farmsteads with dispersed huts and enclosures would have remained. It would perhaps have been like in the picture to the right – a road with roadside ditches and wooden post trench buildings flanking it.

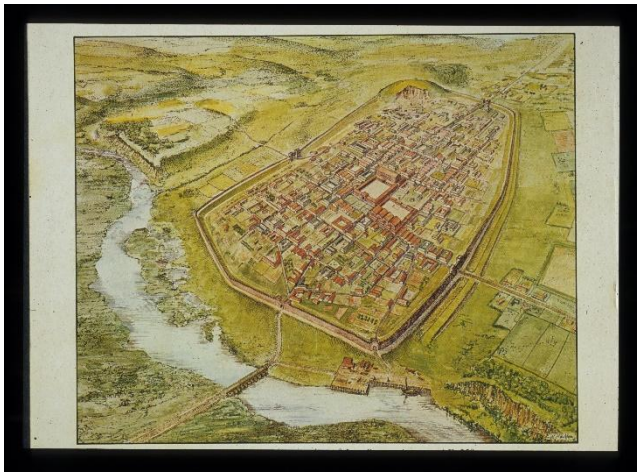
The legion was here until AD75, so in total only for about twenty years. Then they were uprooted and taken to Wales where there was trouble. There was probably little

reason for the army to remain in the South West, although some forts and auxiliary troops remained for a few more years.

Exeter then became the regional capital of the South West that the Romans had chosen it to be. The front of the Guildhall makes a best guess at the foundation of the City of Exeter civil administration as 80AD.

The amazing bath house, equipped for the use of 6000, now became the Basilica Forum. A civic centre was one of the first requirements of any Roman city. It was filled in, new floors were built, and steps were built on top of the furnace (the heating system for the bathhouse). With the legion gone, every Roman town needed its basilica forum. It was no less opulent – as the centre of administration for the area no expense would have been spared.

The Roman walls survived, and have now been rebuilt in many places, with some medieval underpinning from when the ground was dropped.



As Exeter became more important and a fully functioning city, it began to acquire the trappings of that kind of city. The walls were more of a boundary statement. There would've been a temple and likely an ampitheatre (possibly by the Iron Bridge); a new civilian bathhouse would have possibly been located at the top of South Street. City gates were built. But once you were outside them, you would be back into the simple, rural areas and isolated farmsteads that wouldn't have changed much since the Romans' arrival.

There was a Roman economic monetised system. Prior to their arrival there was no coinage, so this was a major change for those farming.

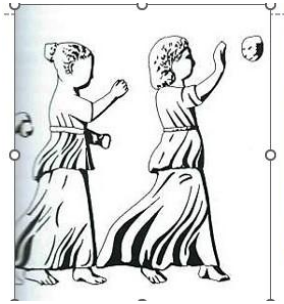
Exeter was on the very Western edge of an empire that stretched as far as Iraq. There wouldn't have been that much difference in the style of Roman city whether in Exeter or in another province/country.

John finished his talk by comparing some pictures of people from Roman times and today, demonstrating that we haven't really changed that much.

Music was appreciated: lyre vs modern harp

Chariot racing (found carved on a glass in Topsham) vs the rivalry between Hamilton and Vettel

Fitness - a Herculaneum woman with weights and a modern woman 2000 years later



Roman and modern children playing. Romans used sponge balls.

A birthday invitation sent by tablet or Whats App

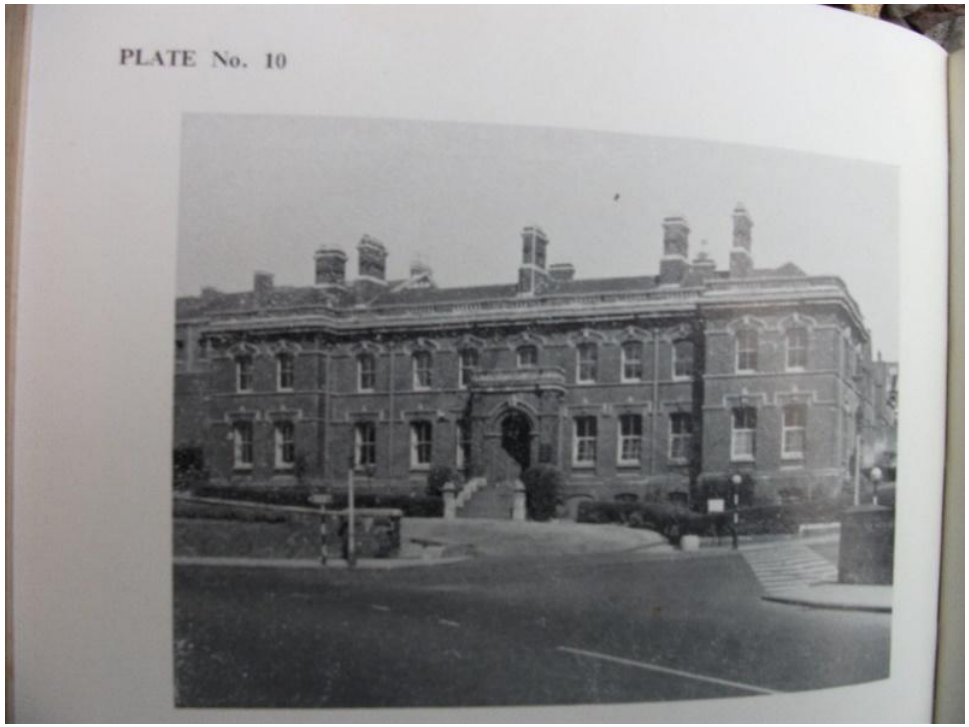
Politics

A named cup. This one belonged to an Exeter occupant – Lucius Julius Hipponicus

The Heavitree Police - Peter Hinchliffe

Heavitree was policed by Devon Constabulary which became operational in 1857, I do not know when the first policemen arrived in Heavitree, I believe the police station was in Fore street, old photos show a white building below North Street and above the entrance to Regent Square, which I think may have been the "town hall", school, and police station (no proof of that, just a suggestion)

Traditionally the management of the police for operational purposes, has been divided into Divisions, (Superintendent) Subdivisions (Inspector) and Sections (Sergeant) Heavitree was a section. There was a police station somewhere in Fore Street, the Sergeant would probably have been in charge for the whole area of the Urban District Council, it probably included Whipton, Wonford, and Countess Wear, he lived at the police station. In 1913 he had 6 constables to provide cover for the area. The station had no cells, so any prisoner they arrested had to be marched to New North Road Police HQ (the red brick building below the prison) where there was a cell.



Police H Q New North Road

X" Division in garden at 9 Mont le Grand C 1903-1909 when the police had different headgear

Heavitree was part of the "X" or Exe Division of the Devon Constabulary which had its Divisional Headquarters at No 9, Mont le Grand which is just off Polsloe Road. This was the home of the Superintendent, who lived above the offices. There was also a stable for his horse, he commanded a swathe of the county, more or less the Exe Valley below Tiverton. I am uncertain when the building was taken into use in the mid-1800s. It was still the "X" Division HQ in 1941

In ancient times Local government in England was in the hands of Magistrates in each county. In 1828 Counties were divided into Petty Session Divisions, Heavitree was in the Wonford Division. In 1889 County Councils were established and in 1894 they were sub divided into smaller units, Heavitree became an Urban District with a council. The records for Heavitree Urban District Council can be viewed at the public Record Office, Great Moor House, Exeter. Wonford Magistrates sat at the Castle in Exeter until 2005.

In 1913 when Exeter City expanded to incorporate Heavitree, the Devon Constabulary Police Sergeant who had resided at the police station, retired, The six constables decided to remain members of the Devon Constabulary, they were transferred to other stations. They chose this option because, at

Sunderland style police box, the type that stood in North Street

that time police pay varied between the various police forces, the pay of a constable was greater in the County than the rate in Exeter city, (a few years earlier when St Thomas UDC joined Exeter, the policemen did become city men, because the pay was then greater in the City.

The consolidation of the U D C to the City coincided with the appointment of Arthur NICHOLSON as Chief Constable of Exeter. He had served through the ranks at Bradford and proved to be a visionary with modern ideas. The former Chief had died suddenly whilst still in office, NICHOLSON inherited his plans for the policing of Heavitree.

At first Exeter City police continued to operate the police at Heavitree in the same fashion as the County. They stationed a Sergeant at the Heavitree Station, he moved his family into the accommodation at the station and lived rent free, he was provided with free coal and gas to keep the station warm. The county had six houses on lease for their constables, which the city continued their lease.

The advent of the Great War in 1914 brought huge pressure on police forces, almost a third of the manpower were army reservists who were all recalled to the colours. After the war there were great constraints on public finances, which meant there were fewer policemen, the limited technology of the day had to be utilised to make up the shortfall. The telephone was becoming more available in people's homes and in business premises, but were no public telephones, no kiosks, at that time.

Original style pillar used in Exeter

The city police were e-organised in 1925 with the installation of Police Boxes and telephone pillars, from which the public could contact the police, fire, and ambulance when required. I have seen no mention of the closure of the police station in Fore Street, which would have been surplus to requirement, when a police box was installed. Until the 1950s there were subterranean lavatories in the centre of the road in North Street, behind the Northcott Lamp the police box stood on top of them.

The wooden police box in North Street was replaced by a permanent police office, built in the 1950s, between the Congregational and Roman Catholic Churches at the top of For Street, it was still in use this century, but has now been converted to an office block.

I joined the City Police in 1958 when the Heavitree Beat (Fore Street) had a constable on patrol 24/7 One of the most important roles for the constable was at the junction of Fore Street/North Street/Church Street for the children crossing for schools. I can honestly say that the many hours I spent walking up and down Heavitree were a total waste of time, I never arrested anyone on that beat, but I do not know what crimes my presence prevented, nor can I measure the reassurance it gave to the public for their safety and protection.

I do know that I saved numerous children from the life of debauchery they would have faced, by their use of the see saw or other infant playground equipment available in Heavitree Park, on a Sunday! Can you imagine the moral danger these children were in. Would you believe their parents were assisting their enjoyment on a Sunday !!!!! of all days. Until well into the 1960s, the City Council closed all parks at dusk on Saturday, they placed chains with locks around the swings, immobilised any other equipment they could to prevent children playing on them before Monday.

One of the residents In Whipton Lane, overlooking the children's playground, was also deeply concerned with the children's moral welfare. At the first sign or sound of a child's chuckle of enjoyment, he was on the phone, 999 …. for the police to stop their happiness.

I am now ashamed to think to think I was party to this religious bigotry.

Joining the Bridges walk – Polsloe Bridge to Heavitree Bridge

On Saturday 12th July, Martin led a really enjoyable walk around 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 4 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 on line 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 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, 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.

This Newsletter was published by the Heavitree Local History Society
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