

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 11th Mar 2026

'The lost rivers of Exeter and Heavitree'

The talk will be given by John Davidson who has studied the rivers extensively. John says, "When the Romans arrived in Exeter 2000 years ago, there were over seven streams draining the area which became the city and its suburbs. By 1800, there were four streams still visible on the surface but today, only two remain visible for all or part of their course."

This is the story of Exeter's lost rivers, and why they were drained or hidden underground. The talk will also look at the new idea of "daylighting" rivers that are now underground and why this is being considered for the future.

The talk in Heavitree will look particularly at the local area of Heavitree and the catchment of the Northbrook River, known in its lower course as the Panny.

Wed 10th Jun 2026

'Devon in the 1920s: Shadows and Sunshine'

Julia Neville

Wed 9th Sep 2026

TBC and AGM

Exeter Civic Society and their Work in Heavitree

Keith Lewis, Chair of Exeter Civic Society, came to talk to us about the Civic Society, which was formed in 1961 with the following aims:



1. To promote high standards of planning and architecture.

2. To educate the public in the geography, history, natural history and architecture of the city.

3. To help to secure the preservation, protection, development

and improvement of features of historic or public interest across the city.

At the time there were several dire threats to the city centre which galvanised opposition. Having opened in 1976, the Guildhall Shopping Centre is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

This never would have happened if the 'Golden Heart Development' had gone ahead. The area was known as Higher Market (see photo above and below), and many remember the historical building being under threat of demolition; it would have been awful if it had been knocked down.

Proposals for a new bridge across the Exe would have entailed a "spaghetti junction" across Bull Meadow. Traffic still drove through the High Street, and plans to widen its western Tudor end threatened the merchants' houses nos. 225 & 226, and might even have involved moving the



Guildhall backwards. This sowed the seeds for the creation of a society to fight for the protection of these buildings.

In the 1960's, planning applications were not even advertised, but they now monitor all applications and comment where necessary.



On a completely different note, Keith mentioned that in 2018 the Society unveiled a plaque to commemorate Cecil Brewer and Mary the Pigeon. Mary lived at 6 West Street and carried top secret messages in WWII, winning the Dickin Medal for Animal

Bravery. Mary, "the bird who never gave up", was dropped behind enemy lines and despite being attacked by a hawk and wounded by gunshot on different occasions, and once going missing for ten days, she always completed her mission by returning to Exeter where Charlie nursed her back to action.

The Society still get lots of enquiries about Mary.

The Civic Society also published the "Discovering Exeter" series of booklets about different areas, including Heavitree. They're gradually working on updating them; a lot has changed since they were first written – of the 40 or so places mentioned in the Heavitree book, at least a quarter are no longer there. Martin and Sally are working on this and the Civic Society would like to come and launch it in Heavitree when it is eventually republished.

The Society introduced "Conservation areas" now taken up efficiently by the City Council. They saved the Duryard Valley from development and it became the first of



Exeter's Valley Parks.

The proceeds from their work have gone towards maintaining the Matthew Miller clock, Sidwell Methodist Church cupola, the sundial on the Devon and Exeter Institution, and the wind vane on the North Gate, among other things.

The Society's first aim is promoting good standards of planning and architecture. Keith joined the Society when Princesshay was about to be demolished and rebuilt, and he had concerns about the consultation. He showed us a prospectus for the Redevelopment of the Wider Water Lane Area, a current concern that will change the local community a lot. The Society wanted to consult with local residents about what they wanted and produced a prospectus to present to the City Council.

Plan for the Wider Water Lane Area



Some thoughts on developing the area if Liveable Exeter's plans are brought forward

Areas shaded red = existing residential areas

Areas shaded yellow = critical infrastructure

Google Map image of Water Lane 2022

The second concern of the Civic Society is to educate the public, and this is done via monthly talks at the Mint Methodist, visits to places of interest (tend to be monthly), lectures about significant events and characters, and installing blue plaques. Information about all of this is available on their website.

Some plaques of interest are:

Baring-Gould (Southernhay at his birthplace – this was erected on the 2nd day of Lockdown and as the small group were doing it, his granddaughter walked past by chance and participated!)

Franz Liszt - This plaque at the Royal Clarence survived the fire undamaged. Liszt visited for two days in 1840. He wrote the Exeter Preludia (only lasting 20 seconds) and played two concerts.

Robert Veitch - born in Killerton, he lived at 11 Elmgrove Road, adjacent to his nurseries.

Charles Dickens and Thomas Latimer – the two became friends after meeting at a hanging at Exeter castle!

Nicholas Hillard – a goldsmith and painter born in Exeter who was employed to paint miniatures by Elizabeth I and James I.

Sir Thomas Bodley – In 1545 he was a scholar in Gandy Street, who became the founder of the Bodleian Library. He reportedly managed to ‘acquire’ several books from the cathedral that were never returned.



The third aim is about preservation, protection and development. The Civic Society’s emblem actually came from the copper weather vane (wyvern) which was once on top of the city’s North Gate. The gate was demolished in 1769, and the Society created a replica of the Wyvern

which swings on the Iron Bridge opposite the City Gate Hotel. The original, which dates back hundreds of years, is safely housed in the RAMM. If you look closely you will see it has gunshot dents. Although some like to think it dates back to the Civil War, this is impossible to prove, but it is said that the dents were due to shooting in the sieges of Exeter.

The Society contributed towards the renovation of the cupola on Sidwell Street Methodist Church, the sundial at the DEI, and the Matthew the Miller Clock on St Mary’s Church, Stepcote Hill. It sounds as if the latter is no small task:

‘Over the centuries since its installation the clock has been both a delight to the citizens and a source

of endless frustration to the churchwardens of St Mary Steps. As with any complicated and intricate machine, the clock is prone to fits of uncooperative behaviour. The installation of an automatic winding mechanism, though saving the trouble of ascending the tower every day to wind it, has done nothing to prevent the clock from showing its independence of spirit. Although setting the clock is easy enough, should anything at all go wrong and the clock wind down for any reason, it is necessary to call out a professional technician. The clock also requires a regular service to ensure its survival as a working timepiece and prevent it from falling into disuse and dereliction.’ (Civic Society website)

The Society always has many current issues to be dealing with. These can be found on their website, but Keith talked to us about a few:

Former Police Station Site - this will be student accommodation and co-living accommodation.

There were concerns about the effect it would have on homes in Higher Summerlands, as it will be so tall, but it still got approved. Talks are ongoing.

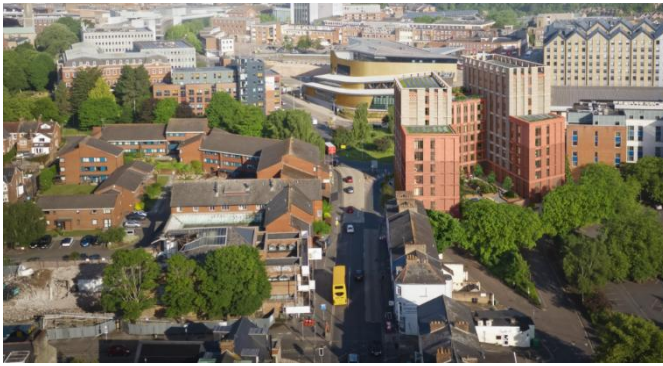


4.4.1 heavytrees road



Clarendon House

This will be student accommodation. The Society tried to object because of the overbearing size and difference between listed buildings next to it and the huge size it will be. As of February this year, the plans have been approved.



Energy Plant at Clapperbrook Lane

The Society objected to this development because it was in the Valley Park. It will require a lot of pipework to run around the city to pump the heating.



Mary Arches Car Park



This is due to be demolished and new plans for residential accommodation are still being looked at. The Society has objected due to it not suiting local housing needs, and also the elevational appearance within the area.

Royal Clarence Hotel Replacement

The rebuild has been granted permission but there are still concerns. Interestingly, the fire uncovered many historical details in the buildings affected, including medieval wall paintings, rooms and plaster.

The Civic Society and Heavitree Area

St James Weir – the Society has expressed its frustration at the expenditure of some £470,000 by the Environment Agency on extending the fish pass at Trews Weir. This became necessary following the semi-collapse of St James Weir, half a mile downstream. They have long been pointing out the deteriorating condition of St James Weir and calling for its repair. The City Council have at last expressed their wish to see the Weir repaired, and the consequent restoration of the leat to Countess Wear, but need now to find a way of funding the repair, which won't come cheap.

Gordon Lamp – the Society paid for its renovation, which turned out to be a lot trickier than expected, costing £3080 in 2016. Also the Nethercott Lamp at the top of North Street.

Active Travel – 'Low Traffic Neighbourhoods'. This is a sore point in Heavitree, and the Society has mixed views. They broadly support having fewer cars and more walking, but think this went too far, too quickly. On a smaller scale it could've worked.

Wonford Sports Centre

They have objected to the demolition as it is only 45 years old, and substational. The walls are half a metre thick, the foundations are wide, and it has interesting architecture. It would be very expensive to demolish.

The new plans are to refurbish it with lots of new facilities. It is actually built on a waste tip.



Wonford Inn

There have been two applications for demolishing the building and replacing with two blocks of flats. The Society objected. The developers should try to find an alternative, community use, and there has been a lack of investigation of this.

Heavitree Church Antennae

At the top of the tower there are telephone masts. When mobile phones first became popular, nobody wanted masts near them, which is why they're up there. The Society wants to protect the fabric of the building as they are updated.

Scout Hut

This rebuild was supported because of the high quality of the design. They did object to some minor details of the front courtyard.



Bramdean School Field

The Society objected to aspects of the design, and poor access for the older people expected to live there – narrow pavements, not well lit, lack of crossings or bus services. They are hoping the applicant will pay towards improving the pavement access, but it's still early days.

Windsor Castle Pub

There is still no planning permission for this site.



Tree Preservation Taskforce



The Society started this taskforce in 2023 with the aim of looking into how to preserve trees in Exeter. The first area to be looked at, with help from a Sidmouth expert, was Bull Meadow, which now has its own tree map accessible via the QR code to the left.

The QR code to the right is for the trees of Cathedral Green map.



The taskforce is currently working on a tree map of Prospect Park area, as an example of street trees, and we hope they will map the trees in Heavitree Pleasure Grounds in the future.

There was an interesting question about the Leylandii tree stump near the main entrance of Heavitree Pleasure Ground. It has 135 rings, but this means it is older than the park itself, and maps show it wasn't there before.

One member said that the tree had been on East Wonford Hill, and when it was cut down the stump was put in the park so that it remain part of the community. If anyone has anymore information on this, it would be interesting to hear!

Sally Robinson

Further Heavitree Memories from Alan and Ruth Brend

I was lucky enough to spend a couple of hours chatting to Alan and Ruth Brend, after Martin shared some of their memories of C20th Heavitree in the Dec 2025 newsletter. The couple have been married for 64 years and grew up in Heavitree.

The Carnival and the Circus in Heavitree

Ruth was not allowed to go to the Heavitree carnival because her mum looked down on it, but Alan was part of it, and his dad was a planner. His sister was an attendant to the carnival queen.

After the war, Chipperfield's Circus came into Wonford. Elephants paraded through the street. One baby elephant was sick and was unable to travel with

the rest of the animals in the special train they used. Ruth's father was asked to help organise getting it back to the circus group. He managed to arrange a Cullen's Furniture van to transport it!



Photo courtesy of Olwen Foggin Thomas, photo taken where Mr and Mrs Hairdressers was War in Heavitree

Although we covered this in Dec 2025, WWII was a time that Alan kept returning to, the vivid memories dominating almost all of his other memories of Heavitree. It must have made such an impression on him as a young boy, although he stressed several times that it was an exciting time for a young boy, and the war going on around just felt normal.

One thing that I hadn't realised, was that when German planes flew over, they would also use their machine guns to shoot at anyone they saw on the street. At one point Alan's mother was standing by the entrance to the Butcher's at Regent Square, and was pulled inside suddenly by the butcher, as a plane flew over and fired at her.

Alan also remembers cycling at age 8 or 9, to look at the seaside (you couldn't go on the beach due to defences). He was at Starcross when a German plane came down, and dived under a tree. He also remembers being out on his bike in Heavitree Pleasure Ground when the sirens went off, and hiding in the bushes when he heard the planes go over.

Ruth remembers the bombing of Attwyll Avenue. Her mother and sister had gone shopping, whilst she was left at home waiting for the cleaner, Mrs Baker, to arrive. As she came up the driveway a German plane went over and she flattened herself against the wall. She dived under the kitchen table and stayed there while Attwyll Avenue was bombed.

When houses were bombed, people were not altogether honest; items would be stolen opportunistically. For example Ruth's doll's house, which was kept in the outdoor toilet, was stolen. Her mum dug out the carpets while their house was being rebuilt so that they wouldn't be stolen.

Life in Heavitree

Alan remembers going to the Co-op, which in those days was opposite the Congregational Church. You had a number that you gave to show you were a member. He says, 'in those days all I did was carry'. People would generally go to the Heavitree shops every day, but if you wanted to buy



something like a present for someone you would go into Exeter itself. You generally felt like you were from Heavitree. There weren't very many people in the centre of Exeter, which was a small commercial and ecclesiastical area – people lived in all the separate areas around like Heavitree, Whipton and Wonford.

Even when Alan worked in a bank in Alphington Street, he would cycle home for lunch and even have time for a nap! Most people went home for lunch at that time and there wasn't really anywhere you could buy lunch out.

Alan finished by saying that he is never happier than when he is sitting on a bench in the Pleasure Ground, remembering watching the planes, with his friends living in all the neighbouring streets, his parents in Higher Cemetery, remembering games of football, cricket and tennis tournaments a happy life in Heavitree.

Sally Robinson

Quality Radio: Fore Street



It was lovely to see this ghost sign temporarily uncovered beneath the Laundrette's modern signage. Quality Radio (not to be confused with Heavitree Radio) was advertised in the Express and Echo in 1956/57. Thanks to Teresa Smith for discovering this!

Peter Colwell on the Exeter Memories Facebook page remembers:

*'When I was a kid growing up in the '50's, **Radio House** were the first TV & Radio shop to move in there (about 1954). I used to walk the short distance from my home to watch a snowy 14 inch TV through the window. Sad I know. As time went on, the shop was divided into two separate shops, which is hard to imagine now, since theres no sign of a the separation. It was pretty narrow!: Radio House took up one half, and the other was taken up by **Rowlands Bookseller**. He had the left hand bit, which is why the 'ghost sign' with his signage is all the way to the left. Rowlands was a second hand bookstore, and later had a popular stall in the Market.*

*At one point before Rowland came along, an Italian gent opened up one half of the property with **Furini's Pasties**. Try as he could, he couldnt make a go of it: he went out of business in no time. Back at that time the shop was on the*

end, and was adjacent to a bomb site. The Devon Air Ambulance building wasn't built until the 60's or later. I was friends with a lad who lived in the flat above the shop, the entry of which still exists. He was called John Wallage, and he had a sister called Shirley.' Thank you so much for these really interesting memories, Peter.

Sally Robinson



History of Retailing in Fore Street, Heavitree

If the article above interested you, you may like to look at our Retailing in Heavitree page on the website. We have records of what the shops in Fore street were used for dating back to 1851. Prior to the 1960s, numbering ran upwards going down the hill on the south side, then continued upwards going up the hill on the north side.

This has been updated recently by Jonathan to reflect changes into 2026.

<https://www.heavitreelocalhistorysociety.co.uk/articles/RetailingInForeStreetHeavitree.pdf>

This Newsletter was published by the Heavitree Local History Society

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[heavitreelocalhistorysociety.co.uk](https://www.heavitreelocalhistorysociety.co.uk)