

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 Jun 2026

'Devon in the 1920s: Shadows and Sunshine'

The speaker will be Dr Julia Neville who between 2020 and 2025 ran a participatory research project involving volunteer researchers from different Devon communities and interest groups, investigating what life was like in the county 100 years ago. Her talk will reflect on what was learned about Devon in the 1920s.

Julia says "This was a time when the shadow of the Great War still hung over many families, and recession, rapid technological change and untreatable illness affected individual lives. On the other hand, for many people life improved. There were new houses, motorised transport and opportunities for extended education and new jobs. The shortened working week gave people the opportunity for more time out for sport, for dancing (including to new 'American' styles of music) and for going to the cinema. Devon in the 1920s was a decade of 'Sunshine' and 'Shadows'".

Wed 9th Sep 2026

AGM, followed by 'A History of Exeter Hospitals' Mike Richards

Wed 9th Dec 2026

'Wills as Windows on Tudor, Stuart and Georgian Lives' Dr Laura Sangha, University of Exeter

Wed 10th Mar 2027 TBC

News from the Chair...

This is a new column in the newsletter that will hopefully bring together in one place various initiatives that your Officers and other members are involved in.

Talks: Our last meeting on 11th March was very well attended. John Davidson spoke about 'The lost rivers of Exeter'. We are looking forward to Julia Neville's talk on 'Devon in the 1920s' at our next meeting on Wednesday 10th June. If anyone has any topics they would like to have at future meetings, then do let me know. My details are at the end of this article.

Walk: Our spring walk was a leisurely stroll along the Northbrook from Polsloe Bridge to Wonford on 16th May. Twenty walkers joined us for this. We usually hold both a spring and autumn walk so watch out for details of another walk later this year.

Northbrook project: The Society is leading a project with our local partners and individuals to promote interest in and activities along the Northbrook – 'Heavitree's River'. A bid has gone in for a grant supported by local County Councillor Thomas Richardson. We are currently awaiting the outcome of our application. If anyone would like to get involved, then do let me know. The more the merrier.

One result from the publicity for our Northbrook walk in May was that the Society was contacted by the Whipton History Detectives group who would like to help with the history of the Northbrook – a major arm of which flows through Whipton. We will be attending a meeting of the group on 8th June.

Parklife exhibition: We have been invited, along with the Exeter Civic Society, to exhibit some historic photographs in the Park Cafe in Heavitree Pleasure Grounds next January. An initial meeting with Park Life took place on 29th April. The focus from the Civic Society will be the trees of the Grounds; we will be searching out old photos of the Pleasure Grounds. Does anyone have any old photos we could copy?

Heavitree Booklet: We have been invited by the Exeter Civic Society to work on a new edition of the Heavitree booklet originally produced in 1983. A lot has changed since and newsletter editor Sally Robinson has started on a redraft.

Queries: The Society regularly receives requests for help with information about Heavitree local history. Recent approaches have included questions about the impressive Uplands building on Heavitree Road and about the original BMX/Skateboard area in the Pleasure Grounds.

Squillometre Projects: After 11 years of enterprising local community projects we have been advised that the Community Interest Company, Interwoven Productions, which ran them, was wound up at the end of March. JoJo Spinks and all the community contributors should be congratulated on a fabulous legacy full of local history. We were very lucky to hear about several of these projects at our meetings and on local walks.

AGM – vacancies: Our AGM will be held on Wednesday 9th September at 7.30 pm. It's at the AGM that we appoint our Officers to run the day-to-day administration of the Society. This year there are vacancies for Secretary and Bookstall co-ordinator. Please don't hold back. If you are interested, then contact me to discuss what is involved. The Society will only continue and evolve with fresh blood.

Hazel Bound RIP: The Society was greatly saddened to hear of the death in May of Hazel Bound, wife of former Society Chair Terry. Hazel contributed widely to the community in Heavitree and beyond, and will be much missed. We send our condolences to Terry and all the family.

Martin Weiler

Chair, Heavitree Local History Society

Email: martinjohnweiler@gmail.com

John Davidson- The Lost Rivers of Exeter and Heavitree

Why study the lost rivers of Exeter?

After many years of teaching Geography, Geology and History, when John finished teaching, he wanted to share some of the things he'd picked up along the way.

Forty years ago he was inspired by his mentor and head of Geography who told him to 'read the landscape' – and that is exactly what is needed when trying to find the lost rivers of Exeter. Not only are there bumps, slopes and dips in the land that give clues, there are also man-made remains that raise questions.

John's son asked, 'why is there a bridge over nothing at Bull Meadow?' (it's actually the remains of the old viaduct crossing a valley that used to carry the

now-culverted Chutebrook stream).

Street names are puzzling as well: 'Well Street', 'Chute Street' or 'Brook Cottages', for example. John used to travel to work by

bus and initially wondered why people asked the conductor to stop at 'Heavitree Bridge' when there was no bridge in sight.

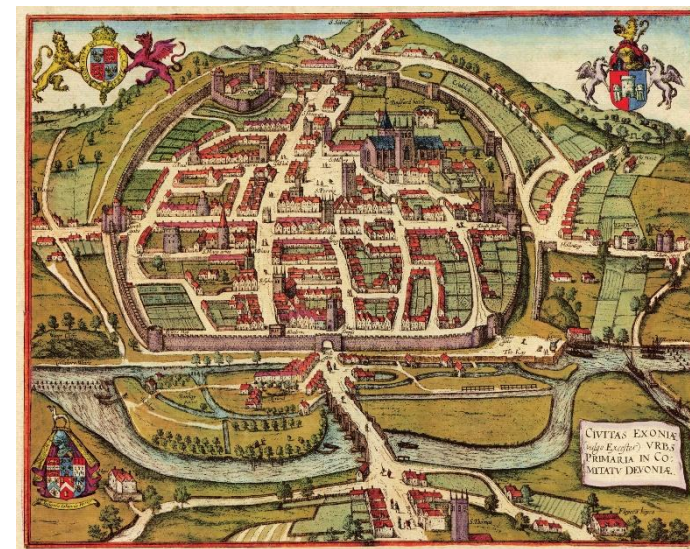
John was also confused about mills. Why were there no mills in Exeter other than on Exe Island? (This is actually due to the nature of Exeter's rivers: they rise very quickly in rain and then go back down to a trickle, making only the two main leats on the main river suitable for powering mills.)

Glimpses of streams amongst the urban landscape are also tantalising, and the more you're interested in them, the more you'll spot.

Before the First Inhabitants of Exeter

The Roman centre of Exeter was a relatively flat plateau that was protected by steep slopes on two sides. On the South side was a steep slope down to the River Exe Valley and on the East was a steep drop toward the Longbrook Valley (a small stream valley). The North and West sides were more gently sloping down to the surrounding countryside.

The geology of Exeter is mainly made up of two important rock groups: the Culm Measures and Permian Breccias. Culm Measures are very old sedimentary rocks formed 300-320 million years ago from



deep marine sediments. The Culm Measures are grey/black and slaty and impermeable, meaning that water cannot soak into them but the Permian rocks are permeable and springs form where they meet the Culm.

There is evidence of a wooden Roman aquaduct, which brought water to the fortress and town of Exeter. To supply this, the Romans drew water from local springs at St Sidwells, Longbrook and further away in Stoke Hill and Pennsylvania.

Crolditch was fed by springs and wet ground on the Eastern side of Exeter, that fed a small stream outside the city walls. It may or may not have been used as a Roman sewer. When the first houses of Southernhay were being built, the area still felt very rural, and the neglected parts of the ditch had become stagnant and filled with rubbish – there were complaints that it was full of dead horses (large horse fairs were held there for centuries, and animals that died or became diseased ended up dumped in or near the old ditch and low ground). Everything was levelled and made sanitary, but the line of modern Southernhay still follows the curve of Crolditch, along the southern edge of the medieval city walls.

Coombe Brook was a small valley brook further east/north-east of Exeter. It was also used by the Romans, who wanted to keep it clean, so alongside it they built a ditch to take runoff from their bathhouse. It appears in maps from 1610, 1677 and disappears on maps by 1709. There is a bricked up arch in the city wall behind the Customs House – was this the exit of the Coombe Brook?

By late Saxon/Norman Exeter, the two main streams, Longbrook and Chutebrook were still natural, but were valuable as a source of water and drainage. The Chutebrook probably stayed closer to its natural state, and flowed through the valley (Bull Meadow Park, Magdalen Road area) towards lower ground south-east of the city.

Exeter in the 1800s

At this time, the Longbrook and Chutebrook were still on the map. Here, the Chutebrook, also known as the Shytebrook and Shutebrook, started at St Anne's well horse trough. Its source was three springs, which joined up quickly at Chute Street. From its name, we know it was definitely used as a sewer/refuse dump. Its steep course meant that when it rained the water would flush things through.

Bull Meadow ravine was bridged in 1832 and the Longbrook and Chutebrook started to disappear soon after that.

The 1832 Cholera epidemic was blamed on the miasma (bad smells), but it was actually water borne. When they started burying the streams, it didn't

go away. They also got rid of the open market in Queen Street, creating a covered market in 1828, but it wasn't until 1860 that they realised it was spread via water in shallow wells, contaminated by human waste, in poorer areas. Despite having one of England's oldest municipal water systems, Exeter's system had leaky pipes, uneven supplies, and poorer areas lacked reliable access and so depended on shallow wells instead.

The Chutebrook that ran through what is now Fairpark Car Park was culverted in 1843-5. It can still sometimes be heard after heavy rain. John once waded through the vegetation in an overgrown area and saw there was definitely still some water on the surface. The Chutebrook outfall into the Exe (near Larkbeare House) is currently degraded, but the council is working on it.

The culverted stream runs down Polsloe Road to Sidwell Street, and another part goes under Holloway Street/Topsham Road. This part is very interesting as there is actually a C13th red vaulted bridge 2.4m underground, beneath the modern road. A contemporary of the Old Exe Bridge, it is known as Larkbeare Bridge and it crossed the Chutebrook. It has a ribbed stone vault, gothic style chamfered ribs, a narrow arch over the brook and intact medieval stonework. This bridge would've existed to save having to have a ford to cross the road, and in more modern times a new road was simply built on top of it. Engineers from the council still have to go down a manhole to check the mortar. At one point they were scared by a ghost, and an exorcism was performed. The stream there is still flowing.

The Iron Bridge was one of the first of its kind in England, and when it was built in 1834-5, there was still a river here – the Longbrook. The enormous St Anne's Brewery (now housing) was one of the major historic breweries and deeply connected to the water system. It was named after St Anne's Well and



water was brought from the well to the brewery through pipelines and conduits and gravity. This water was really clean, and their waste was dumped into the Longbrook.

St James Park Station sits on a natural drainage corridor between higher St Sidwell's ridge (spring fed ground) and the lower Exe Valley. When they were cutting the tunnel leading to the station, the railway builders encountered medieval and post-medieval storm drains, stone and brick culverts and buried watercourses.

The Longbrook valley lies alongside Central Station and a stream ran by it – apparently there is a secret door, iron ladders and you can find the Longbrook under Central Station itself, coming out near the Mill on the Exe.

The Buckerell Bore once came up at Exeter school and ran on to Rivermead Road. After a drought in the 1970s, the spring, which was by a tree, started to move up the playing fields until it was really close to the buildings. The spring has now been capped and the pond filled in.

At Nuffield car park, on the left, you can see the stream on the surface for a short distance. It is managed for wildlife.

On Wonford Road it is possible to see part of the brook from one side of the



bridge; it is then culverted and goes under the road.

Only two waterways remained above ground by the 1940s: at the university, and the Northbrook. The Northbrook, which is largely still on the surface, started at Mincinglake Stream (the nuns' stream and fish pond) and the lower point became the Won Ford or the Northbrook. It was once home for amphibians, trout, roach and salmon.

Its tributaries are the Whipton Brook, Heavitree Park and the Won Ford from the parish church (John can't find this on any maps but knows he's seen it on one somewhere).

The Northbrook is actually famous in Geography textbooks as permission was given to monitor it through building data. There are two types of river: pre-urban river flow and urbanised river flow. After building, urbanised rivers are more prone to flash flooding, which washes away all of the sediment. After rain, the water levels rise and fall very fast. Because of the lack of sediment, the running water has more power – water can also rush out and erode the ground, causing potholes. This is why much of the Northbrook is a really steep channel.

Mincinglake Valley Park was a refuse tip, and not much was documented when it went in. When they finished, they landscaped it with soil on top. But the trees are now penetrating into the landfill and below that is the Northbrook. The water is brown because it is carrying the leachate. Fortunately this is monitored by the Environment Agency but may carry pollutants. By the time it reaches Prince of Wales Road, much of the cloudiness is gone. Polsloe Road playing fields is another old landfill. After it gets to Sweetbrier, it goes into a concrete channel.

The Whipton Brook is on the road out to Sainsbury's, and is half a km of fairly natural stream, some of it running through people's gardens. It disappears under the railway then joins the Northbrook just before where Heavitree Bridge was.

The Heavitree Park tributary is visible on the map - it originally continued past the park into the cemetery. In the dip on Hamlin Lane opposite the cemetery you can find flagstones (near the access to garages) – the root of the stream is underneath. After heavy rains, water flows on the surface. It must be culverted at the Pleasure Ground – there is no trace by the tennis courts so it must be quite deep down.

In 1930s, the stream was culverted at Heavitree Bridge., inside a concrete channel. The bridge itself actually remained until 1958. Unfortunately the culvert cannot take the flow from all of the new housing, so it takes the surface route and causes flooding. There is no easy solution. The culvert

comes out at Rifford Road, eventually goes under Topsham Road, the golf course and onto the River Exe.

Taddiford Brook rises in fields and springs east of Exeter and parts of it can be seen in the landscaped ponds of the Streatham Campus. The stream has suffered from 'cutting down' in a deep channel, but is down to be relandscaped, restored to a more natural, meandering river.

The new idea of 'daylighting' – revealing streams from being buried and making them look more natural, is catching on. A lot of culverts are disintegrating: brick and stone are losing mortar; iron is rusting. It's much easier to maintain things on the surface. This was done in Saw Mill River, New York, and also in Sheffield. In South Korea, daylighting a river in 2005 has cooled temperatures by 3 degrees. This could be an excellent idea with climate change raising temperatures around the world.

Locally, we have one plan by Devon Wildlife Trust. They hope to rewild the part of the Northbrook in Ludwell. The next plan is to remove the concrete box channels and maybe one day go up to Hamlin Lane.

Sally Robinson

Northbrook Walk, 16th May 2026

Polsloe Bridge to Wonford Community Centre



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,



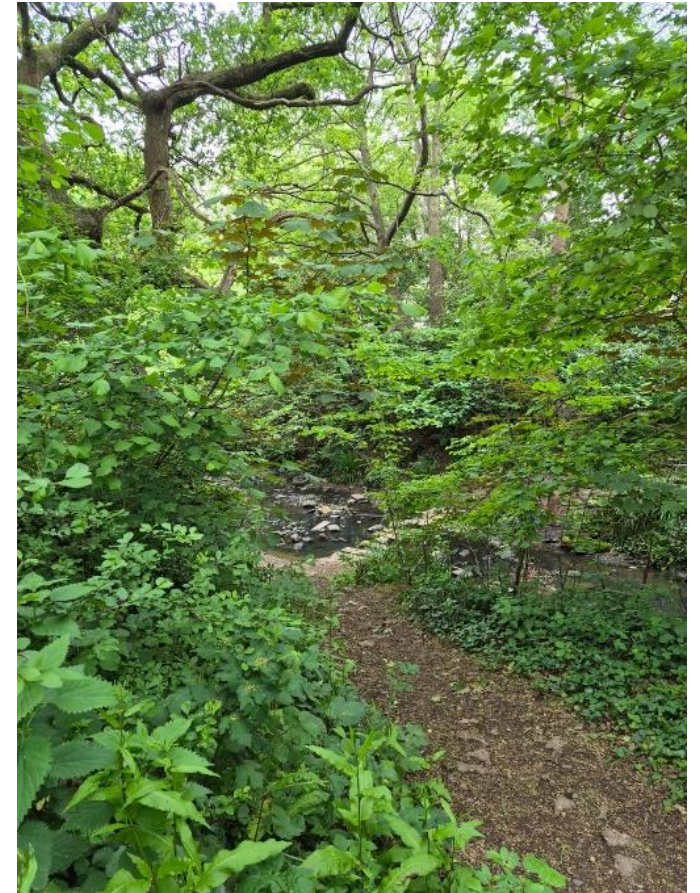
cottages and even a pub, The Bridge Inn, until the landlord committed suicide in 1866. Flooding had been a regular occurrence around the bridge, and it was removed and the stream covered over in 1932 as part of the widening of the road to Gallows Corner.

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 Loye's 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.

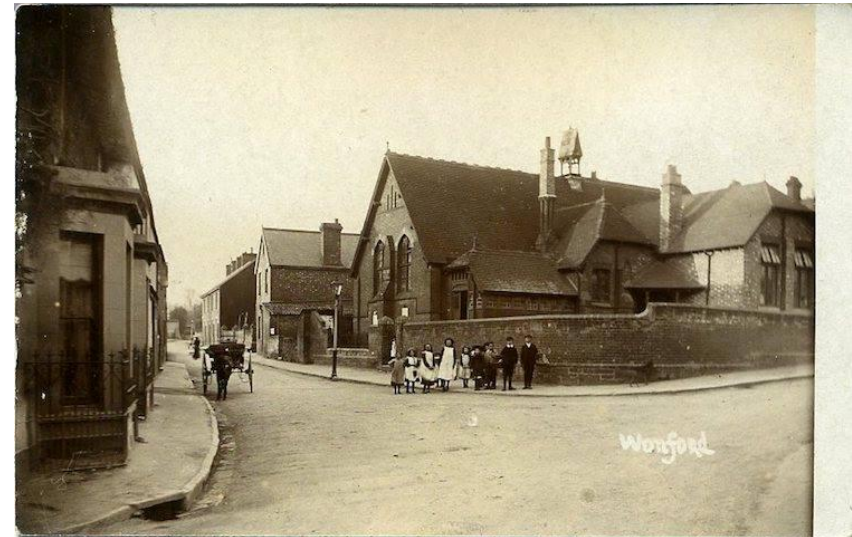
The remerging Northbrook

The Northbrook had been mainly underground since Vaughan Road/Sweetbriar 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'.

Wonford Village School

Jill Fuhaid shared this amazing old photo on Exeter Memories of Wonford Village school in the 1920s, and has given me permission to share it with you (Edna Woodbury is marked with an x)



I found this old postcard of Wonford Village School so we can imagine what it was like from the outside. The building is

still there today, as flats, and you can still see the school bell.

Digby - City of Exeter Lunatic Asylum, Part 3: 1920s

In Newsletter 88 (available in our website archive), I wrote about some Exeter City Council minutes that I had been given (found in a skip!), and the story that they told about the founding of Digby Asylum in the 1880s. Those minutes dated from 1890 and gave us interesting details about the brand-new asylum and how it was equipped and run.



Asylum Kitchen 1890 (credit Pete Martin)

In Newsletter 97, I used the minutes from 1918/19 book to talk about the state of the asylum during the First World War. The institution was understaffed – many employees were serving or had been killed overseas; food was of such poor quality that it was said to have a direct effect on the mortality rate; there was a lack of room to isolate contagious patients; there was an ongoing problem with typhoid; there was no money for necessary building repairs; the heating was failing and workers striking for better conditions drew national attention to the asylum. The Medical Superintendent, who had been managing the running of the institution, was the subject of much resentment due to the harsh recriminations he dealt out

for all strikers.

The next books date from the 1920s, a time for a fresh start for the asylum, with the end of the war, strikes being concluded, the appointment of a new Medical Superintendent and its new name: 'Exeter Mental Hospital'.

1922

In 1922 the Mental Hospital Visiting Committee had only good things to say about the state of affairs, stating that:

'The patients, as a rule, upon discharge, testify to the kindness which they have received.'

They seemed keen to bolster the soon to be departing Dr Bartlett too, saying: *'The Medical Superintendent has discharged his duties to the entire satisfaction of the committee, who have also to commend the conduct of the other officials of the institution.'*

The reasons for admittance to the asylum included ex-soldiers presumably suffering after-effects of the War; 'mental stress' was given as the cause for 27 patients. Dr Bartlett frequently referred to the 'unfavourable type' of patients being admitted (i.e. old and in very poor health/ likely to die soon). In 1922 there were two escapes:

'A female patient effected her escape through the boot room at 7.20am one foggy morning, and though viewed on the farm she evaded the nurses and was not discovered until 9am. The same patient slipped away as patients were coming in from Court at noon and was able to reach Wonford, being retaken after an absence of eighty minutes.'



Medical Superintendent George Bartlett

The atmosphere in the asylum seemed cheerier than it was during the War. A quarter of male patients (which Dr Bartlett calls 'a large proportion' although it seems small to me!) were allowed 'on parole' in the grounds; cricket and bowls were in full swing until 9pm in the summer. Entertainments and dances had been given as usual, and the Christmas festivities and annual fete were much enjoyed. The Topsham Cricket Club provided matches for their entertainment and three patients were able to take part

in the League games. The croquet lawn was very popular and the chaplain visited wards every other week. There were bi-weekly services and monthly services for Catholics.

We don't hear much about children in the mental hospital, but records show that they were sometimes there. Dr Bartlett happens to mention that a child was admitted from the Home of Good Shepherd, which was a home that cared for young women and girls in difficult circumstances (as a refuge or penitentiary). We do not know why the girl ended up in the mental hospital but on admittance she fell ill with Scarlet Fever. This caused a big panic and she was annexed into an unused room; when another patient fell ill, the unpleasant-sounding 'needle room' was made into an isolation area. This caused 'endless anxiety' and many comments about financial stringency meaning any attempts to isolate patients was 'makeshift' and dangerous.

Dr Bartlett also had much to say about the difficulties small mental hospitals faced in 'classification' of patients, saying

'recoverable cases must have close association with hopeless cases' and referring to 'juvenile idiots who obviously degrade the standard of any ward in which they are housed.'

He was very much representative of new ways of thinking about mental healthcare in the 1920s – Victorian asylums were starting to be thought of as not fit for purpose, with mental illness highly stigmatised, little distinction between short-term and chronic illness, and people ending up there for life. In his report, Dr Bartlett spoke at length about the idea of 'reception hospitals' – small mental health units usually attached to general or district hospitals, which would aim to mainly treat patients voluntarily and in the short term. He, like many, believed that early intervention could prevent lifelong, unspecialised institutional care. These ideas would eventually lead to the 1930s Mental Treatment Act.

Dr Bartlett also complained of the 'lack of keenness' of female staff to

prepare themselves for the medico-psychological examinations, with ten males presenting themselves but only one female. For males the qualification would probably have been 'Diploma in Psychological Medicine' and for females the 'MPA Certificate for Mental Nurses.' The reason that female staff probably weren't very keen to study for this qualification (which would typically take three years) were probably related to the inequality that gave them a really raw deal. Even if they passed the exam, opportunities for promotion or a pay rise were scarce; male staff were much more likely to be granted study leave or paid time off to prepare; there was a view that nursing was 'natural' for women and didn't need advanced training; women rarely had any female role models or mentorship, and nurses especially had long, gruelling shifts with fewer breaks and support.

By October 1922, Dr Bartlett had handed in his resignation, having been appointed the post of Medical Superintendent in Derby County Mental Hospital. It is likely that his reputation never recovered after the strike action spoken about in my previous essay.

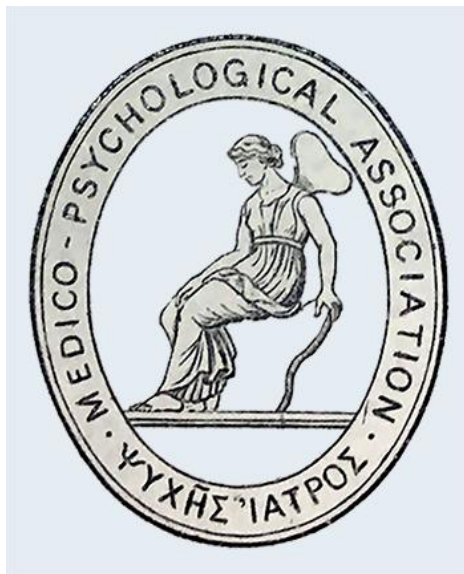
The Committee advertised for a new Medical Superintendent. The salary would be £700 rising to £800 per annum (£41,160 today) and would include an unfurnished house, coal, lighting, laundry, vegetables and garden produce. The person appointed should be under 45 years.

By December 1922, Dr Daniel McKinlay Reid had been appointed – it would be his first post as Medical Superintendent (he was previously Deputy at Govan District Asylum).

1923

The cost per pauper patient was reduced from 31/- week to 29/- week (£74.60 in today's money) and the excess on the weekly charge that was paid for criminal and out of borough patients raised £1,399, which was transferred to the Buildings and Repairs Fund. The hospital was costing quite a lot in these – repairs and alterations amounted to £2,207 (£113,554 today). This included external painting and finally the installation of two boilers. A fitted hand-basin was recommended to be installed near to the lavatories 'toward the promotion of the general health.'

The effects of the war were still being felt. One of the principal causative factors for admission was given as mental stress (bereavement worry about physical health, strain of War service, unemployment etc). A later comment about allowance from the Inspector gives an insight into the state of some of these men:



'Nine service patients receive the weekly allowance of 2s 6d in money which they spend themselves, one has extra comforts obtained for him, one is unable to appreciate or benefit from it, and one refuses to draw it.'

with senility, climacterium (menopause), alcoholic excess and epilepsy given as other reasons. 'Defective heredity' was found in 27 percent of the cases. 9 patients were discharged as 'relieved'. The principal causes of the 25 deaths were: valvular or muscular disease of the heart (7), cerebral haemorrhage (3), phthisis, epilepsy and influenza. Only 5 were autopsied.

Two inquests were held, one for a female patient who died from a fracture of the skull just two weeks after admission, and a female who died suddenly from 'rupture of the heart' following a seizure. One operation mentioned, was of the amputation of the left arm of a female patient who was suffering from tuberculosis of the elbow (basically skeletal TB, where the bacteria enters the elbow joint)!

Only one escape was recorded – a female escaped whilst with a walking party, eluding the nurses and making her escape for 6.5 hours, before being recovered in a house in Pinhoe.

Although health was considered to be satisfactory, the superintendent mentioned that:

'For over three years there has been endemic among the female patients a group of skin diseases (having scabies undoubtedly as its origin) and despite much investigation and labour many patients are still affected. This I have regarded with a good deal of concern. On account of it, proper segregation, from the mental point of view, has often been impossible, and from the financial point of view, the cost incurred through extra laundry work must have been considerable. Again, patients' friends often look with feelings of disgust upon skin disease of any kind, and because of this there is always the probability that private patients may be removed elsewhere. I need not say that much tact has to be exercised in dealing with enquiries regarding these conditions.'

Generally patients were encouraged to work when possible. 'drifting' was prevented by engaging patients in small tasks. Parole to visit friends or attend amusements in the city was granted to a small number of 'reliable men'. Recreations and amusements were carried out: in the winter there were dances, several cinematograph exhibitions and Christmas celebrations. The Annual Fete was favoured with good weather and enjoyed by all, a tennis court had been completed and made use of by the female patients and



Topsham Cricket Club continued to play matches in the grounds.

Clothing was described as 'well-fitting suits, made of superior quality brown cloth' by the inspector, but he observed that the males were not given night shirts. The superintendent said that they were trying to stop using corduroy and it seems the aim was for patients to be provided with dresses or suits individually made for each patient, to allow them to retain them and their boots on removal from one ward to another.

Food was considered to be improving after the privations of the War. The inspector said:

'I saw an excellent dinner served to the men in their wards today which consisted of meat pie, with vegetables, followed by fruit pudding; this provided an ample meal which satisfied the men; the tables were neatly laid, the men took their meal in a quiet and well-ordered manner and the food provided was nicely served.'

The diet generally is liberal and varied, the menu being revised each week, extras such as porridge, fish, bacon etc are given daily at breakfast; a second course is provided for dinner and cake or jam issued for tea on four days a week. A light supper of bread and cheese with coffee us allowed to those in the sitting up party.'

1924

This year some of the works carried out give us a nice picture into the different areas of the asylum. Works carried out included:

- Installation of a Thresh disinfector in the laundry
- Alterations of windows (from bars to sash)
- Provision of wash basins in lavatories
- Erection of piggeries
- Resurfacing and tarring roads and courts
- Repairs to greenhouse
- Repointing portions of South Front
- Alterations to cowshed floor
- Painting
- Overhauling and Repainting Water Storage Tanks
- Borrowing of £2000 to build two dwelling houses for Clerk and Steward and Head Attendant
- Purchasing a fire escape from Merryweather & Sons for £115

Although the farm and garden was profitable, there was a shortage of male patients to work on it, so efforts had been made to get men boarded out from other mental hospitals. So far this had not been successful.

Efforts had also been made to provide patients with suits and dresses that were 'less of an Institution pattern'. Underclothing too was gradually being replaced by a type 'less antiquated and shapeless than hitherto provided.'

The superintendent said that most were able to appreciate the difference between being well and badly dressed, and that this may even contribute to recovery rates. This 'of course' applied more to women and great effort had been made to please them with garment and colour, but

'unfortunately the physical disabilities that so often accompany insanity tend to mitigate against the desired result.'

The death rate was fairly low this year, but these inquests were held:

'E.A. who died on 5th January "through a fall causing an abrasion of the forehead, which became septic through his having boils on the body and through his restless and dirty habits.'

'F.S. who died on 26th December, death having resulted from fractures of both bones of the right leg and bruising of the back.'

This casualty also sounded unpleasant:

'A fracture – dislocation of the left elbow in a Private Patient, caused by her being pushed down in the Airing Court by another Patient.'

There were three escapees – one female (8.5 days!), two males (37 hours and 30 hours).

Throughout the winter a dance or cinematograph display was held almost every week. The nursing staff, Matron and Miss Webb gave a concert in March which was successful and it was hoped would become an annual event.

More female staff were now studying for and obtaining the Medico-Psychological Certificate which seemed to be becoming a requirement for working in the asylum.

1927

In addition to the Mental Hospital Committee, the books contain some occasionally interesting notes from Exeter Mental Deficiency Committee. This committee would have been formed in 1913, under the Mental Deficiency Act, which required all councils to have a committee to 'assess, supervise and make placements for individuals deemed mentally deficient.' The minutes this year included details of individuals to be detained in the workhouse (now called the 'Poor Law Institution') and also of 'A.B' who had got married. The committee resolved that: *'in the view of the Committee, knowingly contracting marriage with a certified mental defective should be made a penal offence.'*

Meanwhile at the Mental Hospitals, numbers had increased to 345 and the hospital was actually making a profit (£1305, 2s. 2d. about £90,000 in today's money). A cinematograph was installed. The apparatus was to be worked by Mr Willcocks, and suitable films were to be obtained on hire from Pathe Freres Cinema Co.

The superintendent was pleased to say that:

'The time has passed when it was thought necessary to restrain patients within the walls of their wards until discharge was given them. Nowadays much greater freedom is allowed, and, even though an occasional risk is taken, I am sure this a sound policy. It often speeds recovery and for those of a more chronic type it makes for greater happiness or content. 65 patients have parole within or beyond the grounds and during the year 43 have been permitted daily or (more frequently) weekend leave with relatives.'

He reported that the year was a good one for livestock and crops, giving insight into the Mental Hospital Farm:

'Barley and hay were well harvested and the yield of potatoes and mangolds (a type of root vegetable grown primarily as animal fodder) was heavy, the former being of excellent quality. Many new apple trees and fruit bushes were planted. The supply of milk was well maintained, and it was found possible to

issue it frequently to patients at dinner. Despite the fact that the herd has been subjected regularly to the Tuberculin test two cows developed Tuberculosis and had to be destroyed. Further misadventure occurred when a cow died of Anthrax and when owing to an outbreak of Swine Fever in a litter of young pigs it was necessary to slaughter the whole stock.'

The Report of the Royal Commission on Lunacy and Mental Disorder had come out in 1926 and was described as *'an event outstanding in the history of the treatment of the insane'* by Dr Mc Kinlay Reid. This report really represented the evolving attitudes towards mental health that we see reflected over recent years in the minutes of the Exeter Mental Hospital, as well as national feeling. The report recommended:

- That mental illness was a medical condition, to be viewed and treated as a physical illness – moving away from the legal/custodial framing of 'lunacy'
- Early intervention and voluntary admission to mental hospitals rather than forced detention or waiting for certification to be able to treat someone.
- More community care and integration of services rather than relying on large asylums.



In Exeter there was a rise in patients attending the Mental Clinic at the Exeter Dispensary (located at 26 Queen Street with a resident dispenser). Dr Reid spoke positively about the Mental Clinic:

'certain prejudices concerning in are disappearing, and general practitioners

take fuller advantage of the facilities offered for advice and treatment. The fact that through its agency it is more possible to keep in touch with patients out on trial from the County and City Mental Hospitals is alone almost a justification for its inception.'

There were two inspections of the hospital in 1927, and they reported:

The day being bright nearly all the patients were in the ward gardens and some of the men were amusing themselves by playing clock golf and instructions were given today for the croquet lawn to be mown and the hoops

set out on the female side.

I was most favourably struck by the obvious friendly relations between the patients and the medical and nursing staff.

The day rooms were well supplied with plants and flowers; the bookshelves were well filled and there was a good supply everywhere of daily papers picture papers and magazines.

I saw a nice dinner being served of boiled fish and white sauce, potatoes and leeks and jam tart, and though I was told that fried fish is the more popular fish dinner, today's meal seemed to be appreciated.

Those seen were neat and clean in person and dress, each man having two lounge suits and personal underclothing of good quality; all are provided with overcoats, night shirts and toothbrushes.

The Committee have installed a wireless set, capable of carrying five loudspeakers, for the entertainment of the patients.'



Patients gardening in Digby Ground – 1930s. Photo courtesy of Tom Fairfax

1929

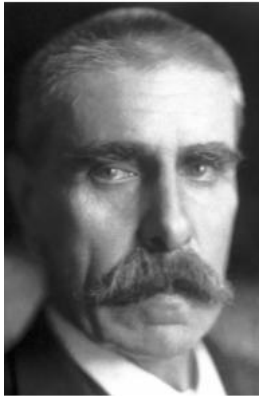
This year more technology entered the Mental Hospital – electric cooking equipment comprising oven range, fish fryer (capable of dealing with all

required for patients and staff), a boiling table (like a flat stovetop designed for mass catering of soups, pots etc) and grill.

The inspector stated that 'trial' had been allowed to 18 patients, and in 3 instances money allowances were made. He asked the Committee to '*consider the advisability of making use of their powers in this respect when granting trial.*'

This year there was a large influenza outbreak, affecting 82 patients and 18 members of staff.

General paralysis (GPI) was a late-stage manifestation of untreated syphilis, affecting the brain. It caused delusions, mood swings, memory loss, seizures and eventually paralysis and death. In 1917, Dr Julius Wagner-Jauregg (right) introduced malaria inoculation as a treatment for GPI! The theory was that the high fevers could kill or weaken the syphilitic bacteria. Patients would be deliberately injected with malaria, then after a few fever cycles, given quinine to kill the malaria parasite. Despite showing some effectiveness in many patients, this treatment obviously came with serious risks – death from malaria (5-20%), organ failure or persistent malaria. Many of the patients would not be able to give informed consent. Despite this, patients at Exeter Mental Hospital were given this treatment, the inspector boasting:



'The treatment of general paralysis by induced malaria has been adopted at this hospital in cases which are considered suitable, and so far the opinion formed is favourable.'

The report on the 10 service patients was interesting and sad. All had a complete outfit of clothing for personal wear, including two or three suits made of good quality tweed cloths, and their neat, clean and well-dressed appearance suggested they were very well attended.

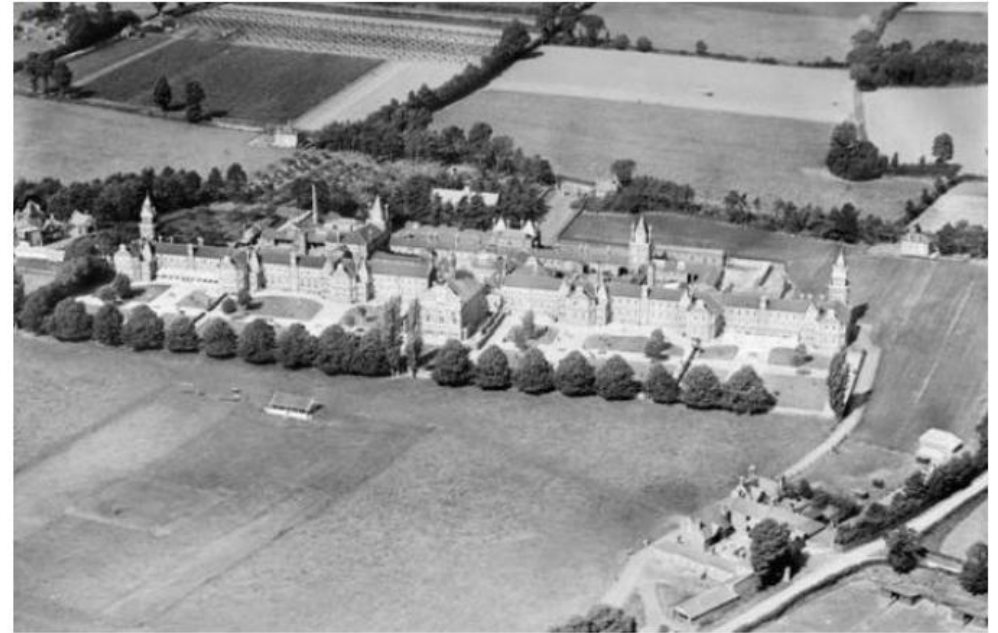
One patient, owing to his mental state, was unable to benefit from pocket money, and one refused to claim it. The others received 2/6 week with which they bought their comforts when out with shopping parties.

Service patients received a special dietary (along with the private patients) and this included a variety of extras for the morning and evening meals and a second course at dinner throughout the week.

All but one were expected to be in the institution permanently.

A very sad request came from one service patient – it makes you wonder how he must've felt having fought in the war:

'One patient stated he had not been visited during the past six or seven years, and as he is anxious to see his relatives, Dr Reid is arranging for them to be notified of his wish to see them.'



Digby Asylum 1928 (photo from Britain from Above)

This Newsletter was published by the Heavitree Local History Society

Editor: Sally Robinson, 6 Stanwey, EX1 3DR

sallykernick2@yahoo.co.uk

Please contact us with any enquiries via the form on our website:

heavitreelocalhistorysociety.co.uk