

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 14th Jun 2023

‘Victor Street and the Entrepreneurial Spirit of Heavitree’- A joint meeting with Heavitree Squilometre

Wed 13th Sep 2023

AGM + ‘Meeting the promise of “Homes for Heroes” in Heavitree after the First World War’ - Julia Neville

Wed 13th Dec 2023

TBC

Heavitree and the Railways – Richard Westlake



According to Richard, railways are in your blood. Richard’s father was Station Master at Okehampton. The museum at the recently re-opened station is named after him.

Richard began as a fireman on steam trains at the age of 15. He went on to take charge of inter-city trains running between Paddington and Cornwall in a career which

spanned more than 40 years. In recent years, he has been a councillor on Devon County Council. In 2010 he was awarded an MBE for his services to public transport and the community in Devon.

Richard showed us an examination paper for firemen to become drivers; it had 131 questions. If you failed on your first attempt, you were allowed another two goes. Here are some example questions:
When is it permissible to pass signals at danger?
How would you shut an inside omission piston valve?
If the wheel reverser became stuck, what would you do?



Exmouth Junction railway apprentices c.1910 (*The Railway in Whipton*)

Nowadays, it takes about three years to become a driver, back then it was a minimum of fifteen – you had to learn the trade and then qualify. Some were there for 25-30 years and never made it to driver. There was good comradeship however, and he enjoyed coming to work. The pay was good: a fireman might earn £2.59 a week; compare that with a worker in a shop or farm who would earn maybe £1 or so a week.

The railways came to Exeter in the 1840s (St David's) and sixteen years later to Queen Street (Central). A junction was initially based at Queen Street but in 1887, a new shed was opened at Exmouth Junction, on land to the north of the main line. This lay within the historic parish of Heavitree. Some of the now disused buildings still remain near Morrisons.



Exmouth Junction was where the Exmouth branch line diverged from the London Waterloo to Exeter main line. There were many smaller stations between Exeter Central and the Exmouth Junction signal box: St James Park Halt (originally 'Lion's Halt', after the field name), Mount Pleasant Road Halt (by the current Health Centre), Whipton Bridge Halt (by Summer Lane) and Polsloe Bridge Halt.

Polsloe Bridge Halt was opened in 1908 and thankfully still remains open. It was built with two platforms, one of which is now disused (and will probably last forever!). There used to be a ticket office at street level. With the reorganisation of the railways, they had the mad idea of 'single lining' everything. In 1973, they converted the Topsham and the Salisbury to Exeter lines to single track. The second track was removed entirely; just a few passing points were left in situ.



Polsloe Bridge Halt around 1910



Polsloe Bridge Halt 1959 showing double track



Drummond M7 Class 0-4-4T No 30024 at Polsloe Bridge Halt on a local passenger service on the Exmouth branch c.1954

The service pattern went down to two hourly, the rails wore out more quickly, and it is now much slower getting to Waterloo than Paddington, despite the fact that it's actually a quicker line. Being single track slows everything down.

The path alongside St Katherine's Priory used to take you to Exmouth Junction; they called it 'the junction path'. When you arrived, there was a large steam shed. It was rebuilt from corrugated iron to brick and concrete in 1924/6, and at its peak between 1930 and 1960 it typically had an allocation of over 120 locomotives, as well as being responsible for engines at other depots in the south-west. It was a great employer – about 500 (mostly) men worked from that steam shed.

Richard's father was there in the 1950s. He remembered 151 engines there once on a summer's day, sat ready to go off-shed to work trains all over the place: it was SO busy.

There was a very large coal tower which was in use practically 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Coal would be hoisted up out of the wagon into the tender – anyone nearby would be covered. There was also an area where you would clean out. Many people ended up with lung problems.



Exmouth Junction's twelve road depot shortly after opening

They also did repairs there, and it was busy 24 hours a day. There was a turntable, and there were quite a few incidents where the engine missed the turntable and ended up in the lane. Once it ended up in Monks Road; no-one would own up.

During WWII, railway sidings were built for military storage. The other side of the line was built with clinker from steam engines. Richard's father remembered ambulance trains from Southampton to Exeter going into those sidings before deciding where to go next. There is a map of German targets in the museum – Exmouth Junction had a big circle around it, but somehow they never hit it.

There was also a Southern Railway club up there, which was very well used. Older drivers would often have 3-4 pints of cider. There were old nameplates all over the walls, worth over £100,000.

When the railways decided to do away with steam, management decided to gradually introduce diesel, but that they would downgrade routes. In 1965, steam finished in Okehampton, and by the end of that year, in Yeovil. Exmouth Junction started to run down very quickly and closed in 1967. Some employees moved to St Davids, others all over Southern and Western. It was heartbreaking – people who had spent all their lives on the railway suddenly found they didn't have a job. The whole place was completely ripped up: the steam shed employing 500 plus people; the concrete depot; the marshalling yard...all around, workers who lived in that area, were suddenly gone. The impact on Heavitree would have been huge.

The site is now Morrisons. As you come into Morrisons you can see where the sidings were, and the cement works. These works provided reinforced concrete, cement, and fencing for the whole of the Southern Railway. Polsloe Bridge station was built from this cement.



The coaling plant, built 1930, was visible for miles around

The Royal Engineers asked if they could practice blowing up the coal tower on Priory Road, but failed after four attempts. It was built so solidly that they gave up.

The land was contaminated for years, as it was built from clinker and oil etc would have been dumped on it. For a long time, any trees or plants planted there would die. Planning was refused for years, but suddenly now 400 new flats and houses are to be built there. Hopefully most of the contamination is under Morrisons! The railways in Heavitree were a massive part of our local history – but so many people have no idea. All the old drivers are gone, and along with them, the history. Things move on and if you are not quick enough to capture it, you miss it.

(Right: An artist's impression of the development plans for 51 apartments on the Exmouth Junction site. The site will be 'car free'.)

Sally Robinson



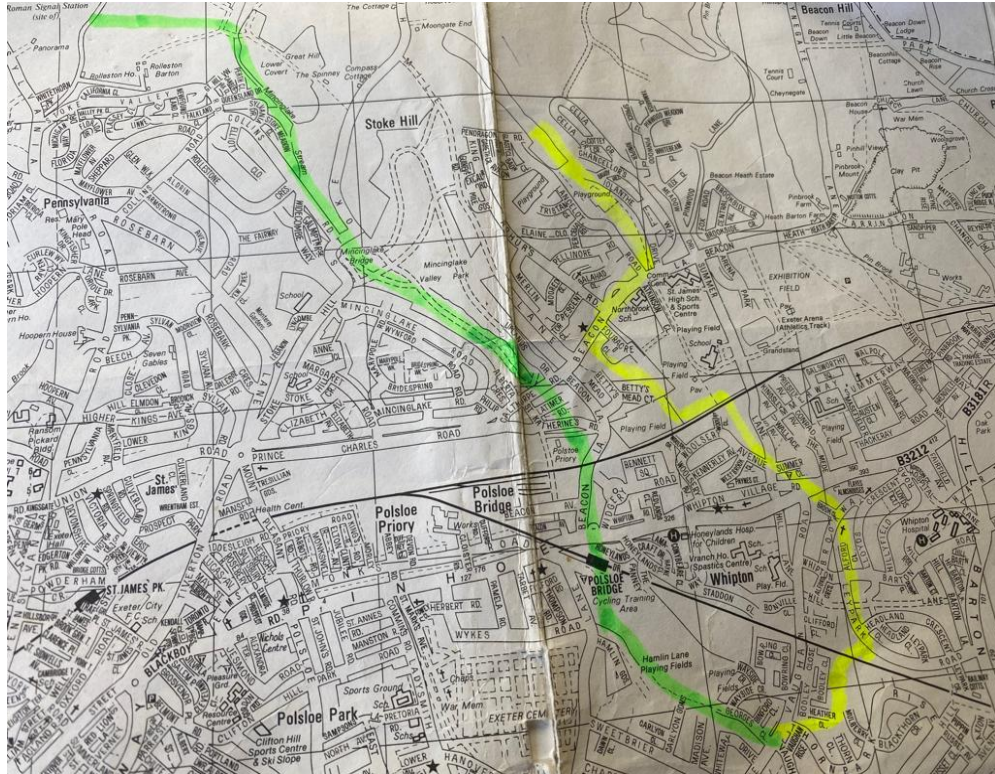
Society members explore the Whipton Brook

Heavitree's river – the Northbrook – has come under increasing scrutiny by members of the Heavitree Local History Society.



Previous attention, including walks, had mainly focussed on the arm of the river that flows down from Stoke Hill, known locally as the Mincinglake Stream.

On 20th May this year, a hardy group of walkers explored the other major tributary, the Wipton Brook, which rises on Beacon Heath and drops down to join the Mincinglake Stream by Vaughan Road.



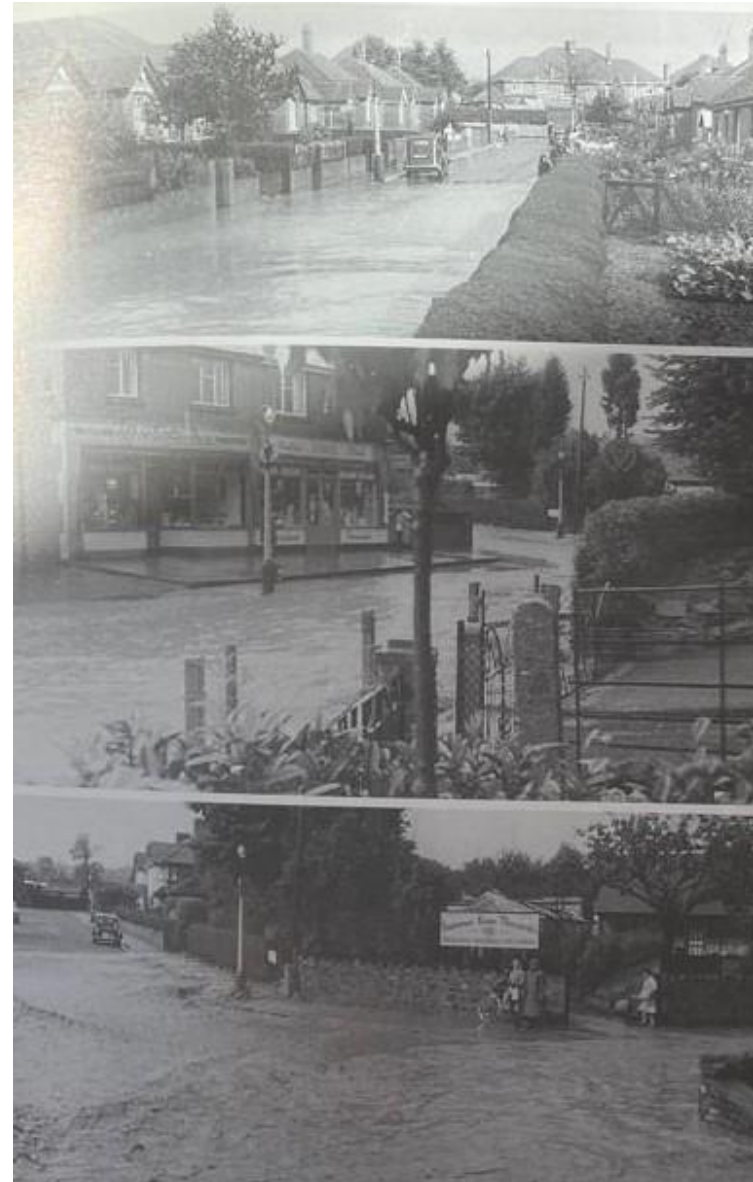
The green line is Mincinglake Stream; yellow is Wipton Brook

Old maps show that the Wipton Brook flowed openly through countryside. As the area was built up with housing and other infrastructure like railway lines, it was increasingly 'managed' with concrete sluices and weirs, as well as being covered over and running through underground culverts. The walkers were able to see good examples of both open and covered stretches. Meeting by the playground at Pendragon Road on Beacon Heath, the group were soon walking along a green valley that stretches down to Beacon Lane, following the line of the river. Much is culverted there, but we saw open stretches with concrete channels and trash screens in the upper section. Unfortunately, records are hard to come by so we cannot be sure when the

various pieces of engineering were carried out, or indeed the exact layout of the covered culverts. Something to be further researched.

There are further concrete works at Guinevere Way, but walkers have to then loop round to Bettysmead Playing Fields to follow an open stretch which runs

down to the railway line. From here the stream is culverted under the railway and through to Wipton Village. Local resident Rose Gander explained how the stream used to be open and run through people's gardens. It was culverted after the floods in Wipton in 1960 (see photos to the left, from 'Wipton of Yesteryear').



The open river can next be seen from a nicely railed bridge on Pinhoe Road, and can be followed off Brookway (a clue in the name there!), Alford Close and Leypark Road. Rosie told us that locals called the stream 'The dyke' along this green wooded stretch.

After another loop via Vaughan Road, we returned to the stream at Bodley Close and followed the open water right down to its confluence with the Mincinglake Stream at Vaughan Road. From here the river flows under 'Heavitree Bridge', on through Wonford Playing Fields, and out to the Exe beyond the Crematorium.

It surprised us all just how much open river there is still, but also the scale of the engineering works to manage the flows. Despite all the modern adaptations, the line of the stream has ensured a number of green spaces survive. A wildlife corridor to enjoy.

The walk stimulated talk about a leaflet to summarise what we know and what can be seen by walking along 'our river'.



A full, labelled set of all the different points in the walk can be seen on our website here:

<http://www.heavitreelocalhistorysociety.co.uk/archive.html#gallery-of-past-society-events>

Martin Weiler

This Newsletter was published by the Heavitree Local History Society

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

www.heavitreelocalhistorysociety.co.uk