

Tremough School Ping Pong Balls - Archives & Special Collections,
Falmouth University & University of Exeter Penryn Campus



Archives don't often contain objects, but now and then something really special sneaks in. In this case, a pair of special objects has bounced its way into our Collection, and our hearts.

These balls are seemingly innocuous at first sight, with little to indicate their special status in the history of education on this site. However, closer inspection reveals something both unassuming and rather remarkable – they are stamped with the initials 'USA'.

The balls were donated to the Archive by a member of the religious order Les Filles de la Croix – the nuns that ran the Convent School for girls at Tremough prior to its current use as the home of Falmouth University and University of Exeter's Penryn Campus. The balls were used by American troops stationed in Falmouth during World War Two, who would visit the School to play ping pong with the pupils.

Thousands of American troops passed through Cornwall during at this time, in what is often known as the 'friendly invasion'. Many of these were stationed around Truro and Falmouth ahead of D Day in June 1944. The GIs that visited Tremough were involved in the construction of a religious grotto and star shaped pool, still visible on campus, where their names are commemorated in a granite

memorial stone. It seems likely that these were the same men that played ping pong with the Convent School girls. It was long thought that the men took part in the D Day landings and may have perished amongst the troops killed on the beaches of Normandy. However, recent research by history students at the University of Exeter discovered that the men were in fact part of an advanced amphibious base, and that they returned safely to America. It is hoped that the next stage of research may be able to trace the men's descendants – families with a connection to Tremough although thousands of miles away.

It is well documented that the Americans based in Cornwall were friendly and outgoing; many local girls entered into romances with the glamorous visitors. One view is that due to links between the military pastor and the Convent, these ping-pong playing GIs were the most devout in their unit. However, when we consider that some of these men were barely 18, and many of the girls only a little younger, we can only speculate as to the stories these super-bouncy spherical delights could tell...