



## EXETER SHIP CANAL ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

We see the latest approach by the City Council to the future of the canal as an opportunity to collate good ideas and build on them to produce a strategy for breathing new life into the canal through improving the facilities and attractions it offers to boaters, other water users, businesses and visitors, and by realising the canal's potential income today and to come.

Income generation and improvements go hand in hand; but we feel their value will be limited unless policies are simultaneously developed to address the constraints that affect the canal's use and therefore its income potential in the future.

The most immediately important and far-reaching of these challenges is the integration of the development of the Canal Basin with plans for the canal. The Basin is—and always has been—the hub and focal point of canal use. The Basin's buildings and facilities cannot be separated from a realistic strategy for the future of the waterway, nor from the revenue the Basin and Quayside generate to attract boats and visitors beyond the range of present users.

Our proposals that follow include immediate practical improvements, new attractions, sustainable income generation and forward planning. Income generation is underpinned by two principles: access and navigation of the waterway must be open, affordable, easy to arrange and widely marketed and publicised; and upkeep and improvements to the waterway and its facilities must make the canal and its landscape a more worthwhile all-round destination for boaters and other water users and visitors of all ages by land or water. In addition, the door should not be closed to larger heritage and commercial vessels using the canal.

It goes without saying that while these proposals are based on widely-drawn experience of market needs and opportunities for canals today, economic assessments of the business case for the proposals will be required, although in the context of a strategy for the canal as a whole rather than as separate profit centres.

The Exeter Ship Canal was constructed to make the River Exe navigable by a variety of vessels from the estuary to the heart of Exeter and to bring benefits to the city, its economy and culture, and it has the scope to continue this today if new markets and needs are recognised. We have avoided a re-hash of the history of past attempts and welcome the council's revived approach, and hope that we and others involved with the canal can contribute fully to the process.

### TABLE OF PROPOSALS: DETAILS ON FOLLOWING PAGES

1	Integrated policies for the Canal and the Basin
2	Install new slipway and pontoons, and promote the canal, to attract trail boats and other craft
3	Waterbased activities to make the canal a destination for all
4	Attractions and facilities for canal holidays
5	Residential moorings
6	A Canal Carnival
7	Develop heritage and maritime activities at the Canal Basin
8	Use of volunteers on the Canal
9	Canal charges
10	New railway station at Marsh Barton
11	Develop a policy for new and replacement bridges
12	Topsham Lock mini-hub
13	A379 (Bridge Road) blockage

## **1 INTEGRATE POLICIES FOR THE CANAL AND THE BASIN**

The Canal Basin is integrally the hub and focal point of the canal: a realistic strategy for the canal's future cannot be separate from the plan for the Basin and the buildings and facilities there. They should be planned to provide a compelling destination for vessels and visitors by accommodating businesses and attractions to serve the resultant needs. Revenue from council-owned property on the Canal Basin and Quayside is therefore key to generating an income strand for maintenance and improvements for the canal as a whole. We believe:

- The Council and the Exeter Quay and Canal Trust (ECQT) should immediately work jointly on strategy and business planning for the canal. As landlords in the Basin, ECQT is inextricably part of the future of the canal.
- The Exeter Canal Basin Masterplan (2004) should be re-envisioned to reflect the Council's new approach to the canal as a whole.
- The Canal Basin should be the site for an integrated centre for canal information and management, replacing the present Canal Office and possibly combined with boaters' facilities such as showers, toilets and waste disposal.
- Arrangements for boat maintenance, repair, craning and lay-up should be improved and marketed.
- Additional space near the Basin for maintenance and storage of larger vessels than can be accommodated by current weight limits should be sought nearby, eg in part of the site of the former gas works, in order to generate additional income.
- Policies for the Basin should encourage new businesses / developments that promote Exeter as a centre for inland and offshore boating and interest.

## **2 INSTALL NEW SLIPWAY AND PONTOONS, AND PROMOTE THE CANAL, TO ATTRACT TRAIL BOATS AND OTHER CRAFT**

The Quay and Canal Basin are rated the second most visited attraction in Exeter, behind the Cathedral, which underlines the canal's potential. Although the canal is fairly short at 8.3 km (5.2 miles) and its passage is interrupted by the A379 dual carriageway, it should nevertheless prove an attractive destination for trail boaters, in particular the northern section between the A379 and the Basin, which is close to the city centre and its many facilities and attractions.

The market is substantial. Annually nearly 700,000 people enjoy inland boating, a figure which soars to over two million when canoeing and paddle boarding are included (Inland Waterways Association [IWA] statistic). Yet virtually no pleasure craft visit the Exeter Ship Canal.

Attracted by accurately targeted promotion, trail boat owners will typically travel long distances around the country to cruise canals and attend trail boat rallies. Rallies were held on the Grand Western Canal over the May bank holidays in 2008 and 2014 and attracted over 30 trail boats on each occasion, many staying on the canal for up to a week. A rally for some 20 trail boats takes place on the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal this May. But at present there are no adequate slipways on the Exeter Canal for trail boat use.

The IWA is actively encouraging boaters, canoeists, rowers and paddle-boarders to cruise less frequently visited canals and rivers across England, Wales and Scotland.

We have produced a one-page summary of key steps to build a slipway on the canal, potentially using voluntary labour. It has been endorsed by the management team and the next step is to undertake initial research and consultation with interested parties. The suggested steps for the project are in Appendix A.

Additionally

- New pontoons for short-term visitors at selected points will attract more boaters and users.
- To make the most of launching and other income generating opportunities, the canal should be promoted as a boating and holiday destination in specialist boating as well as general tourist media. Information about navigation, facilities and costs should be simply and readily accessible. A separate website should be established for the canal.

- Fixed summer dates and times for boat convoys when the locks and bridges will be open should be considered.

### **3 WATERBASED ACTIVITIES TO MAKE THE CANAL A DESTINATION FOR ALL**

Making better use of the waterway itself is central. Our ideas for attracting visitors of all ages include:

- Connected passenger boat services on the canal in season from the Basin or Quayside to Double Locks (existing service) and from Double Locks to Turf; co-ordinated ticketing and schedules and hop-on/hop-off points, eg at Countess Wear and Topsham Lock.
- Encourage exploration, interest and exercise through improved signage, interpretation and accessible circular walks incorporating the towpaths, and longer trails in conjunction with canal and river transport and public transport on land.
- A horse-drawn passenger barge or lighter in high season along part of the canal (the model here is the Grand Western Canal).
- Canal trips in a “feature” boat.
- Visiting heritage and working boats.
- Shuttle boat links with country park activities in the adjacent Riverside Valley Park, e.g. in conjunction with Devon Wildlife Trust.
- Develop the interactive educational potential of the canal for school visits to the canal and the Basin in conjunction with the Custom House and Quayside.

### **4 ATTRACTIONS AND FACILITIES FOR CANAL HOLIDAYS**

The canal can become a West Country holiday attraction:

- Identify stretches of the canal that are suitable for the growing market for “green” holiday houseboat moorings, or “canal-glamping” holiday lets at attractive rates.
- Provide summer visitors’ short-term moorings, with necessary facilities, for boats either launched on the canal or vessels coming up from the estuary, including sea-going vessels.
- Identify a location for a camping and touring caravan site.
- Bike-hire and drop-off points along the canal.

### **5 RESIDENTIAL MOORINGS**

In addition to holiday moorings, selected areas along the canal and in the Basin should be designated for properly regulated and licensed residential moorings along with appropriate services. A ribbon development along long sections of the canal should be avoided.

### **6 A CANAL CARNIVAL**

The Friends of Exeter Ship Canal have put forward plans for an annual Canal Carnival as a celebration of the canal and its community, and an addition to Exeter’s calendar of attractions for residents and visitors. We believe the council should support the development of this idea through practical and financial contributions.

### **7 DEVELOP HERITAGE AND MARITIME ACTIVITIES AT THE CANAL BASIN**

The Canal Basin can become a strong centre for sustainable maritime activity that will raise the profile of the canal and the city in the following ways:

- The council should consider the case for developing the potential opportunities in and around the Canal Basin to build, maintain and restore historic ships and boats, up to the size that can readily navigate the canal. The principal aim would be to create a centre of excellence at the Basin that would ultimately, through a reputation for high quality craftsmanship, attract more ship-based heritage work and create skilled jobs for the city of Exeter.
- We suggest discussions with the current marine businesses around the Canal Basin and with other organisations, such as The Maritime Heritage Trust.

- In addition, the renovation and use of the historic Maclaines Warehouses fronting the Basin for a mix of chandlery, waterway heritage and souvenirs, cultural and appropriate commercial uses should be urgently explored.
- Part of the boat lay-up areas should be allocated for projects such as work on boat conversions, which will also add to the visitor interest of the area as a whole. Small sheds to rent would support projects of this kind.
- The turning bay at the Canal Basin should not be restricted by permanent moorings or fixtures.

## **8 USE OF VOLUNTEERS ON THE CANAL**

Since being formed in 2016, the volunteer group, the Friends of Exeter Canal, has extended its practical work on the canal. Volunteers are engaged in clearing banks and towpaths and a programme of repainting a number of canal structures. The group's aims also include developing and co-ordinating ideas for income generation through improvements that bring more boats and marine business to the canal and basin, and that secure the canal's future as a great attraction for all. Consideration is now being given to training volunteers to assist with the operation of locks and bridges in conjunction with the council's waterways team with a view to increasing the capacity for navigation.

- Boater operation of bridges and locks, as is the practice on numerous canals, should also be considered where feasible.
- We believe the council should continue to encourage the participation of volunteers in the canal's development and operation.

## **9 CANAL CHARGES**

In the past charges for boaters' use of the canal have risen sharply and have been partly blamed for dwindling use. We believe:

- These income strands should be expected to contribute to, but not bear in full, the canal's operating and maintenance costs. Fees and charges must be attractive enough to encourage boats to the canal and marketed as competitive with comparable charges elsewhere in the UK.
- Charges for the use of the canal and basin by sporting and other organisations and water-based businesses should be set so as to encourage local clubs and small businesses by reasonably reflecting the extent of demand.
- Charges should entail a programme of upkeep that ensures a navigable, obstruction-free and adequately dredged waterway with well-maintained banks and towpaths.
- Maintenance, such as weed clearing and upkeep of canal banks, towpaths and facilities should be set against the total income derived from the basin and its buildings as well as the waterway, and not from earnings from the waterway alone.
- Charges should be simply and clearly set out and readily available to inspect.

We also believe that the canal and the basin with their appeal to water users and visitors, as well as commercial opportunities, contribute significantly to the overall economy of the city, as the Quayside does, and this factor should not be ignored.

## **10 NEW RAILWAY STATION AT MARSH BARTON**

Devon County Council has plans for constructing a new station at Marsh Barton, which is to be built immediately to the south of Clapperbrook Lane. We understand that the new station will be served by a twice-hourly service between Exmouth and Paignton, via both Exeter Central and Exeter St. David's.

The principal purpose of the new station is to serve Marsh Barton Industrial Estate so it should be well used at peak times. However, the station will be adjacent to the canal and sporting facilities and not far from Double Locks so there should be opportunities to develop its use at off-peak times for leisure purposes including, for example

- Access to the waterway, boat trips and holiday moorings.
- Reaching a potential camp site.
- Using the picnic area and Valley Park.
- Promoting circular walks within the Exeter conurbation in conjunction with the canal towpath or longer walks between Marsh Barton and Starcross, using the railway to travel in one direction.

In the longer term, the station could serve commercial vessels and boat storage at a new basin at Grace Roads playing fields.

We believe there is a case, as part of the associated road traffic measures, to consider replacing the existing Clapperbrook Lane swing bridge, which for some is very difficult to access, and realigning its approach. A new car park on wasteland west of the canal would reduce the need for cars to cross the swing bridge.

## **11 DEVELOP A POLICY FOR NEW AND REPLACEMENT BRIDGES**

With the exception of the bridge carrying the M5, all the bridges that cross the canal are either swing bridges or lift bridges. Their operation causes delay to boaters and to bridge users and in the case of the A379, swing and lift bridges can cause significant traffic delays. Construction of the M5 road bridge in the 1970s effectively placed a clearance limit on fixed bridges across the canal of 10 metres (33 feet).

We believe that the Council should develop a clear and unambiguous policy in respect of any proposed new bridges crossing the canal and for the replacement of existing bridges. The policy should in our view include the following:

- New crossings should take the form of either a swing bridge or a lift bridge and if feasible should provide a minimum clearance over water level of, say, 4 metres (13 ft) thus only needing operation for craft that exceed this. This will facilitate increased boating activity without the additional interruption and inconvenience that would otherwise be caused to pedestrians, cyclists and, if a road bridge, motorists. All new bridges should be electrically operated and designed for boater/volunteer operation.
- When any of the existing swing bridges are replaced they should be rebuilt to accord with the criteria set out above.
- The eventual replacement of the steel swing bridge on the westbound carriageway of the A379 should use modern materials and have a clearance over water level equal to that of the 1970s' aluminium lift bridge on the eastbound carriageway. Any new fixed bridges across the canal should have a minimum clearance equal to that of the M5 crossing.

## **12 TOPSHAM LOCK MINI-HUB**

We recommend that the council considers the long-term development of a mini-hub at Topsham Lock. This could encompass the following:

- The existing ferry service to/from Topsham.
- Improving the pathway between the swing bridge and Topsham Lock.
- A stop for cyclists and bird watchers.
- Walking and angling.
- Heritage and environmental interpretation boards.
- Potential uses for the lock, e.g. as a dry dock in winter, and consideration of its longer term re-opening.
- "Green" holiday moorings possibly in association with Topsham Lock Cottage.
- Berthing on the east bank of the canal.
- Improved access from Exminster including more/longer passing places.
- Adequate car parking spaces.

### **13 A379 (BRIDGE ROAD) BLOCKAGE**

The A379 dual carriageway comprises the most serious blockage to increasing boating on the canal and to reaping the leisure, recreation, tourism and hence economic benefits that such boating would bring to Exeter. While the towpath, cycleway and two pubs are well used, the canal itself is an underutilised asset when it comes to boating. Much of this in our view is brought about by the A379 blockage.

We recommend that the Council works with interested parties to identify the potential options that may become available for dealing with this blockage. We recognise that these options may only be achievable in the long term and that significant costs will be involved but that farsightedness at this stage is important.

Our current thoughts and ideas include the following:

- Constructing a “drop lock” at the A379 crossing to enable boats with a clearance of up to, say, 10 ft to pass under the existing bridges without the bridges having to be raised. The world’s first drop lock was built during the restoration of the Forth & Clyde Canal at Dalmuir, Scotland, c. 2001, to enable a heavily used swing bridge to be replaced with a fixed road bridge.
- Replacing the existing steel swing bridge with a modern bridge with a clearance at least equal to that of the lift bridge built in the 1970s, thus permitting boats with a clearance of up to 5' 8" to use the canal without the bridges being raised.
- Building a canal diversion in conjunction with a replacement A379 bridge over the main line railway, at the same time providing for future electrification and possible four tracking of the railway. This would allow boats with up to a clearance of, say, 12 ft to use the diverted canal, thus avoiding the existing bridges, which would continue in operation for larger vessels.

For the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal  
John Monks  
Chair

For the Inland Waterways Association  
Ray Alexander  
Chairman, West Country Branch

April 2018

## **APPENDIX A**

### **FRIENDS OF EXETER SHIP CANAL INLAND WATERWAYS ASSOCIATION**

#### **EXETER SHIP CANAL SLIPWAY FOR TRAIL BOATS AND OTHER CANAL USERS – SUGGESTED STEPS**

*To be preceded by a preliminary consultation with appropriate user groups and individuals.*

1. Identify and evaluate for each existing slipway on the Exeter Ship Canal and River Exe
  - Size of boats taken, purpose of use, ease of use, costs of use
  - Quality of slipway, depth under water
  - Ability to park trailers nearby and securely
2. Identify requirements for new slipway
  - Maximum size of boats to be accommodated and depth to reach under water
  - Gradient, orientation, length, impact of launching
  - Accessibility for vehicles towing trailers with boats, turning circle
  - Ability to park trailers nearby and securely
  - Usage issues and bye-laws (e.g. gate, keys, restrictions, bookings, charges, insurance, risks, liabilities)
3. Identify potential locations (assumed between A379 and Exeter Canal Basin)
  - Taking into account the above
  - Assess impact of narrowing the width of the canal
  - Check if planning permission/landowner consent required (for each location)
  - Select preferred location, subject to consultation
4. Obtain cost estimates
  - Prepare outline specification of works
  - Produce an estimate of the expected costs (if work undertaken by WRG)
5. Consultation
  - Summary report to user groups/others plus meeting
  - Public consultation (if required)
6. Council approvals (as required)
7. Planning application (if required)
8. Submit application for Canal Camp to WRG
9. Undertake works
  - Canal may need to be closed during works
10. Post-completion
  - Opening ceremony, publicity, update website, arrange celebration trailboat rally