

# An Assessment of Current Planning Proposals relating to the Exeter Ship Canal and the Heritage Harbour

Greenwood Projects, August 2023

(Updated and with additions by the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal, 1 September 2023)

## 1. Introduction

This brief report has been commissioned by the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal, who have asked Greenwood Projects to consider the likely and potential impacts of proposed planning applications on the operational capacities of the Exeter Ship Canal and the potential for the Heritage Harbour.

In 2020, Exeter Ship Canal and Basin were recognised as a heritage harbour by the Maritime Heritage Trust and National Historic Ships. It provided an opportunity to create wider understanding and appreciation of the area's maritime significance and to protect it through regeneration of the use of the waterway. Subsequently, Exeter Canal and Quay Trust (ECQT) commissioned a Route Map and established a Heritage Harbour Group of trustees representing Exeter City Council and independent trustees, with the addition of the Harbour Master and the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal. The Route Map, which was produced by Greenwood Projects, outlined the opportunities presented by the heritage harbour designation and suggested strategies by which to capitalise on these.

The scope and opportunities of heritage harbour designation can be summarised as a range of short- medium- and long-term proposals and objectives, which include:

- coordinating projects, activities and improvements for the canal and basin to achieve their potential as a leading heritage harbour, and improve the level and range of maritime activities on the canal and basin
- building community and visitor appeal through engagement with working maritime and heritage revival
- docking and restoration of historic vessels, return of traditional maritime skills and crafts, and activities and opportunities for all on and off the water
- becoming an exemplar of the Heritage Harbour scheme and recognised for statutory protections which may be given in the future to places of maritime significance
- restoring maritime activity and heritage to Exeter's programme of events and culture and putting Exeter back on the wider maritime map through networking with boat owners, boat builders and maritime heritage groups.

Two significant waterside development proposals have subsequently progressed that are likely in their current format to have a negative impact both on the operational capacities of the canal and basin, and on the ability to fulfil the aspirations and potential of Exeter Heritage Harbour. They are the Exeter City Living proposal at the Canal Basin for water sports facilities with homes above, and the redevelopment of the canalside at Gabriel's Wharf as part of the Water Lane area development.

Public consultation has been carried out in respect of both proposals.

The Water Lane Development Management Company (WLDMC) submitted an outline planning application to Exeter City Council (23/1007/OUT)<sup>†</sup> in August 2023. The present

<sup>†</sup> <https://publicaccess.exeter.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=summary&keyVal=RZ803JHB00E00>

report was completed before the outline application was announced on 29 August and updated to take account of it. It is not a formal response to the planning application.

This report focuses on and raises concerns about the extent that the implementation of the Gabriel's Wharf and Canal Basin proposals would compromise the potential for sustainable regeneration of waterway use, and the continuance of traditional skills and crafts in the heritage harbour. It recognises that both proposals represent opportunities for other, non-waterway related benefits. The paper does not constitute formal planning advice, but where the two developments under consideration appear to compromise the scope to deliver the opportunities for the heritage harbour and the canal and basin, this is identified and the negative impact is summarised.

It is vital to consider both developments together because if both proceed as currently planned, there is a cumulative potential negative impact which is greater than either proceeding alone.

## **2. Exeter City Living: enhanced water sports facilities and homes at Exeter Canal Basin**

No formal planning submissions have yet been made in respect of this development. All information used in the preparation of this report is based on information on Exeter City Living's website (accessed June 2023). The website indicates a target submission date of Spring 2023 for a full planning application; however, there is currently nothing on the Exeter City Planning Portal.

The proposals include the demolition of nos. 61 Haven Road (currently the cycling charity and social enterprise Ride On) and 62 Haven Road (currently home to the Exe Water Sports Association, Exeter Rowing Club, Exeter Canoe Club, Exeter British Sub-Aqua Club, and Exe-Calibre Dragon Boat Club). Neither building is listed, however the gateway to 62 Haven Road is locally listed.

Nos. 61 and 62 Haven Road appear in the Conservation Area Appraisal (Exeter City Council 2005) to be identified as of neutral significance in their contribution. It is worth noting however that the Conservation Area Appraisal attributes negative value to the last remaining tin-roofed workshop on the Basin (the shed on the East Quay just south of Haven Banks Outdoor Education Centre), a useful building which represents one of the last remaining facilities for housing maritime trade and activity of any kind on that side of the Basin, which would otherwise be devoid of any trace of those maritime skills and industries on which the City's wealth was created.

The availability of buildings around the basin offers the only opportunities for housing traditional maritime activities that would otherwise be almost entirely eradicated from the city. This point is raised in order to illustrate that the Conservation Area Appraisal could benefit from revision in order to take into consideration the Heritage Harbour designation and the changing recognition of the value of the water as a key part of the significance of the area, and the roles of built structures in relation to water-related industry and activity.

Building over an area of hardstanding to the south of the present Water Sports Association premises to create Block C of the proposed Exeter City Living development will permanently take out a large proportion of hardstanding space for boats which at present can be used for storage. There is already very little hardstanding available for boats. The removal of a significant portion will mean further pressure will be placed on the remainder of the adjacent hardstanding thus reducing the ability for boats to be stored and worked on out of the water at the basin. The present somewhat limited ability to offer services to maritime visitors and

the consequent economic viability of the canal and basin, and the overall attractiveness and useability for boat owners, are therefore reduced.

As already pointed out, East Quay on the other side of the basin is critical for the achievement of the aims of regeneration and heritage activity. East Quay offers a city centre space within the basin for traditional boat repair, maintenance and building as well as showcasing visiting vessels. A thriving and successful maritime destination would need to be supported by provision of maritime services. Any permanent loss of hardstanding will inevitably put pressure on the areas that remain.

The online material relating to the Exeter City Living development states that it '*presents a rare opportunity to imagine how the canal basin may have taken shape if development during the 18th Century had continued. Our design uses this idea and we consulted closely with Historic England during the process to develop a contemporary design that is respectful to the surrounding buildings*'. While the design intention 'to imagine how the canal basin may have taken shape if development during the 18th century had continued,' is interesting, the reality is that an 18th century basin<sup>‡</sup>, where one existed, would have had ample waterside facilities to support the maintenance and promotion of maritime traffic as an absolutely fundamental keystone of its activity. Speculative or conjectural concepts of how areas may have developed are difficult to justify in terms of modern conservation principles whereby ideas of significance are based on heritage evidence.



Part of the site for Exeter City Living's proposed waterside redevelopment: Exe Water Sports Association HQ (centre) with boatsheds (right) and boathouse (left)

Although at present the Heritage Harbour designation is not a material planning consideration, the question of how the Heritage Harbour concept could be embedded in the planning process in future is one to be investigated.

Following enquiries by the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal, it appears that the Historic England Case Officer, who reported on the proposed development at the Basin, was not made aware of the Heritage Harbour designation, nor was it practice for such a query to be referred internally to the Case Officer responsible for maritime heritage. While it was not a statutory requirement, it would seem to be a missed opportunity not to consider how the two interact, and to consider the impact of proposals on the Heritage Harbour and the waterway. In this

<sup>‡</sup> Exeter Canal Basin was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and opened in 1823.

way, formal advice from Historic England could be given to the applicant in a coordinated way regarding the significance of the Heritage Harbour, mindful that at present the Heritage Harbour designation does not have formal planning status.

#### *Impact of the proposed Canal Basin development*

The negative impact of the Exeter City Living development on operational aspects of the heritage harbour and canal are tabulated below. The asterisks \* refer to section 3 below, 'Water Lane and Gabriel's Wharf redevelopment'.

Activity	Impact of Proposed Development
Establishing available space for maritime pop-up / short-term uses	In removing a large area of hardstanding alongside the basin, there is greater pressure in the basin to accommodate need and demand. Restricting the potential space for maritime activity also restricts the potential for Exeter Heritage Harbour and the use of the canal. Available space would be further restricted by the need to relocate cranage facilities from Gabriel's Wharf.*
Historic vessel restoration on East Quay	East Quay will be under greater pressure as a result of reduced hardstanding, with an inevitable impact on the Heritage Harbour's room for historic vessels.
Preparation of a small project relating to the historic crane on the East Quay of the basin	The pressure on space will be increased considerably to threaten the preservation of the crane in its original setting.
Newly-established boat builders	The ability to take considered risks in terms of short-term / pop-up and experimental uses will be compromised by the need to service current demand with restricted space. Space would be still further restricted by the need to relocate cranage facilities from Gabriel's Wharf.*
Outline feasibility study for use of the former Gasworks Social Club	While the former Gasworks Social Club, a landmark locally listed building, relates to Phase 3 of the overall Water Lane development and is therefore not an immediate subject of this report, it has significant potential to form an iconic entrance to the canal basin. Its transformation as a hub for maritime management and services should be part of present considerations.

### **3. Water Lane Development Management Company: Water Lane and Gabriel's Wharf redevelopment**

The Water Lane Development Management Company (WLDMC) publicised and consulted on their proposals in the document 'Ideas for a Waterside Community' (June 2022 and March 2023). Their statement (29 August 2023) announcing their submission of an outline planning application identifies Gabriel's Wharf as becoming 'a local centre', with a shop and café as well as space to support community life, including boat storage, storage of shared

equipment, and community events and activities. There is no reference to what this could mean in terms of the operation of the canal and basin and their future.

Gabriel's Wharf represents at present the only location along the canal strong enough for craning and handling larger vessels of up to 50 tons in and out of the water. As such, it is a critical operational area which enables the Harbour Master to carry out his duties in respect of the proper management and maintenance of the canal and the Exe estuary. This includes the ability to remove unauthorised or polluting vessels. When a wooden ex-fishing boat, the *Johnny Eager*, sank near Gabriel's Wharf last year spilling oil into the canal, it was lifted onto the wharf preventing a serious situation from getting worse, and broken up on the wharfside. This containment was possible because of the Gabriel's Wharf facility. The wharf will also be the launch site for historic vessels such as the fishing smack *Britannia*, scheduled to visit Exeter for her final fit-out in 2023/24.

The removal of the maritime-related industrial area around Gabriel's Wharf would permanently remove available space in which to accommodate low-impact maritime industries, putting further pressure on space and requirements in and around the city canal basin. The workshops at Gabriel's Wharf include or have recently included Exeter Maritime Services (moving to new headquarters at Honiton), and the commercial shipbuilder Coastal Workboats. Closure of the Wharf to these and similar activities has the potential to be highly detrimental to the ability to generate the Heritage Harbour and maintain an active waterway with working quays and maritime businesses.

There have been discussions about relocating the craning facility if the canal is to be able to function in line with its statutory obligations and secure its regeneration. It is understood that the developer has indicated they recognise this and will contribute positively towards the creation of an alternative facility with sufficient load-bearing capacity. Provisionally, this has been discussed as being at the basin.

While the acknowledgement that a craning facility is essential to the operation of the canal and basin is welcome, the pressure on the hardstanding around the basin, particularly if compounded by the Exeter City Living proposals, is such that a combination of all three—i.e., the implementation of the WLDMC proposals, the implementation of the Exeter City Living proposals, and the creation of a craning area on hardstanding at the basin—will mean that hardstanding for boats will be almost eliminated. This has serious implications for the future ability to service any kind of meaningful maritime activity at this central location.

In addition, the loading requirement for craning 50 ton vessels would be considerably in excess of the present capacity of the available ground at the basin. Detailed investigation will be needed before viability could be established. A mitigating factor would be provision of a winch slipway. The only location on the canal for this is at Gabriel's Wharf as there is currently no capacity for it at the basin.

During the public consultation, detailed sketches exhibited by WLDMC of Phase 1 of the proposed Water Lane development ('Testing the Concept: Emerging Ideas for Phase 1') made reference to a quayside area at Gabriel's Wharf. It was identified on plan as food and beverage use with co-working space above, but on the accompanying sketch it was noted as 'waterside living.' The area was described as a focal point with 'moored boat activity ... reinstated by the quay.' Boats were shown as moored alongside the quay area. However, the developers have confirmed with both the Harbour Master and the Chair of the Friends of the Ship Canal that there will be no facility for vessels to be craned or launched here OR for a substantial slipway in their proposals. Functionality would be eliminated further by the presence of public realm interventions.

The consequential serious impact of diminishing what little hardstanding is left around the basin, as described earlier, must also be considered.



Gabriel's Wharf, Exeter Ship Canal

Reference is also made in the DMC's announcement to the potential for a new pedestrian and cycle bridge across the canal to link to the Riverside Valley Park and beyond. This is referred to in the March 2023 plans as a swing bridge but no further detail is provided as to the useability for boat traffic and measures to mitigate an additional interference with navigation, or the functional necessity of an extra bridge at this point.

#### *Impact of the proposed closure of Gabriel's Wharf*

The proposed closure of Gabriel's Wharf in the Water Lane development has the potential to be highly detrimental in the following ways to the success of the heritage harbour and regenerating an active waterway with working quays and maritime businesses:

Activity	Impact of Proposed Development
Encourage maritime uses and skills and attract more boats	The removal of the facility for craning larger vessels will inevitably restrict the size and type of vessels that can visit the canal and basin. There is no proposal to accommodate workshops for maritime activity in the area around Gabriel's Wharf any longer. The Friends of Exeter Ship Canal have proposed an urgent feasibility study of the potential for retaining a maritime facility at Gabriel's Wharf as well as recreational boat uses, but this would have to be commissioned before the possibilities of the site are lost.
Historic vessel restoration	Invitations to vessels such as <i>Britannia</i> to undergo restoration in Exeter Heritage Harbour will be more difficult in future.
Newly established boatbuilders	The ability to take considered risks in terms of new, short-term / pop-up and experimental uses will be compromised by the need to service all demands

	within restricted space in the basin area. Gabriel's Wharf was a key space where it could have happened because of its potential for ancillary facilities, e.g., a slipway and workshops.
Improve navigation for visiting vessels	It is currently unclear what the impact of the proposed new bridge would be, and how much it could frustrate navigation and add to the present burden on the Harbour Master's team in terms of the need to operate the bridge or whether the intention is for it to be self-service.
Outline feasibility study for a heavy-duty slipway Gabriel's Wharf	Exploring the case for a winch slipway at Gabriel's Wharf has been suggested. The facility would support maritime activity by making it easier to launch and retrieve larger vessels. The possibility of incorporating such a slipway will be permanently eliminated if the current canalside development goes ahead as proposed. A slipway of adequate size at Gabriel's Wharf would also support the operation and functionality of the entire port, i.e., the Exe estuary, canal and basin.
Outline feasibility study of waterway-related use of the former Gasworks Social Club and surrounding area	This element, although not an immediate subject of this report, is of such importance that it should be included in considerations of the Heritage Harbour and the canal and basin.
Bridge proposals affecting Bridge Road / A379	The proposals by Devon County Council that would increase headroom and improve canal navigation are not directly the subject of this report. But any counter-measure which creates additional challenges to navigation (i.e., the proposed new footbridge) or has negative impact on access to the waterway (i.e., closing Gabriel's Wharf) will exacerbate the overall picture for those wishing to use the canal and basin. This would be in direct conflict with the improvements to navigation the new bridges would bring.
Initial feasibility study of conversion of existing bridges and locks from manual to electrical	There is currently no information regarding the proposed new footbridge so it is uncertain what the specification and useability of the operating mechanism will be.
Waterborne freight and passenger traffic	Retaining functionality at Gabriel's Wharf would create a significant opportunity for the loading and unloading of waterborne freight, particularly if there is reduced space at the Basin. The gradual development of waterborne freight as a low-carbon means of transport to the city centre is noted to be of particular appeal to stakeholders. The removal of Gabriel's Wharf as a facility for supporting this would compromise the ability to meet this green ambition by focusing all direct and ancillary activity onto the basin – itself seriously

	<p>compromised in terms of space if the Exeter City Living development also went ahead. The same would apply to passenger ferry and leisure cruise uses.</p>
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#### **4. The combined impact of the developments**

Should the development at Gabriel's Wharf go ahead as indicated, then there are serious ramifications in the basin area requiring consideration and mitigation.

An area for craning vessels of up to 50 tons in order to ensure the ongoing operational needs of the canal and basin, if moved from Gabriel's Wharf, could only be relocated in the basin area.

It will involve a considerable need for safe working areas and increased loading capability in a suitably-sized area immediately by the water's edge. Detailed investigations of the ground would be essential to establish the current ability of this restricted space to support the craneage operations and the strengthening work involved. Without this information there could be no assessment of the likely specification, costs and therefore viability of moving from the present location at Gabriel's Wharf.

If the present Exeter City Living proposals were also to go ahead, then the amount of available hardstanding at the basin would be very severely reduced, taking into account the craneage requirements and the extent of the new development. While there is a possibility that some space within the former gasworks site could be used, this is by no means certain because a) there are likely to be plans forthcoming for using the site for residential rather than maritime uses, and b) as the site is not in the ownership of Exeter City Council, no reliance can be placed on it as an alternative site for hardstanding to replace that lost to craning requirements and the Exeter City Living development.

It is vital, therefore, to consider the combined effects of the current proposals on the waterway and its working quays and maritime businesses, and on the moorings and facilities of the Heritage Harbour.

#### **5. Conclusions**

The need for sustainable and attractive housing has never been greater and the imperative behind the two proposed developments considered in this paper is recognised. This report however aims to give an alternative context for judgement, by considering the combined effect of the proposals in terms of their potential impact on the heritage harbour legacy and the long-term health and well-being that active regeneration of a waterway such as the Ship Canal and Basin can bring to the lives and engagement of generations of Exeter citizens at large. Its future role will be significantly compromised unless there is the capacity to bring new and exciting life to its operation. Taken together, the proposals under consideration pose the threat of permanently eliminating opportunities for the use and economy of the waterway.

There are elements of each of the proposals that would compromise delivery of immediate benefits as well as pose challenges for wider strategic development of the waterway and Heritage Harbour. Taken together, they mean that the potential operational capacity of the canal and basin—and ultimately therefore the Port of Exeter as a whole—are threatened.

On a practical level, the principal challenges can be characterised as a) the loss of boatyard hardstanding permanently from the basin because of the Exeter City Living proposal directly and through the need to relocate craning operations as a result of the Water Lane development proposal; and b) the proposals to close the facilities of the canal's Gabriel's Wharf. These two impacts have the ability to compromise seriously the future functionality of the canal & basin.

The potential resource of the canal and basin as a low-carbon asset for the city for freight, leisure and passenger transport depends on the ability to attract and service maritime traffic. The cumulative impact of the two developments will mean a substantial restriction on the space and therefore facilities available to do so successfully. The same restrictions will hit the ambitions to bring historic and heritage vessels to Exeter for restoration or lay-up.

The specification and cost required to bring hardstanding on the West side of the basin to the strength to accommodate craneage of vessels up to 50 tons is at the moment unknown. Without this information, it is not clear if it is technically or economically feasible to progress this possibility as a solution.

The two developments if implemented would exacerbate the current lack of facilities for boaters and boating services in the canal and basin generally—workshops, repairs, boatbuilding, storage—and exclude possibilities of amelioration. The challenge of bringing back traditional maritime activity to the canal & basin in line with Exeter's Heritage Harbour designation would become difficult to address.

A key uncertainty is the weight that Heritage Harbour recognition is given in planning terms. It may well be, as the formal planning process commences for the two proposed developments, that there is greater regard for the planning and conservation implications of a Heritage Harbour. If more widely recognised, this would potentially change the tone of the initial advice and take into account the functions of buildings, the historic structure of the Canal and Basin as a whole, and the impact changes on land can have on the ability of the waterway to function.

Based on this, and taking into account the submission of articulate and detailed responses and proposals from the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal, Exeter Civic Society and other groups, productive next steps would include:

- Issue this report to National Historic Ships / Historic England / Maritime Heritage Trust to seek advice on how the Heritage Harbour designation could be a factor in formal planning pre-application consultation advice. It is difficult to assess at this stage what this conversation could lead to. It may well be that given these factors, the experience at Exeter in respect of the two proposed developments would be a 'test case' in terms of how the Heritage Harbour concept moves forward.
- Make responses to development proposals affecting the waterway coherent and unified, fully reflecting their impact on operational and conservation aims, taking the items within this report as a starting point.
- Consider the possibilities of a substantial slipway and low-impact facilities and workshops for maritime operations at Gabriel's Wharf being incorporated in the Water Lane vision. It may be that some provision could be requested through a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Further discussions between the Harbour Master and the DMC would seem essential at this stage. Commissioning a full Viability Study may be required if there is an in-principle agreement to explore this further, given the level of

work it would require to design and cost. It would need to consider operational and environmental implications as well as design and location.

- It is essential that a slipway is considered now because of the cumulative impact both the Exeter City Living proposal and the creation of a craneage area in the basin will have on the amount of hardstanding remaining.
- Establish as soon as possible the feasibility of strengthening hardstanding at the West Quay of the Basin to bear the required weight. The outcome of the investigations should be fed into considerations of both the development proposals.

It is essential that the cumulative impact of the two development proposals is considered. Without this holistic view, the risks of consequences arising which appear in themselves to be manageable for each scheme but between the two effectively compromise the ability of Exeter to function as a maritime destination, are considerable. With the loss of this ability, many of the benefits that the canal and basin and the heritage harbour can offer the city and its people may be permanently compromised.

*Associated documents by the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal: Making the Canal Matter Again to Exeter. (2020); and Exeter Harbour: A New Outlook for Exeter Canal Basin (2021).*