



# *Making the Canal Matter Again to Exeter*

## *Exeter: A Heritage Harbour*

Exeter Ship Canal is back on Exeter's agenda. The Canal and City Basin have been recognised by the National Maritime Trust and National Historic Ships UK as a Heritage Harbour. Exeter is only the fourth historic port in the country to receive this nomination.

It is an incentive to bring the canal and basin back to life; and to make this a priority.

*Making the Canal Matter Again to Exeter* is a programme of far-reaching, practical ideas and objectives to release the canal's potential by improving its attraction to boat owners, local communities, businesses and visitors.

Exeter can once more enjoy its maritime traditions. The canal and basin were built so that vessels could navigate from the coast to the heart of Exeter to benefit the city's economy and culture. There is scope for this to revive significantly if today's markets and trends are recognised and the opportunity is taken.

### **The Friends of Exeter Ship Canal**

We are a voluntary group dedicated to breathing new life into the heritage and use of the canal and basin as an integral part of the city's life and economy, and for the enjoyment of everyone today and in the future. We work closely with the West Country Branch of the Inland Waterways Association. This revival programme for the waterway points the way forward, but is just a start.

### **Heritage Harbour recognition**

Heritage Harbours are an initiative by the National Maritime Trust and National Historic Ships UK, collaborating with the European Maritime Heritage organisation, to recognise historic ports across the UK and Europe.

The Friends of Exeter Ship Canal achieved recognition for Exeter on the basis of our shared aspirations and objectives for the long-term benefits maritime heritage can bring to an area.

The Heritage Harbours vision includes

- protecting waterfront and maritime heritage assets
- supporting local business growth
- increasing tourism
- community inclusivity
- attracting investment and heritage funding
- providing a welcome for historic vessels to find moorings, facilities and support.

## **Joining the basin and the canal**

The City Canal Basin and boatyard are an integral part of the canal. They are its main destination and centre of activity, and most visible focal point.

Exeter must not miss out on the growth of green activities and increasing popularity of boating and waterway use of all types. The management plan for the canal and basin should include promoting Exeter Heritage Harbour as a centre for inland and offshore boating, heritage, and visitor interest. This needs action.

It calls for Exeter Canal and Quay Trust (ECQT) and Exeter City Council to work together, as well as with Exeter Port Authority and waterway stakeholders, on complementary objectives and initiatives.

As buildings around the basin fall vacant they should be assessed either to encourage established maritime business or entrepreneurial start-ups that will benefit the canal, or to connect the waterway with the community through educational, training and leisure activities. ECQT, with its valuable property portfolio of waterside buildings, is inextricably part of the future of the canal as a whole, as its name reflects.

## **A game-changer for canal navigation**

More headroom beneath the bridges across the canal on the A379 Exeter by-pass would let many craft navigate the canal without the road having to be shut. It is now in prospect because upgrading the bridges is included in a road improvement scheme being developed by Devon County Council for submission to the Department of Transport for funding.

The plan is for replacement bridges with increased headroom for pedestrians, cyclists, and boats navigating the canal to pass beneath, while the bridges would still open for the tallest vessels.

This will be a game-changer for the canal, dramatically increasing the potential for more boats by removing a major blockage to navigation. The outlook for the canal's future will change radically because of this development. We should start preparing for it now.

The following vision will become possible

- Quicker and easier canal navigation for many boats, reducing operating costs.
- Making the basin more accessible for projects such as boat restorations.
- Increasing the commercial appeal of the boatyard.
- More visitors by boat to the basin, Quay and city.
- Passenger boat trips by a variety of craft from Exeter to the Exe estuary with pick-up/set-down points en route, and to the coast beyond.
- Encouraging commercial freight traffic back to the canal.
- The waterway from Double Locks to Turf opened up from the basin for ferry connections, bird watching excursions, and for leisure and watersports.

## **New slipways**

Virtually no pleasure craft visit the canal. Although the waterway is fairly short, 8.3 km (5.2 miles), its diversity and attractiveness should draw trail boat and other visiting boat owners. At the instigation of the Canal Friends, the canal was made one of the destinations for the Inland Waterways Association's 'cruise it or lose it' Silver Propeller Challenge to encourage boats onto neglected waterways.

Popularity of inland boating soared pre-covid. This substantial market is likely to return. Trail boat owners typically travel long distances to cruise canals but there are no slipways along

Exeter Canal for these or other boats. One or two new slipways, with convenient car and trailer parking, are essential and urgent: one close to the basin and the other below the A379 bridges. The inadequate slipway at the basin that drops suddenly to deep water should be reconstructed and the gradient smoothed out.

### **A new plan needed for waterway and community**

The current Canal Basin Masterplan, dating back to 2004, needs to be re-visioned to recognise the basin as part of the canal and reflect the opportunities and new approach to waterway enterprises and buildings.

A welcoming, accessible centre located at the basin for canal management and visitor information should replace the present Canal Office. Toilets, showers and waste disposal should be provided and upgraded. A dedicated canal website is essential, and an overhauled fee structure for boat maintenance, conservation, lay-up and craning, would support targeted, competitive marketing. These would enhance what the canal, basin and boatyard have to offer. Space close to the basin should be found for larger vessels than can be accommodated by current weight limits.

The old Gas Works Club, a fine building adjacent to the basin, could be acquired for canal management and a variety of community inclusive activities connected with the waterway. These could include

- telling the story of Exeter's maritime heritage
- community boat building and restoration projects
- courses and demonstrations for people of all age groups and abilities
- meeting rooms and workshops for clubs and organisations
- studio spaces
- markets, stalls and refreshments that encourage produce landed by water
- pop-up projects according to season.



**The Canal meets the Basin at King's Arms**

## Historic boats back in Exeter

The Quay and the Canal Basin are the second most visited attractions in Exeter after the Cathedral. With Heritage Harbour designation there is great scope for Exeter to be a desirable haven for historic and traditional vessels, which will add to visitor attraction. As a Heritage Harbour, we are well placed to attract interest and funding.

Restoration or conservation of a traditional working craft such as a canal barge, or a historic sailing vessel, would light up the quaysides at the basin. A scheme to attract such vessels and to develop the skills to support them is key.

Our Heritage Harbour status connects us to National Historic Ships' Shipshape Network and its register of historic vessels, skilled workers, businesses, training bodies and heritage organisations. Discounted mooring fees for historic vessels, such as are offered elsewhere, could bring these beautifully crafted wooden vessels to Exeter. They are rapidly disappearing and the visual interest, increased visitor numbers and community engagement would repay this investment.



**An important heritage project at the basin is the restoration of the historic hand crane on the east quay.**

Boat restorations also bring opportunities to train for new skilled jobs and fuel local business growth. We need to seek links with established boat building training bodies and educational establishments that would provide essential courses.

Part of the basin's boat lay-up area should be allocated for longer-term projects such as boat conversions. The turning bay at the basin needs to be kept unrestricted by permanent moorings.

*The attractions of Exeter canal and basin for boat historic restorations include: non-tidal static water conditions • vessel length of up to 126ft • convenient quay height • room for additional under-cover workshop space • access for cranes and low-loaders • on site parking • materials, equipment and tool suppliers nearby • convenient to the city's facilities • secure working areas • easy reach of national transport links • mast un-stepping derrick at Turf Lock.*

## **Transport could return to the canal with freight...**

Easier canal navigation will increase the options for a return of freight traffic to the canal by making it possible for local products and other cargoes to be carried all the way along the waterway. Gradual revival of commercial waterborne traffic will be positive for Exeter's image and an attraction for locals and visitors.

There could be, for example:

- Fresh fish for sale landed at the basin.
- Shellfish brought from the Exe estuary.
- Local produce and supplies shipped by water.
- Freight from farther afield transferred from larger vessels to come up the canal.
- Floating shops and stalls.

## **...and combined bus and ferry tickets**

Options for public transport are also possible on the waterway particularly over spring and summer. A combined bus and ferry ticket for the 'G' service to the Quay and a ferry to Double Locks, and return, would be an attraction for locals and visitors. When headroom is raised beneath the A379 bridges ferry services will be able to connect to Turf and back. Hop on-hop off points, at the new Marsh Barton station for rail connections, and at Topsham Lock for the Topsham Ferry, will add to opportunities for a day out. Water taxis could operate seasonally.

## **A water corridor**

Exeter Ship Canal is a water corridor for events and community activities of all sorts that would become part of the city's cultural, social and commercial calendar.

- An annual canal carnival.
- Picnic boats for hire.
- Visiting vessels open to inspection.
- A horse-drawn passenger barge in high season.
- Links with entertainers, musicians, and theatre and dance companies to stage shows on water.
- Specialist boat trips for people with disabilities and other needs.
- Team building events.
- School projects and educational visits.
- Encouragement of 'slower exploration' through water/land trails that combine towpath walks with overland and water transport.
- Seasonal boat moorings.
- Boat rally and cavalcade of local and visiting boats.
- Boat 'boot' sales.

## **Canal holidays**

Exeter Canal is a West Country holiday base in waiting. Narrowboat and 'canal glamping' holiday lets on parts of the canal would match the growing market for 'greener' holidays. The canal and its proximity to the coast and other attractions for all ages need to be promoted in specialist boating as well as general tourist media, with bookings available online.

In addition we need moorings with top-class facilities for boats whether launched on the canal or vessels coming from the estuary, and arrangements for boat convoys with dates and

times should be advertised well in advance. A location should be identified for a camping and touring caravan site.



**The two sides of Exeter Ship Canal: beauty and tranquillity and maritime bustle.**

### **Canal charges**

Income from the waterway comes from the boat owners and enterprises that use it. Charges for using the canal and basin have risen sharply and are partly to blame for a decline in use. Fees should be overhauled so they are competitive with comparable charges elsewhere. All charges, regulations and points of contact should be clearly set out and easily accessible.

The charges should entail an upkeep programme that ensures a navigable, obstruction-free and adequately dredged waterway with well-maintained banks and towpaths. Fees for boat owners should not be expected to cover all the canal's operating costs. Much income is generated by waterside rents, while the canal contributes to the city's overall economy and quality of life.

### **Residential moorings and live-aboards**

Live-aboards create a waterway community and alternative lifestyles. Selected areas along the canal and in the basin should be designated for competitively priced, regulated, permanent moorings with top-class services; but ribbons of residential boats along long sections of the canal should be avoided.

### **Topsham Lock mini-hub**

The Friends of Exeter Ship Canal have been given use of Topsham Lock Cottage for a canal and waterway information point and refreshment stop for walkers, bird watchers and cyclists. Longer-term they wish to see a mini-hub for the canal at Topsham Lock that encourages waterway use and is sensitive to environmental wildness and wildlife. Features would include:

- The existing Topsham Ferry service.
- Grant-funded restoration of the historic lock.
- Heritage and environmental interpretation boards.
- Educational and bird watching visits by boat.
- 'Green' holiday moorings.
- Berthing on the east bank of the canal.



**Topsham Lock and Cottage: location for a canal mini-hub**

### **Policies for bridges and boater operation**

The M5 bridge in the 1970s effectively placed a clearance limit across the canal of 10 metres (33 feet). Except for the M5 and A379 crossings, all bridges across the canal are simple swing bridges.

Manual operation of bridges and locks causes delays for boaters and bridge users. A programme of conversion to electrical operation would enhance the usability of the canal.

- New canal crossings should be either a swing bridge or lift bridge and should provide a minimum clearance at least equal to the increased air draft beneath the rebuilt moveable bridges on the A379.
- New crossings should be electrically operated and designed for boater operation.
- When any existing swing bridges are replaced they should be rebuilt to the above criteria.
- While new fixed bridges across the canal are not recommended, they should be required to have a minimum clearance at least equal to the M5 crossing.
- Double Lock should be refitted for boater/volunteer assisted operation.

### **Volunteers and stakeholders**

There is enormous willingness and commitment among canal users, stakeholders and volunteers to see the waterway thrive in years to come. Their collective experience, expertise and input will make a great difference to the canal's development and operation, which Exeter City Council, ECQT and the Port Authority should welcome and encourage through effective consultations.

The roles of volunteers should be expanded and training provided when necessary, for example to assist in operating locks and bridges.

Written and prepared by the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal, with support from the West Country Branch of the Inland Waterways Association, November 2020.

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