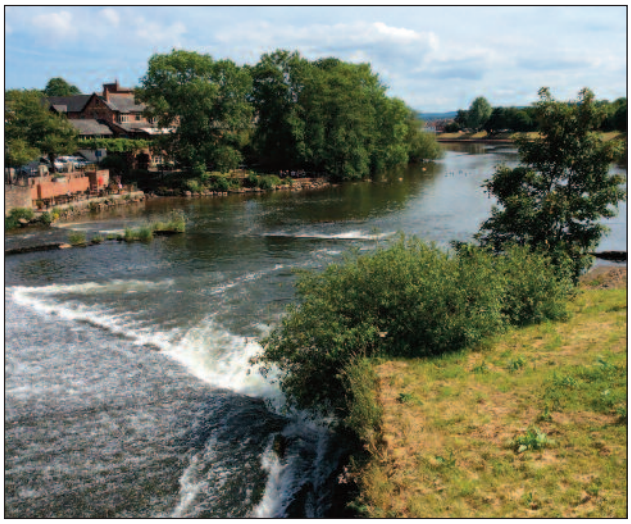
Exeter Civic Society



A future for Exeter's River, Canal and Quayside

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Introduction

Exeter Civic Society was established to promote high standards of planning and architecture; to secure the conservation, protection, development and improvement of features of historic or public interest; and to educate the public in the geography, history, natural history and architecture of Exeter.

We are the only independent body in Exeter with a group dedicated to the future of the river, canal and quay. The River, Canal and Quayside sub-committee was established in January 2014 to conserve and enhance the waterways and their environs and to examine and comment on matters that affect their use and character.

The waterways and their heritage are part of what defines the identity of Exeter as a whole. They are enjoyed, admired and used by a large number of individuals, groups and businesses all year round, but they are also a specialised area with a range of specific and technical problems and concerns.

This report sets out our vision for the future of Exeter's waterways. We wish, through the sub-committee, to be a voice in the process that decides how the waterways and their surroundings are conserved and developed. We want to see a 'joined up' approach that recognizes the special qualities of the river and canal and their surroundings all the way through the city from Cowley Bridge to Turf Lock, bringing environmental, leisure, commercial, landscape and tourist benefits. Decisions must reflect the interests of the entire community who use, visit and live in the area.

The word historic is often applied to the quay and canal. How do we want this area of Exeter's heritage to be appreciated in the future? How are we going to be remembered as custodians of what we inherited? Our report sets out criteria by which to assess future planning applications, and an overview of how the waterways and their adjacent areas should be both protected and developed. We would like to see many boats of different types on the river and canal, reflecting a wide range of educational, sporting, commercial, holiday and tourist activities.

A secure future for the ship canal is the most important matter facing Exeter's waterways – all the more challenging because cuts in local council spending may force the council into decisions about its centuries-old ownership of the canal. We want the canal to be seen positively in terms of commercial, leisure and tourist use that will generate income to help maintain it.

The Quay is one of the most attractive and thriving parts of Exeter. The current visitor leaflet describes it:

> *This year-round destination is one of the most interesting and picturesque areas of the city, popular with locals and visitors alike for its fascinating history, interesting architecture, lively events, exciting activities, great shopping and friendly pubs, cafés and restaurants.*

It is relaxed, and not crassly over-exploited; we want to see this quality preserved. The quayside area should become a cultural as well as trading and sporting location.

The river, canal and quay are great assets, but are vulnerable to exploitation, vulgarization, and decay. We must ensure that their future is worthy of their past.

A future for Exeter's River, Canal and Quayside

1 Purpose of the report

(i) The purpose of the report is to present the Civic Society's vision for the future of the Exeter waterways and the land and buildings along their course in the city from Cowley Bridge to Topsham. It makes use of our findings about the use and state of the waterways and the use of the land and buildings adjacent to them.

(ii) The report is intended to be an influential contribution to debate and decision-making at a time when Exeter City Council is carrying out, in 2015, a *Waterways Review – Towards a Waterways Strategy*.

(iii) One of our aims is to consider how we may unite citizens at large, commentators, commercial interests, councillors, developers, officials, planners, residents and current users around a set of principles and goals for Exeter's waterways, quayside and their environs.

(iv) At the core of the Civic Society's thinking is the recognition that decisions affecting the waterways and their environs, whether or not based on current interests and activities, will endanger the distinctive qualities of the area unless there is a considered set of strategic goals. A vision for a sustainable and beneficial future for the river, canal and adjacent lands should be the basis against which development and conservation proposals can be assessed.

(v) The timescale of the report, in line with other ECS strategy papers, is the short to medium term of the next ten years, coinciding with the end of the city council's Core Strategy in 2026; but our vision also looks beyond that and will be regularly refreshed.

(vi) The report does not consider the city council's responsibilities as the Port of Exeter Authority for the lower estuary and sea beyond Turf Lock.

Our view

The waterways should be conserved and developed under a unified and sustainable plan that recognises the distinctive qualities of the area and brings environmental, leisure, commercial, landscape and economic benefits.

Exeter Civic Society wishes to be recognised by the City Council and other bodies as an independent 'critical champion' in any partnership of stakeholders established to develop and deliver a strategy for Exeter's waterways and their environs.

2 Historical context

The following paragraphs sketch the historical and heritage context of the River Exe in Exeter and the ship canal.

(i) Exeter has prospered from its proximity to the river Exe, and this is probably the reason for its establishment on a hill overlooking the river. It is difficult to imagine how communities may have used the river in past times, but we know that once the Roman city became established the river started to be used for trading, albeit with shallow-bottomed boats. The river was tidal to the outskirts of the new city and there is evidence of trading with Mediterranean ports from Roman times.

(ii) Exeter was the lowest crossing point on the Exe, and over time many bridges have been built. The position of the remains of the medieval bridge is evidence of how wide the river was at this location (it is known that it extended to the junction of Okehampton Road and Cowick Street), and that the course of the river was moved to the west.

(iii) As industrial processes developed in post-medieval times many mills were built along the Exe. This started to change the river as it was dammed by weirs to feed the leats that powered the mills. Several weirs and leats survive today and are looked upon as picturesque features of the river, although most have little purpose. Cricklepit Mill in Commercial Road is the one exception, having been restored by Devon Wildlife Trust with one working waterwheel and two modern but small hydro-electric generators.

(iv) Exeter developed as a centre of the wool trade with much produce being exported from the city. The lands sloping from the city to the east of the riverbank became dominated by this industry, which was reliant upon water for cleaning and dyeing the wool.

(v) St James' Weir was built in the fourteenth century by the Courtenay family to feed their mills at Countess Wear. This and other weirs cut off the city's port, resulting in the development of Topsham as the main port for Exeter. Permission was given to build a canal linking the estuary and the city. Trews Weir was built in the sixteenth century to raise the water level at the head of the canal and to allow larger ships to dock unaffected by tides.

(vi) The historic buildings on the quayside and in the canal basin area are the result of the city's shipping trade. From the late nineteenth century modern industry developed on the west side of the river and canal with the establishment of the gasworks, electricity generating hall, and foundries.

(vii) The development of larger ports elsewhere, and the introduction of the railway and an improved road network, contributed to the demise of the port. This resulted in buildings on the quay being used for small-scale industry such as car repair workshops, with this use continuing until the City Industrial Estate was built to the west of Haven Road in the 1980s to relocate traders.

(viii) Major flooding of the west side of the city in 1960 resulted in the significant flood relief works that now dominate the passage of the river from Exwick to the quayside and beyond. Two new bridges were built to cope with growing levels of traffic, but also to allow for the bridges to be wider so they would not impede the flow of flood waters. These works significantly changed the character of the riverside, resulting in the current paths and cycle ways and amenity activities alongside the Exwick flood relief channel.

Our view

Historical context is part of the heritage of Exeter's waterways. The physical environment we possess today is the result of developments and attitudes over many centuries. In defining how this aspect of Exeter's heritage should be treated, we must consider how we want the waterways to be appreciated in the future, and how we will be remembered as custodians of what we inherited.

We wish to see open, informed debate on the maintenance and future of the waterways, acknowledging the diverse range of groups, individuals and interests involved.

3 The future of the river

(i) Footpaths have been developed alongside the river, some of which were designed to give access to the growing industrial area of Marsh Barton.

(ii) Between Exeter and Topsham, much of the river is accessible to the public from footpaths. Between Countess Wear and Topsham, however, the footpath is passable only at low tide, due to a low-lying stretch near the Retreat Boatyard.

(iii) The stretch of river north of Station Road to Cowley Bridge does not have public access. Proposed flood alleviation works could be a step towards opening up parts of the area for public access.

(iv) The river below Bridge Road as far as the mouth of the estuary was designated a Ramsar site in 1992. (The Ramsar Convention was established in 1971 for the protection of wetlands of international importance.) This recognises the Exe estuary's important marine environment and protects its habitats and species from damage.

(v) The natural flow of the River Exe has been changed, constrained and exploited during Exeter's existence. As the city has ceased to depend commercially on the waterways, the focus on the river as a threat to people and property from flooding has inevitably increased.

(vi) Flood defences have severely altered and channelled the river in order to prevent its overflowing into its natural flood basin. The path and cycle way from Station Road to the Quay run partly alongside an artificial overflow channel leaving the river unnoticed behind bushes for some of its length.

(vii) Flooding at the start of 2014 cut mainline rail links above St David's Station, while elsewhere Exeter's anti-flood measures generally coped well. The high-profile nature of the storms, prospects of changing weather patterns, damage and economic loss across the region and beyond, and repeated graphic references back to Exeter's 1960 flooding, led to the Environment Agency's current Exeter Flood Defence Scheme to control the river for the next century being accepted. A target of protection against a 1 in 100 chance of flooding was adopted.

(viii) The proposed £30 million defence scheme will yet again significantly and intrusively change the appearance of Exeter's riverside and quay, only this time not in the wake of a serious flood but primarily as a preventive measure. Permitted construction of phase 1 began in 2014 in the vicinity of Trews Weir and the flood relief channel through Valley Park. Exeter City Council gave planning permission for Phase 2 in June 2015 and work is due to start in the summer of 2016. Exeter Civic Society and English Heritage expressed reservations about some of the details.

(ix) Network Rail has plans to improve the flow of the Exe and divert floodwater near Cowley Bridge to protect the railway. It is important that this is complementary to the Environment Agency's scheme.

Our view

We support proportionate measures to protect against flooding by the River Exe while believing that flood defences should be in harmony with and support strategies to enhance, conserve and manage the special character of the city's waterways. The Civic Society will adopt this approach as a basis for monitoring and commenting on the implementation of flood defence schemes.

The natural banks of the river where they remain should be undeveloped. The City Council and landowners should take appropriate measures such as tree planting to enhance the natural environment, and maintain footpaths that run the length of the river.

4 Management and Planning Responsibilities

The management of the waterways and their environs through Exeter is split currently between the Environment Agency, Exeter City Council, Devon County Council and the Exeter Canal and Quay Trust (ECQT).

Our view

We would like to see the authorities developing clear complementary strategies for the management and future of the waterways and their environs.

This would incorporate a unified strategy and clear set of principles for the development and management of the built environment around the historic quayside and the canal basin area. It is time to review or replace the current Canal Basin Masterplan as part of any built environment strategy.

We would like to see Exeter Canal and Quay Trust, which has played an important role, strengthened as necessary in its management and promotion of the quayside and canal basin areas in accordance with its aims and objectives.

5 Stakeholders in the waterways and their environs

(i) Current users of the waterways, and owners and users of associated land and buildings are key stakeholders in the future of the river, canal and quay. The waterways and their environs support a number of businesses – the majority local – that depend on the topographical nature of the area (for example, maritime services and water activities) or on its attraction for visitors (shopping and catering).

(ii) Many interests, but not all, are represented on the River and Canal User Group, a city council-run representative body open to traders and businesses, clubs and associations using the River Exe in the vicinity of Exeter Quay and the canal.

(iii) Boat owners, moorers and repairers have specific interests in the management and facilities of the waterways to support their livelihoods and leisure activities.

(iv) In addition to specific user groups such as the water-based sports clubs, a far greater number of people regularly visit and benefit from the waterways and their environs, including many who walk, relax, run or cycle along the banks and quay and associated parkland.

(v) Non-organised canoeing and kayaking in hired boats is another popular leisure occupation in the summer, and the Exeter Canoe Loop trails link the River Exe and the canal between Exeter Quay and the Exe estuary. These activities support a number of businesses.

(vi) The area has also become home to a considerable number of residents over the past few decades. They are entitled to representation as stakeholders because any development in the area affects them on a daily basis.

(vii) Interest groups such as those concerned with history and heritage, and environmental and wildlife protection bodies such as Devon Wildlife Trust, based at Cricklepit Mill, are likewise interested bodies.

Our view

Conservation, development, use and management of the waterways and their environs should reflect the entire community of those who use, visit, and live in the area, equally representing those who use the water and those who use the adjacent land. Ways should be considered to widen the concept of ‘users’ and ‘stakeholders’ to include residents and local people who use the area as individuals, and to strengthen the River and Canal User Group to ensure all interests an equal voice.

We believe that accountability should be built visibly into decision making on the conservation, development, use and management of the river, canal and quay and adjacent lands.

We would like to see the authorities working in partnership with all stakeholder interests to develop clear principles and a strategy for the future management and use of the waterways and the surrounding area including the historic quayside and canal basin.

6 Development of the Quay and Riverside

(i) As well as the Exeter Flood Defence Scheme, other plans either approved or awaiting planning consent will shape the river, canal and quay in the future. They include a new building incorporating boathouse, gym and clubhouse for the Exe Water Sports Association at the canal basin, and a proposal for another pub/restaurant with residential and retail accommodation at Kennaway's Warehouse on Commercial Road, one frontage of which overlooks the river.

(ii) The Custom House at Exeter Quay reopened in May 2015 as a visitor centre. With further interpretive attractions planned, it has the scope to become both an information centre and a major historical attraction in itself. It also fulfils a long-held desire for public access to this important Grade One listed building at the heart of the Quayside. The building has been transferred by the City Council to Exeter Canal and Quay Trust, which also owns the premises of the former interpretation centre, Quay House, also listed Grade One. The future use of this building has not been announced.

(iii) There is very little scope for further new development in the area apart from the former industrial area of Water Lane and the gasworks. However, the letting of Maclaines Warehouse and No. 60 Haven Road by the ECQT will both result in conversion into alternative use.

(iv) We would like to see arts facilities included in as rich a diversity of use as possible.

Our view

Decisions on planning applications should be made in accordance with a developed strategy for the waterways and their environs. In particular, piecemeal planning decisions should not limit opportunities for conservation or for longer-term enhancement and innovation.

Openness of view and the retention of existing sightlines, perspectives and green open spaces should generally be a requirement for all developments in this area.

We encourage the City Council to produce a development plan for the Water Lane area that will recognize the activity and use of the canal basin area, as well as the need for regeneration.

The Civic Society will review and comment on planning applications affecting the future of the river, canal and quay area.

7 Our Vision – a Strategy for Locals, Visitors and Business

Here we set out how we believe the waterways, quayside, and adjacent lands can be invigorated and how their heritage should be conserved and protected.

7.1 Using the river

> Below the city, dammed by Drew's Weir, the Exe forms a fine reach, of a summer's evening crowded with pleasure boats
>
> (*The Rivers of Devon*, 1893)

We would like to see a strategy that will bring more boats of different types on to the river and canal, covering many different types of activity including educational, commercial, sporting and leisure use.

(i) Types of river usage include educational, sporting, commercial, holiday and tourist activities.

(ii) An improvement in facilities for launching and berthing is badly needed to support versatile use of the waterways, with more boats of different types.

(iii) Water-based educational and sporting activities on the river should complement the seasonal nature of leisure use for canoeing, kayaking and holiday boating.

(iv) The strategy should encourage and accommodate appropriate commercial use — particularly maritime commercial use — of the waterways and their environs.

(v) The new permanent wetland and tidal conditions of the flood relief channel below Trews Weir when the flood defence scheme is complete should be managed with regard for all interests; likewise, the proposed wetland north of Station Road being formed as part of the flood relief works.

(vi) The Civic Society has raised issues of concern about the deteriorating condition of St James' Weir and its possible collapse, and the consequences of that.

7.2 The future of the canal and canal basin

A secure future for the Exeter Ship Canal is the most important single issue affecting the future of Exeter's waterways. The canal and basin should be seen as positive commercial, historic and leisure assets and sources of income. Unusually, we have a municipally owned and administered canal, but the costs of maintaining and operating it call into question the possibility that the City Council will transfer the ownership and/or the maintenance and development of the canal elsewhere.

We want to see openness, accountability and public involvement built into future arrangements for the ownership and management of the canal. The establishment of a broad volunteer body of Friends of the Canal, with representation on governing bodies, could help to underpin this, as well as being a driving force for monitoring, maintenance and creative ideas.

(i) Establishing an economic use of the canal is all the more challenging in the context of drastic local government spending cuts, and at a time when it is known to be leaking and in poor condition in places.

(ii) We would like to see more commercial, leisure and tourist use of the canal to generate income to help maintain it.

(iii) The development and maintenance of an historic canal is a matter of expertise as well as vision. Advice should be sought from organizations involved in similar work. If a successor body is appointed for the Exeter Ship Canal it is essential that it is equipped and funded sufficiently to enable it to secure the canal's sustainability.

(iv) There is potential for commercial use of the canal and adjacent quays and land for expansion of boat maintenance and building, currently confined to Gabriel's Wharf, as well as for attracting associated chandlery and brokerage businesses. Development should not be permitted that inhibits the capacity to take boats in and out of the water at key points. As well as achieving economic potential, it is also important to recognise that activities of this sort, including boat storage, are intrinsic to the special quality of this area and should be retained and encouraged. A 'marina' feel, or ill-judged 'tidying up', would be detrimental to this.

(v) The canal banks could be used for carefully managed moorings of properly equipped holiday barges, possibly in association with Double Locks and Turf hotels. Recreational and tourist use of the canal could be encouraged, as at the Grand Western Canal at Tiverton.

(vi) Educational trips from the canal basin along the length of the canal could cover a wide range of curriculum opportunities, attracting schools from across the region. These could be undertaken in association with interpretative displays and activities at the Custom House and the Quay.

(vii) The SecAnim rendering plant, source of much unpleasant odour for residents as well as walkers and boat users, should be relocated from its inappropriate site on the canalside. The land should be developed for more suitable use, such as income-generating leisure or tourist use.

(viii) The operation of the locks at Turf and Double Locks, and the road bridge at Countess Wear, which make boat access to the canal basin difficult, should be examined to find ways of making their operation easier.

7.3 The Quay

The Quay is already one of Exeter's most attractive and thriving hubs, drawing local visitors and tourists by its distinctive qualities. The current visitor leaflet describes it:

> This year-round destination is one of the most interesting and picturesque areas of the city, popular with locals and visitors alike for its fascinating history, interesting architecture, lively events, exciting activities, great shopping and friendly pubs, cafés and restaurants.

One of its qualities is that it is relaxed and not crassly and commercially over-exploited. We want to see this quality preserved while its distinctive heritage, tourist, arts and educational potential is sensitively developed. We would like to see an increase in the programme of themed activities in the Transit Shed and on the quayside generally.

Greatly and imaginatively improved signage and pleasanter access from the city centre to the Quay and riverside should be provided as a matter of urgency.

(i) Where lettings and activities are under public control, there should be positive support for local enterprise over outside chains. The river and canalside buildings lend themselves to a variety of artistic and cultural uses, so the Quayside area should become a cultural as well as a sporting and trading location. There should be positive support for this diverse mix.

(ii) '100 sail of ship may safely ride therein' (quoted in Hazel Harvey's *The Story of Exeter*). The riverside quays have a maritime heritage that could be the basis for a vessel used as a permanently moored, floating museum. A visitor attraction could be developed (commercially or in conjunction with RAMM, for example) to form a joint themed feature with the new Custom House visitor centre.

(iii) Exeter's Roman heritage already adds to its status as a major visitor destination. The history of the Roman quay should be included in Roman history displays in the city centre, linked to interpretations in the Custom House and at the Quayside. There should be more information and interpretation boards on and around the Quayside; a visitor trail should be considered for the area.

(iv) The public conveniences on the east side of the Quay should be retained, and consideration given to ways to make facilities more accessible on the west side.

(v) The grassed open space next to Maclaines Warehouse should be retained as an open space.

(vi) The heritage of the Quay would make it naturally complementary to any eventual development of the Roman Baths at Exeter Cathedral.

7.4 Development and Access

The undeveloped lengths of the river and canal should as far as possible be preserved in their natural state and kept free of development, except where it enhances the use of the waterways, whether for leisure or commercial use.

Statutory authorities should implement a strategy for the use and management of the waterways as the basis for future development and to preserve access.

(i) The implications for the river, canal and quay area of the zoning of the Gasworks / Water Lane area for substantial housing need to be considered in the light of strategies for the development and conservation of the waterways and their environs as a whole.

(ii) Road plans that will have an impact on the area, such as a new road from Water Lane to Salmonpool Bridge, and a link from Water Lane to the industrial estate, should be examined to identify points of conflict of purpose with the waterways strategy.

(iii) The Haven Road car park should be developed and promoted as intended to support visiting boat users and tourists to the area.

7.5 Environment and wildlife

The river is a living part of nature. A rich diversity of wildlife will add to the benefits of the waterways, and this should be made compatible with the requirements of navigation. Nature conservation groups such as the RSPB and Devon Wildlife Trust should be involved in regular reviews of the area's ecology.

(i) Existing and new aquatic plants and wildlife should be encouraged along the river and canal and their banks through maintaining a wide range of habitats, and through monitoring and improving water quality when necessary.

(ii) Fish stock, often an indicator of the health of a river or waterway, should be monitored and conserved.

(iii) The Environment Agency's management of salmon smolt in the river Exe should be arranged to assist the smolt to travel out to sea by the river, while still permitting unrestricted navigation through the King's Arms sluice gates at all times.

7.6 The Exe from Cowley Bridge to Station Road (Exwick Acres)

> How quick is the transformation from the thronged and noisy streets to the isolation and quietude of the river bank. … The way to Cowley Bridge is by way of rich meadows and a wide water
>
> (S. P. B. Mais, *Glorious Devon*, 1929)

To extend the Exe Valley Green Way northwards from Station Road to Cowley Bridge would greatly enhance appreciation of this attractive part of the valley as well as improve road safety. Flood prevention work by the Environment Agency and Network Rail should facilitate this by keeping the tops of the embankments clear for the future establishment of a cycle way.

(i) The benefits of a cycle way here would be better and safer cycle access from the Cowley Bridge residential area and from towns and villages to the north to St David's station and the city.

(ii) The improvement to the Devon County Council long-distance walk, the Exe Valley Way (Stage 2: Exeter to Brampford Speke), will be substantial, cutting out some 1.5 miles of busy urban road, making this section more attractive to local people and visitors.

(iii) Footpath access to the countryside north of Exeter will be improved, bringing enhanced opportunities for walking. Local communities will have safer pedestrian and cycle access to the city. An improved riverside route, together with measures to ease the plight of pedestrians and cyclists crossing Cowley Bridge, are supported by Upton Pyne Parish Council.