



FRIENDS OF EXETER SHIP CANAL

Britain's oldest pound-lock canal
Cruise, Walk, Enjoy

Maclaines Warehouses—The Future

Introduction

Exeter Ship Canal is back on Exeter's agenda. Maclaines Warehouses on the basin were built to bring life to the canal and the city. They can now have that role again as a vital hub for the commercial and community revival of waterway-focused activities on and around the canal.

Units 3 and 4 of Maclaines are the only substantial buildings left at the basin for waterway use. They need to be managed flexibly and responsively within the city council's Canal Management Plan. A commercially and community-oriented management partnership that will encourage start-up and established maritime-focused enterprises as well as bring voluntary groups and societies to the buildings will help to bring about a revival. Now is a unique and possibly the last opportunity to establish the model for doing this.

The need for recovery in the aftermath of Covid-19 makes this a moment of decision. Although much activity has ground to a halt, a fruitful scheme can be explored now for a new maritime-focused future for Maclaines as life picks up again.

The basin, buildings and waterway together make up a valuable and enviable asset that is part of Exeter's future as a green, liveable, and enterprising city. Their potential extends from new styles and qualities of life and tourism to opportunities for employment and skills development from boatyard and water-focused business.

Current planning application

Units 3 and 4 are subject to a planning application by Forward Space Ltd, of Frome, for change of use to offices together with alterations to the listed buildings, which has still to be determined. The application has been strongly opposed by the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal and the West Country Branch of the Inland Waterways Association.

Future users for Units 3 and 4

We believe a better outcome is flexible adaptation of the warehouses for maritime-related and community purposes. The buildings would be managed with a strong emphasis on entrepreneurial and community participation. They would form part of the plans to revive and manage the life of the canal and working boatyard as well as offering flexible spaces for a variety of community, sporting, leisure and educational activities associated with the waterway. A focal point for community activities and meeting places is lacking west of the river for St Thomas, Exwick, Alphinton and Marsh Barton.

Potential uses for the buildings include:

- boat building, restoration and sail making
- vocational skills training
- demonstrations and weekend courses for people of all abilities and backgrounds, for example, canoe and surf-board construction
- adaptable spaces for clubs, voluntary organisations and school visits
- workshops and office space for waterway businesses and start-ups

- boat projects associated with the working boatyard
- craft and art studio spaces
- waterside meeting rooms for hire
- shops and produce markets encouraging produce landed by water
- a café/restaurant
- seasonal pop-ups.

An improved canal office with a visitor engagement and heritage information centre could be incorporated.

The building and its surrounds would be managed as a hub with an ethos of encouragement, adaptability, variety and collaboration in using, promoting and enjoying the waterway in every way.

Why Maclaines

1 The canal basin was built so full economic use could be made of the canal. The basin is still the canal's principal destination for boats, visitors and waterway-related activities. The revival of the canal will continue to rely on what the basin can provide. Proximity to the city centre with its other visitor attractions and commerce makes the canal and basin a source of wider economic advantage to the city.

2 Units 3 and 4 of Maclaines are the last unoccupied buildings on the basin that can still be returned to purposes connected with the water. Others have been let for other uses. To lose them to commercial office space will remove any meaningful value they have for the waterway. It would seriously restrict the scope for forward planning for a viable future for the canal and basin that the city council's Canal Management Plan must provide.

3 Removing Maclaines Warehouses from waterway-related use will hinder the economic potential of the canal and basin in a number of ways. It will reduce the long-awaited advantages of freer canal navigation when the headrooms of the A379 moveable bridges are raised during planned major road improvements. The city would miss out on the full benefits of market growth for greener activities and the anticipated increases in the popularity of boating of all types. Re-generation of boat maintenance, restoration and storage and the introduction of new enterprises and commercial water-borne traffic would be hampered, as would the potential for shore-based facilities and attractions for boaters, communities and visitors. All such activities need bases of some sort at the basin.

Why now

1 The outlook for the planned offices in Units 3 and 4 looks bleak. In these unprecedented times, new commercial office space seems a considerable gamble. Many businesses are being forced to rethink where and how work is undertaken. It is very likely a high degree of home working will continue, contributing to decreasing demand for office space. These factors create an opportunity for a new scheme of entrepreneurial and community partnership and innovation at the basin.

2 The opportunity is for a time-limited programme of research and planning to prepare a road map for returning Units 3 and 4 to purposes focused around the waterway and to test whether they are viable as part of the Canal Management Plan.

3 To implement this it is necessary for the city council and ECQT, as owners and landlords respectively, to agree jointly that a partnership of bodies, including themselves, comes together to assess demand and build up a business plan.

4 Immediate aims for the partnership will be to draw in potential users and assemble evidence for commercial and community requirements that demonstrates a viable and sustainable

business case and income generation; to explore options for design and funding the necessary adaptations to the buildings; and to build a model for the future management of such an asset.

5 Through an initial board, it would pursue an ethos of collaboration and collective input of ideas. It would work through a part-time project manager on strategy and delivery and towards creating a permanent organisation to manage the building.

6 Organisations that might be represented on an initial board include (not exclusively) Exeter City Council, ECQT, Exe Estuary Management Partnership, Exeter College, representative community groups such as the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal, Boat Owners Association, Exe Water Sports Association, the River and Canal and Exeter Port user groups, and the Inland Waterways Association. A maximum of 12 would allow an effective board.

John Monks
Chair
Friends of Exeter Ship Canal
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