

## **Topsham Lock cottage is going to reopen with a cafe**

A new lease of life is being breathed into the Victorian cottage by Exeter City Council and the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal

*By Anita Merritt, Devon Live 16 May 2021*

Iconic landmark Topsham Lock Cottage, located on a small piece of land between the River Exe and Exeter Canal, is starting to have a new lease of life to be breathed into it. It was originally built for lock keepers around 1800, and has since also been a cafe and holiday let. Last year the building was handed back to Exeter City Council, which owns it, and it has remained closed ever since.

Rumours about its future have now been confirmed by the council and also Friends of Exeter Ship Canal, which include making it available for community use and reopening it as a cafe.

The cottage is currently in need of some repair work, such as to the roof, but the council has assured the lock cottage will open its doors again. A spokesperson for Exeter City Council said: "There are plans for a number of property improvements that are being scheduled to ensure the building remains safe and compliant for any occupation. Talks are ongoing with the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal over plans for them to use the cottage as a base for their activities which may include them using part of it for an interpretation education centre covering the history of the canal with adjoining small coffee shop provision."

Revealing what plans the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal have in store for the cottage, volunteer Bob Lucus said: "The Friends of Exeter Ship Canal see Lock Cottage as an exciting opportunity to provide a new facility for the enjoyment and information needs of the community, and the many users of the canal and its associated footpaths and cycle ways."

As the handover of the building has been delayed, a start has been made on the gardens which have been cleared and lost features have been recovered.

"The area will house new seating and information boards. Meanwhile, with assistance from Topsham Museum and other partners, we have been planning the exhibition area within the cottage and for an information area. We plan to open a cafe a little later to provide a range of refreshments in a picturesque setting."

To celebrate the cottage's intriguing history in Exeter, Devon Live spoke to some of its previous inhabitants. Former Exeter city councillor Olwen Foggin lived there as a child following the death of her mum in 1956. Olwen recalled: "I had 10 siblings. The younger ones were shipped out to family members across Topsham and Exminster, and my three-year-old sister Jackie and I stayed with Edna and Jack Densham in the lock keepers cottage. Topsham was very much a working class town. Fishermen would repair boats alongside the causeway at the top beneath the Passage Inn, giving a homely feeling to Topsham. We would come across by ferry each day to shop, and for Edna's work. Bill Woods was the ferryman. He was a slim man with auburn hair who lived in Ferry Road, just up from the causeway to the left."

In the morning, Edna worked in the Passage Inn and knitted Aran Jumpers and cardigans for the wool shop. "Topsham had a very friendly atmosphere. People knew us as the children who lost their mum and were very kind to us girls. It would then be back home for lunch by ferry. Meals were very much around what time the boats were put through the locks. Frank M, the coal boat,

was the boat most waited for, especially if he had just got back from Jersey with tobacco and whiskey." There is a sack of coal at the bottom of the canal with Edna's name on it.

"We were never lonely in the Lock Keepers cottage. People were passing throughout the day, and the teapot was never cold. Eggs were exchanged for vegetables and used for cooking."

Olwen has many fond memories of the people she met while living at the cottage. She recalled: "There was a man and his partner from Budleigh Salterton, I believe he was called Michael, on a houseboat. They moored up to the right of the cottage for several weeks and were a very friendly couple indeed. I will never forget the day they left. I was so keen to help lock keeper Jack open the lock gates through to the river as I had never seen this gate opened before. Most boats used the Exe Estuary. He released the first gate from the canal to allow the water level to rise, put the boat through, and lowered the water level to the river. Looking down into the lock pit I had a panic and have never been so scared in my life. Jack said, 't'iz okay maid, you're going nowhere'. Then he opened the gate to the river. It was a wonderful experience to be part of and I was probably the last child to help open these gates and witness this wonderful event."

Olwen recalls there was never a dull moment from living in such a quirky home. She said: "Water and electricity was piped into the cottage under the river, and one year the taps froze. The only time they got water was when it was high tide, something to do with the pressure, and they would have to fill all the pots and pans up to last the day. Then there was the day an aeroplane was seen coming up the canal and landed on the bank."

Edna and Jack left the lock keepers cottage in 1969, after Jack, an Exminster man who worked for Exeter City Council, had sadly been diagnosed with cancer. They moved to Countess Wear their furniture was taken up the river by boat. They remain the last lockkeepers at the cottage.

In 2018, Edna was awarded The Pride of Devon award for her charity Work by the Express & Echo. Edna remained a great character in the city because she has done four charity abseils, the first at age of 75 and again at the ages of 80, 85 and then 90. Last September she was awarded The BEM by the Lord Lieutenant of Devon. She then passed away on October 3, aged 95.

The last person to have leased the cottage is Vivianne Arendal who ran it as a self-catering holiday let during the winter and tearoom during the summer. She has now moved back to Denmark, where she grew up, and this summer will be preparing breakfasts, including her renowned cinnamon rolls at the Arnfeldt Hotel in Ærøskøbing on the island of Ærø. She opened the Topsham Cottage cafe in August 2010, following a vast internal transformation as it had not been lived in for many years. Vivianne recalled: "I took it over in 2010 on a 10-year lease and applied for planning permission for change of use. I made extensive building work to the kitchen, bathroom, walls and decorating to make it suitable for a summer cafe and for holiday let the rest of the year. I also cleared a lot in the gardens etc."

When it opened Edna came to the cafe. Big hits at the cafe were cinnamon rolls and generally the good selection of tasty cakes, all baked in the cottage kitchen.

"On busy days we probably had 200 customers sitting on pontoons, ledges, the grass as well as on picnic benches and chairs inside. Customers were very happy with the food, probably even more so as they had built up an appetite having had to walk, cycle or paddle to get there. Sometimes customers hung around for longer than planned, having missed return ferry due to low tide, or got a lift to Exeter with me! I have had many, many cafe customers and holiday guests from many

countries. They were very happy guests and many returned again and again. I made it suitable for sleeping up to six people, despite being small, and it seemed to work.”

Vivianne also remembers the challenges its location posed. She said: "It was lots of hard work bringing in things such as supplies, firewood, ingredients and furniture by hand, trolley, wheelbarrow etc. The new bathroom arrived on pontoon/ boat along the canal as road through the marshes was flooded. The flooding of Station Road was a major challenge as it was rarely predicted and when it happened I was unsure whether I should cancel holiday booking etc." One lot of guests had to be brought to Topsham by boat as they road was flooded. They came to retrieve their car from the unflooded, but inaccessible car park, a week or two later. Others stayed at Christmas and went to their Christmas dinner in Exminster along flooded Station Road in a canoe. It was 10 good years at a most beautiful and unique place, loved by my guests and customers, as well as me.”



*Unknown date*



*Vivianne Arendal during renovations, 2010*







*Topsham Lock Cottage in 2010*