



FRIENDS OF EXETER SHIP CANAL

Britain's oldest pound lock canal

3 August 2022

Andrew Howard
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The West Wing
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Dear Andrew,

WATER LANE REDEVELOPMENT

We were very pleased to have the opportunity to meet you and your colleagues to view and discuss your proposals for developing the Water Lane area.

The Friends of Exeter Ship Canal was established in 2016, the year of the canal's 450th anniversary, to campaign for the canal's future as an active waterway integral to the city's life and economy and a continuing asset for the enjoyment and benefit of everyone.

In 2020 the Friends secured the nomination of Exeter canal and basin as a Heritage Harbour, then only the fourth designation in the country. This reflected its status as the country's first pound lock canal and its maritime potential. Enthusiasm for renewing the use of the waterway and its frontages has grown as a result, and plans involving the major stakeholders and users of the waterway are now in progress.

The Water Lane development because of its access routes and proximity to the canal and basin is inextricably part of the waterway's future as the heading of your initial proposals, 'Ideas for a waterside community for Exeter', reflects. The idea of a waterside community owes its credibility to the existence of Exeter Ship Canal. The canal's vitality and facilities are crucial therefore.

We hope you will recognise the need for a development whose objectives and initiatives are complementary to those for an active waterway with working quays and maritime businesses such as boat building, restoration of historic vessels (plans already underway), repairs and boat storage and the gradual resumption of low-impact waterborne commercial freight and passenger traffic.

The core of our ideas and objectives for a viable future for the canal and basin are set out in our publications *Making the Canal Matter Again to Exeter*, and *Exeter Harbour: A New Outlook for Exeter Canal Basin*, which we gave you when we met. They are attached and I will enclose an additional printed copy with this letter through the post. These ideas have gained wide acceptance since publication.

To summarise the key aspects that will affect the Water Lane proposals:

- A priority for the waterway is the active encouragement of more boats of all sizes to visit the canal and use improved boatyard facilities at and on the approaches to the basin, as well as peaceful ‘green’ moorings for holidays afloat.
- Full vehicular access to the basin needs to be maintained for craneage and equipment and trailers for boats of a range of sizes.
- Exeter Quayside and the canal areas are the second most visited areas of the city by locals and tourists. The interest and vibrancy of boats and boating activity on the water and the surrounds will strengthen visitors’ and residents’ interest. To achieve this it is necessary that land and buildings around the canal are made available, and water, electricity and toilet facilities are provided at mooring points.
- The case of Gabriel’s Wharf is central. Under your ‘Emerging Ideas for Phase 1’, Gabriel’s Wharf ceases to have anything but merely vestigial relevance for the canal and becomes an adjunct to the housing scheme only.

Gabriel’s Wharf was until recently a location for high quality new boat building. The potential for attracting boatbuilding, design and repairs here, whether using traditional craft skills or hi-tech, is considerable if facilities are properly developed.

Since space at the canal basin is tight to meet today’s requirements, Gabriel’s Wharf is an essential space to allow Exeter’s maritime businesses and boating activity, with access to the sea, to grow.

Gabriel’s Wharf must have a slipway fit for this purpose, with enough nearby public parking also – including for boat trailers – so users can bring their craft and their families. For recreational craft hired on the spot there must still be a satisfactory way onto the water at this point. We hope that the development and traffic planning of the Water Lane area will not close down these aspirations.

We suggest an immediate feasibility study of the full potential at Gabriel’s Wharf for a maritime facility as well as recreational boat use, before the possibilities of the site are lost altogether.

- Seven or eight storey buildings shown at the waterside for the new community hub are out of scale and proportion for the area and will overshadow the waterway, which will affect the water’s ecology and ultimately navigability. Contrary to their reflecting traditional characteristics of waterside buildings, eight storeyed warehouses were never part of Exeter Ship Canal’s towpaths, nor even part of the basin. Each location has its own spirit that should be respected.

We accept the hard fact that need and demand can drive density but believe it would be good to set the architect a challenge now to develop a better canal-side theme.

- The towpath past the former SecAnim factory: an imaginative re-evaluation is required of this stretch of canalside frontage in terms of attractive waterway and waterway-related uses. It is a stretch of waterside that needs especially sensitive handling to maintain its character, because this length of towpath will also be a strategic route for passengers walking or cycling to and from the new Marsh Barton Station. We hope passenger ferries will also run there, in time.

- We support the desire for low traffic use in the Water Lane development overall. To support ship, boat, and recreational activities on the canal that are so important to people, necessary vehicle access and parking must be maintained at the canal basin and Gabriel’s Wharf for the launch and maintenance of craft.

– Waterside access and facilities should be accommodated for increased recreational activity such as rowing, canoeing, paddle boarding and dragon boats, and competitive events on the river and canal, all attracting participants of all ages from sometimes considerable distances from the waterway itself.

– Today’s outlook for waterborne canal activity is good. People’s access to open water is much more important to fitness and well-being since the pandemic. We are working with the County Council as Highway Authority to ensure that when the bascule and swing bridges on the A379 are replaced the draught under the bridges is substantially increased to allow the majority of smaller craft to pass under without the need to open the bridges and disrupt journeys. This will also result in cyclists and pedestrians passing under the A379, which will be a significant safety gain as they currently have to cross all four lanes of the dual carriageway. It will make the canal more navigable for many purposes, including trip and pleasure craft.

Therefore new crossings over the canal should provide at least this same draught, and any new bridges should be swing or lift bridges and both user and electrically operated.

Proposals that turn their back on the waterway except as an adjunct to a property development will, if they go through, block off opportunities for a water-based renewal for the City of Exeter for generations to come. We are sure this is not the developers’ intention.

A living and changing variety of interest and activity on the canal can only be good for adjacent housing and add to the joys of life for the people there. It requires focus and background knowledge in the planning. We wish to work with the developers to help achieve this successful outcome and would very much value a meeting with you and your colleagues before the proposals are developed in more detail.

The Friends of the Canal also hope that the Development Management Company will understand that the impacts of the Water Lane scheme on citizens and organisations in Exeter are complex and affect many different interests. It will take more time than is being allowed to achieve genuine community involvement and understanding. We urge you, as do other local organisations, to show appreciation of this and extend the timetable of your consultations and their follow-ups.

I look forward very much to hearing from you.

Sincerely

John Monks
President and Acting Chair

Copies to:

Cllr Phil Bialyk, Leader, and Cllr Ruth Williams, Portfolio Holder for Waterways, Exeter City Council.

Karime Hassan, Chief Executive, and David Bartram, Director, Exeter City Council.

Grahame Forshaw, Harbour Master.