

## A CONCISE HISTORY:-

The Exeter Ship Canal was the first canal to be built in Britain since Roman times. It enabled vessels to navigate to the wharves at Exeter Quay which have recently had their Roman remains excavated. Vessels navigating up the River Exe in Medieval times had their passage obstructed by shoals as well as fishing weirs, purposely enlarged by Countess Isabella De Fortibus to prevent goods being carried all the way to Exeter, thus diverting trade to Topsham. In 1566 John Trew constructed a weir that fed river water into the canal which he had been commissioned to construct in 1563 between Exeter Quay and tidal water at Countess Weir.

The canal, then called the "Haven", extended down the western bank of the river for 3,110 yards entering the Exe at Matford Brook. Three pound locks were constructed - the first pound locks on any British waterway, consisting of vertical guillotine sluice gates under which the barges had to pass. The canal had a depth of three feet and a breadth of sixteen feet and was capable of taking craft of 16 tons.

Vessels approaching the canal continued to be impeded by shoals and tidal restrictions and in 1676 the canal was extended by half a mile downstream towards Topsham. The larger entrance for 60 ton craft with a single pair of gates was known as Trenchard's Sluice.

Exeter by this time was the fourth largest city and port in England and use of the canal continued to increase and in 1701 it was enlarged for craft of up to 150 tons. The three old pound locks were removed and Double Locks was built to provide a greater rise in one lock. Due to the siltation and dredging problems on the canal, a pair of floodgates were built soon after at Kings Arms Sluice.

In the 1750's some 500 craft used the canal annually with exports and imports of equal importance and early in the 1800's pressure of use on the canal called for extra dredging and straightening to improve the navigation. In 1824 James Green recommended that the canal be extended a further two miles down the estuary to Turf, a recommendation that was supported by the eminent engineer Thomas Telford.

The extension to Turf enabled all sea going craft able to cross the bar at Exmouth to navigate through the estuary into the canal. In 1827 the new extension was opened and the Basin at Exeter followed in 1830 thus enabling craft to offload in Exeter without entering the river through King's Arms Sluice. Such improvements increased the use of the canal substantially. However, the

merchants at Topsham, where goods were transhipped into canal barges prior to 1827, feared a decline in trade when Turf Lock was opened and an Act of Parliament deemed that a side lock at Topsham be built. The latter was duly completed in 1832, 88 feet long and 25 feet wide. Turf Lock measured 131 feet by 30 feet, allowing sailing vessels of 14 foot draught and 400 tons to enter Turf Basin where they often lay awaiting fair winds to exit the estuary having offloaded into lighters for transhipment to Exeter.

The Canal presently remains very much as it was redesigned in 1827, but the tow paths are no longer used by horses and men for towing craft the five and a half miles between Turf and Exeter. Towpaths on each bank is a unique feature of this canal enabling two horses to tow the larger vessels (as shown on the frontispiece) and the setting of sails was against the byelaws! In 1848 steamers from Topsham to London were the only recognised competition for the railways which reached Exeter from Bristol in 1844. Canal trade was subsequently seriously affected and it was not until 1867 that a railway branch line between the Canal Basin and the main railway network was constructed, possibly all too late.

Coasters continued to use the canal up until the late 1960's and the Water Authority's sewage sludge vessel exported its cargo to the English Channel daily until 1998. New lock gates recently installed at Turf, Kings Arms and Double Locks have given the canal a new lease of life into the 21st century. Current use is mostly for sport and recreational vessels, whilst both people and wildlife enjoy the unique environment.

For further information please contact:-

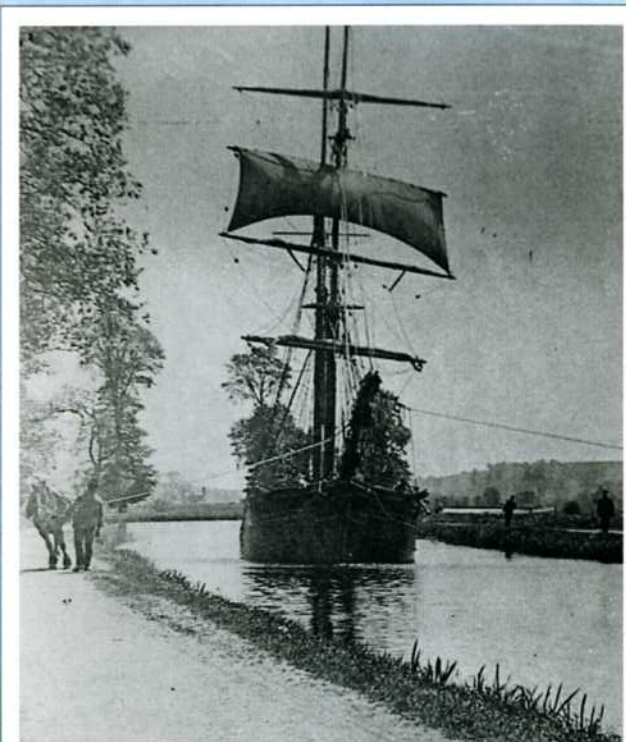
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or  
Exeter City Council  
Civic Centre, Exeter, Devon EX1 1RP  
Tel: (01392) 277888



**Exeter City Council**

**EXETER SHIP  
CANAL**

## *The First Four Hundred Years*



A Brigantine under horse drawn tow  
between Double Locks and Exeter Basin

Cover Photograph by kind permission of Topsham Museum



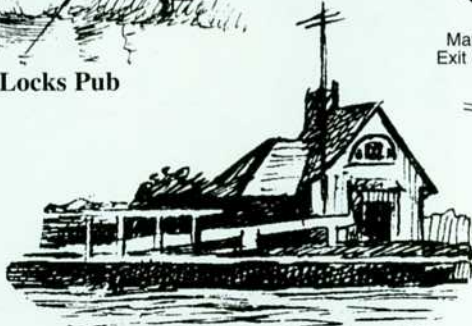
**Exeter City Council**

**Exeter City Centre**

Exe Bridges  
 Quay Interpretation Centre  
**Exeter Quay**  
 King's Arms Lock Gates  
 Canal Basin  
 Canal Office  
 Trew's Weir & Suspension Bridge  
 Belle Isle Park  
 Salmonpool Lane  
 Riverside Valley Park  
 Clapperbrook Lane  
 Exe Valley Way  
 Ducks Marsh  
 Northbrook  
 River Exe  
 Wetlands  
 Double Locks Pub  
 Mattford Brook Exit (1563-1676)  
 Swing Bridges  
 Limekilns  
 M.V. 'Countess Wear' Sludge Vessel berth



**Double Locks Pub**



**Topsham Lock and Cottage**



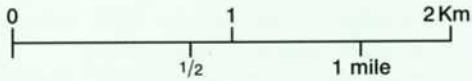
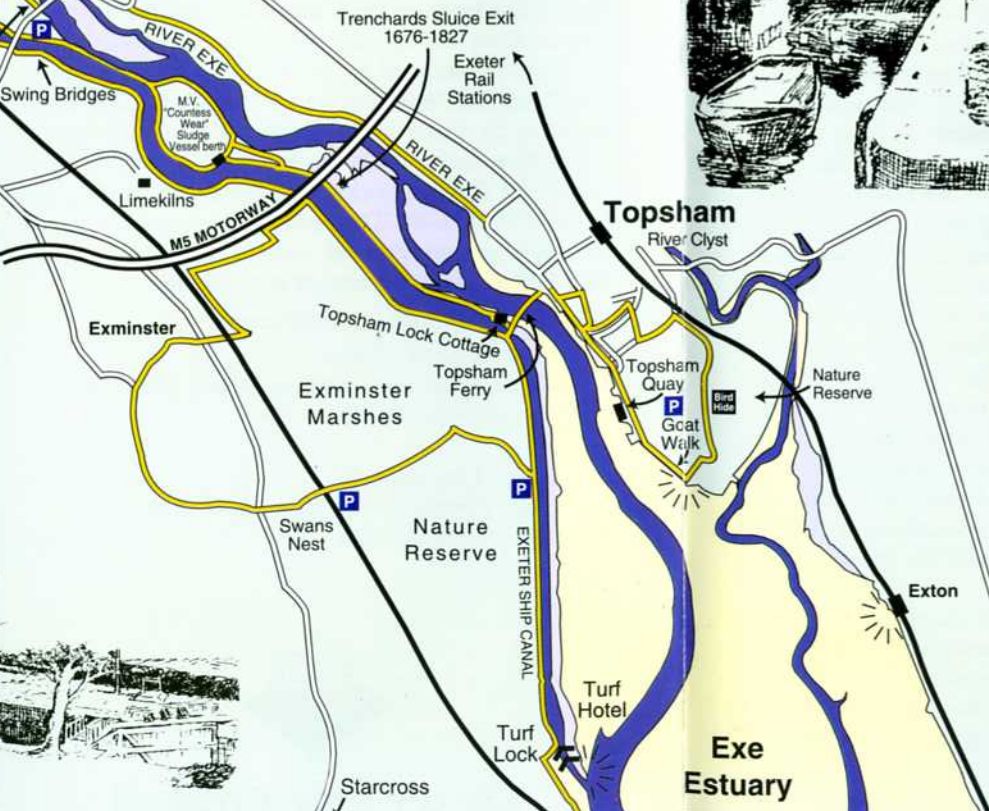
**Turf Lock Hotel & Canal Entrance**



**Exeter Canal Basin and Quay**



**Topsham Quay**



KEY	
Footpath	
Road	
Railway/Station	
Viewpoint	
Mudbanks	

**EXETER SHIP CANAL**



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