

Exeter Ship Canal



THE INLAND WATERWAYS ASSOCIATION
in association with the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal

1. Canal basin

The canal basin, 900 ft long and 18 ft deep, was constructed in 1830 after the Exeter Ship Canal was lengthened and improved by James Green in 1827. Notice the disused railway wagon turntable at one corner of the stone-edged basin, a relic of the City Basin branch of 1867, displaying a rare example of a broad gauge line. The former warehouses, dating from the 1830s, are built in turn of limestone, brick and red sandstone.

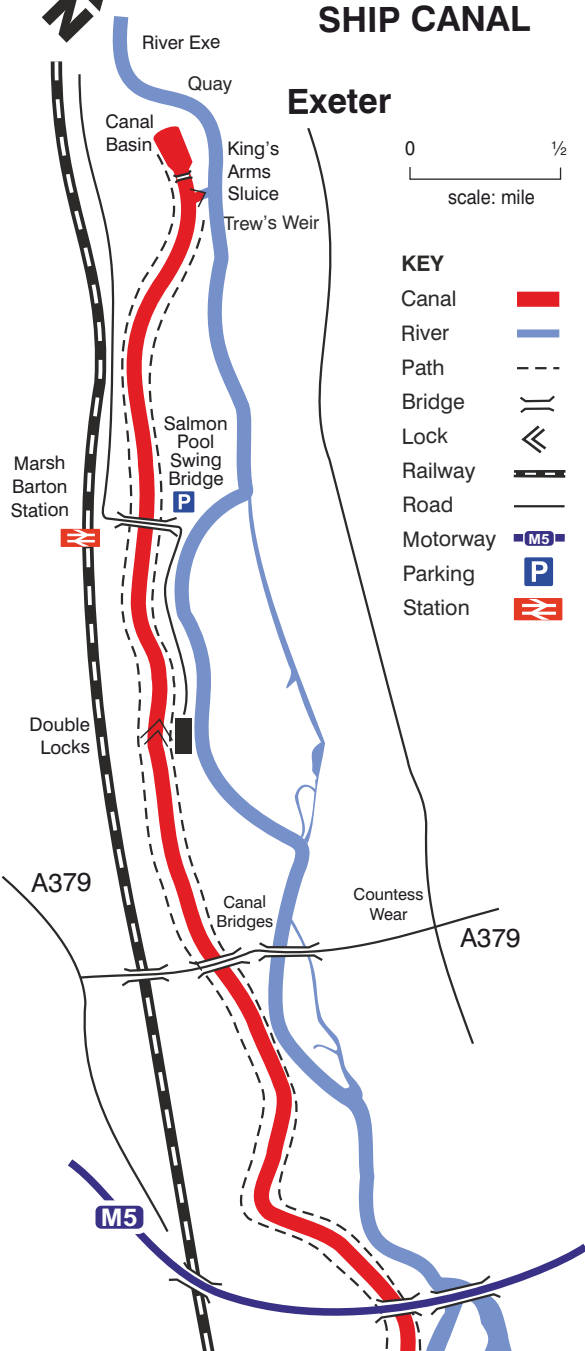
Having left the basin area, you pass Salmonpool swing bridge before reaching Double Locks. The bridge is operated by a hand winch and carries a single track road leading to Double Locks. Exeter's new railway station, Marsh Barton, opened near Salmonpool Bridge in July 2023. It enables car-free access, via the canal's pathways, into the city or out to the estuary.



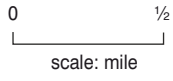
2. Double Locks

This is very large, measuring 312 ft x 26 ft, compared with the 70 ft x 14 ft usual on broad inland canals. The larger the lock, the more water is wasted each time it is used and one of such size was practicable only when there was an exceptionally good supply of water. It was unusual in being turf sided until strengthening works took place. Notice the masonry approach to the metal gates, which have wooden mitre posts and balance beams. The gate paddles which let the water in and out of the lock are here operated by hand windlasses. Rails running from the end of the lock down to the lower water level once carried a wheeled truck for the transport of light craft so that the lock gates did not have to be operated. The four paddles of the bottom gates are operated by windlasses. Outside the inn, which probably dates from 1701, is a mounting block.

EXETER SHIP CANAL



Exeter



KEY	
Canal	
River	
Path	
Bridge	
Lock	
Railway	
Road	
Motorway	
Parking	
Station	



Behind the inn are the old stables. This is a popular inn for hot and cold snacks, it has a large beer garden and hosts a number of events throughout the year.

3. Exeter bypass

Continue along the towpath on the right bank of the canal to the next bridge. The old swing bridge carrying the Exeter bypass over the canal was supplemented by a new lifting bridge to the north, opened in 1971. This is of a pattern found on the Llangollen and the Brecon and Abergavenny canals but rarely elsewhere in the country. This example, being a heavy metal one, is mechanically operated.



As you leave the bypass, look back to see a fine view of the river bridge to your right. This was built in 1772, under the supervision of John White, by a Topsham builder, Thomas Parker.

White advised that the abutments and piers should rest on oak piles. Between this and the canal is a bridge erected as part of a flood prevention scheme to deal with flooding in the lower parts of Exeter. On the opposite bank a narrow road to the sewage works separates the canal from the river, which at this point is very close. The bank here is reinforced with metal piles.

4. Sewage Works

Beyond the works the canal bends to the left and opens up into a wide passage which seems almost like a lake. This is the trans-shipment basin of the 1676 canal. On the right were a canal cottage marked on earlier maps and the Matford limekilns. Here too there was probably a wharf, as the edge is reinforced and a lane once ran back to the main Dawlish road at Matford.

A short way down the next straight stretch was the original entrance to John Trew's canal before it was extended to Turf by James Green in 1825. Here the viaduct of the M5 crosses the canal, giving a clearance of 10 metres.

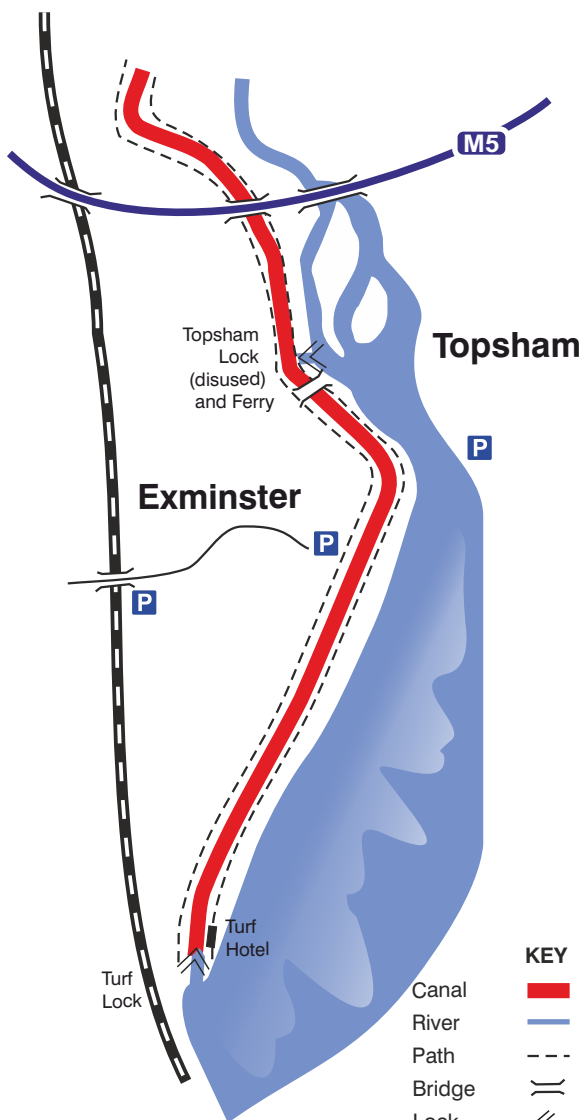
5. Topsham Lock

After a short while, the canal curves to the right and ahead can be seen the disused Topsham Lock, from where the City Council runs a seasonal ferry service for foot passengers and cyclists to the Passage Inn, Topsham. Telephone 07801 203338.



The Lock House is an attractive building of limestone with a steeply-pitched roof, having a later addition in two colours of brick.

EXETER SHIP CANAL



0 1/2
scale: mile

KEY

- Canal
- River
- Path
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- Railway
- Road
- Motorway
- Parking

An unusual semicircular window can be seen in the gable above the door.

A path from the Swan's Nest Inn at Exminster comes across the fields here and a wooden swing bridge crosses the canal. You can see the curved wall where it turns to fit into a recess in the opposite bank to enable boats to pass through the narrow channel. The derelict lock has massive wooden gates. The top gate has two ground paddles on the banks, which allowed water to pass into the lock through culverts. Beside these are two gate paddles. The bottom gate released water through four gate paddles only.

The final section of the canal runs almost in a straight line alongside the River Exe to Turf. Here there is a very wide mooring basin, at the entrance to which is another narrowing of the canal for stop gates to be inserted when it is necessary to cut off a section for repairs.

6. Turf Hotel

Graded II listed, The Turf Hotel is substantially as designed by James Green in 1823, though the attractive central porch with triangular pediment, which was an elegant feature of the south facade, has been replaced by a larger, utilitarian structure. The east wing originally held stables for six horses, with a hay loft above. The best parlour was on the first floor, where there is now a shallow bow window, and there was originally only one inside water closet.



The main part of the hotel is now slate-hung to protect it from the elements in its very exposed position, and it has been extensively modernised.

7. Turf Lock (Entrance Lock)

The large entrance lock has some interesting features. The gates are steel, made by Donald Edward Engineering Ltd., Gloucester, 1990. The top ones have two ground paddles or culverts and two gate paddles and the bottom ones have four gate paddles. Notice the older mushroom shaped paddle mechanism, now used as bollards, near the hotel. The gates have no balance beams but are opened by means of massive winches. A chain from the end of the winch goes down a well to the level of the bottom of the lock and then over a pulley and under the water to the bottom of the gate. The winches on the lower side of the gates are attached to the opposite gates in order to pull them shut.

The handrail on the gates can be removed at the centre to accommodate boats which are slightly longer than the length of the chamber, which is 122 ft long. The sill of the upper gate is 7ft 6in above that of the lower.

The average rise of the lock is about 10ft but as the approach is tidal, this varies. The lock cannot be used at low tide as there is insufficient depth of water in the approach channel. The canal ends at Turf with the massive curved walls of limestone and granite but it is possible to continue the walk along the sea wall to Powderham Church and on to Starcross, where a bus or train can be taken back to Exeter.



Alongside the lock, The Turf is one of very few pubs in the country that cannot be reached by car; instead, approach by foot, bike or boat. A direct ferry operates across the Exe from Topsham, tel. 07778 370582.

www.topshamturferry.com

CYCLING AND WALKING

The whole area from the canal basin to Turf Lock has a complex network of paths, cycle tracks and nature reserves, with many possible circular walks. The canal has paths either side, one for walkers, the other for cyclists, which cross from side to side as each bridge is reached.

The cycle path forms part of National Cycle Network Route 2 which runs along the coast from Kent to Cornwall. From the canal basin the cycle path starts on the west bank on Haven Road by the Quay Climbing Centre.

Going south down Haven Road and continuing along the towpath, with a signposted wiggle off the canal down the terraced houses of Cotfield Street and left down Water Lane, after 0.9 miles the cycle path reaches the swing bridge at Salmonpool. Here it crosses the canal to the east bank on a dedicated cycle path to the left of the road.

Double Locks is reached 1.6 miles from the canal basin, and the A379 Exeter bypass at Bridge Road 2.2 miles from the canal basin. The cycle path does not go under the bypass, so cross over the road at the pedestrian crossing and follow the cycle path, now on the west side of the canal, towards Turf Lock. Finally, 5.2 miles from the canal basin, the canal flows into the estuary at the Turf Lock.

For the return route, follow the signs for National Cycle Network Route 2, which mostly follows the same route, but takes a car free path from Salmonpool back to the canal basin past a picture postcard view of Exeter and the Cathedral.

If walking, follow the same route as cycling but on the opposite bank of the canal.

WATERSIDE WILDLIFE

The canal is rich in wildlife, home to some of our favourite species. Watch out for the flash of blue that is the distinctive sign of a kingfisher, flying low over the water, then settling further away on an overhanging branch. At dusk or dawn you might catch sight of an otter; this once-endangered species is now well established along the Exe valley and other Devon rivers. The Old Sludge Beds nature reserve lies on a bulge of land between the canal and the river, south of Bridge Road. Administered by Devon Wildlife Trust, it is a good site for dragonflies, harvest mice and grass snakes, as well as having a resident population of Cetti's warblers.

Further to the south lies another DWT nature reserve, Exe Reed Beds, enclosed by tidal creeks but viewable from the left (east) bank of the canal. This continues to Topsham Lock and, with the canal itself, forms a continuity with the RSPB's Exminster Marshes reserve on the west side of the canal. This whole area is a birdwatcher's paradise, home - or temporary home - to many resident and migratory species.

HISTORY OF THE CANAL

The Exeter Ship Canal originated in a canal constructed by John Trew for the City of Exeter in the 1560s to enable ships to bypass the weir, attributed to the malevolence of the Countess of Devon, which prevented ships from reaching the City of Exeter. It was only 3ft deep and 16ft wide and went from a single sluice, entered at high tide near the Matford Brook, to Watergate, rising by means of pairs of sluices with gates raised by racks, bearing some resemblance to the later pound locks.

There was no towpath for horses and boats were hauled by teams of men called 'halers', probably often the crews themselves. In its early days it was frequently leased and suffered neglect by the lessees and loss of water through the activities of the fulling mills between the Quay and Trew's Weir.

In 1676 the canal was extended to Topsham and in 1698 William Bayley undertook to deepen it to 14 ft and to replace all the sluices except the entrance one, known as Trenchard's, by a double lock. Bayley abandoned work the following year leaving the canal in a ruinous state. David Durell, an engineer, undertook to complete it, with some extraordinary backing from local voluntary labour. A newspaper of 21 July 1689 reports that 'the citizens helped, including 200 women all in white, with clean straw hats, armed with mattocks and shovels, with drums beating and the city music playing before them; 2 grave matrons with shovels in their hands leading the van... the engineer going along with them.' It is probable that the canal in its new form re-opened in 1701, 10 ft deep and 50 ft wide, with Double Locks as the only passing place. It took at least 3-4 hours to haul a boat up from the lower sluice.

In 1825 an extension of the canal to Turf near Powderham was authorised, the well-known canal engineer, James Green, being engaged to carry this out. In order to avoid valuable agricultural land, the course followed the mud flats of the River Exe, and

this brought expensive trouble with sinking banks and sea water forcing its way in through gravel beds. The bottom and sides had to be lined and the banks raised as a result of higher tides after breaches in Dawlish Warren. By 1837 a new lock had been provided to give access to Topsham near the site of the original lower sluice. A towpath for horses was made on both banks and a new artificial canal basin was constructed west of the King's Arms flood gates which gave access to Exeter Quay.

The canal prospered until the coming of the railway in the 1840s, declining at the end of the nineteenth century and reviving a little in the 1930s. Since the closing of the oil depot in 1972, the only commercial use was by the sludge boat from the sewage works which made trips from near Countess Wear out into the Channel for dumping, but this ceased in 1998. The Exeter Maritime Museum on the quay and canal closed in the previous year, 1997.

Today the canal's main use is to provide a haven for pleasure craft, including rowing boats, canoes, kayaks and paddle boards. It provides moorings, storage and repair facilities for seagoing and inland craft. It is also a unique way for boaters to visit the popular city of Exeter, by cruising up the Exe estuary then along the canal to moor in the basin near the city centre. In 2020 the canal and its basin were designated as a Heritage Harbour by the National Maritime Trust and National Historic Ships UK. This is helping to bring welcome new life to the canal, such as the extended visits of traditional vessels *Britannia* and *Snark* in 2023/24.

FURTHER READING

The Canals of South West England (Charles Hadfield)
The Exeter Canal (Kenneth R. Clew)

REFRESHMENTS

Piazza Terracina at the canal basin – various cafés.

The Quay, across the river from the canal basin -
various pubs and cafés.

Double Locks - popular pub with large garden, 1.6
miles from the canal basin. Tel. 01392 256947
www.doublelocks.com.

Turf: gastro pub with garden, in idyllic setting at the
junction of the canal and estuary. Tel: 01392 575200
www.the-turf.com

BOAT TRIPS

Exeter Cruises offers seasonal round trips on the river and canal, from Exeter Quay to Double Locks.

Tel: 07984 368442 info@exetercruises.com

Stuart Line offers seasonal trips between Exmouth and Exeter, cruising the Exe estuary and canal.

Tel. 01395 222144 www.stuartlinecruises.co.uk

TOURIST INFORMATION

Canal Office, Canal Basin: 01392 265791

Custom House, The Quay: 01392 271611

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This leaflet has been based on extracts from "Exeter Canal & Quay" a booklet produced by IWA members Jean Hall and Joy Yeates in 1989 and revised in 1995. It is one of a series published by the West Country Branch of the Inland Waterways Association to encourage greater use and appreciation of the West Country's canals and rivers.

The Inland Waterways Association is a membership charity that works to protect and restore the country's 7,000 miles of canals and rivers. IWA is a national organisation with a network of volunteers and branches who deploy their expertise and knowledge to work constructively with navigation authorities, government and other organisations. The Association also provides practical and technical support to restoration projects through its expert Waterway Recovery Group. To find out more visit the IWA website: www.waterways.org.uk or e-mail iwa@waterways.org.uk.

Although great care has been taken in preparing this leaflet, no responsibility can be accepted for any errors or their consequences.



**INLAND
WATERWAYS**
ASSOCIATION



The Friends of Exeter Ship Canal is a voluntary organisation open to everyone who uses, values and loves the historic waterway.

Information about the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal is available at

www.friendsofexetershipcanal.co.uk.