

Sustainable Seas – Bringing together Marine Conservation and Maritime Heritage. Exeter June 20th 2026 – Background Information

For centuries, two waterways have sustained the city of Exeter. The river Exe was probably the main reason for the original establishment of the city, providing a plentiful supply of water and the fish that swam in it. Crossing the river here was also just about feasible, even before the construction of the first bridge around the year 1200.

Then in the sixteenth century what can probably be claimed to be the country's first canal was constructed. The engineer responsible was instructed, *"To build the haven of the city,"* so that vessels could travel *"from the seas unto the city walls."*

The quay around 1835
"One hundred sail of ship may safely lie therein."



This transformed the city into a major port; by 1700 probably the country's fourth most important.

Exeter's links to the sea were crucial in the development of the city's prosperity. But times changed and the waterways ceased to be a commercial highway and have now become an attractive leisure destination within the city. Everyone enjoys being by the water or even on it. Exeter Rowing Club dates back to 1864 and many other clubs and organisations have followed their lead in providing a means to 'get-afloat' in the midst of the city.



In 2021 the area was designated a 'Heritage Harbour' under a national scheme; a recognition of the surviving historic buildings and the determination of local people to recognise their historic role. Following this, traditional vessels have returned to the canal basin for the first time since the closure of Exeter Maritime Museum, almost thirty years ago. Popular activities, events and exhibitions also recall and celebrate the area's heritage.

But everywhere our seas and waterways are under threat. In the Exe, the once plentiful salmon are now so scarce that the traditional seine net fishing from small boats has had to come to an end. Effluent and rubbish enter the waterways, netting and other single use plastics litter rivers and the sea-shore. Abandoned boats made of glass reinforced plastic deteriorate in creeks and harbours, shedding micro-plastics that enter the food chain.



Abandoned boat 'Hurley Burley,' recently displayed at the National Maritime Museum of Cornwall to highlight the polluting effect of such vessels.

In Devon and throughout the country there is an awareness of these problems and many organisations and individuals are keen to try to help save our seas and waterways from the pollution that threatens them and, by extension, ourselves.

On Saturday June 20th, organisations will come together at East Quay alongside Exeter canal basin to hold a day of events that show how individuals can become involved and demonstrate solutions that will promote what we are terming: '*Sustainable Seas.*' And not just the seas, but also the rivers and smaller waterways that flow into them and we are particularly keen for those groups that share our concern to join with us.

But this will not be a sombre occasion; we will have music, song, film and activity. And, just along from the event, will be Exeter Harbour's monthly Farmer's Market; another organisation promoting sustainability.

*Friends of the River Exe
campaigning at Exeter Quay
September 2024*



Also taking part will be representatives of traditional maritime crafts; skilled workers in willow, rope, flax, metal and principally wood. These are of course a sustainable alternative to the plastics and other man-made materials that pollute the waterways.

The traditional vessels that are based in Exeter, some dating from the nineteenth century, will be on display with those who care for them pleased to explain how they can contribute to a pollution free future.

Do Come and Join Us!



Restored sailing barge, "Lynher," dates from 1896 and is now part of an innovative 'sail-trade' initiative.

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