

Maritime activity report

This quarter of the season up to December has been relatively quiet in terms of the weather; we have had some strong winds and rough water in the river at times but thankfully not nearly as bad as this time last year. Even so, there have still been some instances of note, at the beginning of the month we were notified of a yacht that was drifting up the river in a still wind. Thankfully we were able to get to it in time before it beached on the shore or mudflats. We towed the boat back down to the Bight and put it on an EPA visitor mooring but after enquiries were made with the mooring associations it appears that the yacht is not registered with any of the associations and despite our best efforts, the owner cannot be identified. This means we have another potentially abandoned yacht that we will have to ultimately dispose of. This is just one of 14 abandoned vessels that we must deal with in river and canal this year.

At the last meeting I told you that we had recruited Lee Price as a new Harbour Patroller after the retirement of Alan Harwood. Unfortunately for us Lee has had a significant change in his personal circumstances which means he has to leave in December. This is a blow because he fitted into the organisation very well and is a strong member of the team. We will not be able to recruit a replacement however, it has been decided that a review of the Operations department will take place first.

The formal consultation is now closed, and the responses are currently being processed by the Marine Management Organisation. We are not in a position to discuss the consultation not its outcome until this process is complete.

When the MMO have sifted through the public responses, Ashfords will contact us to see where we can move forwards.

The season of goodwill is fast approaching, we will have staff afloat on Christmas Day to cover the charity swim from Exmouth beach at 10.00hrs, we will also have staff on the water on Boxing Day to cover the organised powerboat racing as well as on New Years Day.

The Topsham Ferryman will also be operating in the week between Christmas and New Year.

At the last visioning day that the Harbour Board had at the start of the year, ideas were discussed about creating extra income. We tasked Graham Manchester with doing a small advertising campaign to increase the number of customers storing their boats at the Turf or Basin. For a modest outlay of £2k we have increased our income by a further £6k.

Colin Acton – Canal Manager

The only things I can think to mention for December's meeting are:

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We have completed winter boat cranings onto the quayside.

The Canal team have installed two escape ladders to the pontoons at Regents Wharf and Double Locks. We have contractors planned to carry out works at Turf, the outer walls are due to be pointed.

Ground works for additional pontoon arms on the West side of Turf, this has been done by a contractor and when we have time we will be able to connect further pontoons along that side.

Turf Lock walls – repairs to masonry joints and underwater inspection using divers. Engineering are investigation quotes for bank repairs along the Canal towpath (west) from Salmonpool Bridge to Double Locks.

When time allows the Canal team plan to carry out some tree cutting / maintenance on the top Canal section.

From Nick Stone at the Buoy Store – lead officer

A few words for the report

Through the Autumn we have been making the most of having sufficient staff in the Estuary. We have had the new member of staff with us, as well as the Topsham Ferryman whilst the ferry has not been operating. Having these staff makes a real difference and feels like an adequate number. The new member of staff has expertise in the field of vessel management, so he has been setting up some systems for us to make dealing with the various vessel requirements easier. He has also been making preparation for the transition to the new workboat coding. We are aiming to make the best use of his specialist skills before he departs in December.

We have been able to complete the winterisation of moorings in good time and are now into the navigation mark servicing which will carry on in earnest, weather permitting, through the winter months.

Our risk assessment review has continued with the focus on 'hot works'. Work has also started on the navigational risk assessments so there is a base to work from when the 'HazID' process takes place.

From Graham Manchester - lead officer on volunteers and Aids to Navigation

Volunteers

We have a team of ten volunteers who gave their time assisting staff with weekend patrols on the Estuary and seafront in 2025.

- 2024. Coolest summer in 10 years – We ran 39 patrols. Totalling 118 volunteer hours.
- 2025. Warmest summer on record – We ran 43 patrols. Totalling 197 volunteer hours.

In October we ran a volunteer training evening for our team of volunteers. Eight of our volunteers attended. We also had two of the local neighbourhood police officers attending (who had joined us on four patrols during the summer period) and a wildlife Warden. All are keen to be involved again in 2026

Sharing Resources with East Devon Wildlife Wardens

We have now entered a partnership where the wardens will charter our RIB 'Exe Harbour Launch' for up to 40 days per year. This is a good example of sharing resources and strengthening local partnerships. This partnership will also generate income for replacement of craft in future years.

Winter Storage at Turf and the Canal

During the summer we had a push on attracting new customers with yachts/powerboats to the canal for winter storage (five months storage). For this we:

- Carried out a questionnaire of existing customers to gain feedback.
- Produced a promotional leaflet
- Reworded the winter storage offering on the web site
- Put a small number of adverts on Facebook
- Produced banners for the canal and our work boat.

We are pleased to say that we have 12 new customers storing their yachts at the canal and at the quay over this winter period.

Aids to Navigation

We continue working through the servicing of aids to navigation and gradual replacement of older buoys. All aids to navigation are in working order as of the 15th November 2025. **From Carolyn Nation – lead Officer on moorings servicing work and incident statistics**

12 incidents logged in the last quarter

5 x private mooring failure

4 x grounding

1 x capsize

2 x collisions

75 moorings have been winterised

John Kent - Topsham Ferryman

During 2025 the ferry wasn't working for two weeks during weekdays during May due to anticipation of low customer numbers, this closure worked well.

The difference in annual number is in line with Easter 2024 being at the end of March and during 2025 on the 20 April.

The Topsham Ferry season for 2025 had a very successful start to the season then evened out during the seasonal peak period, I am pleased to confirm that the numbers of families with young children increased during the season, they have enjoyed our fantastic river estuary and canal side views.

The numbers of public using electrical assisted bicycles has increased considerably this year, these bikes have enabled people who would not be able to use a

conventional bicycle to complete the loops around the estuary and into the city along the fantastic cycle tracks.

There is currently no specific ferry on the Exe estuary that disabled users and their mobility buggies can safely use to access the canal side from Exmouth or Topsham, The Topsham ferry causeway ramp up to the canal and the ferry itself would need adapting, these adaptations would also greatly help the many families with push chairs who struggle to get up causeway ramp on to the canal bank.

This year has also seen another steady flow of tourists from Europe cycling from Harwich and channel ports down through the south of England to Lands' End then either returning to Europe via Plymouth or other south coast ports, the Topsham ferry appears in their cycle travel guides.

There is continuing clearance of rubbish from the river and canal, litter picking is carried out twice a week around the ferry causeway areas and appx 50 metres in each direction along the paths on both sides of the canal.

It is an absolute privilege to be the Topsham Ferryman and provide a safe, friendly, easy economical route across the river for locals and visitors, many of my customers are repeating trips across the river that they have been carrying out for many years.

Wildlife enthusiasts continue to enjoy using the service, as soon as a wild bird that is not often seen appears on the river or water meadows there is a regular procession of ornithologists on the ferry.

Many customers report they have enjoyed the walk to the Turf Lock inn along the canal and then back to the ferry, Customers sat outside the Passage House Inn at Topsham continue to be a source of customers for the ferry.

Visiting craft users of all types are increasingly happy to chat and take on information regarding water safety on the river and estuary, next year I hope to include tide tables and further water safety notices on the ferry notice board, the numbers of kayaks and paddle board users on the river and canal at Topsham has increased this year, Information for those both new and old to these sports will hopefully lessen the risk of safety incidents.

This year has seen a marked decrease in the numbers of adults and children swimming in the canal by the Topsham swing bridge, hopefully this carries on during next year.

The ferry was open during half term in October this year, unfortunately during the weekdays the number of passengers were low due to poor weather conditions however it was busier at the weekend when tides and weather conditions were good.

It is planned to operate the ferry during the Christmas break starting on Boxing Day for six days and ending on New Years day, an increase in advertising is being carried out to promote this period of ferry operations.

Looking forward to the 2026 ferry season Easter Sunday is on the 5 April, which hopefully will kick start the season with plenty of customers, In addition an advertising schedule targeting specific areas of the UK where it is known that visitors

who have been on the ferry during 2025 come from, a more general adverting schedule is also being planned to attract tourist customers who are staying in Devon on holiday.

Volunteer Patrols and the Local Neighbourhood Police

We have a team of ten volunteers who give up their time (mainly at weekends in the summer) to allow us to do regular weekend patrols on the estuary and approaches by acting as crew on the patrol boat. We started the season with some 'on the job' volunteer training as well as an RYA Level 2 Powerboat training course for three new volunteers who did not hold the qualification. This included a new volunteer who is a recently retired member of staff from the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office.

Please note, Exeter Port Authority is an RYA Powerboating School, specifically for training volunteers and new staff members.

The volunteers are a great resource, resulting in an increased presence on the water at the busiest times of the year. In total between May and the end of August 2025, 43 patrols took place equating to 197 volunteer hours. We have also developed closer ties with the local neighbourhood police. Police officers have joined us on three patrols and are keen to join us on additional patrols moving forward

Statistics for 2025

Compiled by Carolyn Nation lead officer for stats

2025 – 127 incidents this season, including 1 breakdown, 1 dismasted yacht, 3 antisocial behaviour, 5 collisions, 1 sinking, 1 swimmer stuck on Stuart Line pier, 3 skiing in channel, 3 occasions children jumping into marina entrance, 1 kite surfer caught around a mooring buoy, 79 speeding vessels skippers spoken to about their speed. As ever, this is only a fraction of the true number of incidents that happen afloat, the table below only indicates either what we have seen or what is reported to us.

Incident type	Number
Sinkings	3
Groundings	4
Collisions	7
Speeding vessels	85
Machinery failure	1
Engine breakdown	2
Injury afloat	2
Vessels adrift	2
Swimmers in the main channel	
Navigation errors	3
Capsized vessels	1
Man overboard	

Vessels parted from moorings	5
other	12

Grahame Forshaw

Harbour Master

24th November 2025