

Maritime activity report

It has been a slow start to the season so far in terms of water users, the poor weather in the spring has kept many boat users away but the recent good periods of sunshine and better conditions, has seen more activity afloat.

We had a visit from Steve Race MP, he came out on the water with us and had a look around the river from our patrol boat. We told him about the need for the Harbour Revision Order, and he took on board our request for his support.

We have started again the Topsham Ferry service for the summer season; we did have it running for the Easter Break as well as the Christmas period. Much of the time spent since the last report, the Waterways teams have been carrying out essential spring maintenance at the canal, and at the river the team have been working hard servicing our customers moorings, carrying out training and working on the aids to navigation.

The new waterway engineer Mr Jasper Chun has started working with us, since he joined he has been getting to learn all about our interesting canal system, as well as learning the ropes down at the buoy store at Exmouth to get a full understanding of what we are responsible for and how it all fits together in the bigger team.

Canal Manager

In April, the Canal was closed to users for 2 days after reports of blue-green algae in the river and nearby flood relief channel.

Testing in the Canal at that time did not show any signs of blue-green algae however contractors were brought in to clear the algal bloom around the smolt net at the Kings Arms gates.

The smolt net is late being lifted out this spring due to low river levels causing salmon smolts to remain in the upper River Exe.

The Spring boat craning and convoy operations completed for winter storage boats.

New 50-week storage contracts for compliant boats are due to be sent out in June.

Customers who have exceeded the existing contract period or haven't signed a contract are being asked to leave the Canal for a minimum of 2 weeks.

Canal bank repairs which took several weeks have been completed on the west towpath between Salmonpool Bridge and Double Locks.

Outstanding Canal asset maintenance tasks are being carried out including swing bridges, pontoon washing etc.

The existing marine outlets have had replacement parts fitted to meet EICR compliance. Repairs are becoming costly and issues take up much of staff time.

There is still some outstanding work to be completed, and the Waterways Engineer is compiling data for a capital bid to replace old pedestals and meters.

There are outstanding works to be done at Turf Lock to repair the side sluice using diving contractors on the inner gates and investigations into leaking lock walls.

The Canal team will also be looking at replacing the decking on some of the Canal loop landing stages and pontoons.

Senior Harbour Patrol Officer at the canal

Canal work

The last four months has been busy, now we are into mid-May most of the winter boats have left the canal basin, some are still in the canal at Turf lock.

Tree clearing and overhanging branch works were completed January/February mostly between Double Lock and Limekilns sites in the S.S.S.I areas.

Bank repairs have been carried out from Clapperbrook bridge to Double Lock, also 20 metres have been repaired from the Topsham bridge to Turf areas.

The pressure washer cleaning of the Pontoons and walkways has now begun; because of other over-running works we are behind with this task.

The next important task is the inspection and repair of the safety chains along the walls of the canal.

Kings Arms gates have been opened since 20/03/26 and have only had to be closed twice for 24 hours, the salmon smolt net has been in place since 01/04/26

Lead Officer for Volunteers and Aids to Navigation

Volunteers

We delivered two half-day training sessions for eight volunteers during April and May, covering general boat handling, man overboard exercises, and shore landings. Weekend patrols began on the 18th April, with additional midweek evening patrols planned as the season progresses. We have a strong and dedicated volunteer team in place for the season.

The East Devon Wildlife Rangers continue to contribute towards chartering the Patrol RIB for their weekday patrols, and the arrangement is working well.

Aids to Navigation

Work continues servicing aids to navigation and the gradual replacement of older buoys. Permission has been received from Trinity House to install a light on buoy number 14 which has now been done and a local notice to mariners has been promulgated. The National Grid Gas marks that mark the main gas pipes that cross the river to the west of England have also been serviced, and invoicing for this work is currently in progress.

Wrecks

We continue to monitor abandoned vessels and boats at risk of becoming hazards to navigation. Over the past month, two craft have left the river following intervention by the harbour team.

Officer responsible for river stats, moorings, and vessel servicing

To date we have had 20 incidents on the estuary, between Dawlish and Topsham. These include:

6 x mooring failures, mainly due to poor maintenance by mooring holders or being dragged by trees in the river flow

4 x groundings of boats

1 x navigation buoy breakaway (Safe Water Mark)

3 x vessels sinkings

1 x vessel found adrift

1 x collision between two boats

1 x damaged property

1 x member of the public stuck in the mud at Topsham Quay, recovered by the RNLI, Waterways team in attendance.

It has been quiet on the water so far with only 4 speeders spoken to, including a boat load of young men towing a ringo, and later a surf board through the navigation channel at high speed.

The vast majority of the mooring servicing has been completed, with 120 moorings serviced in total this winter. In addition to this, we have dug in 4 new moorings in the 02 area.

The moorings vessel Port Constructor will be coming on to the beach area behind the buoy store for an annual overhaul over two weeks in June.

Topsham Ferry Skipper

The Topsham ferry was operational for 14 days over the Easter holiday and carried 646 passengers and 190 bicycles.

Weather conditions were generally cold and windy, with some rain.

Since the Easter holidays, the ferry has operated for three weekends only. Unfortunately, weather conditions, the closure of the Turf Lock Inn, and a mechanical steering breakdown on one of the working weekends discouraged many customers from travelling on the ferry. An exception was the weekend of 25 and 26 April, when

the sun came out, the tides were great, and passenger numbers were good, with 246 people and 91 bicycles carried, earning revenue of £696.50.

Looking ahead, from Saturday 23 May 2026, the ferry will return to operating five days a week until the end of September 2026.

A series of "Float to Live" posters from the RNLI campaign have been obtained and are being displayed on the ferry noticeboards on either side of the river. As the ferry represents Exeter Port Authority in Topsham, we actively promote water safety for all users.

An enhanced Facebook advert for the ferry has been produced and will be presented during June in order to promote the Topsham ferry and encourage both holidaymakers and local people to use the service.

This type of promotion was carried out before the ferry operated last Christmas and received 680 likes and 21 shares.

We are looking at adapting the ferry, with help from a specialist, to make loading bicycles easier. As I have explained previously, electric bikes are much heavier than traditional bicycles, so, to help with loading and unloading on each side of the river, we are looking at designing a conversion to the bow section to assist with this.

Waterways Engineer

I've recently joined Exeter Port Authority (EPA) as the Engineer, covering infrastructure assets across the Exeter Ship Canal, Estuary and Harbour. It is a great honour to dedicate my skills and efforts to such an important part of the community and I intend to drive positive change. I grew up in and around Exeter, attending secondary school in Ottery St Mary before undertaking a degree apprenticeship in Civil Engineering at Exeter University. As such, I have always had a keen interest in, and personal attachment to, the waterways around Exeter, and I still spend much of my time exploring the water and cycle paths with my family.

During my first two months as part of Exeter Port Authority, I have focused on building an understanding of operations across the canal and estuary. To implement engineering solutions effectively, it is first necessary to understand how the system works and where the key issues lie. It has been eye-opening to learn about the complexity of the canal and estuary, and the dedication required from the EPA team, particularly in relation to water management across the canal. I have now also worked through much of the historic information relating to the canal and estuary, organising and storing it so that it can be used effectively over the long term.

Although still settling into the role, I have already progressed a number of important engineering matters.

One of my main roles and focuses over the next 12 months is the Canal and Harbour Asset Management Plan (AMP), which will provide the framework for maintaining and improving assets in the years ahead.

To deliver this effectively and enable prioritisation of spending, the Canal and Harbour must be broken down into their individual components, with the condition of

each component (or asset) assessed. To date, I have developed and implemented a procedure for undertaking engineering inspections consistently, ensuring that information is collected and stored appropriately. This has enabled several condition inspections across the canal, including identifying defects, assessing overall condition, and providing engineering recommendations. As part of the AMP, I will be developing plans for undertaking works and identifying funding sources, so that the plan clearly sets out what needs to be done and how it can be delivered.

My engineering role extends beyond the AMP, and I will also support engineering works across the asset base where ongoing or urgent attention is required. Since starting in my position, my focus has included the following matters:

- Canal bank repairs
- Lock wall leaks
- Trews Weir repairs
- Upgrade of pedestals across the canal and Topsham Quay
- Improvements to the winch system and replacement of the landing stage for Butts Ferry
- Replacement of lock paddle mechanisms

I look forward to attending the Harbour Board meeting and discussing these matters further with members.