

Good evening, everyone. I can hear you thinking — Another pitch for maintenance and protection of waterway heritage? Historic ships, traditional skills, defence against inappropriate development?

Actually I'm setting off on a different voyage this evening, a voyage with centuries of maritime tradition behind it, to find treasure. And our chart indicates: set a course for the Port of Exeter. We wouldn't dream of asking, though, would we, 'What is a port'?

'A town or city with a harbour, or access to navigable water,' is one standard dictionary's definition. And a harbour? 'A place where vessels may moor, in shelter either naturally formed or artificially created.'

From Exmouth's shoreline to Exeter's historic canal is how the Port Authority's website defines the Port of Exeter. It's been going for centuries but hasn't always been the same kind of place. Famously 'a hundred sail of ship might once safely ride' there. They came up the estuary and the canal in the 17th and 18th centuries and made fortunes for some.

In the Port Authority's words again, the water now plays host to an active boating and water sports community. And lately we've appreciated a new revival: in the shape of interest in maritime heritage and restoration of historic boats.

Meanwhile, also in these very days, Dawlish Warren, the natural breakwater at the entrance to the estuary, is being washed away. Last month at Exe Estuary Management Partnership's Winter Forum the topic was Flood and Coastal Risk Resilience. One speaker was Stephen Edwards, senior ranger at the Warren and a practical advocate if ever there was one for calling out the human causes of climate change and mitigating their damage.

It is in our power to hold back the destructive forces but not to save Dawlish Warren from being overrun by water. This, Stephen acknowledged, would happen. When? Who knows exactly? But as Stephen mildly put it, 'A Plan B is needed for managing the extra water going up the Estuary', that is, flooding straight into the Port of Exeter.

And this is the nub of it. Dawlish Warren, the breakwater between sea and port, will be lost. As the estuary becomes a tidal inlet and no barrier protects it, the present moorings can no longer be as safe. Eventually, perhaps the only secure winter moorings the Port will be able to offer will be behind the safety curtain of Turf Lock, within the Exeter Ship Canal. The Canal will become one of Exeter's most valuable assets in the future, a potential goldmine.

The warning about the Warren followed an update from the Port Authority by the Harbour Master. Grahame Forshaw showed alarming images of boats damaged by this winter's storms. This is another factor. Because storms are becoming more frequent and severe, customers of the Port who pay for their moorings will require those facilities to be made ever more secure. The Port will need its own plan B for achieving this; or, either the Estuary will lose its customer base or customers will lose their boats.

How do we keep up with what came out at that meeting: what do we do with the information? Even the banks of the canal may eventually need to be raised. Flood and coastal risk resilience is one answer. Another stares us in the face: we should grasp the opportunities that will arise as well as the dangers.

While coastal ports are going to become more dangerous, we have a safe waterway and harbour right here in the Exeter Ship Canal and Basin. It's a ship canal in depth and width with access to the coast — Exeter's port-in-the-storm, in fact. With the basin, it provides the safe and productive harbour that pleasure and working craft will seek in the future. I'm asking you to consider it in this completely fresh light.

It's the treasure I talked of at the beginning if only we would take full advantage: for these are not opportunities just for the Port and Canal. The range of benefits they open will comprehensively boost the stability of Exeter's resilience over the coming decades but once again, only if the city would realise the significance of the amazing asset it possesses.

So forgive me, but what is a harbour board for? Top of its terms of reference from the City Council is maintaining 'strategic oversight and direction of all aspects of the Harbour operation'. Accordingly, plan ahead.

Think in terms of the Port and Canal as a multi-faceted project to deliver new enterprises and skills, inward investment from businesses, and regeneration that's compatible away from the waterside as well as on the water; think how encouragement of boatyard businesses can be combined with the popularity and wider reach of the heritage industry; and how cutting edge technologies and research into water use and clean propulsion can combine with both habitat enhancement and the tourist, shopping and fun industries; and not least of all, think of the Canal providing waterborne passenger transport and commercial carrying again, which will present yet further benefits for locals, traders and visitors.

Do you see the opportunity? Strategic oversight of the Canal is a climate change mitigation measure which can vitalise local and regional economies and people's lives. The Canal and Estuary — including Topsham's public quay — are indivisibly the Port of Exeter.

It is an idea people do not always grasp that the working Canal with its integral harbour is logically part of the framework for the next 25 years and beyond, around which our wider urban, community and commercial prosperity can be built. You can see elements of it now — some interesting projects are using the basin today ... And yet sadly it's happening against a background that goes persistently against the grain of future opportunity.

Boat building has ended because the Water Lane plan will absorb Gabriel's Wharf. It happened even while a new generation of pollution-free vessels, of a size that could well be built here, was being trialled on the Estuary. One of the natural locations for a safe new boatyard and marina—indispensable and indescribably valuable in terms of sufficient secure moorings and the attendant businesses they attract—is at Grace Road Fields which are being earmarked for a heat network centre of industrial scale. There could even be a gin bar actually floating in the Basin, where waterside buildings have lost their water-related uses already.

What is a port that surrenders indispensable elements such as these in the circumstances we have? I think we have reached a turning point.

It is obvious that matters like this need to be realised beyond this Harbour Board as well as within it. I'm not seeking to reopen old issues but much of this is current. I uphold a council's right to make its decisions, and Exeter City Council does, when all's said, own the Canal. But this does not seem like strategic oversight and direction. It does not seem to be integrating our responses to immediate concerns with the chances for the future. It is not the forging of the range of necessary partnerships with communities, other authorities and private enterprises.

Take heart. The world's busiest inland waterway is Kiel Ship Canal in Germany. It's huge. 66 miles long and around 100 boats in transit each day. Yet its locks, like ours, are over 100 years old and can't accommodate larger modern vessels but it still carries barges and cargo boats. Along the way are marinas, pedestrian walkways, toilet blocks (think of that as you pass the closed Welcome Cafe!), a dockyard, viewing platforms and the thriving port and

cultural city of Kiel with its maritime museum of model ships and nautical instruments, and so on. You can't map Exeter onto the Kiel Canal, but you can get a picture.

So, we should start with the idea of working waterway prosperity, commercial, cultural and social. Bring the pieces together until they fall into places that reinforce the city's project as a whole. The ultimate climate change mitigation measure is emerging in the future with a future. There's no getting away from the fact that enhancing the work of the canal and being cognisant of its purposes will bring positive ramifications in many spheres of life and not only along the waterfront.

I don't expect you to accept this without more thought than I've presented just now. A high level, strategic, outline feasibility study would either underpin or demolish the idea that the Canal might be a goldmine for Exeter's future. The Friends can be the channel for receiving outside funding for such a study, and through our contacts with expertise in the Inland Waterways Association we can reach out to consultants who know what they are talking about. But I think the lead starts here at the Harbour Board.

The city can diversify, become more interesting, be on more maps. But it needs its Canal and Port with their heritage harbour status to be viewed as integral to strategic planning, rather than put piecemeal to uses as unconnected as historic vessels and nicely situated waterside homes and bars. Worthy though these are in themselves, you cannot have the trimmings unless the infrastructure is in full working order and working fully.

We support the Harbour Master and his team and understand the backlog they must deal with; and I hope I have not disappointed the risk the chair took in letting me speak. I don't believe we overreach ourselves—not too far anyway—by suggesting to Harbour Board, Port Authority, and City Council in all its various committees and manifestations, a coping, more rewarding and integrated approach. Modest investment in a feasibility study of the Canal's value to the city especially in the context of climate change mitigation is — I was going to say — worth a punt; but it's possibly worth a whole flotilla. Thank you.

John Monks
Chair, Friends of Exeter Ship Canal