

Exeter Woollen Trail



Exeter City Council



The coming of the canal

In the 13th century the Courtenays, Earls of Devon, owned Topsham and other landing places along the River Exe. Earlier, small boats may have made it up river to Exeter, although ships would have stayed in the estuary. Legend has it that Isabella, Countess of Devon built a weir across the river below Exeter, stopping the boats and forcing the city merchants to use Topsham and to pay her dues.

Although the city obtained an Act of Parliament in the early 16th century empowering them to re-open the river, it proved easier to build a canal. The first canal was built in 1564-66 by John Trew and was then progressively deepened and extended in the 1670s, 1690s and 1820s to take seagoing ships. The Exeter canal is the earliest working ship canal to survive in England.

We need a bigger quay!

By the early 1800s the woollen cloth trade had all but finished. Many other goods were still being shipped to and from Exeter Quay. Although vessels up to 200 tons could get up the canal there was limited space to dock at the quayside. In 1830 more space was provided by the construction of this new 5.5m deep canal

basin and Exeter continued to thrive as a port for another 15 years.

All change

The arrival of Brunel's new railway to Exeter in 1844 made transporting goods a lot more efficient and, with the completion of the rail link to the sea at Exmouth in 1861, trade on the canal began to decline.



Aerial view of the Canal and Canal Basin (Graham Ward)



Lithograph Opening the New Basin at Exeter 1830 by J. Roberts (SC 747 Westcountry Studies Library)



Exeter Below the Canal by Arthur Henry Enock (Exeter City Museums)



Having explored Exeter's woollen industry why not spend some time and see what else you can experience and enjoy today?

Exeter's Quayside and the Riverside Valley Park has something for everyone. Explore its variety of shops

and places to eat and drink. For the more active why not cycle alongside the canal, canoe along it or take a boat trip?

The Riverside Valley Park offers great walking and is excellent for bird watching.

To find out more visit the Quay House Visitor Centre on the other side of the river by the Custom House or call 01392 271611.

Alternatively visit Exeter Tourist Information Centre on Paris Street or call 01392 265700.

For hundreds of years, English wool has kept people in far off lands warm.

