



FRIENDS OF EXETER SHIP CANAL

Britain's oldest pound-lock canal
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16 April 2020

Maclaines Warehouses — The Future

Present circumstances arising from the Covid-19 pandemic coupled with the planning application being considered for Units 3 and 4 of Maclaines Warehouses to become offices, make this a moment of decision. Although much activity has ground to a halt because of the pandemic, a fruitful scheme can be in put place now for a new maritime-focused future for Maclaines when life picks up again.

Summary

The Exeter Ship Canal is back on Exeter's agenda. Maclaines Warehouses were intended to bring life to the canal and the city. They can have that role again as a vital part of a commercial and community revival of waterway-focused activities around the canal and basin. As the only substantial buildings left on the Basin available for waterway use, they need to be managed flexibly and responsively within a Canal Management Plan. A community-oriented management partnership encouraging start-up and established maritime-related enterprises and non-commercial organisations and societies to the buildings can help bring about the desired revival. Now is a unique and possibly final opportunity to establish the model for doing this.

The basin, buildings and waterway together make up a valuable and enviable asset that is part of Exeter's future as a green, liveable, and enterprising city. Its potential extends from new styles and qualities of living and holidaymaking to opportunities for employment, skills and commerce from boat and water-focused business, traffic and projects.

Current planning application

The planning application by Forward Space, of Frome – 19/1714/FUL (LB and CA) – for change of use of Units 3 and 4 of the warehouses to offices together with various associated alterations to the listed building, has yet to be determined. The application has been strongly opposed by the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal and the West Country Branch of the Inland Waterways Association.

The future for Maclaines Warehouses

We believe a better outcome for Maclaines Warehouses is flexible use of the buildings for waterway and maritime-related purposes, managed with a strong emphasis on community and entrepreneurial participation. It would form part of the plans to revive and manage the activity of the Canal and Basin, as well as offering flexible spaces for a variety of community, sporting, leisure and educational activities associated with the waterway. The range could include boat building and restoration; vocational skills training; weekend short courses and demonstrations for people of all abilities and backgrounds, for example, canoe and surf-board construction; flexible space and workshops for clubs and organisations; workshops and office space to rent for waterway businesses and start-ups; craft and art studio spaces; shops and produce markets encouraging produce landed by water; refreshments; and short-term and seasonal pop-up projects.

A welcoming canal office where moorings and storage would be managed, together with a visitor/information centre and educational and school visits could be incorporated. The building and its surrounds would be managed with an ethos of encouragement, adaptability, variety and collaboration with other organisations using, promoting and enjoying the waterway.

Why Maclaines

1 The Canal Basin was built so full economic use could be made of the Canal. The Basin has retained this heritage and is still the Canal's principal destination for boats, visitors and waterway-related activities. The revival of the Canal will continue to rely on what the Basin can provide. Their proximity to the city centre with its other visitor attractions and commerce makes the Canal and Basin a source of wider economic advantage to the city.

2 Units 3 and 4 of Maclaines Warehouses are the last unoccupied buildings on the Basin that can still be returned to purposes connected with the water, others having been let for other uses. To turn them into commercial office space will remove any meaningful value they have for the waterway. It would severely restrict the scope for forward planning for a viable future for the Canal and Basin that Exeter City Council's Canal Management Plan must provide.

3 Taking Maclaines Warehouses out of waterway-related use will hinder the economic potential of the Canal and Basin in a number of ways. It will reduce the long-awaited advantages of freer canal navigation when the headrooms of the A379 bridges are raised during planned major road improvements. The city would miss out on the full benefits of market growth for greener activities and the anticipated increases in the popularity of boating of all types. Re-generation of boat maintenance, restoration and storage and the inauguration of new commercial water-borne traffic would be hampered, as would the potential for shore-based facilities and attractions for boaters, communities and visitors. All such activities need bases of some sort at the Basin.

Why now

1 The outlook for the present plans for Maclaines Warehouses appears bleak. Given these unprecedented times and their possible aftermath, new commercial office space seems a seriously high gamble. With many businesses forced to rethink where and how business is conducted, it is very likely a high degree of remote working will continue, adding to a post-pandemic decrease in office space demand. These factors have created an opportunity for a new scheme of entrepreneurial and community partnership and innovation at the Basin.

2 The opportunity is for a time-limited programme of planning and activities to establish the case for returning Maclaines to purposes focused around the waterway and to test whether they are viable as part of the Canal Management Plan.

3 To implement this it is necessary for the City Council and Exeter Canal and Quay Trust, as owners and landlords respectively, to agree jointly to grant for a fixed period of time the management of Maclaines Warehouses Units 3 and 4 to a partnership of bodies, including themselves, coming together to seek to establish waterway and maritime related uses for the building.

4 Immediate aims for the partnership will be covering immediate costs, research, contact with potential users of the building, and assembling evidence for commercial and community requirements that demonstrates a viable and sustainable business case for waterway use; to explore options for funding the necessary adaptations; and to build additional partnerships.

5 Through a joint management board, it would follow a model of collaboration and collective input of ideas. It would work initially through a part-time project manager on strategy and delivery and towards creating a permanent organisation to manage the building.

6 Organisations that might join the initial board include Exeter City Council, ECQT, Exe Estuary Management Partnership, Exeter College, representative community groups such as the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal, Boat Owners Association, Exe Water Sports Association, and the River and Canal and Port Users Groups, and national waterway bodies such as the Inland Waterways Association. A maximum of 12 would allow an effective board.

John Monks
Chair
Friends of Exeter Ship Canal