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QUAY STAGES

The city’s new flood defences aren’t stopping
a tide of fresh businesses from setting up
shop beside the water ▶

Words by MATT RICHARDS

The shining waters of Exeter
Canal Basin. Photo by Emma Solley

When Mark Eastman's mother was growing up in Exeter, she was strictly forbidden to go down to the city's Quayside. The area, away from the city centre, was just far too dangerous, she was told.

But that was then, and this is now. Take a stroll down the hill to the historic waterfront and, day or night, you'll be greeted by a whole host of places to eat, drink, shop and try out the varied activities on offer – many of which may simply not have been there last time you visited.

Mark is director of South Devon Inns, which owns bar-restaurant On The Waterfront. His is one of the well-established businesses along the Quayside that have recently been joined by an influx of newcomers: Exeter Cookery School, Doctor Ink's Curiosities, Puerto Lounge, Exeter Bierkeller, Rock Chiropractic... the list goes on.

This exciting regeneration is breathing new life into a historically significant part of the city. Waterways like Exeter's have long played an important role in the UK's economy and culture. Over the years, the Quay helped to encourage the city's development as a regional capital, providing a means of exporting products from its flourishing wool industry.

"It's so crucial for the history of the city," says



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Exeter City Councillor Rachel Sutton, portfolio holder for Economy and Culture. "It's why Exeter is where it is."

The rows of atmospheric old warehouses that line the river and boatyard are evidence of this once bustling meeting place, but since the industry's decline, the quayside has struggled to recapture its former glory.

"Exeter has been slow to embrace the potential of its historic Quayside area," says Claire Bliss, from long-standing quayside gift shop Quay Presents. She suggests the city has focused too much of its attention on the High Street and the development of the Princesshay shopping area.

The Quay's geographical position has played a part, too. "It doesn't help that it's at the bottom of a hill," says Cllr. Sutton. Although there is a bus service, she acknowledges that it doesn't run in the evening, and says Stagecoach should consider extending it.

Alan Williamson, chair of Exeter Canal and Quay Trust, believes that since the Maritime Museum shut a couple of decades ago, the Quay has lacked one major attraction to draw visitors down the hill. As a result, he says, it's been slow getting going to the point where the area can really "take off".

Even 10 years ago, the Quay had a somewhat unsavoury reputation. Natalie Vizard, from Exeter Cookery School, which celebrated its first birthday at the end of July, believes the >

This page: Cricklepit Bridge by Tony Cobley
Opposite, clockwise from top: Much is afoot on the Piazza Terracina side of the Quay; obviously, the swans own the place; the Customs House, built 1680 – photo by Philip Vile; try (or watch) all manner of watersports



dominance of late night establishments meant that, even as the area developed, it retained a reputation for anti-social behaviour.

But perhaps this outsider status has been a hidden blessing. Back in 2005, Exeter High Street topped a poll of the most generic city centres in the UK. Meanwhile, the Quayside was becoming known for its range of unique independent businesses.

“Small local businesses and artisans have been beavering away to raise our profile and remind people that the area is a hidden gem,” says Claire.

In the last six years, she has noticed a shift in the numbers, and types, of visitors. Alongside the hard work of the local businesses, she suggests there are broader reasons for the growth, such as an upturn in visitors coming into Exeter.

“I think that our city has become a city-break destination,” she says. She also credits the success of the Exeter Chiefs as having an impact. “The home games bring a huge upturn in visitors who seem to spend a weekend in the area.”

Mark Eastman also acknowledges the benefit

New places to eat and drink
al fresco have sprung up all
over The Quay

of the city’s growing economy, and Chris Billing, who works with him as director of On the Waterfront, highlights the expansion of Exeter University as another factor. “Exeter has a massive international draw,” he says.

But the Quay also attracts locals. Emma Lewry, who lives in Exeter, points to the Quay’s unique location, and the potential influence of the surrounding area. “St Thomas is getting a bit more trendy,” she says, “so quite a lot of people are wanting something this side of town.”

Many of the businesses also point to a recent upturn in council support as having a positive impact on the area. “With the new tourism and sports manager in place we are seeing a huge improvement in the communication and activity of the city council,” says Mark.

“We’re always conscious it’s a great asset to the city,” says Cllr Sutton, of the Quayside. “We want to encourage people to get off the beaten track.”

With all this going on, Natalie Vizard suggests the area’s regeneration has been “a long time coming” and its potential is now being realised.

“There has been a real momentum,” she says, “with new businesses on both sides of the Quay finding a home side-by-side with the fabulous businesses already in existence.”

Visitors to the Quay are now faced with some difficult decisions. Where should they grab that coffee or beer? What kind of food do they want to eat? Do they hire a canoe, attempt a cooking class, or try out the climbing wall? And if they’re looking for a more permanent spot, the new Kennaway Apartments offer luxury living, waterside views and the bustle of the Quay right on their doorstep.

“I think it’s needed it for a long time,” says local resident Emma, of the recent changes. “We’ve always come down here... but it’s more vibrant now.”

These positive changes have had a further boost this summer, with the opening of The Boat Shed. This pop-up theatre, arts space, cultural hub and bar crowdfunded over £30,000 to fund the first stage of refurbishments of the Maclaine’s Warehouses along the edge of the boatyard.

Coming from the team who run the Bike Shed Theatre on Fore Street, another area of Exeter known for its independent businesses, July saw a 60-show theatre festival and in August there will be an Exeter-themed mini golf course.

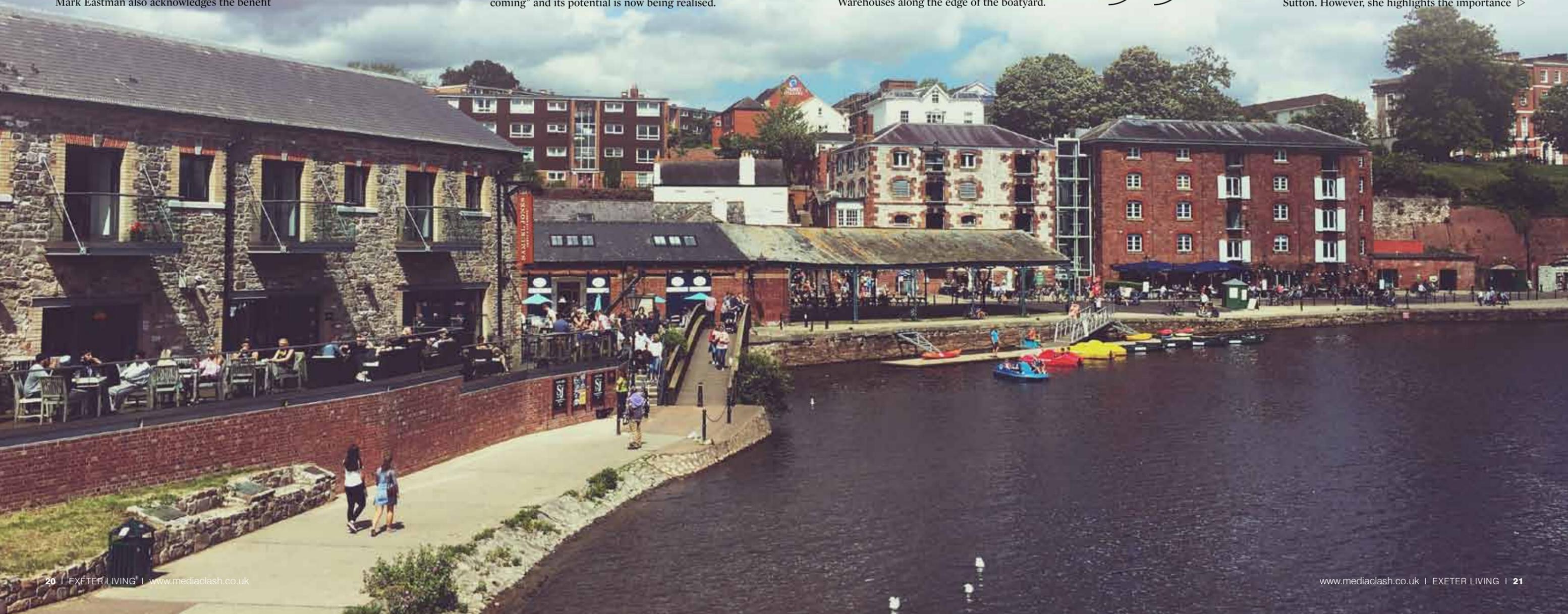
By 2020, the aim is to have refurbished all three floors of the warehouses, which will house a 250-seat theatre, a comedy and live music space, as well as a rehearsal space, an indoor market, and food and drink choices.

Other businesses are optimistic about the addition. “We are blessed with the most exciting cultural project to launch in the city for many a year,” says Natalie.

There are still challenges though, particularly in the form of new flood defences. The council is investing £3 million in the works, with another £36 million coming from the Environment Agency. But the project has been paused, to give local businesses a chance to make the most of the summer months.

“The potential for flooding is huge,” says Cllr. Sutton. However, she highlights the importance

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ON THE WATERFRONT

of minimising the impact on businesses “during and after” the works.

There is yet more change to come. Mitch Tonk’s Rockfish will soon be setting up shop, and the team at tapas restaurant Forn are opening The Salt Shed. But with such rapid growth, is there a danger that the area could become over-developed and lose its unique charm?

Chris Billing, of On the Waterfront, isn’t worried. “There is a strong sense of independence along the Quay. This should be protected, but we should also welcome investment from national companies”.

Alan suggests that the geography of the area will diminish the risk of over-development. “I think the physical limitations imposed by the river and canal basin will protect the area from over intensive use,” he says.

Claire Bliss is only positive about the future. “The Quay businesses have plenty of room for growth,” she says. “The only risk is that the bus and car park won’t be big enough for all the people!” **EL**

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A balmy afternoon at On The Waterfront on Exeter Quayside. Photo by Alex Toze

KEY ON THE QUAY

Some of the traders busy making Exeter Quay the city’s hottest destination right now

The Boatyard Bakery

New home for Emma’s Bread, with a bakery and café serving artisanal treats
01392 279 208; boatyardbakery.co.uk

The Boat Shed

Pop-up creative space from the Bike Shed Theatre: mini golf and killer cocktails among the attractions
01392 434169; bikeshedtheatre.co.uk/the-boat-shed

Doctor Ink’s Curiosities

Quirky Victorian-inspired cocktail bar/tea room in the Customs House
01392 491695; doctorinks.com

Exeter Bierkeller

The city’s first Bavarian-style beer hall
01392 670424; facebook.com/bierkellerexeter

Exeter Cookery School

Cookery courses, from bread-making to shellfish, with the highly experienced Jim and Lucy Fisher.
07415 78375; exetercookeryschool.co.uk

On The Waterfront

Popular bar and restaurant; pizzas and people-watching a speciality!
01392 210590; waterfrontexeter.co.uk

Puerto Lounge

Informal and eccentric new café-lounge with enviable watery vistas
01392 422102; thelounges.co.uk

The Quay Climbing Centre

The South West’s largest indoor climbing wall, no less
01392 426850; quayclimbingcentre.co.uk

Quay Presents

Long-running gift shop, with many locally-produced crafts
01392 477771; quaypresents.com

Rock Chiropractic

Treatment for a variety of health issues such as back and neck pain
01392 790499; rockchiropractic.co.uk

Saddles & Paddles

Canoe, kayak and bike hire
01392 424241; sadpad.com

Samuel Jones

Craft beers and smokehouse-style food in a stylish setting
01392 345345; samueljonsexeter.co.uk