

EXETER FERRY SERVICES

800 years of Exe Ferry Crossings

All Exe ferries now are primarily for recreational trips, with few passengers crossing the river by ferry to get to work. Bridges have slowly replaced the ferry and crossings which at times were very hazardous. One bridge was provided by an Exeter engineering company for its employees.

The ancient crossing linking Exeter Quay to Haven Banks dates back to medieval times. It was only named Butts Ferry as recently as 1972, when a Mr George W Butt assured its continued operation taking visitors either side of the river to the old Maritime Museum. Butts Ferry is technically a floating bridge in that it is pulled along a wire fixed on either bank, so it cannot get swept away and endanger lives on Trews Weir not far downstream. There are only five floating bridges of this nature in the country used for pedestrians whilst there are a further five chain ferries that carry motorised vehicles across larger rivers.

Topsham Passage Ferry dates back in records to the middle ages when the Port of Topsham was flourishing and Exeter Ship Canal had not been extended to Turf. This foot ferry was much used by passengers travelling through Exminster Railway Station and to Exminster Hospital. Passenger numbers reduced during the Second World War and under the Ferries Acquisition Act the local council took over its operation. Topsham Passage Ferry is most convenient for train and bus connections with a ferry link on Exeter Ship Canal either down to Turf or up to Double Locks where a change of boat can take you on up to Exeter Quay.

Southern Comfort Cruises run regularly during the summer months from Exeter Quay to Double Locks; and, as in Victorian times, the service passes on down the Canal to Turf Lock and Hotel, with the ferry boat White Heather. Passengers are able to get on or off at various locations along the Canal.

Turf Hotel also operates a charter ferry service for groups and parties, running from Countess Wear Wharf (Water Mongoose).

Ferry crossings of the River Exe downstream of the ancient fording locations in Exeter have, over the centuries, been of significant interest to travellers as well as of strategic importance.

In the middle ages the Starcross Ferry is known to have transported horses and carriages as well as foot passengers, so time was saved in not having to travel around the Estuary. Originally the Bishop of Sherborne provided this ferry for pilgrims travelling between the abbeys of Sherborne and Buckfast. Ownership of the licence passed to the City of Exeter in 1267 and for 200 years travellers were given free passage. In 1846 Exeter Corporation sold it to the South Devon Railway who were then extending the railway line from London, 20 years before the railways were to reach Exmouth. Starcross was named after a set of stairs placed to aid operation of this ferry and a cross sited by the Bishop of Sherborne on the west bank of the Estuary.

The medieval ferries went directly across the river, as they do now; but others travel up and down the Estuary and Exeter Ship Canal, with cruises between Exeter, Topsham, Turf, Starcross and Exmouth. The Exe Explorer leaflet shows the extended services throughout the Estuary.

For further information please contact:-
River & Canal Office
Haven Road, Exeter Basin, Devon EX2 8DU
Tel: (01392) 274306
or
Exeter City Council
Community & Environment Directorate
Civic Centre, Exeter, Devon EX1 1RP
Tel: (01392) 277888



Exeter City Council

Exe Ferry Crossings

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Bull's Ferry



Double Lock



Topsham Passage



Photograph courtesy of Topsham Museum



Exeter City Council

