

Exeter and Countess Wear

The Exeter suburb of Countess Wear is linked to the city by both the River Exe and the Exeter Canal. This walk goes out to Countess Wear along the Canal, returning via the river, taking in a number of historic features on the way.

The outward leg of the walk, along the Exeter Canal, also follows the line of the Exe Valley Way, a long-distance walker's route which explores some 45 miles of the valley between Exmoor and the Exe Estuary. This part of the walk is waymarked with the Exe Valley Way logo.

The walk is virtually flat the whole way, and there are no stiles. It is therefore also usable by those pushing buggies or pushchairs. In addition, because there is generally a good surface over the entire length, it makes a good walk in the winter or early spring when walks in the countryside can be muddy.

Fact File

Exeter is at the hub of transport facilities in Devon and is also served by national coach and rail connections. The starting point for the walk in Exeter Quay which, as well as being walkable from the city centre, is also served by a local bus service. Bus timetable details are available by calling 0870 608 2 608 or visiting www.traveline.org.uk. For train information contact 08457 484950.

Walk Length: 8km/5 miles; no stiles or gradients.

Facilities: Exeter Quay has all facilities; Double Locks - pub; Countess Wear - pub, buses.

The Walk

The walk starts at Exeter Quay.

There was almost certainly some sort of quay here in Roman times, but its present form largely dates from the late 1500s. It was much improved in the 1830s, when the imposing warehouses were built. At one end is the Custom House, dating from 1681 and said to be the first brick building in Exeter. Nearby is the shed of the old fish market which was erected in the late 19th century.

Walk past the fish market shed and cross the wooden footbridge.

The footbridge crosses one of the leats used to power the industrial premises which were found nearby in medieval and later times. Next to the footbridge are former bonded wine warehouses of the 1870s and 1890s.

Immediately afterwards cross the large suspension bridge over the Rive Exe.

This, known as Cricklepit Bridge, was built in 1988 to link the Quay with the old canal basin.

On the far side of the river turn left.

The walk is now on the line of the Exe Valley Way. Look out for the waymarks. On the right, just after the Piazza Terracina (named after Exeter's twin town in Italy) is the basin of the Exeter Canal. The first part of the canal was completed in 1567, making it one of the first inland waterways to be built in England. It was originally built to bypass a weir which had been constructed across the Exe by the Countess of Devon in the late 1200s. This had the

effect of cutting off Exeter's link to the sea and thus boosting the Countess's port at Topsham at the head of the estuary. The weir gave its name to the settlement which grew up there, Countess Wear.

The canal was successful and was extended further towards the sea in 1675, and then widened and improved in 1701. Further substantial improvements were undertaken between 1825 and 1830 by the famous Devon engineer James Green. These included a further extension to the canal's current end at Turf Lock on the estuary as well as the building of the canal basin here.

Continue alongside the river to reach a pair of lock gates.

This is the inland end of the canal. On the right is the canal entrance to the basin. Look at the information board by the bridge for more details.

Turn right on the bridge over the basin entrance, then left alongside the canal.

The lock to the left gives access from the river to the canal and quay. The canal's current size dates from James Green's improvements in the 1820s. Originally it was a good deal narrower.

Keep on alongside the canal, passing a couple of small quays, to a swing bridge over the canal.

On the opposite side of the canal is the extensive green area of Exeter's Riverside Valley Park, a popular recreational area with Exonians.

Continue ahead past the bridge, the canal path now a little narrower. After a little while a substantial set of locks is reached, with the Double Locks Inn on the opposite side.

If refreshment is needed, the lock gates can be crossed here. The lock raises or lowers the canal water level 10 feet/3 metres. The current gates were installed as part of the improvements in 1701, replacing 3 earlier locks which were the first pound locks in England. The Inn was built at about the same time, or perhaps a little earlier, and its design shows Dutch influence. It is likely that all the canal improvements around this time were carried out by Dutch engineers.

Continue on alongside the canal.

The city has now largely been left behind and green hills appear on the right. Nearer, the flat area to the right of the canal is part of the flood plain, and will be substantially covered in standing water after a period of wet weather in winter.

Continue alongside the canal until the main A379 road is reached.

At this point the walk leaves the Exe Valley Way, which crosses the road on its way down to the estuary.

Turn left over the canal bridge.

There are actually two parallel bridges, one of which lifts, the other swings, to allow the passing of craft up and down the canal.

Keep alongside the main road to cross the Exe.

This is Countess Wear bridge. It was built in 1770 and then widened in the 1930s. It is said to be on the site of the weir which caused the building of the canal and gave rise to Countess Wear's name. Looking upstream, there are views of the line of Haldon Ridge, the hills which frame the western skyline of Exeter.

After crossing the river take the first left, Countess Wear Road.

This leads towards the old village of Countess Wear. Most of the houses at this end are relatively modern, but no. 59 on the right, an impressive building, dates from around 1770. A little further on, also on the right, is Mount Wear House, the home of Exeter's Youth Hostel. This is even older, dating from the late 1600s.

The road then drops to some picturesque thatched 17th century cottages, marking the original Countess Wear village. Bear left here along Mill Road, a public footpath.

There is a little green by the river to enjoy a rest if needed. Alternatively, continue along Countess Wear Road for a little way for refreshment of a different sort at the Tally Ho! Inn.

Continue along Mill Road until it becomes a surfaced road again. Just before it bends to the right, take the public footpath on the left, Mill Lane.

The first, roughly surfaced, part of Mill Road can be rather wet and difficult to pass without boots after heavy rain. If you find it is too wet, continue along Countess Wear Road instead, until reaching the Tally Ho! Inn (if in need of refreshment you may wish to go this way anyway). Turn left at the Inn into Mill Road then, after bearing left, take the public footpath on the right. This is Mill Lane, and you have rejoined the main route.

Mill Lane leads back into the Riverside Valley Park. Pass the ruins of the Old Mill on your left.

This is an important industrial archaeological location. The mill is an historic site. Countess Isabella (who built the famous weir) first had a corn mill built here in 1284. It was rebuilt in 1658 and then was used as a paper mill, making paper from rags. It was destroyed by fire in the early 1800s and rebuilt. The existing ruins are of the 1800's rebuilding. It was closed in 1885. There was a plan to use it to produce hydro-electric power, but it never materialised. Look at the board on site for further information.

Cross the mill leat then turn right before Millyard Cottage.

The walk has now joined another waymarked route, the Exeter Green Circle. This is a 12 mile walk encircling Exeter - look out for the green waymarks.

Keep ahead on the clear wide path, crossing the leat again behind Exeter's crematorium gardens.

The leat is of ancient origin, being constructed to power the original 13th century mill. When the idea of building a canal to avoid the weir was first proposed, it was thought the leat could be widened to be used as the canal route, but this never happened.

Continue alongside the leat until the path crosses it at a parking area by the Salmon Pool Lane Play Area.

The Green Circle Route is left here.

Cross the leat and follow the road ahead and left. Continue straight ahead onto the narrow footpath between Old Abbey Court and Salmon Pool Lane.

Old Abbey Court commemorates St. James Abbey, or Priory, which was built near here in medieval times. All traces of it disappeared long ago.

The path soon emerges alongside the Exe. Look out for the entrance to Belle Isle Park on the left and follow the path around the edge of the park next to the river.

Until fairly recently this was Exeter City Council's nursery, where the plants used for bedding in the city's floral displays were propagated.

Go through the gate at the end of the park and turn right, away from the footbridge. At the next junction go left.

A little further on the path passes Trew's Weir over the Exe. This was built to ensure a depth of water in the river to top up the canal. Its name commemorates John Trew, who built the canal in the 16th century.

Opposite the weir is Trew's Weir Paper Mills. There is a date stone of 1780 on the wall. It may incorporate an older mill. It was used as a paper mill from 1835 until well into the 20th century. The two paper mills in a short distance illustrate how important this industry once was in Devon.

Cross the mill leat inlet and continue alongside the river, past the Port Royal Inn, to return to the Quay.

Further Information

A free guide booklet on the Exe Valley Way is available in local Tourist Information Centres. Alternatively it may be obtained from the Discover Devon Information Service, Westacott Road, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531 - quote reference DTY/DP14.

A free information pack is available on the Exeter Green Circle at local Tourist Information Centres. The total walk is divided into five lengths, each with its own leaflet. The Countess Wear length is part of the Ludwell Valley Walk.

For information on the wider network of walking routes in Devon obtain the free leaflet "Discover Devon - Walking" from local Tourist Information Centres or the address above. Alternatively, visit the website www.discoverdevon.com which has all the information.

OS maps for this walk:

Explorer (1:25,000 scale) no. 114 Exeter and the Exe Valley.
Landranger (1: 50,000 scale) no. 192 Exeter and Sidmouth.