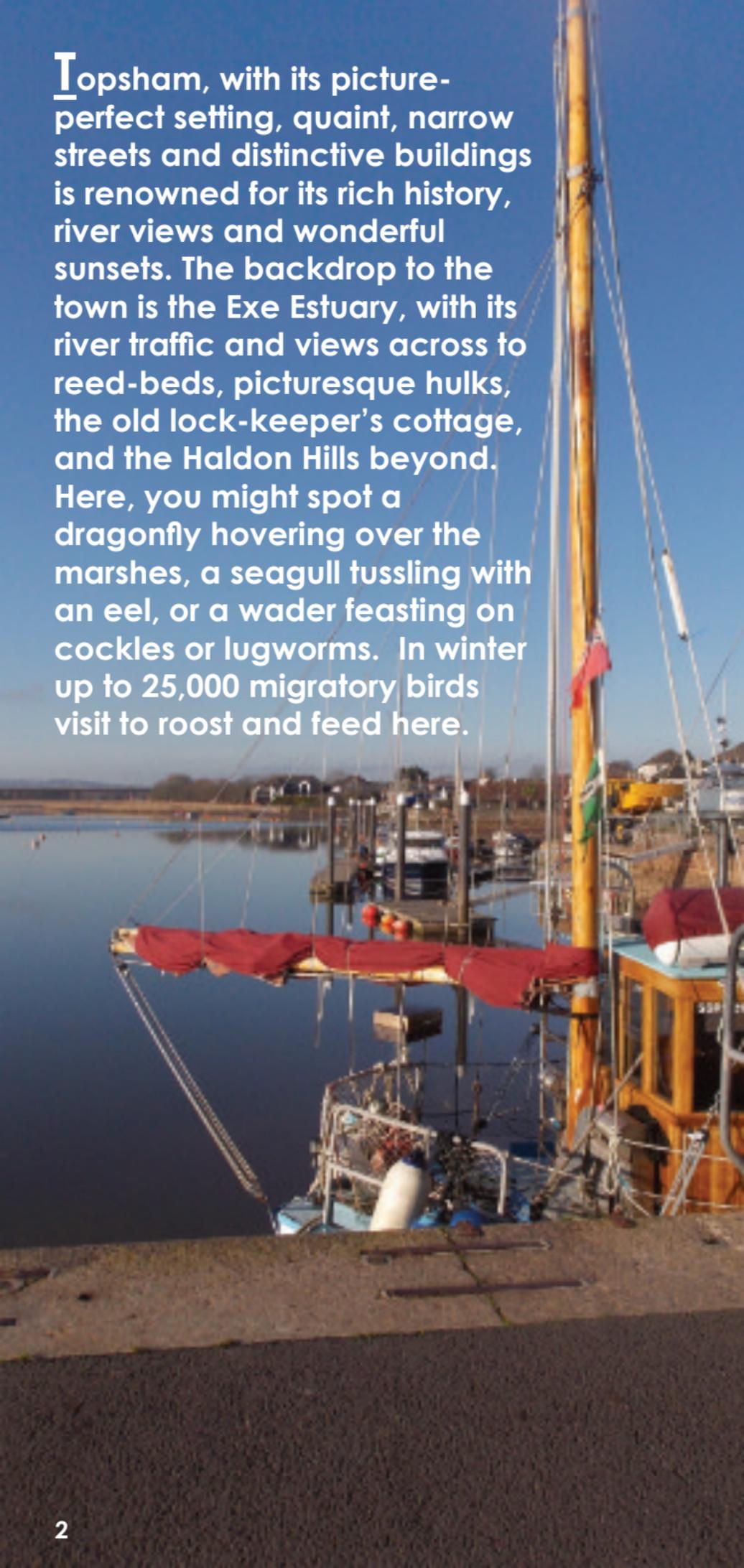


# TOPSHAM TOWN TRAILS



**T**opsham, with its picture-perfect setting, quaint, narrow streets and distinctive buildings is renowned for its rich history, river views and wonderful sunsets. The backdrop to the town is the Exe Estuary, with its river traffic and views across to reed-beds, picturesque hulks, the old lock-keeper's cottage, and the Haldon Hills beyond. Here, you might spot a dragonfly hovering over the marshes, a seagull tussling with an eel, or a wader feasting on cockles or lugworms. In winter up to 25,000 migratory birds visit to roost and feed here.



**T**opsham was once an important estuary port with busy shipyards, a working fishing fleet and a cosmopolitan atmosphere. From its bustling quay, cloth was exported to Europe, fishing boats set off for Newfoundland and passenger steamers hugged the coast to London. It still retains a strong maritime flavour.

Visitors will find a West Country welcome in the eclectic mix of independent shops, pubs, cafés and restaurants. If you'd like to linger, there are accommodation options, too.



*We say Top-sham!*

*We say Top-sam!*

*This is a topic of lively debate in the town!*

# Walk 1 (1 hour to 1½ hour)

This walk takes you from Topsham Quay to Fore Street and back, through historical streets with independent shops and cafés....

See page 9 for the puzzle pictures for this trail!

**1** Topsham Quay has been much enlarged since medieval times. It was especially busy in the 16th-18th centuries exporting vast quantities of Devon woollen cloth. Officers from the Customs House (now the Lighter Inn) suspended weighing scales from the 'King's Beam' (c.1830s) when assessing duty. The Antiques Centre (1953) was a Rank flour store. ●



**2** Ferry Road sits on reclaimed land below the river cliff. Beneath the 1721 church wall is Underway, where salmon fishermen dried and mended nets. A 61lb salmon was caught in the river in 1924 – see it at Topsham Museum.



**3** Wixels was a landing place with cellars and lofts, before conversion in the 1920s to a private house. It takes its name from the building opposite, the 19th century Wigzell Bros factory, where specialist nails were made for local shipbuilders.



**4** In summer, Topsham Sailing Club (1885) hosts races for both cruisers and its own fleet of Devon yawls.



**5** The slate-hung Passage House Inn dates from the 18th century. The nearby ferry has run since medieval times (see operating times on the board). ●



**6** Furlong, now a private house, was built around 1800 as a sail-loft for the Davy (later the Holman) shipyard. The most famous Topsham ship was HMS *Terror*, used for Sir John Franklin's ill-fated expedition to the NW Passage in 1845. See a model of the *Terror* at Topsham Museum. ●



**7** Turn right up Follett Road (or first continue to the Recreation Ground and return).



**8** Look for a cobbled pathway with one of Topsham's many water pumps. ●

**9** Clara Place (1841) comprises nine houses arranged around a garden.



**10** The 19<sup>th</sup> century wash-house in Coysh Square was last used in the early 1950s. Nearly derelict in 1981, grants helped restore it in 2002. Do look inside!



**11** Broadway House (1776), with its elegant gateway, is a fine example of Georgian architecture. F W L Ross kept a museum of natural history here. Later, it was home to Mrs Mary Frood, a campaigner for votes for women. She held suffrage meetings, graffitied pavements and wrote slogans on her garden wall, before finally casting her vote in the 1918 election.



**12** Grove House was the Georgian home of the Holman family, one of Topsham's two principal shipbuilders. Two cannon protect its corner at the mini-roundabout!



**13** Matthews Hall (named after the donor) is the town's principal social centre. Behind are tennis courts, summer swimming pool and bowls club. The Hall hosts a Saturday market, drama productions, concerts and classes, and a plaque at the entrance recalls the Town Charter, granted in 1300 by King Edward I. ●



**14** The true age of many buildings in Fore Street is disguised behind later rendering or decoration. The mock timbers of 78 Fore Street cover a 17<sup>th</sup> century structure similar to no.74. Both were built in the medieval manner with upper floors projecting over the street.



**15** The Co-op store was once the London and South Western Hotel. In 1877 the owner, Charles Gale, married Tryphena Sparkes, former fiancée of the writer, Thomas Hardy. When she died, Hardy cycled here from Dorset to visit her grave. Opposite, the seven arched frontages belong to the old market (1791), later housing the police station (the cells are still there), the fire engine, the Home Guard and now a garage.



**16** The Salutation Hotel, perhaps originally a granary, became an 18<sup>th</sup> century coaching inn, with a bowling and wrestling green at the back. Its fine old door on strap hinges (with a wicket gate) displays markings to keep bad spirits away! The 'Assembly Room' above has 1774 graffiti etched into a Venetian glass window. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Salutation also hosted the town's mortuary.



**17** St Nicholas Methodist Church (1867) benefited from the generosity of the Holman family. Its unusual design follows Early English lines including rose and lancet windows, and stained glass reflecting its seafaring connections.



**18** Church House, a former priest house with medieval door, dates from the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. The adjoining arch takes you into St Margaret's Terrace where a plaque marks the site of a late Victorian soup kitchen.



**19** St Margaret's is at least the fourth church built on this site, the first perhaps in late Saxon times. The 1870s limestone rebuild retains the medieval sandstone tower with its fine ring of bells, and inside is a Norman font. From the churchyard, the river view helps to explain why Topsham developed as a successful estuary port. ●



**20** In Trees Court, between shops at 26 and 27 Fore Street, is the great pole which served Topsham's first telephone exchange. ● Supposedly it was winched over the arch connecting the shops! In 1917 the telephone lines were struck by the trailing wire of a low-flying Zeppelin.



**21** On the left round a bend in Trees Court you'll find a (modern) wall comprising the different materials used to build Topsham. Look for granite, limestone, Heavitree sandstone, Exeter trap (volcanic basalt), Budleigh buns (pebbles), and the thin Dutch bricks brought over as ballast in 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century trading ships.



**22** Continue and turn left to Victoria Road with its terraces of early-Victorian houses and the former Congregational Chapel (1839). This straight road was once known as Rope Walk, near where hemp was twisted into ropes for ships being built along the river.



**23** Returning to Fore Street and passing late 17<sup>th</sup> century houses, you come to The Globe, second of Topsham's old coaching inns. The building dates from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There were once over 40 inns in Topsham, and until the 1990s the 'Topsham 10' was a target for local university students aiming for a pint in each!



**24** Cromer House is a handsome 18<sup>th</sup> century brick house. It shares a cobbled forecourt with two shops of the same period that are built down the cliff edge, with ● lower floor access to Ferry Road.



**25** Chapel Place contains interesting 18<sup>th</sup> century houses and a building that served in turn as a 19<sup>th</sup> century Wesleyan Reform Chapel, the Cosy Cinema, an RC church, a glove factory and a private house. A sign to the glove factory is displayed on the wall. ●



**26** White Street was once a rough, poor area. Many of the men here were 'mariners' or fishermen. The women left at home worked as servants, fish sellers, laundresses or lacemakers.

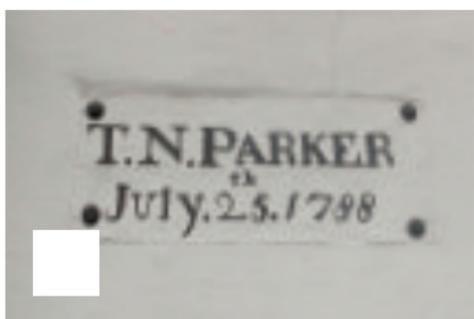
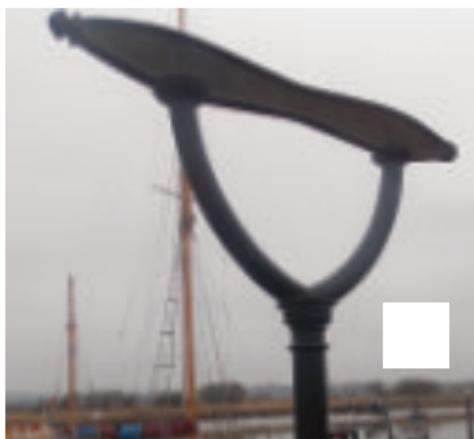


**27** Walk back down to the Quay, crossing the railway cutting (now Holman Way) which until 1957 accommodated a spur line to the dock. The old latticework railway bridge still crosses the road.



# Puzzle pictures

Look out for these things on your walk.... tick them off as you go!  
The red dots should show you where!





MAP NOT TO SCALE

WALK ONE



WALK TWO



CAR PARK



TOILET



# TOPSHAM

## TWO TOWN TRAILS



## Walk 2 (1 hour)

This walk combines appealing town architecture with river and countryside views.

Topsham Museum tells the town's story, and you will also encounter an internationally important RSPB bird reserve.

Part of this route lacks pavements so take care! Also note there is a steep(ish) climb just after point 14.

See page 16 for the puzzle pictures for this trail!

**1** Topsham's Strand starts with a series of limestone, former warehouses on both sides of the road, most dating back to the **●** 18<sup>th</sup> century. In medieval times the first building on the left, now a shop, was a warehouse and, in Napoleonic times, a gaol. The river lapped its walls at high tide.



**2** The buildings open out at Hannaford's Quay, offering a view of the Exe.



**3** Shell House, 17<sup>th</sup> century but with an older core, shows off an impressive plaster porch. **●**



**4** From a few metres up Higher Shapter Street, turn and look down to Fisherman's Causeway, a quintessential view of the river.



**5** Back on the Strand, continue past handsome Queen Anne House, 19th century three-storey houses (nos 16 and 17), and diminutive 17th century cottages (nos 23 and 24). Further on are Topsham's 'Dutch' houses with their gabled frontages, owned by 17th century merchants who traded with Holland. Most were built with inner courtyards similar to Devon farmhouses. The window bays to no. 26 and the Dutch House (no. 40) were 18<sup>th</sup> century additions. ●



**6** Topsham Museum (no.25) occupies one of the merchants' houses and tells the story of the town as well as presenting a series of period rooms (see p.17). The house was previously owned by Dorothy Holman, a member of the local shipbuilding family, and the Museum collection includes the nightdress worn in *Gone with the Wind* by Vivien Leigh, Dorothy's sister-in-law.



**7** Many of the Strand houses, including the Museum, have attractive riverside gardens which you glimpse through gates and railings. They were once the loading yards for ships moored along the river.



**8** William of Orange House (no. 38) is a reminder that when the future King William III landed in England in 1688 to take the throne with his wife Mary, his baggage, ammunition and stores all came ashore at Topsham Quay. The late 1960s Strand Court (opposite) replaced Holman's lower shipbuilding yard. Beneath the central garage block the old dock is still there!



**9** The Goat Walk, opened in 1911, offers views across to the Haldon Hills and down to Exmouth. At the far end, the small beach was a swimming site favoured by the local youth in days gone past. Why the Goat Walk? There was some opposition to the construction of the path, especially its width. When the Council met to name the new 'road', one Councillor was heard to say in his Devon dialect, "Tid'n a rawd, tis nort but a bliddy goatwalk." It was never given the status of a road and has always since been known as the Goat Walk! ●



**10** At the end of the Goat Walk, an estuary wall wraps round Riversmeet, behind which the rivers Exe and Clyst meet. Shipbuilder Robert Davy bought the shipyard here in the early 19th century and his son Frances built the grand house in the grounds.



**11** On the other side of the road from Riversmeet, two fields ● purchased in 2015 through a public appeal are now in the hands of the Goat Walk Land Trust. They are open to all and the second field is dog friendly.



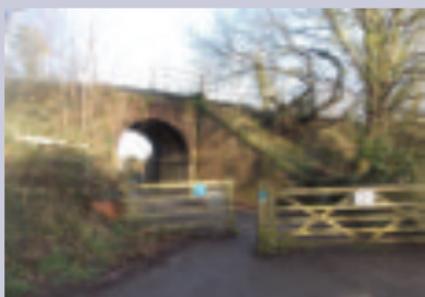
**12** From the town side of the fields, you can glimpse on the hill the prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century house, Mount Howe.



**13** Bowling Green Marshes are an important RSPB reserve. A gate leads to an observation platform over the River Clyst. Further along the road, an informative bird hide overlooks the Marshes. This is an important winter resting place for migrant birds but there is a lot to see at any time. ●



**14** Follow Bowling Green Road up the hill away from the railway bridge and the cycle path to Exmouth. Turn left at the top.



**15** Monmouth Street has a series of attractive late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century houses; some are now divided into two but share a porch. Tincombe House (no. 33) may be earlier and has been less altered. During his attempt to displace King James II in 1685, the Duke of Monmouth visited Topsham and addressed the people from the first floor bow window of an inn at no.9 Monmouth Street (then New Street). ●



**16** At the end of the street, turn right into Monmouth Hill (formerly Quay Hill) and walk down back to the Quay. The cottages on the left are built over the houses on Strand below.



**17** At the bottom of the Hill, Route 2 café was formerly the Steam Packet Inn and one of the oldest pubs in Topsham. The pub name reflected the steam packet service that sailed between the town quay and London, before the railway introduced a much quicker form of transport. ●



# Puzzle pictures

Look out for these things on your walk.... tick them off as you go!  
The red dots should show you where!





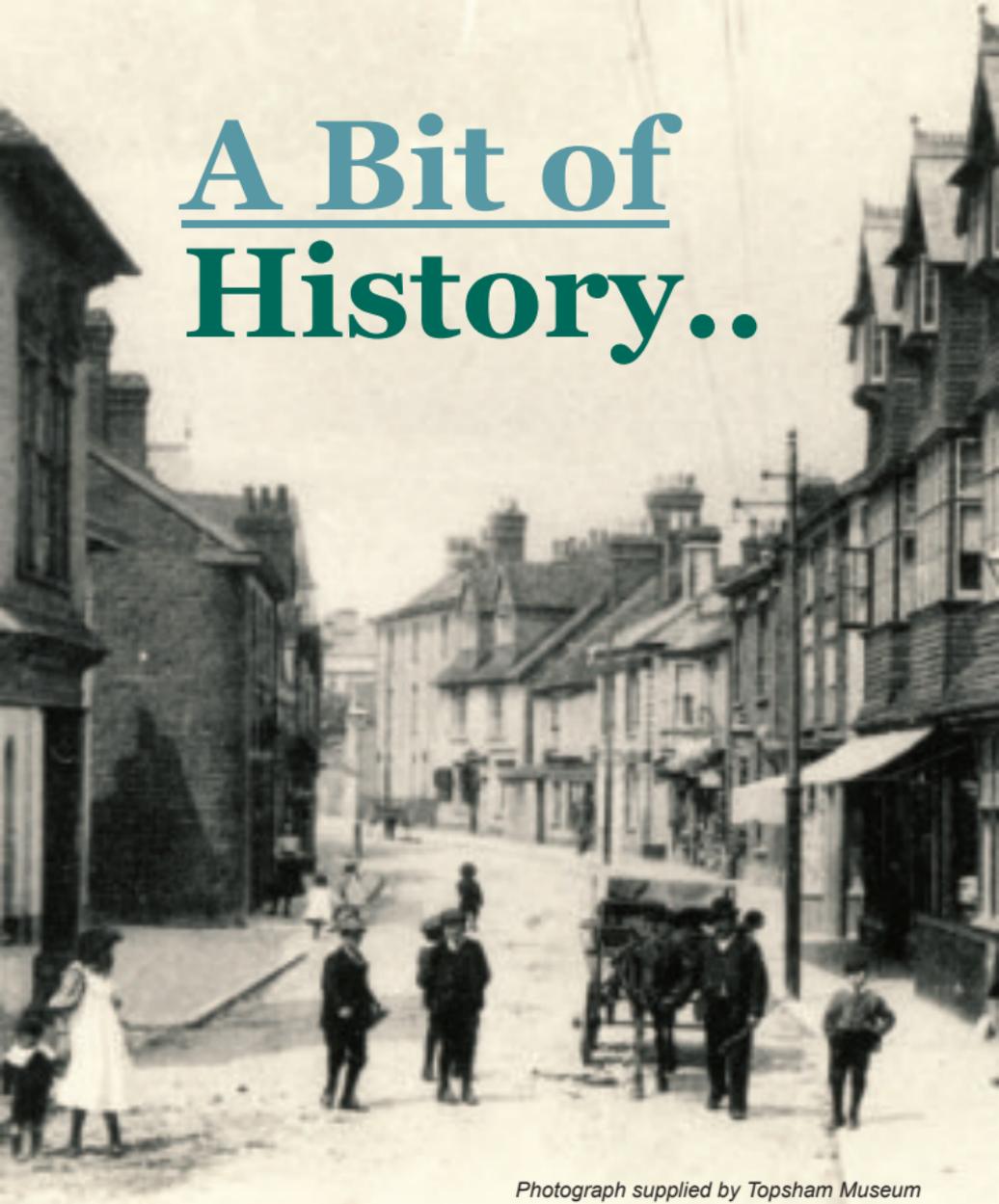
*Admission Free  
Children welcome  
Gift Shop and Garden  
Home-made cream teas*

## TOPSHAM MUSEUM & MERCHANT'S HOUSE at No 25

Open from April to October  
Open every day except Tuesdays  
2.00pm to 5.00pm

25 Strand, Topsham, Exeter, Devon EX3 0AX  
email: [info@topshammuseum.org.uk](mailto:info@topshammuseum.org.uk)  
[www.topshammuseum.org.uk](http://www.topshammuseum.org.uk)  
Telephone 01392 873244

# A Bit of History..



*Photograph supplied by Topsham Museum*

**N**o one knows when people first came to this estuary. There are Iron Age forts nearby and the Romans certainly sailed up the river in 50AD. They established a port here to offload supplies for their new town *Isca Dumnoniorum*, which grew into the city of Exeter.

Perhaps a man called Toppa settled here, as in 937, King Athelstan gifted 'a parcel of land which the vulgar call Toppesham' to an Exeter monastery.

In 1300, King Edward I granted a Royal Charter, allowing Topsham to be called a Town and to have a market every Saturday. In 1316, the first substantial quay was built, and the canal between Topsham and Exeter opened to shipping in 1566.

From about 1500, fishermen set out annually to fish the cod banks off Newfoundland. When their holds were full, they sailed back to Spain or Portugal to exchange fish for wine or dried fruit. Back home at last, the dried cod or 'toerag', would supplement bread and potatoes, especially when crops were poor. Closer to home, herring were caught at sea, and salmon in the river.

Ships were built on the river beach. The *Gifte*, *Grace of God*, *Bartholemew* and *Rose* sailed against the Spanish Armada in 1588. In 1607, the *Gifte of God* left for the Americas and founded a colony at Topsham in Maine.

From about 1600, Exeter became famous for the production of woollen serge cloth, and it was exported to Holland from Topsham Quay. The cloth merchants appreciated Dutch architecture and incorporated their style into some of the local buildings.

Shipbuilding grew in Topsham during the 1700s and became an important industry in the 1800s, with the Davy and Holman families operating the principal yards. Davy built merchant ships and naval warships and Holman a variety of merchant vessels. In the 1850s, the Holmans were employing 200 men and apprentices, supported by sail-makers, rope and block-makers, and foundries forging anchors and chains. The Holman family developed a large commercial empire and founded a shipping insurance company that is still active today.

Towards the end of the 19th century, though, iron-clad ships were being built in deeper and wider rivers, heralding the end of major shipbuilding in Topsham.

Fishing for salmon with seine nets continued until 2018, when the Environment Agency imposed a ten-year moratorium. Visit Topsham Museum to see a salmon boat and find out how salmon were caught.



OS map: Sheet 114, SX 9655 8812,  
GPS 50.68360138, -3.46559738

**Bus: 57** bus to and from Exeter and Exmouth,  
(journey time 20 minutes).

**Train:** From Exeter or Exmouth, every 30 minutes.

**Cycle:** Exe Estuary Trail (National Cycle Network Route 2)

**Parking:** Pay and Display at Holman Way, at the  
Quay, or next to Matthews Hall in Fore Street.

**Shopping:** There are over 50 independent shops  
offering a wide range of services.

**Food and drink:** You'll find a variety of cafés,  
pubs and restaurants throughout Topsham.

**Accommodation:** Visit the Love Topsham  
website: [www.lovetopsham.co.uk](http://www.lovetopsham.co.uk)

**Public toilets** are situated on the Quay.

**Guided walks:** Free 90-minute walking tours of  
Topsham, at 2.00 p.m. every Wednesday and  
Saturday from May to September.  
Meet at Holman Way Car Park.



Topsham Museum  
25 Strand, Topsham, Exeter, Devon EX3 0AX  
[www.topshammuseum.org.uk](http://www.topshammuseum.org.uk)

Design by Phil Keen ([philkeen30@gmail.com](mailto:philkeen30@gmail.com))