

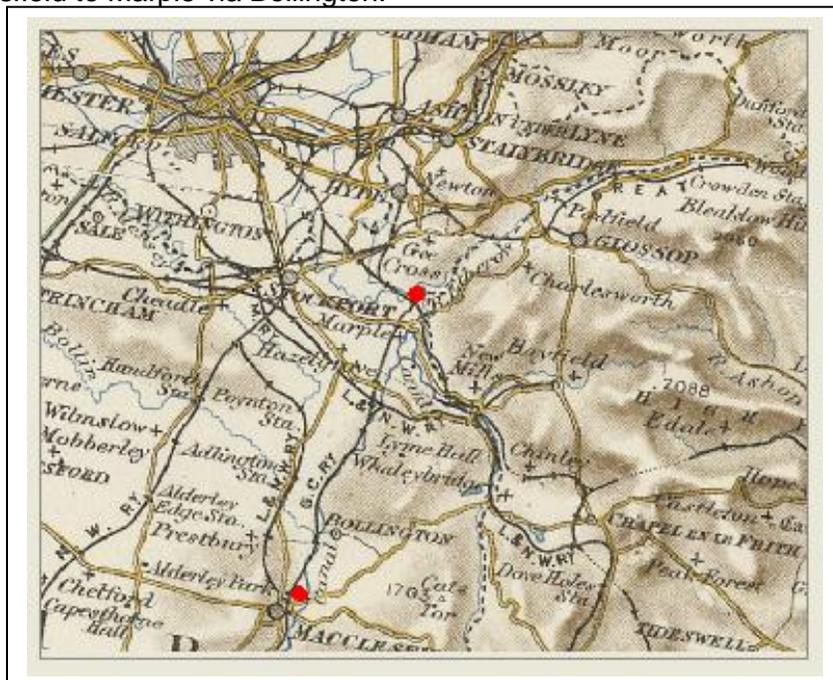
The Middlewood Way

“They’ve shut the road through the woods seventy years ago” .

I can remember learning a poem something like that at school many years ago and, coming to Marple some time ago, I have only to replace “road” by “line” for.... in the sunny glades of eastern Cheshire we have our paradise – it is called the Middlewood Way and it follows a disused railway track from Marple to Macclesfield.



As one can see the canal snakes along beside the railway track – sometimes touching, sometimes drawing away – but always allowing a mix and match of scenery from canal to track. It wasn't exactly seventy years ago that the railway line was closed between Marple and Macclesfield but it was over 50 years and the railway had then been running for about 100 years. As far back as 1849 the North Staffordshire Railway, (N.S.) having reached Macclesfield, found the way to Manchester blocked by the London and North Western Railway, (L.&N.W.) At all stages, the L.&N.W. was obstructive and refused to allow any traffic to Manchester to pass via Macclesfield, insisting that it went via Crewe, thus ensuring a greater mileage. In 1863 a Macclesfield businessman, Thomas Oliver, in an effort to give a fresh lease of life to Bollington, then an important cotton town suffering depression due to the American civil war, promoted a scheme for a local line to be built from Macclesfield to Marple via Bollington.



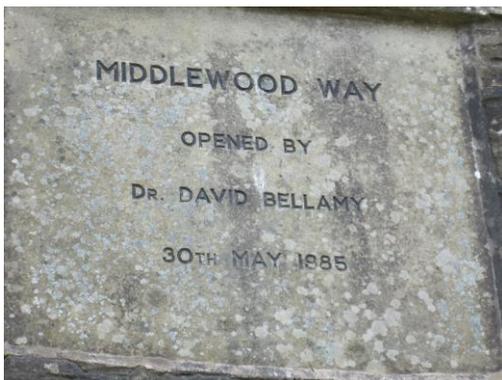
(Note. Macclesfield is just appearing at the foot of the map.)

Both the N.S. and the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway, M.S.L., were enthusiastic about the scheme. The N.S. because it could become a new route to Manchester independent of the L.&N.W. and the M.S.L. who saw it as an outlet to the south. The line in question is that marked between the red dots – from Marple Warf Junction to Macclesfield.

The M.S.L.'s enthusiastic General Manager, Edward Watkin, was an inspired leader of the scheme, second only to Thomas Oliver. With such support the scheme prospered and the line was authorised on 14th July 1864. The N.S. and the M.S.L. were both empowered to subscribe £80,000 for its construction to begin.

There were no major engineering problems apart from a viaduct at Bollington and a deep cutting on the approach to Marple Wharf Junction. When, at long last, it opened for passenger traffic on 2nd August 1869, the Macclesfield, Bollington and Marple Railway, M.B.M., was single line only. Four single platform stations, Marple Rose Hill, High Lane, Poynton and Bollington served it. Initially there were four trains each way on weekdays and two each way on Sundays. Goods depots were opened at Rose Hill and Bollington and a goods service began on 1st March 1870. A bridge carried the M.B.M. line over L.&N.W.'s Stockport-Buxton line at the northern end of the L.&N.W. Middlewood station. In early 1879 the M.B.M. authorities opened a station almost directly above the L.&N.W. Middlewood station for the interchange of passengers. The stretch of line eventually became part of the Great Central Railway with the stations being maintained by North Staffordshire Railways.

So the service continued for almost 100 years with passengers and goods. Then the Beeching axe fell. Thankfully, Marple Rose Hill station has remained open; that little spur of 500 metres or so between Marple Warf Junction and Rose Hill station. Its use has increased steadily as a commuter line for the Greater Manchester conurbation and, only recently (2011), has an express service begun to operate from the station much to the delight of Rose Hill passengers.



For many years the rest of the line fell into dereliction and then the Stockport and Macclesfield councils, with the aid of a Department of Environment grant of £1.3 million, turned it into a nature treasure trail. Dr David Bellamy gave it such an effusive opening on May 30th 1985 that it has never looked back.

The Middlewood Way is certainly one of the finest examples of skilful conversion of a derelict line in the whole of the country. Much of the credit must go to the Macclesfield Groundwork Trust - motto: "Linking Town... With Country" -



which provided so much expertise. In three brief years the line as far as Bollington was transformed from an eyesore to a most pleasing trail which provides excellent walking, riding and cycling facilities well away from road traffic. Stout fences separate the bridlepath from the path used by cyclists and walkers. Within the sheltered cuttings there is a choice of routes for all. You can either keep to the cutting bottom or, should you prefer it, take either of the paths built along the tops of the embankments from where right along the route, there are always fine views of the Cheshire Plain, the urban skyline and the Pennine foot-hills. Bridges have been repaired, more than 28,000 shrubs and 8,000 trees have been planted and miles of ditches dug.

Attractive milestones measure one's progress along the way and five evenly spaced picnic areas attract a lot of people, many of whom are content to sit at the stout tables provided, eat their sandwiches, drink their beverages and watch the passing parade. Nothing much happens at these places but many people come and go. The walk attracts walkers and cyclists in roughly the same numbers. People on horseback are happy to walk their horses amongst the wooded banks. Because the Middlewood way slices through 'Horsey' country the bridle-way is seldom devoid of equestrians; and this is as it should be although the delicate fragrance of the wild roses or the woodbine is always supplemented with an even richer aroma which befits a stable-yard.

Starting from Rose Hill, one travels through a canopy of trees until, close to High Lane, the track emerges into open country: far away to the right is Manchester International Airport and much nearer to the left – lush pastures.



What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows.

No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.

No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.

No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance.

No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began.

A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.



William Henry Davis

Back into the canopy of trees after High Lane, through Middlewood and hence to Poynton High a perfect stopping point for a picnic.

“Now, come on, we haven’t got all day, we have passed our sheep and cows!” Quite some miles later we arrive at the viaduct at Bollington and enjoy the view of White Nancy. Industrial Bollington has, in times past, plonked itself onto the disused railway line so we do a short diversion on a footpath. A sturdy wooden zig-zag slope leads us back to the railway track and surprise, surprise we have a paved pathway and street lights. A mile or so further on we are confronted with crossing a dual carriageway, the Silk Road. Don’t try dodging the traffic - there is much to much; anyway a bridge has been provided. Trees have now given way to pylons on our walk. About a mile and a half after the bridge we arrive in Macclesfield. The route may not follow the original disused railway as the major roadway has taken priority. The pathway winds its way through pleasant parkland and it is a paved surface all the way.



Well that’s it. Indeed, we have a treasure trail to be proud of. Trees, flowers, birds, bees, butterflies and tranquility for most of the way to be enjoyed by all users. It is within easy reach for families on the eastern side of Manchester and, in particular, is well used by our family. Improvements to pathways and tree management have taken place in the past few years and the Middlewood Way **must** be assured of a strong future.



Branching off the Middlewood Way offers yet more delights. As we have said, the Macclesfield canal meanders gracefully through the Pennine foot-hills roughly parallel to the Middlewood Way. It is good for both cycling and walking and makes an interesting diversion. The grandeur of Lyme Hall and it’s gardens is simply breathtaking and the extensive parklands are a haven for deer and all manner of wildlife. At Poynton there is the Anson engine museum and many historical records of times past. At Bollington stands the huge Adelphi Mill, a proud reminder of the town's strong association with cotton.

Now, how does that Kipling poem end? Even though the woodland walk has long gone: “You will hear the beat of the horse feet and the swish of a skirt in the dew”. I am sure that, in the quiet of the morning, I have heard the impatient “puff, puff, puff” of a steam engine speeding along the line from Marple to Macclesfield.

Web-sites

<http://www.marple-uk.com>

http://wikipedia.org/wiki/High_Lane

<http://happy-valley.org.uk>

<http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lymepark>

<http://www.enginemuseum.org>

<http://www.macweb.org.uk>

Pictures along the way

Poynton Coppice - an example of a beautifully prepared information board



Ready, Steady, Go



It's a matter of perspective



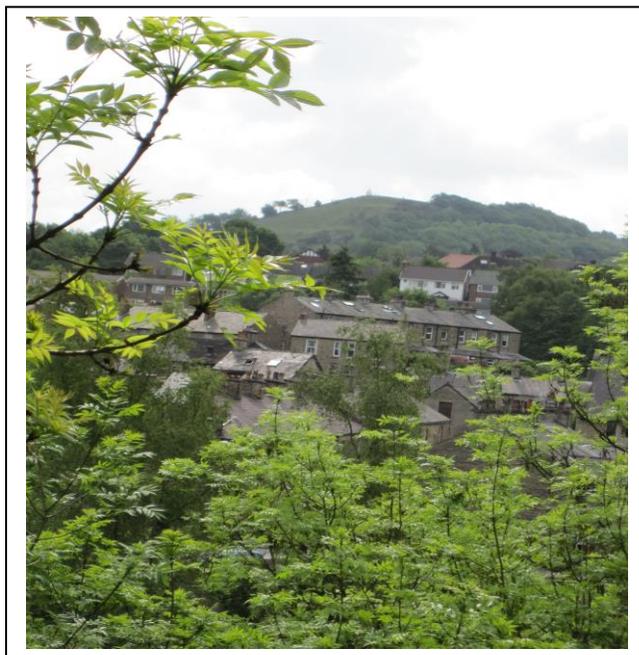
Picnic at Poynton



Adelphi Mill



Something that you may fancy – White Nancy (on a gray day)



Into the Labyrinth



THEY shut the road through the woods
Seventy years ago.
Weather and rain have undone it again,
And now you would never know
There was once a road through the woods
Before they planted the trees.
It is underneath the coppice and heath,
And the thin anemones.
Only the keeper sees
That, where the ring-dove broods,
And the badgers roll at ease,
There was once a road through the woods.

Yet, if you enter the woods
Of a summer evening late,
When the night-air cools on the trout-ringed pools
Where the otter whistles his mate,
(They fear not men in the woods,
Because they see so few.)
You will hear the beat of a horse's feet,
And the swish of a skirt in the dew,
Steadily cantering through
The misty solitudes,
As though they perfectly knew
The old lost road through the woods.
But there is no road through the woods.

ENJOY