

Story of a railway that became a greenway

This is an edited version of Cllr Jon Goldfinch's speech at the opening of the Shallcross Greenway on Thursday 26 April, 2012:

The Cromford and High Peak Railway that we stand on today was completed in 1831, in the reign of King William IV, almost 181 years ago. The old railway went from the centre of Whaley Bridge, at the canal basin, up this slope, and then over some incredibly steep ground to Cromford, almost 33 miles away. When it first opened it took almost two days to travel this distance. It was only two years before that George Stevenson invented the Rocket, the most famous steam locomotive ever, which at the time could reach the ridiculous top speed of 24mph.

Over the next 61 years this railway busily transported limestone, cotton, coal and general goods back and forth between the canal at Cromford and the canal at Whaley Bridge. It is hard to imagine now how important a role it played in the development of our town and in the generations of people who would have been employed or benefited from its operation. Today, it does not look much, but 150 years ago, this path would have been at the centre of the Industrial revolution in the area.

When it started, horses pulled wagons along the more level tracks. In time the horses were replaced by some of the earliest steam trains. Stationary steam engines were used to pull the carriages up steeper tracks, and in this particular section here, a steam engine at the top used to pull wagons up the slope from the bottom, and carefully guide them to the bottom. The water reservoir for that steam engine is still in place near garages in Elnor Lane.

Over the 61 years from 1830 to 1891 that the trains busily went up and down this track, the world around it changed. In the year it opened, 1831, Charles Darwin

set off on his voyage on the Beagle, visited the Galapagos islands and went on to develop his theory of evolution. The first postage stamp in Britain, the Penny Black, was introduced in 1840, Samuel Morse sent the first electrical telegraph in 1844, the beginning of all the electronic communication we know today. Alfred Nobel, after whom the Nobel peace prize was named, invented dynamite in 1865. In the meantime, in the background, this little railway busily chugged on delivering the coal and the limestone.

After 61 years, new and better transport routes meant this railway was no longer able to make its way and it gradually shut down and became unused. From 1892 onwards, the line became completely overgrown, but never forgotten.

As far back as 1972, Whaley Bridge Town Council began looking at how to open up this disused railway for the benefit of Whaley Bridge. For almost 40 years, Whaley Bridge council kept on trying to open up the route so that it could yet again play a significant role. There were many false starts, but in 2010 after some funding magically became available, Cllr John Swift attacked this project anew. In August 2011, planning permission was finally given to allow this section of the old railway line to become a new section of the Goyt Valley Greenway trail.

All the funding for this project has come from the South East Manchester Multi Modal Study (SEMMMS), with Derbyshire County Council implementing the project. We are incredibly grateful to both these groups. It is thanks to John Swift's efforts and particularly to the generosity of the late George Shuker, who gifted a piece of land which enabled the route to go ahead, along with the help of Wayne Bexton at Derbyshire County Council, that we have finally been successful in bringing this scheme to fruition.

The new trail is already extremely popular, used by horses, cyclists, walkers and schoolchildren. It has been resurrected, as a living artery into and through

Whaley Bridge, and the trail is now here for many future generations of people to enjoy.

Benches and Information boards will be in place very shortly. The information boards have been designed by Stephanie Raybould, our town clerk, who has spent many hours researching the history of the railway, and who has also been instrumental in helping to make today's opening a success.

After 40 years of aspiration, everyone can now enjoy this project.