

Quick historical journey along the 'Five Pits Trail'

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First Stop, Tibshelf

Our historical journey along the Five Pits Trail begins at Tibshelf, where the trail connects to the Silverhill Trail; the official starting point.

It is suggested that the name 'Tibshelf' is of pagan origin and had been known by various other names in its infancy: It is claimed that in Anglo Saxon times the area was known as 'Tibba's Shchele' meaning 'Tibba's huts on the ridge!' Another early name, 'Tibber' was translated to mean 'Place of sacrifice on the hill!' But Tibshelf has also been known as; 'Tybcefe', 'Tobershelf' and 'Tybchulf'. In 827 A.D. Tibba signed a loyalty pact with Egbert, first King of England. Tibshelf appeared in the Domesday Book in 1086 as the 'Manor of Tibshelf, held by Robert, with William Peveril in charge for the King'.

Agriculture has always been an important part of the economy at Tibshelf but originally all the land was owned by just a handful of families until the Tibshelf estate was given to the crown in 1553 as a revenue source for the newly constructed St. Thomas's Hospital in London and the hospital remained as the landlord until the takeover by the NHS in 1946. The properties were then all sold off mainly to sitting tenants.

Tibshelf became a centre for stocking making, made on frames by local people in their own homes, and some three storey buildings still remain in Tibshelf; the top storey was used for the stocking making. Stocking making frames were bought for £5 10s in 1818 or rented for 9d a week. Also prior to 1872 the local parishioners took turns to act as constable for the village.

Tibshelf Ponds was one of the first derelict land reclamation projects on the Five Pits Trail and opened way back in 1964. The area now gives us plenty of opportunity to go for a short wander around the woodlands, meadows and the ponds themselves. The woodland now provides an ideal habitat for many birds, especially of the tit and finch families, and consists mainly of silver birch and oak. Whereas the ponds themselves offer a good habitat for a few species of water birds including coots, ducks and moorhens to name a few; some of which appear to be in permanent residence.

The site of the former Tibshelf collieries, the ponds are now home to Tibshelf angling club and fishermen can be seen making use of the facilities at any time of year, however the second pond is closed to angling use during the winter months but the first pond is used throughout the year.

Mining in Tibshelf dates back to the 16th century with shallow mining having been recorded in 1550, these early shallow mines of about 30 feet were privately owned and very dangerous. But in the second half of the 19th century the Babbington Colliery Company came along and it all changed. Their first deep pit was opened in 1868 and became known as Tibshelf Bottom Colliery, production lasting for 65 years until the mine was closed in 1933.

Their second pit was opened in 1891 and became known as Tibshelf Top Colliery; production lasted for just 48 years until its closure in 1939.

With the increase in available employment in the area the local population of Tibshelf increased from around 700 in 1800, to double that by 1871. The population continued to increase and 10 years later had reached approximately 2, 250 and by 1920 as many as 4,000 people lived in the parish. This was mainly due to the coal-mining facilities that existed at the time.

Along with the colliery workings and the subsequent population boom new railways were constructed to facilitate the movement of coal and people in and out of the area. The main station at Tibshelf, 'Tibshelf Town' opened in 1893, regular passenger trains served Tibshelf from 1st May 1896. These earlier passenger services would take 38 minutes to travel from Mansfield to Alfreton via Pleasley, Teversal, Woodend, Tibshelf, Newton, and Westhouses & Blackwell.

This brings me to an interesting point; visualising the route as the train travelled from Mansfield to Alfreton I would imagine that it first passed along the now 'Meden Trail' from Mansfield Woodhouse through Pleasley Vale, then definitely onto the now 'Teversal Trail' from Pleasley Pit to Silverhill, and then along the now 'Silverhill Trail' from Teversal which passes through Woodend, Tibshelf, and Newton before it's rather abrupt current day ending near Blackwell - that's no less than 3 current day green trails that this service would have travelled along all those years ago.

The original track was partly laid to carry coal to the expanding London markets but Tibshelf became a thriving station on this line for the Great Central and Midland Railways. At one point Tibshelf boasted three stations; the main one was Tibshelf Town - now the location of the 'Station Gallop' on the Five Pits Trail near to Tibshelf Ponds - Doe Hill station was nearer Morton but within the Tibshelf parish - the station building still stands alongside the main Midland line between Chesterfield and Nottingham, but no longer a station although the mainline alongside still carries regular trains - Newton Road station - alongside the now Silverhill Trail and still standing, was the site of Smith's Scrap yard for some years well after the station closed in the 1930's. The line (Silverhill) fared better and continued in use for many years as a goods line that served the collieries at Teversal, Stanton Hill and beyond until this was also closed along with the collieries it served during the 1980's. All passenger rail traffic through Tibshelf ceased earlier however under the Beeching axe in 1967.

The railway that ran from Tibshelf to Grassmoor is now the famous 'Five Pits Trail'. Tibshelf and its ponds makes an ideal starting point for anyone wishing to explore the Five Pits Trail and as such is the official start of this trail, mainly because the area was reclaimed well before the area at the Grassmoor end of the trail. People living close to the other end of the trail will possibly argue that Tibshelf is in fact the 'end' of the trail as opposed to the 'start', most probably favouring Grassmoor as the 'start' due to local loyalty. Whatever, the 'Five Pits Trail' is a most enjoyable and scenic route regardless of where you start.

Second Stop, Pilsley

As the Five Pits Trail climbs gradually upwards for a few hundred yards from Tom Hulatt's second memorial we come to a road crossing with a small car park on the left alongside the trail. This is the Hardstoft Road crossing at Pilsley. Once the road is crossed and we are once again back on the trail we are entering the area where Pilsley railway station once stood.

Opened on January 2nd 1893 by the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincoln Railway. The line ran from Beighton (a suburb of Sheffield) to Annesley in Nottinghamshire. So this line would have continued along the route of the now Five Pits Trail towards Tibshelf and then continuing beyond the junction with the Silverhill Trail and on along the Newton Link of the Five Pits Trail. The line would then have passed by Blackwell, South Normanton and Bentinck collieries on its way to Annesley.

Pilsley station finally closed on the 2nd November 1959, the line itself lasted a further 7 years until 1966 when it closed on the 5th September.

As we continue northwards along the Five Pits Trail we soon come to a nature reserve known as Locko Plantation. This is relatively new woodland planted on believe it or not the site of the spoil heaps of Pilsley colliery. The colliery itself was located just before this to the left of the trail.

The first shafts of Pilsley colliery were sunk in 1864 - six shafts were sunk in total over the following decade - mining operations began in 1866. By 1900 the pit was producing 1,200 tons per day with about 1,000 employees. A branch line of approximately 2.5 miles ran from the colliery to connect with the Midland Railway's Erewash Valley Line just north of Doe Hill station at Tibshelf. The colliery closed on 27th April 1957 and hardly any trace remains. However Locko Plantation (on the former spoil heaps) is a fine example of how redevelopment of waste land can totally change the landscape for the better.

As you descend down the slope of the trail from Locko Plantation to the crossing of Locko Lane you will no doubt be aware of how steep this descent and the subsequent ascent on the other side really are, well once when the railway was still in operation there stood a viaduct over the lane that carried the line, but this has long since been demolished.

Not much information is available online about Pilsley village itself, except that it was originally recorded as a borough within North Wingfield Parish and became a place in its own right long after. This gives the impression that Pilsley is a relatively new place by comparison to many others near by.

Third stop, Holmewood

Our next 'pit' stop (please pardon the pun) along the Five Pits Trail finds us at Holmewood. Although officially entitled Hardwick Colliery the pit was known by the locals as Holmewood. Unlike our previous two stops at Tibshelf and Pilsley which had both collieries and railway stations to their name Holmewood hadn't - realistically it didn't even have a colliery named after it (it was called Hardwick as mentioned earlier) but the reason for this will become apparent as you read on. Holmewood had a colliery but no station as did our next stop Williamthorpe but between them used to lie Heath station which served both areas; the twist is thus - Holmewood and Williamthorpe had pits but no station, Heath had a station but no pit.

With the expansion of colliery workings in the area at the beginning of the 20th Century it became necessary to build new housing for the workforce of the new Hardwick Colliery. These new terraced houses, built by the Hardwick Colliery Company were built on the site of Williamthorpe Wood, opposite Heath railway station between 1901 and 1911; the area was dominated by the new pit with the majority of the local men working there. Over the years this 'colliery village' expanded dramatically to become Holmewood. With this in mind we see that Holmewood is a relatively new settlement just over 100 years old and in local village terms is merely a baby, although the parish of Heath in which Holmewood is located dates back before Doomsday

Work at Hardwick Colliery (often referred to as Holmewood colliery) commenced in 1868 and production continued for a century until the mine was finally closed in 1968. Coke ovens were also built on the site and were used from 1910 to 1962. Referring back to my earlier point you will note that Hardwick colliery was producing coal before Holmewood was built. The area where once stood Hardwick Colliery is now a large industrial estate and the area where the first houses of Holmewood were constructed (since demolished) is now 'Holmewood Woodlands' on the Five Pits Trail and supports a large array of wildlife and fauna. The pit was also closely connected to the nearby Williamthorpe colliery that was created a few years later by the same company, Hardwick Colliery Company.

The area was served by Heath railway station which was opened in 1893 but was closed to passenger services in 1963. Freight passage continued for three more years but the station was closed completely in 1965 with freight passage through the site continuing for just one year until the line itself was closed in 1966. The map shows the locations of both Hardwick (Holmewood) Colliery and Heath Station. The site of Heath station is also now part of the Five Pits Trail.

Fourth Stop, Williamthorpe

Next stop on our historical journey finds us paying a visit to Williamthorpe and its pit, our last stop before the end of the journey at Grassmoor.

In 1830 the Hardwick Colliery Company was formed and in 1840 they sank a colliery on Williamthorpe Road, this became Lings Colliery. In 1886 they began to develop a new colliery which was to become Hardwick (or Holmewood) Colliery in close proximity. By 1890 the company was looking to expand and so one of the company owners, John Chambers, purchased a new lease for a large amount of coal. To aid the expansion the Hardwick Colliery Company sold out and formed a new company, the Hardwick Coal Company (not a lot of difference in the name but still a new company), Lings Colliery was closed in 1886 but the new company went on to buy up other smaller mining companies and private partnerships in the area with their large share capital of £350,000 at the turn of the 20th Century.

At Williamthorpe the company wished to establish a new pit, so the sinking of the first shafts for the new Williamthorpe colliery began in 1901 with production commencing in 1905. Williamthorpe was a first class colliery in its time; roadways descended into Williamthorpe colliery pit bottom from the nearby Hardwick (Holmewood) colliery, the idea was that these underground roadways could use the force of gravity as opposed to powered haulage to allow the coal to be lifted with the more advanced winding equipment at Williamthorpe; which could raise 7 tons of coal in just 45 seconds. The shafts at Williamthorpe were the deepest in the Midlands at 550 yards.

Williamthorpe colliery was extensively modernised between 1938 and 1940, overhead pylons and long cables would carry buckets over Holmewood village to fuel the coke ovens on the Hardwick (Holmewood) colliery site; the coke ovens were built in 1910 and closed in the early 1960's. Williamthorpe became the East Midlands showpiece colliery until its eventual closure in 1970.

Nowadays an area of the former colliery is part of a large industrial estate, the rest is Williamthorpe Ponds and sports three areas of open water and extensive woodland on the former spoil heaps. The reed bed at Williamthorpe Ponds is one of the largest in Derbyshire and the area of ponds and woodland supports numerous water birds and a vast array of other wildlife; a startling 200 separate species of birds have been recorded on the site. Angling is very popular here and is actively encouraged along with nature studies - a bird hide is provided on site for use by prior arrangement - disabled access is also provided with a purposely built 'wheelchair route' from here to Holmewood.

The ponds rarely freeze over, even in winter, as from Welbeck and Thoresby collieries in the Nottinghamshire coalfields a staggering 10 million gallons of water per week on average is

pumped into Williathorpe Ponds at a constant temperature of 16 degrees centigrade and helps to support much water life, especially in winter when everywhere else is frozen.



Fifth and Final Stop, Grassmoor

Our fifth stop along the Five Pits Trail brings us to our final destination at Grassmoor Country Park. As we travel along the Five Pits Trail from Williamthorpe Ponds to Grassmoor Country Park for the first time ever we do not actually follow the original railway route which went via Temple Normanton, but instead pass along a once branch via North Wingfield, where we pass Wolfie Pond before descending the slope into the south of Grassmoor Country Park (see archive map picture). After passing over the *old* A617 the line used to branch off west through Temple Normanton and Grassmoor on its way to Chesterfield, but this section is now the *newer* A617 Hasland Bypass. From this branch the line also continued north via Arkwright, Duckmanton, Staveley, Renishaw, Holbrook roughly following a similar route to the river Rother and eventually into Rotherham in South Yorkshire.

Grassmoor railway station was located alongside Mansfield Road to the north-west of the colliery site. Opened in 1893, the station was in a deep cutting, since filled in and levelled off, the station building was a brick construction and a footbridge over the line allowed access to both platforms. After the station closed to passengers in 1940 the station was subsequently partially demolished but the line itself stayed open for coal traffic until the closure of the colliery.

Grassmoor Country Park stands on the site of the once Grassmoor colliery; locally known as the 'Barnes' colliery after the surname of its founder. Prior to the sinking of the first shafts in 1846 the area had been worked by shallow bell pits; the pit officially opened in 1880. By 1896 Grassmoor colliery boasted 60 miles of underground roadways and 6 miles of coal face, and was the first colliery in Derbyshire to have pit baths which were built in 1929 at a cost of £15,000. Grassmoor colliery merged with Williamthorpe colliery in 1950 and the coal was then turned up at Williamthorpe - this is interesting in the fact that coal produced at nearby Hardwick (Holmewood) colliery was also brought to the surface at Williamthorpe; so effectively all three colliers of Grassmoor, Hardwick and Williamthorpe were connected underground.

Coke ovens were worked on the colliery site from around the time the first shafts were worked, the coking plant was modernised in 1935 with the installation of new ovens and would then produce on average 300 tons of coke, 19 tons of tar, 6 tons of ammonium sulphate, 13,000 gallons of motor spirit, 15,000 gallons of crude Benzol and 5,000,000 cubic feet of coal gas, not over a week or a month but daily. Gas produced from the coking process was piped to Chesterfield, Shirebrook and Mansfield for domestic and industrial customers. The Grassmoor coking plant eventually closed during the 1950's with the opening of a newer facility at Wingerworth.

The Derbyshire miners training centre was built on the Grassmoor colliery site in 1952 and provided regular training for all the colliery staff around this area of Derbyshire - I remember

some of my friends when leaving school would begin their initial training at the Grassmoor centre before going into their relative colliery - Grassmoor colliery finally closed in 1971 but the training centre continued into the late 1980's whilst the colliery site was undergoing open cast workings before land reclamation began in 1989. The training centre was then closed and became a business park until that also was finally closed around the turn of the 21st Century.

Grassmoor village was originally known as 'Gresmore', meaning 'grey copse', according to parish records of 1568. During the later half of the 19th and earlier 20th centuries the biggest employer at Grassmoor was the colliery who employed around 3,000 people at its height. A popular leisure facility in the village is Barnes Park, named after the colliery owner, which was opened in 1920 and sported tennis courts, a bowling green, cricket field, football field and children's playground; the tennis courts and bowling green are now gone but the rest remains and the park is now the domain of local leisure-seekers.

The village once boasted two cinemas of which one, the Electric Theatre opened in 1936 and later became known as the Roxy, but has since been demolished. The other cinema had a much longer history; a small chapel built in 1877 was replaced in 1879 by the Grassmoor Primitive Methodist Church as the original chapel had become too small, this new church was also eventually replaced in 1899 by the current Methodist Church but the old one remained as a Sunday school until sold to the Corporation Theatre Company Ltd. in 1913 for use as a cinema. Later this became a billiard hall and then a betting shop, the building was eventually demolished. The eventual replacement Methodist Church however still stands and is put to regular use.

Grassmoor Country Park on the former colliery site is now the end or start point of the Five Pits Trail. Within the park are two ponds supporting many water species, including the elusive water vole and many species of dragonflies, large woodland supports many native birds and areas of extensive grassland which are left uncut until late summer allow an ideal habitat for many butterflies and insects - grass snakes have also been spotted in Grassmoor Country Park.

The park has many benches and picnic areas, lots of easy-access footpaths, and two car parks (although the one on Mansfield Road is very small and can only accommodate a handful of vehicles). During the summer months the park buzzes with human activity and is an ideal starting point to explore the Five Pits Trail.

We have now come to the end of our historical journey through the 'five pits' of the famous trail, thank you for travelling with us.

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