



HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT AUDIT

THE CROFT BRANCH LINE OF THE STOCKTON & DARLINGTON RAILWAY

Archaeo-Environment
for The Stockton &
Darlington Railway
Heritage Action Zone

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SUMMARY

This report looks at the history of the Croft branch line of the Stockton & Darlington Railway and provides an audit of what survives of the original 1829 line and its condition. It also assesses the significance of the line and any remaining structures associated with it. It then goes on to assess the potential for future enhanced access, conservation and interpretation of the branch line in advance of the Stockton & Darlington Railway's 200th anniversary in 2025.

The Stockton & Darlington Railway's Croft branch line was opened on the 27th October 1829. It was 3 ½ miles long and ran from north of Hill House east of Skerne Bridge in Darlington to the north side of Hurworth Place where it terminated at the S&DR's newly built Croft Depot. It was built as a single-track railway designed to haul coals to the depot largely for a domestic market. It also hauled limestone for agricultural use and building materials as required, and passengers made use of the line too. Croft, unlike the main line, was horse powered, at least initially. The branch line was purchased by the GNER in 1836 but they only made use of the first 1 ½ miles of track which they relaid. This stretch of track remains in use today as part of the East Coast Mainline. The rest of the track continued in use for freight delivered to the depot which closed in 1964.

Significance

At first glance, the Croft branch was a relatively simple, short, single track horse drawn railway with a depot that focused on coal traffic and other forms of freight. However, it also used locomotives at various times, and it carried passengers at least until 1833 and occasionally thereafter. Importantly it was part of the Stockton & Darlington Railway whose opening triggered the growth of railways around the world. It falls within the pioneering days of the S&DR between 1825 and 1830 when the S&DR was ahead of all other companies and was testing and running a fully-fledged railway network complete with branch lines. Croft Branch was part of this pioneering network.

While the 1825 S&DR was parent to the modern railways that followed, the Croft Branch was the parent to the GNER. The GNER wasn't seen as a threat to the S&DR; instead its very existence had been anticipated in 1818 and was part of Joseph Pease's vision from 1835. The sale of the branch to the S&DR also had the benefit of giving the S&DR access to the upgraded track at the north end of the line and the new Bank Top station. The creation of this new company was an important leap forward in the provision of a national railway service with the linking together of various private companies. It is part of the site's significance that the northern half has remained in continual railway use since 1829.

Survival of structures and archaeological evidence

The survival of original features associated with the branch line varies along the route. However it can broadly be summarised as being poorer where the line became part of the GNER and is now part of the East Coast Mainline. It is inevitable that constant changes to the line will have removed what went before. That is not to say that evidence of the line has wholly been swept away. Parkside accommodation bridge, not necessarily an 1829 structure, but possibly one from 1838-41 has survived despite a constant battle with today's traffic. The reused sleeper blocks at John Street and Smithfield Road also indicate how archaeological evidence can survive on the route and within later structures.

This urban northern end also contributes towards the setting of the line. The railway attracted industry and it generated more buildings of its own in the form of engineering works and coal depots. Even when these are much later in date, they reinforce the railway

character of the town and merit conserving in a way that reflects their heritage but adapts them for 21st century use. Many are derelict and vandalised; new uses which build on their railway associations, can help to make their contribution to the townscape, the Parkgate Conservation Area and the branch line's setting, a positive one.

Enhancing access to the route

The Council will need to decide whether access from Darlington alongside or on the route is to be pursued. This would link Darlington with Croft creating a mostly attractive green footpath and/or cycle route.

Improving access to the heritage interest of the line so that it can be better appreciated is challenging in this urban environment. Post-Croft branch line development has created private gardens close to the line, or has generated busy, noisy roads that are not pleasant walking experiences. Here the existence of pavements and urban cycle ways in the general vicinity create an option of sorts in the vicinity of Haughton Road.

There are other possibilities in this urban environment. The railway has shrunk since its turn of the century size and as a result there are wide areas of former sidings, now unused scrubland, or in the case of Geneva Woods, a nature reserve with clear evidence for the sidings and railway woodland management techniques. Turning such areas into spaces that can be shared with walkers and wildlife, and maybe cyclists too, could provide an attractive walking environment accompanied by the sounds of trains without detriment to the high safety standards of Network Rail. Such former sidings have the potential to create new accessible areas east of Borough Road and Bank Top which would link into Geneva Woods where there is already access along former sidings. From here there is a well-used network of paths east of Paddock Lane, but they are not currently formal rights of way. The main obstacle to improving access along the entire length of line is the A66. There are no easy or cheap solutions to creating a safe crossing.

South of the Parkgate Junction the branch line takes on a different character because this becomes that part of the line that was retained as a modest freight line until 1964. Alterations were minimal and the structures seen today reflect the structures built in 1829 with just a few additions. The route is easily discerned and consists variously of embankments or cuttings. Much of this section of the line merits protection through designation and the planning process.

Most of the southern section is on private land and so private ownership is the biggest obstacle to enhanced access.

For those stretches abandoned since 1964, the trackbed has become a wildlife corridor. This creates a beautiful route where butterflies and birds abound along with wildflowers and self-seeded trees. It is therefore important that before any additional access is considered, that the significance of the ecology is assessed, and options explored which would protect this interest.

Conservation Management of the Branch Line

The significance of the branch line merits protection through the planning process and so the route and its associated structures should be flagged up on the Council's GIS for the planning department. The survival of sleeper blocks in proximity to the former branch line at John Street and within railway bridges at Parkside and Smithfield Road, all show how archaeological evidence from the line might be uncovered.

One hundred and nineteen records of sites likely to be of archaeological interest or potential have been provided to the Council as a Geographic Information System. Very few of these are known to survive but may require further information regarding their significance and survival if part of any future development. More detailed sections in this report flag up where Heritage Statements or pre-determination evaluation work is recommended, normally where there are development proposals near the route. No development should build over the branch line and any developments nearby should include in their landscaping proposals, provisions to access to the route.

Very little of the trackbed from Geneva Woods southwards is developed and most is now overgrown. At the terminus of the line, there are fragmentary remains of the depot walls and sidings survive as tree covered earthworks. These should be protected, as, like the rest of the surviving trackbed, they are vulnerable to ground moving operations, soil extraction and developments which require no planning permission.

The lack of any protection for the extant remains of the trackbed, mostly from Geneva Woods southwards, suggests that designation either as a scheduled monument or as a Conservation Area, would provide additional protection. Such designation would also encourage the production of a Conservation Plan for the route and help landowners identify uses that are not destructive to the archaeological or wildlife interests.

In isolation, not all parts meet the standard of scheduling on the grounds of archaeological interest, but its association with the internationally important S&DR and the branch line's role in creating an important national railway link, provides a much-enhanced historic interest that merits protection at a national level. The criteria for designation as a Conservation Area is lower and may in fact be adequate to protect the remains.

Fly tipping is also creating unattractive additions to Linden Drive and to parts of the privately-owned line near where there is road access (Snipe Lane and Esk Road for example).

Overall there is enough surviving of the branch line and within a setting that reinforces the railway heritage to merit pro-active conservation and enhanced access. This is underway now for the 1825 mainline with a view to improving the conservation, interpretation, access and long-term maintenance for the 200th anniversary in 2025. The Croft branch line was not built until the revenues from the mainline and the Black Boy Branch Lines had generated sufficient income and confidence to proceed, although some acquisition of land took place from 1825 to build it. If the process of working towards 2025 is successful, it will generate opportunities for the Croft branch line too, but the timetable here could be set for 2029, its 200th anniversary, which would allow the investment to be staggered – much as the Stockton & Darlington Railway Company did nearly two hundred years ago.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A number of archival services have helped with this survey by making available their material based on the S&DR. The Durham Records Office provided copies of Stephenson's 1821 survey and his Book of Reference and the Durham University Special Collections have made their tithe maps available online. Our grateful thanks also go to Alison Grange of the Ken Hoole Studies Library and Mandy Faye of Crown Street Local Studies Library for their assistance in tracking down other relevant material.

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Thank you too to Richie Starrs, the Heritage Action Zone officer, for arranging ownership information so that consents to access private land could be obtained and to Ros Kain, Darlington Borough Council's conservation officer for getting the project up and running.

The fieldwork was carried out in February and March 2019.

Much of the route is on private land or on live line and so inclusion in this report does not mean that there is currently any public access to these areas. Thank you very much to the landowners and occupiers who granted consent to visit their part of the Croft branch line.

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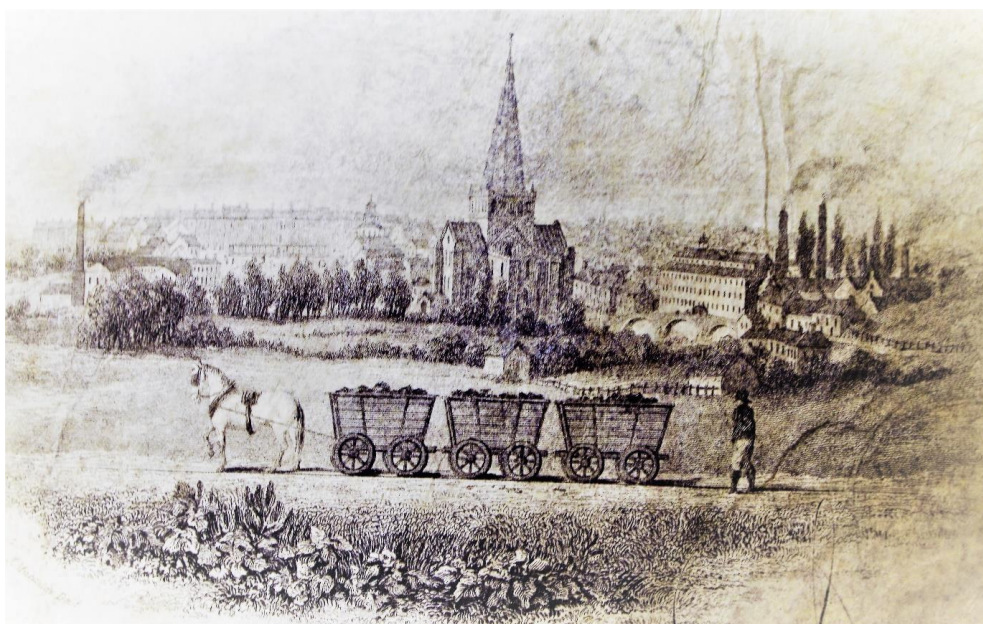


Table of Contents

SUMMARY	1
Acknowledgements.....	4
INTRODUCTION	7
HISTORIC BACKGROUND	7
ROUTE OF THE CROFT BRANCH LINE - HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT AUDIT	16
The Start to Parkgate Junction.....	16
Parkgate Junction to Bank Top.....	24
Bank Top to Parkside Bridge.....	29
Parkside Bridge to the A66.....	38
A66 to Black Banks Farm.....	45
Black Banks Farm to the Coal Depot.....	51
The Coal Depot.....	58
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CROFT BRANCH	65
CONCLUSION	67
BIBLIOGRAPHY	69
APPENDIX A	Maps of the route and site records added
APPENDIX B	The Chronology of the Croft Branch
APPENDIX C	Action Plan (confidential)
APPENDIX D	Landownership (confidential)
APPENDIX E	Spreadsheet of new HER sites added

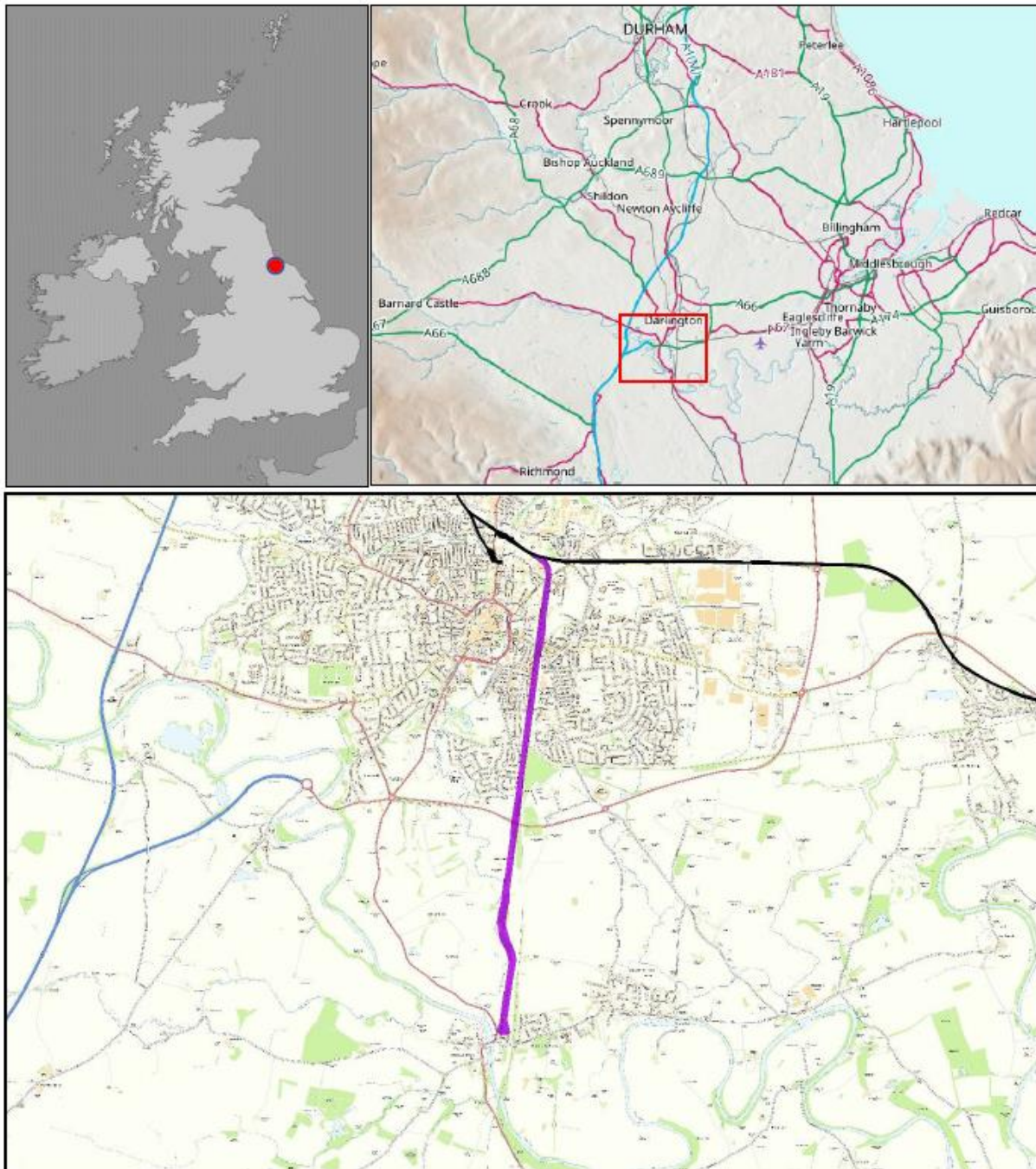


Figure 1. The location of the Croft Branch Line (in purple) running from the Stockton & Darlington Railway mainline in Darlington (in black) to Hurworth Place near Croft on Tees. See Appendix B for a series of larger scale maps with new HER sites added

INTRODUCTION

The Stockton & Darlington Railway Croft branch line was opened on the 27th October 1829. It was 3 ½ miles long and ran from north of Hill House east of Skerne Bridge in Darlington (north of Upper John Street today, NGR 429450 515379) to the north side of Hurworth Place where it terminated at the S&DR's newly built Croft Depot (NGR 429162 509962).¹ It was built as a single track railway designed to haul coals to the depot largely for a domestic market. It also hauled limestone and building materials as required and passengers made use of the line too. Croft, unlike the main line, would be horse powered, at least initially, although locomotives were introduced by the S&DR as they were found to be cheaper to run. The branch line was purchased by the GNER in 1836 but they only made use of the first 1 ½ miles of track which they relaid. This stretch of track remains in use today as part of the East Coast Mainline. The rest of the track continued in use for freight delivered to the depot which closed in 1964.

This report looks at the history of the branch line and provides an audit of what survives of the original 1829 branch line and its condition. It also assesses the significance of the line and any remaining structures associated with it. It then goes on to assess the potential for future enhanced access, conservation and interpretation of the branch line in advance of the Stockton & Darlington Railway's 200th anniversary in 2025.

HISTORIC BACKGROUND

The Stockton & Darlington Railway (S&DR) was formally opened on the 27th September 1825. It was designed and set out as a permanent 26-mile-long mainline running from Witton Park in south west Durham to the River Tees at Stockton. It was intended (in the Acts of Parliament of 1821 and 1823) to have permanent branch lines as well as the main line; by 1830 it had branch lines at Darlington (opened 1825), Yarm (opened 1825), Black Boy (opened 1827), Croft (opened 1829), Haggerleases (opened 1830), and had extended its main line to the new railway port of Port Darlington also by 1830 (which included the creation of Middlesbrough – the first planned railway town in the world).

The railway was designed to transport any goods, freight, merchandise and passengers² between south west Durham and the urban areas of Darlington, Yarm, Stockton and with river links to London. The south west of Durham had several main natural resources that could now be exploited and exported, namely coal, limestone and stone.

Provision for the Croft branch was not included in the 1821 Act, but in the revised 1823 Act dated the 23rd May where it was estimated to cost £74,300. It was however included in a report by George Overton dated 20th October 1818 looking at the feasibility of the railway versus canal.³ In that report, he estimated that the Croft branch could transport 10,000 tons of coal yearly to a target market in Richmond and Northallerton.⁴

¹ The branch line didn't extend into Croft because of the expense of crossing the river Tees. A similar approach had been taken on the Yarm branch line in 1825 which didn't extend into Yarm for the same reason.

² Although passengers were only included in the revised 1823 Act of Parliament which also switched the method of traction on the mainline from horse to locomotive

³ Holmes 1975, 3

⁴ Holmes 1975, 53



Figure 2. George Stephenson's proposed route of the Croft branch line with an improbably sharp right turn leading from the main line at Hill Top House (DRO Q/D/P/8)

The branch line as built, peeled away from the main line a little east of the new railway bridge carrying rail traffic over the river Skerne at Hill Top⁵ and then gently curved southwards towards Croft Bridge where a depot for delivering coal and lime was located.

And whereas by Levels and Surveys lately made and taken it appears that a Branch Railway or Tramroad may be made, as herein after described, to join or communicate with the said Railway or Tramroad at or near a certain House called Hill House, belonging to John Allen Esquire, and situate in Darlington Bondgate in the said County of Durham, and now in the occupation of Anthony Simpson, and extending from thence to or near the East End of Croft Bridge, in the Parish of Hurworth in the said County of Durham, which will be of considerable Utility:"⁶

The single-track Croft branch line was particularly designed to transport coal and lime to the North Riding of Yorkshire and serve the towns of Richmond and Northallerton. It would however be necessary for purchasers of coal etc to drive from Richmond, Northallerton and the surrounding countryside to the Croft Depot by horse and cart in order to load up the purchases and then return. A deputation representing this wider vicinity of Richmond proposed to the Railway Company that they might extend the Croft branch into Yorkshire for about a mile; but on considering the heavy expenses that the company would incur, in

⁵ Hill Top House was said to be a stone building of the Tudor period (Cookson 2003, 124)

⁶ An Act to enable the Stockton and Darlington Railway Company to vary and alter the Line of their Railway...23rd May 1823, 662

particular by the need for a bridge across the Tees and an inclined plane, the committee firmly rejected the proposal.⁷

The estimated costs for the whole branch line had been £74,300⁸ Much of the land for the branch line had been purchased by September 1825 and it had been the intention to proceed with the construction works then too, but the costs of construction including the 1827 Black Boy branch had exceeded budgets and so the Croft branch line was delayed.⁹

Only one section of the route had not been purchased in 1825. This was a small section belonging to Mr Thomas Trueman.¹⁰ Trueman owned land in Blackwell Township on the border of Darlington and Hurworth parishes. His land, occupied by William Smurthwaite, was adjacent to the river Skerne and on Stephenson's proposed route, would require two crossings of the river Skerne, therefore two bridges.¹¹ As works later progressed the stretches of the line and structures took the names of former owners and so there are references to Trueman's Bridge in historic reports. Similarly, there are references to 'Sowerby's cut' in the later lists of expenses. John Sowerby occupied land in Blackwell Township owned by the Trustees of Mary Pease's estate who were none other than Edward and Joseph Pease of the S&DR.¹²



Figure 3 The red arrow marks plot 303 belonging to Thomas Trueman which was the only piece of land not already purchased by September 1825 in preparation for the Croft branch line. The blue arrow marks the location of 'Sowerby's Cut'. (DRO Q/D/P/8)

The route chosen for the line appears to have varied from that proposed by George Stephenson. The meandering nature of the river Skerne resulted in Stephenson's route

⁷ Jeans 1875, 63

⁸ Coulthard and Teasdale et al 2018, 32

⁹ Coulthard and Teasdale et al 2018 32

¹⁰ RAIL 667/8

¹¹ Plot 303 on Stephenson's plan and book of reference DRO Q/DP/8

¹² Plot 297 on Stephenson's plan and book of reference DRO Q/DP/8

making a number of crossings. To reduce the need for bridges and costs, the route as built, stayed on the east side of the Skerne.

By July 1827, about one quarter of the way had been completed and estimates were provided to the Committee to complete the branch line.¹³ These consisted of:

Estimated expense to complete the Croft Branch Railway	
Land, Damages and New Fences	£1900
Cutting and Embanking	1830
Rails, chairs, points, crossings, nails, pins and stone ¹⁴ blocks	2,746
Laying Way, repairing way during forming the way	300
Ballasting during D ^o .	275
Side gutter	43
Finishing the Way and Ballasting	675
Footpaths	70
Fencing off Railway, Gates & Posts	400
Leading sundry materials	500
Bridges, Drains, Aqueducts, Crossings etc	700
Cutting and Embanking & new cuts of the River Skerne	300
Waggons and repairs to D ^o .	100
Depots for coal and lime, weighing machine, sheds etc,	600
Cart Road to the Depots	50
Contingencies 10£ %	1000
Total	11,489

The Committee decided to complete the works in August 1827¹⁵ and the expenses started to flow in with monthly accounts kept of works carried out and the names of contractors employed. The lists of accounts confirm that the drains were covered, not open, Trueman's Bridge was built of bricks, stone blocks were used as sleepers and the boundary of the company's land was marked with fencing rather than walling. The archival material also refers to the names of some of the workers who built the line including William Walker, Ralph Bell, William Surtees, Thomas Law & Wade and Jo Barwick.

The construction of the trackbed and its associated structures was not without tragedy. Two accidents happened during the works within a relatively short time of each other. On the 11th April 1829 The Durham County Advertiser reported:

'A melancholy and fatal accident happened on Friday last, to a labouring man, named Francis Johnson, who, whilst engaged in excavating clay at the Croft Branch of the Stockton and Darlington Railway, was unfortunately killed by the fall of earth and other materials above him. An inquest was held the same day, before C. Sherwood Esq., Coroner of Darlington Ward, when a verdict was returned of accidental death'. The deceased was a native of Newcastle.

¹³ RAIL 667/284

¹⁴ The original manuscript had wood blocks, but 'wood' was scored out and 'stone' pencilled in

¹⁵ RAIL 667/1519

Within only a couple of months (20th June 1829), the same newspaper reported another unfortunate incident:

Yesterday se'night, a melancholy accident happened on the Croft branch of the Darlington Railway. Robert Brignal, who had commenced working only that morning, had his leg so dreadfully fractured by a waggon passing over it, that he was obliged to have it amputated. He is a way of recovery.

The Opening Day

The Croft branch was formally opened on the 27th October 1829. The opening day started with a procession of “numerous coaches, each drawn by one horse, crowded with from 30 to 50 passengers, and supplied with banners. These were followed by a train of waggons laden with coals from every different mine for the supply of the North Riding”.¹⁶

The celebrations then continued with a ‘cold collation’ at Croft Spa Hotel under the supervision of the S&DR Company solicitor Francis Mewburn. Mewburn’s vision, as pronounced on that day, was of a railway that one day might allow travellers to lunch in Darlington and take an opera in London the same evening. Such a vision was met with considerable mirth, but the Croft Branch was to have a role in making that national network a reality.

Croft Branch Key Character. The forward-thinking Francis Mewburn.

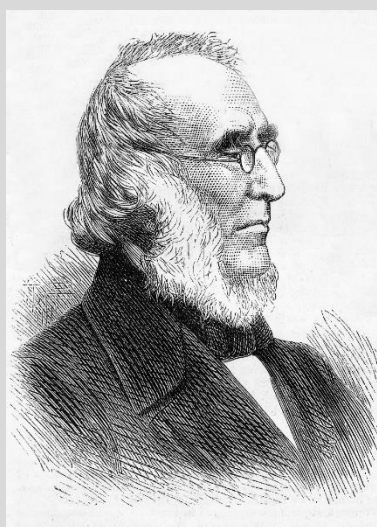


Figure 4. Francis Mewburn, the S&DR Company solicitor looking forward to lunch in Darlington and an opera in London the same day (Image courtesy of NERA and part of the NERA collection).

The presence of passengers in the opening day procession was not just a fun ride, but a sign of the intention to provide a passenger service. This started immediately as a horse drawn service but was withdrawn on 13 December 1833.¹⁷ It is not clear why the service was suspended, but earlier in August 1833, the Committee minutes noted that parliament had increased the duties to be paid for using coaches on the line. This was dealt with by the Committee imposing a small increase on the dues and so no losses were incurred for the

¹⁶ Hylton Dyer Longstaffe cited in Wall 2001, 111

¹⁷ Wall 2001, 111









Company.¹⁸ One year later the Company were concerned about the fall in coal sales (partly due to increased competition) and so sought to decrease their expenditure. This may have been part of the reason for removing the passenger service, but in the same minutes, it was noted how well the facilities for passengers had been improved elsewhere on the line.¹⁹ The improvements alluded to included taking the control back of the passenger service from individual contractors in 1833 and it is possible that the prospect of returns from a passenger service along this short branch were not high enough to merit the investment this would require.

The opening of the branch line occurred in exciting and optimistic times for the S&DR. Not everything had run smoothly, least of all the locomotives until 1827 and finances were stretched. However, after the opening of the Croft Branch Line, the Haggerleases Branch was due to open in May 1830 and it would become a valuable feeder into the mainline. Great hopes were also pinned to the opening of the Middlesbrough Branch Line in December 1830 leading to an increase in the export of coals.²⁰

The presence of the Croft branch line was predicted by the S&DR Committee to bring considerable public benefit and much needed revenue to the railway company; in the words of the minutes “it promises to realise the anticipation formed of its being an important acquisition to your undertaking”.²¹

The Depot

Advance notices in the press promised coals from eight separate collieries which would be available from the opening day. The collieries provided three different types of coal – fire coal for domestic use, small coal for manufactories and lime or splint coal for lime kilns. Those providing the most coal and the greatest range of coal types had the larger number of cells allocated.

-  Witton Park fire and small coal
-  Old Etherley fire and small coal
-  New Etherley fire and small coal
-  Black Boy fire coal, small coal and lime coal
-  Eldon Fire, small and lime coal
-  Shildon fire, small and lime coal
-  Coundon fire coal and lime coal
-  Deanery fire coal and lime coal

The Railway Company also sought to ‘assure the Public that no exertion will be wanting on their part to render this improved means of communication with the collieries, Lime Kilns, Stone Quarries etc as beneficial as possible to the southern district of the county of Durham and the North Riding of the county of York.’²² Not listed here, but clear from other S&DR correspondence, lead and lime were also transported to the depot.²³

The S&DR appointed Mr. George Langstaff as their Agent at the depot; he was provided with a house nearby.²⁴ It was not long before the owner of Coundon Colliery, W.L. Wharton, felt aggrieved that he had only been appointed one cell at the depot while others had been

¹⁸ RAIL 667/8

¹⁹ RAIL 667/8

²⁰ Jeans 1875, 103-4

²¹ Jeans 1875, 104

²² Durham County Advertiser 24 October 1829 – notice published by Richard Otley

²³ RAIL 667/9

²⁴ This does not appear to survive

allocated more. He also accused Langstaff of providing poor quality coals to customers when higher quality had been paid for.²⁵ His complaint became personal and he made very public accusations against Mr Langstaff to the S&DR. As a result, Mr Langstaff published a very long defence in the local press in June 1830 which whilst putting Mr Wharton firmly in his place, also set out how the cells were allocated to each colliery and how coals were purchased from the depot. From his letters we can see that based on the deliveries to the Croft Depot since opening, collieries were allocated cells as follows:²⁶

Old Black Boy was allocated 4 or 5 cells, Shildon 4 cells, Eldon 3 cells, Old Etherley 3 cells, New Etherley 3 cells, Witton Park 3 cells, Deanery 1 cell and Coundon 1 cell. This suggests that there were 22 cells in use at that time, but all have since been demolished.

The same letter alludes to different ways the S&DR had operated the depots generally. On the opening of the Croft Depot, one agent had been appointed, but there was an argument that having agents from each of the collieries at the depots was also a possible way of running them and there is some suggestion that the S&DR had tried this out. It was also emphasised the importance of obtaining a receipt on payment at the depot before collecting deliveries, thus ensuring that customers left with what they had paid for.

Despite the public spat between Langstaff and Wharton, the Croft depot was making healthy returns by July 1830 much to the relief of the S&DR.²⁷ It was also bringing benefits to the Croft Spa Hotel and the adjacent Comet Inn. In January 1830 the lease for the Comet was advertised as the incumbent tenant Robert Marshall was leaving. The inn was promoted as a well accustomed inn with extensive stabling, a Yard, and other conveniences attached'. Its proximity to the great north road and the spa had previously been a considerable advantage, but now its proximity to the Croft Branch Railway and the Depot was also advantageous for procuring coal.²⁸

Stolen!

The branch had initially been horse powered but it is clear that locomotives were introduced early on. One of these locomotives, the William IV,²⁹ was stolen by 'eavel deposed person or persons' from the branch line in summer 1832.³⁰ By March 1837 the committee instructed John Harris to look at the relative costs of hauling coal by horse or engine – suggesting that the use of the locomotive had ceased. Harris reported to the Committee that it would be expedient to use locomotives, but this may never have happened.³¹ In January 1840 a contract was agreed with William Walton for leading coals on the Croft branch by horse to Croft, Black Banks, Polam and Bank Top at varying rates. Yet at the same meeting, the secretary reported on the differences in expense between leading coals to Croft by horse or engine. It had cost an additional £62-10-3 since using horse. It was decided that this information should be given to the GNER who were in the process of taking over the branch.³²

Meanwhile horsepower continued to be used for passengers – but apparently only for private occasional use after 1833. For example, Mr Gill issued a formal request in August 1836 to

²⁵ Moorsom 1975, 38-9

²⁶ Durham Chronicle 19 June 1830

Crown Street Library 33086 U 415J

²⁷ RAIL 667/8

²⁸ Durham Chronicle Saturday 23rd January 1830

²⁹ William IV, Locomotive no. 14. A 0-6-0 type engine built in 1831 (Pearce 1996, 235)

³⁰ Coulthard and Teasdale et al 2018, 33

³¹ RAIL 667/9

³² RAIL 667/11

the S&DR to be able run a coach from Black Banks along the Croft branch on Sundays to take his family to church. This was agreed subject to a payment by Mr Gill of two guineas per annum for two coaches each Sunday.³³

By the mid-1830s lime sales were down due to a depressed agricultural market and while landsales of coal were increasing across the S&DR depots in 1835, they were falling at Croft.³⁴ This necessitated an investigation by the S&DR and while the outcome is not known, there appears to have been an issue with collieries selling direct from the pits.

The line around Bank Top in 1837 was creating some difficulties. In March 1837 the company decided to secure and better define the boundary of the line there.³⁵ John Harris was instructed to put in boundary stones on the Croft branch later that month and in June the way at Bank Top was being blocked by wagons. The area at Bank Top was one of the fastest growing areas along the branch line and it is possible that the need to better define and secure the boundaries was brought about to prevent encroachment and illegal trespass.

Pease's Great Idea and the Sale to the GNER

The Great North of England Railway was based on an idea by Joseph Pease who envisaged a new line between York and Newcastle (via Croft) with the intention of eventually extending the line to London. On the 2nd November 1835 a start was made on surveying the northern half of the line between Gateshead and Croft, but it was clear that this route would be far more challenging than the south section to York. It was decided to proceed with obtaining the necessary consents from Parliament for the difficult north section first to give it a head start, then follow with the south section. The survey took an astonishingly quick fourteen days and the plans were deposited in another fourteen. The race was on to provide this much sought-after linking route that would prove to be so successful that it remains a popular route today.

Royal Assent for the northern half between Croft and the Tyne was granted in 1836 and for the southern half between Croft and York in 12 July 1837. The costs for the entire line were estimated to be one million pounds, excluding locomotives and rolling stock.³⁶

A new company was formed to take this vision forward – the Great North of England Railway Company.

The first sod for this new line to York was cut at Croft on the 25 November 1837 and construction contracts were let including the building of a new bridge over the Tees; a railway bridge that continues in use today as part of the East Coast Mainline. That particular building project was blighted with bad worker relations, strikes and demands for higher wages. All of this was underway before the GNER had bought the Croft branch line so that it could be incorporated into the new route.

The target market of the S&DR for landsale coal in Northallerton, Richmond and the surrounding villages of the North Riding would soon be able to access coal more conveniently via this new line which was set to travel through Northallerton. It was therefore expedient to sell off the Croft Branch to the GNER but a price still had to be agreed.

³³ RAIL 667/9 August and September 1836

³⁴ RAIL 667/8 12 August 1835

³⁵ RAIL 667/9 17 March 1837

³⁶ Hoole 1986, 94

In April 1838, the GNER made two alternative offers for the Croft Branch Line to the S&DR of either £10k or £15k depending on what buildings were included.³⁷ In March 1839 the GNER company agreed to buy the Croft branch from the Stockton & Darlington Railway for £20,000 although the GNER only used about half of the three mile branch for the course of its new line, the southern end of the line from Parkgate Junction being retained for coal traffic. At the northern end the Croft branch was re-laid and re-aligned over the section now occupied by Bank Top Station.³⁸



Figure 5. The newly opened Bank Top Station in 1887 on the line of the Croft Branch originally opened in 1829 and then absorbed into the GNER in 1841

The GNER project was further blighted by delays resulting in the resignation of Thomas Storey who had been instrumental in creating the GNER as its engineer in chief (he had also been the engineer to the S&DR). George Stephenson (to whom Storey was related by marriage)³⁹ was asked to take charge and he sent his son Robert to report. The delays were managed by opening the line in two stages. It had been intended to open the whole line on 25 November 1840, but it was not ready, so it was opened for coal traffic only on the 4 January 1841 (along with the new station at York, to be shared with the York & North Midland Railway) with passenger traffic joining from 30 March 1841.

The former S&DR Croft branch line south of Parkgate Junction then became known as the 'Croft Depot branch line' or the 'Coal Branch' and remained in use until April 1964. The depot continued to receive a range of freight including coals, coke, limestone and lime and forwarded on gravel, sand, bricks, timber, hay and clover, barley, potatoes and livestock.⁴⁰

The northern half of the branch was absorbed into the GNER's new route to York and remains part of the East Coast Mainline today, having since been the NER, the LNER and various subsequent post nationalisation companies, including today's resurrection of the LNER.

³⁷ RAIL 667/1108

³⁸ Holmes 1975, 29

³⁹ [https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Thomas_Storey_\(1789-1859\)](https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Thomas_Storey_(1789-1859)) [accessed 280319]

⁴⁰ Coulthard et al 2018, 33

THE ROUTE OF THE CROFT BRANCH LINE – HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT AUDIT

The list of materials and costs from July 1827 associated with the construction of the line makes it clear what sort of structures and features might be found along the route today. The route consisted of embankments and cuttings as the local topography required, was only single track, had culverted drains to the sides and footpaths were provided along both sides of the track, as elsewhere on the line. Stone sleepers were used with two holes where the iron chairs would be fixed which would carry the rails. Level crossings normally consisted of opposing five bar gates, but accommodation bridges were used too and covered culverts (referred to at the time as aqueducts) were also required to carry watercourses below the trackbed. The line was defined by fencing but by 1837, stone boundary markers were being used at Bank Top too. These are therefore the railway track elements that *could* survive archaeologically.

The first 1 ½ miles of the line were reused by the GNER and remains part of the East Coast Mainline today. Survival of features from 1829 is unlikely in this stretch, but not impossible. The stretch from Geneva Woods to Hurworth Place remained in use only as a freight line until 1864 and has been subject to less change. Survival here is more likely.

The start of the branch line to Parkgate Junction (S&DR 835).

The mainline east of Skerne bridge at an ancient Tudor house called Hill Top House (S&DR 829-30) was chosen as the point at which the Croft branch would leave the mainline and head south, skirting Darlington and Blackwell and then into Hurworth township and Croft.



Figure 6. The start of branch line as constructed and surveyed on Thomas Dixon's plans of S&DR property in 1839. The bridge on the left with curved wing walls and circular end piers is the Skerne Bridge in Darlington (RAIL 1037/456)

In 1829 when the branch line opened this was countryside consisting of enclosed fields and the occasional large country house. The impact of the S&DR on the surroundings had been limited thus far, but the 1830s would bring about considerable change as new businesses were increasingly attracted to the transport opportunities now made possible. The gasworks would open in 1830 and Kitching's foundry would move up to North Road in 1831. The Railway Mill was located near the river Skerne from at least 1837 and featured on the

S&DR's headed notepaper and invoices as one of the buildings in the area worthy of highlighting including the Skerne Bridge and the Darlington branch line coal and lime depot.

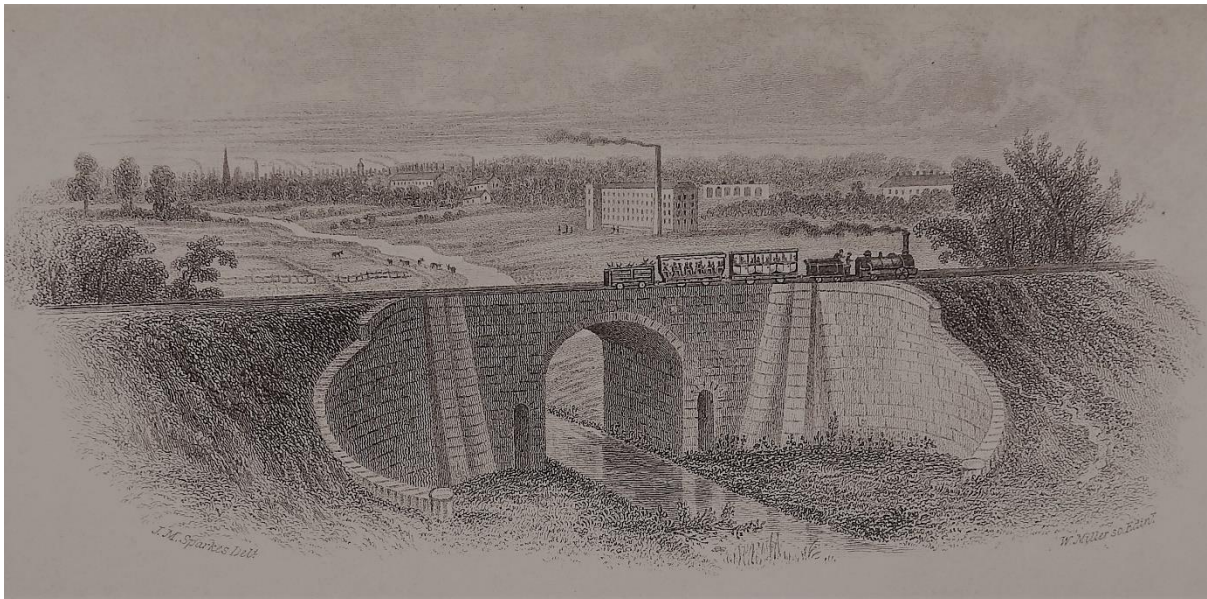


Figure 7. The Skerne Bridge with views back towards Darlington on an 1839 S&DR lime bill. The large mill with the smoking chimney was the Railway Mill of 1837 and beyond the arches of the coal drops on Darlington branch line. However even by 1839 the land was still relatively rural (RAIL 1187/1/105).

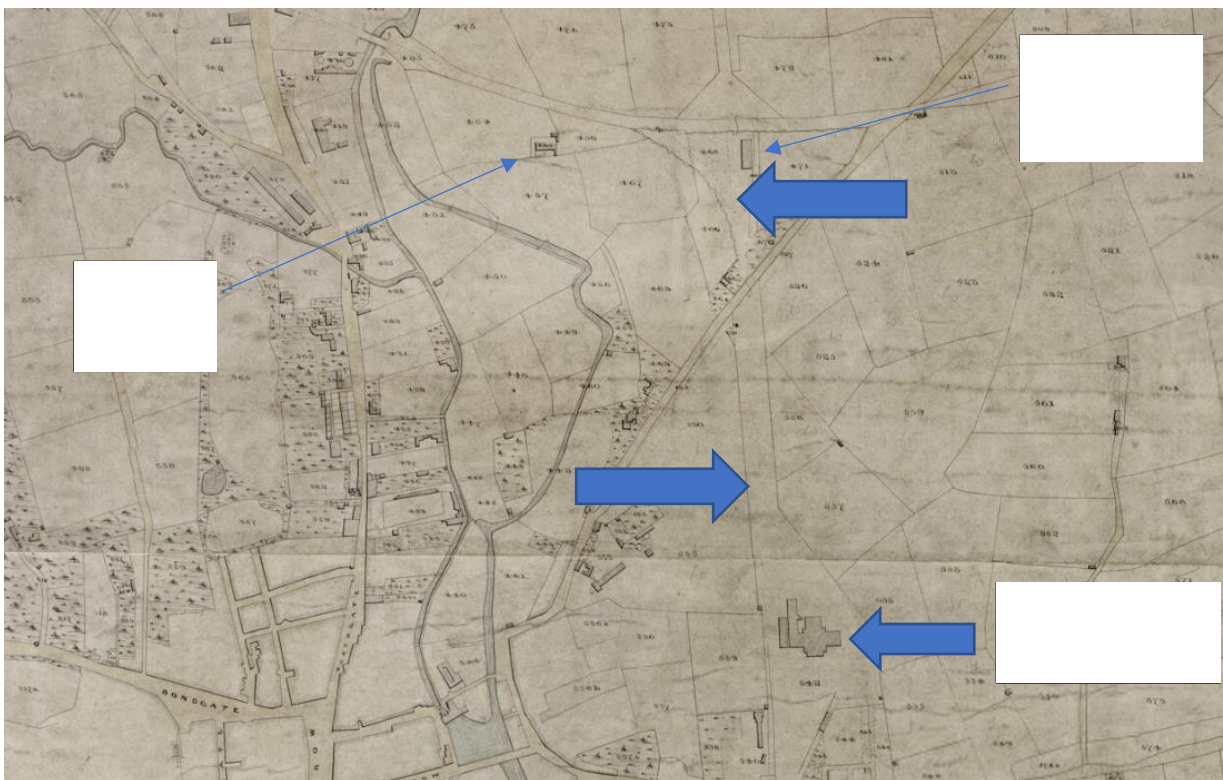


Figure 8 The tithe map of 1847 – the Croft branch line is picked out with a faint dashed line on the curve then as blank un-titheable space. Hill Top House remained, and the engine shed had been constructed by the GNER in 1844. Engine Fitting Shops can also be seen on the plan. These have been demolished and the land is now being developed. (DDR/EA/TTH/1/71)

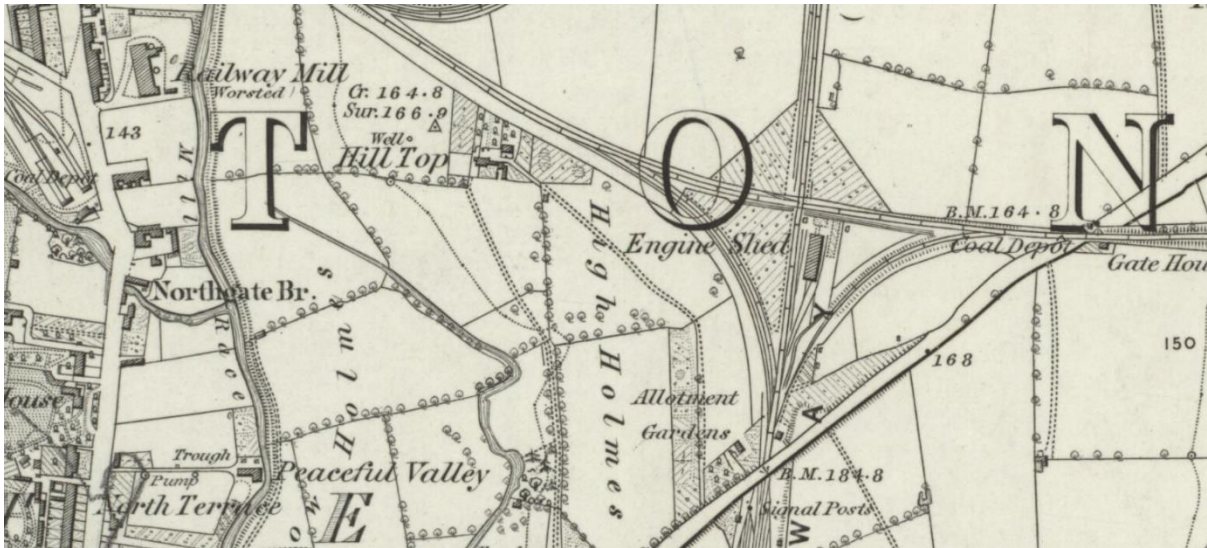


Figure 9. OS 1st ed 6 inch map dating to 1855

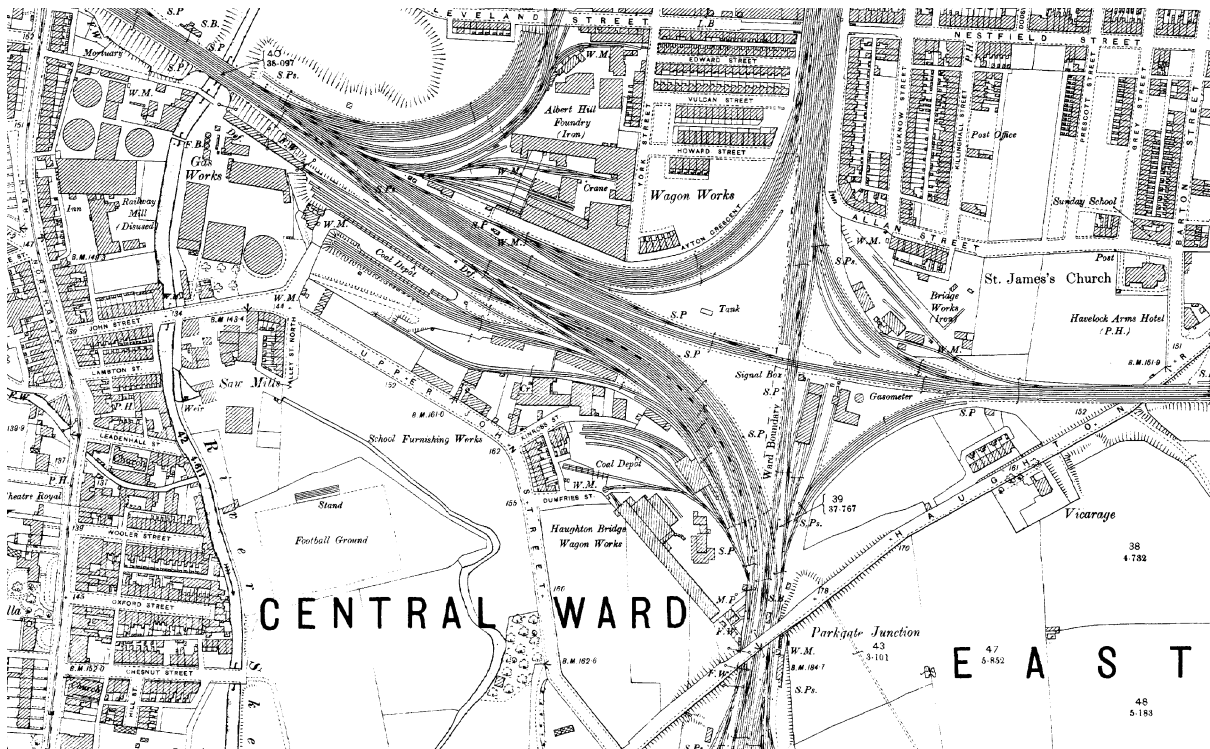


Figure 10. The start of the former Croft branch in 1897 (OS 2nd ed 6 inch). The growth of the iron industry and the locomotive industry had transformed the landscape from its rural character. Sidings and depots fed in much needed coal to power industry.

This initial stretch of branch line would go on to expand considerably as it became part of the new GNER York line from 1841. The branch line was widened, and sidings developed over a large area feeding the growing industry. Substantial depots were also created to bring in coal for a domestic market and for steam powered industries. Today this remains part of the East Coast Mainline and consequently has been through radical changes reducing the likelihood that any original S&DR fabric might survive. There is however some heritage interest in the area, although very little relating directly to the Croft branch line and even less that can still be seen.

What survives and how do we protect it?

Fragmentary remains at John Street (S&DR 827, 828, 832 and 833)

There is still some heritage interest at John Street, although the land is currently being prepared for development. The substantial stone boundary walls relate to the entrance to the former coal depots that survived until relatively recently (S&DR 828). The site of the former sidings (S&DR 832) and the coal depot is now a car wash business, but the back of the car wash has some earlier building fabric possibly from the coal depot. Most of the land is currently being reprofiled ready for development. In the process some demolition debris includes two-hole stone sleeper blocks, some split suggesting that they were reused in later building work and direct evidence of the 1829 track bed. This suggests that even where the branch line has been developed, there is still some archaeological potential. There are also the remains of a building which once sat at the terminus of the sidings to the rear of the coal depot (S&DR 833). This is unlikely to survive development.



Figure 11. Left: two-hole sleeper blocks presumably originally from the 1829 trackbed and now part of demolition debris at John Street (S&DR 827). Right: the fragmentary and broken remains of buildings at the west end of the sidings north of John Street and due to be developed (S&DR 833).



Figure 12. The remains of the coal drops (S&DR 828) behind fencing in 2010. The site is now a car wash.

The GNER Engine Shed (List entry no. 1392356)

Connected with the purchase of the branch line by the GNER, but not directly on the Croft Branch Line, is the nearby Engine Shed dating to the 1844 which is first shown on the tithe map of 1847. This is a long brick shed with two arches at each end designed to accommodate two engines. It was designed by George Townsend Andrews for the Newcastle & Darlington Junction Railway. Rail tracks used to run alongside and into it until the 1970s. It has recently been converted into housing and is a listed building.



Figure 13. The Engine Shed looking north when it was still in use (courtesy of the Northern Echo)



Figure 14 The NER Engine Shed of 1844, now housing, but accessible externally



Figure 15. Commemorative sign (erected 1925) by the East Coast Mainline in 1987 (left) after restoration courtesy of the DRPS; and (right) in 2010 when it was overgrown and in unknown condition. The area around it has now been cleared and the sign restored and moved again in 2019.

A commemorative metal sign is also in this area which was erected in 1925 as part of the 100th anniversary of the S&DR. Intended to be seen from trains, it marks where the East Coast mainline crossed the S&DR mainline which for many years was a signalled crossing. It was restored by the Darlington Railway Preservation Society in 1987 and has been restored and moved again in 2019. Some of the new houses near the GNER Engine Shed have the best view. Its condition is unknown but appears poor and it is now on land which has apparently been sold by Network Rail to a private landowner and so its future is uncertain.

Both of these later features are on the east side of the GNER line and would be difficult to access from John Street, but could contribute to any wider railway walking route.

Haughton Road

As the line is live, it is not possible to access it to determine if anything survives of the 1829 branch line. It can be viewed from a distance from the bridge at Haughton Road (Railway Authority Bridge ECM5/101, S7DR 876) where the curve of the line is clearly visible and views north towards the newly converted GNER Engine Shed.

Although some of the stone boundary walls adjacent to the trackbed appear early 19th century, this area was covered in sidings even below the present-day buildings by the late 19th century. In 1838 the railway line ran over the road and at that point it was double track. This level crossing had been replaced by 1855 with a bridge to carry traffic over the line (OS 1st ed). Little here can date to 1829. There is a small patch of waste ground between the buildings fronting Haughton Road, the bridge and the live line which contains an apple tree; a lone survivor from earlier times.



Figure 16. View north towards the curve on the Croft branch line from Houghton Bridge. The GNER Engine Shed can be seen top right. The tracks on the right are the East Coast mainline. Just beyond the Engine Shed, the mainline of the S&DR runs east-west across the mainline and has been commemorated with a metal sign since 1925. The buildings to the left are on the site of the late 19th century Houghton Bridge Wagon Works.

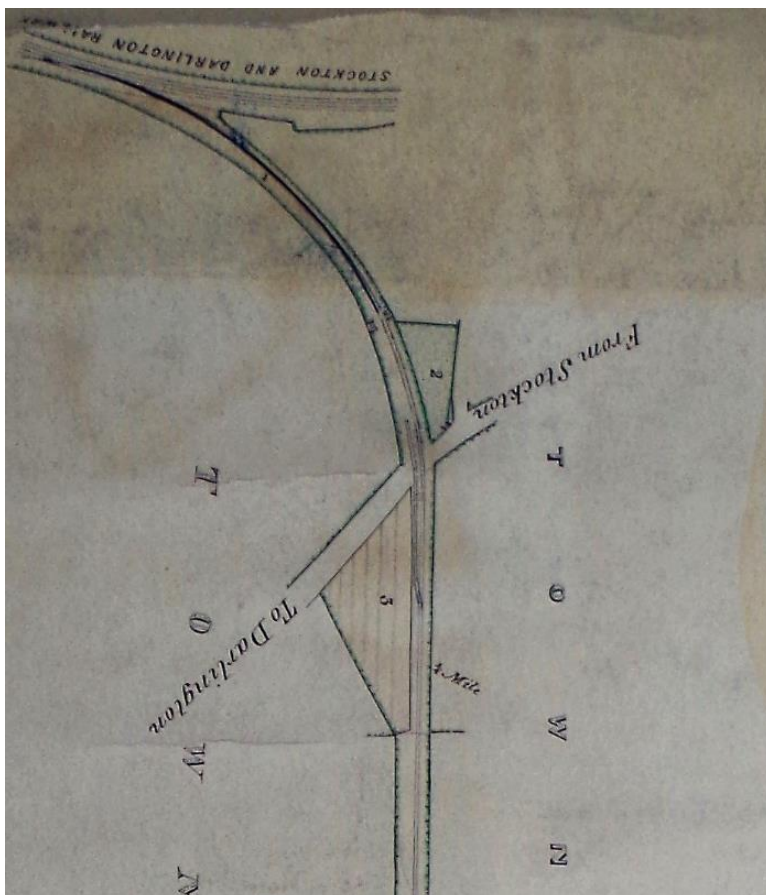


Figure 17. The same stretch of branch line in 1838 when surveyed by Thomas Dixon (RAIL 1037/455). The rail track ran over the top of Houghton Road.

East Mount

The area that the branch line passed through is today known as East Mount. This is named after a house built by the Pease family and occupied by John Pease from 1838 who extended it further in 1845. It was the only Pease property on the east side of the Skerne and was linked to Edward Pease's house and gardens on North Road by a landscaped valley with footpaths and a rustic bridge.⁴¹ This valley, known at the time as Peaceful Valley (Peaseful) now lends its name to Valley Street. The estate was encroached upon by housing from the 1870s and by the turn of the 20th century it was completely built over. There is nothing particularly peaceful about the area now, but the Pease connection adds some interest to the wider area.

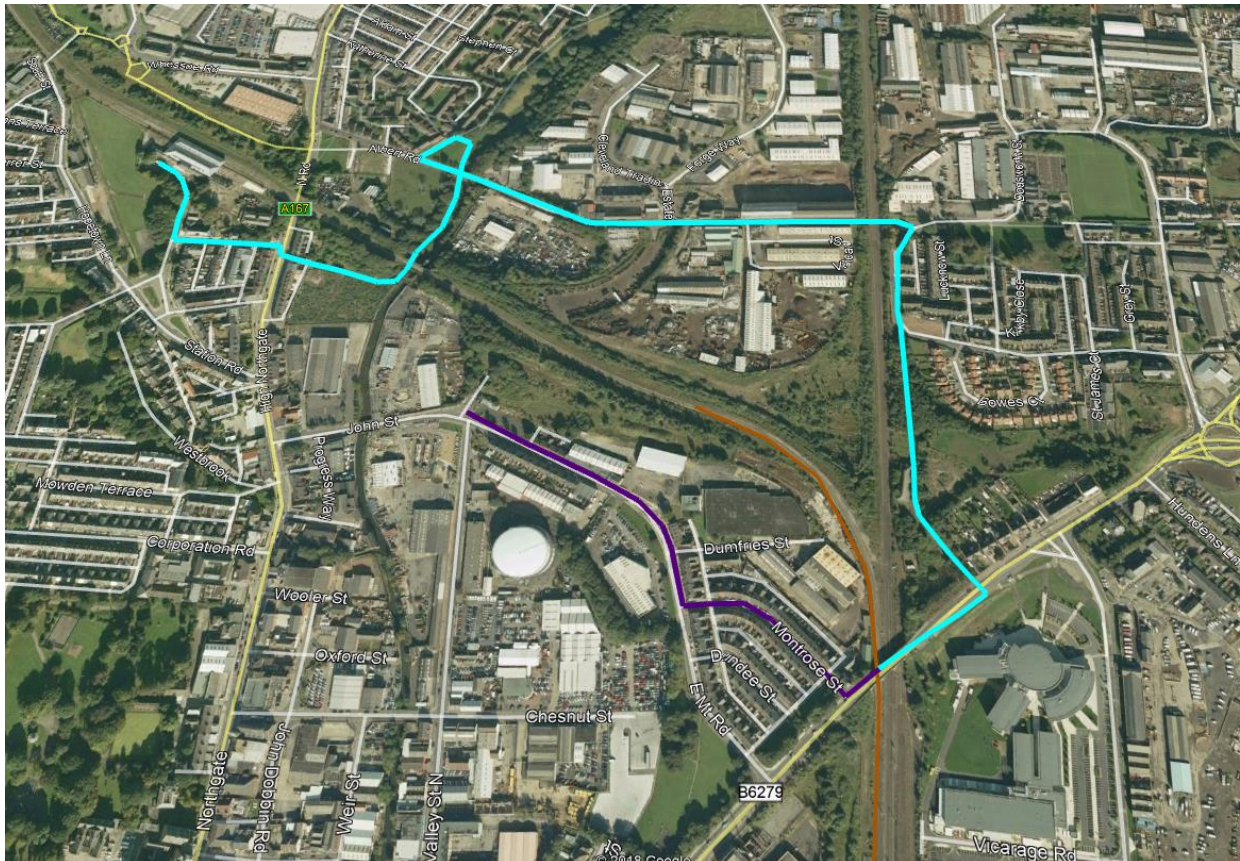


Figure 18. Access options. Option 1 in turquoise. Option 2 in purple. The Croft branch line in brown.

Access

The railway heritage interest of this area is not easy to appreciate or to access. If access to the Croft Branch Line is to be enhanced, there are two options.

1. Use whatever route is chosen for the S&DR mainline access or the newly created cycle paths at Skerne Bridge which will include the GNER Engine Shed to Haughton Road and then walk back towards Haughton Bridge (turquoise route above).
2. Walk users along John Street, East Mount Road, Montrose Street then Haughton Road Bridge (purple route above).

⁴¹ Cookson 2003, 65, 77, 86-88

Neither option provides particularly attractive walking environments. Houghton Road is very noisy but does have a cycling lane.

Management and Protection

- Any development requiring planning permission on the route of the Croft Branch or the site of the former coal depots at John Street should be informed by a Heritage Statement and appropriate archaeological recording carried out if consent is approved.

Parkgate Junction to Bank Top

The railway expanded, particularly once it became part of the GNER in 1841, with vast numbers of sidings on the approach to Parkgate and Bank Top. It has since shrunk in size leaving a long corridor of trees that once consisted of railway. Today the route here still forms part of the East Coast Mainline, so no access was possible to look for surviving remains. Where the railway has shrunk in size, much of the vacant land arising has not been developed so could be used for enhanced access.

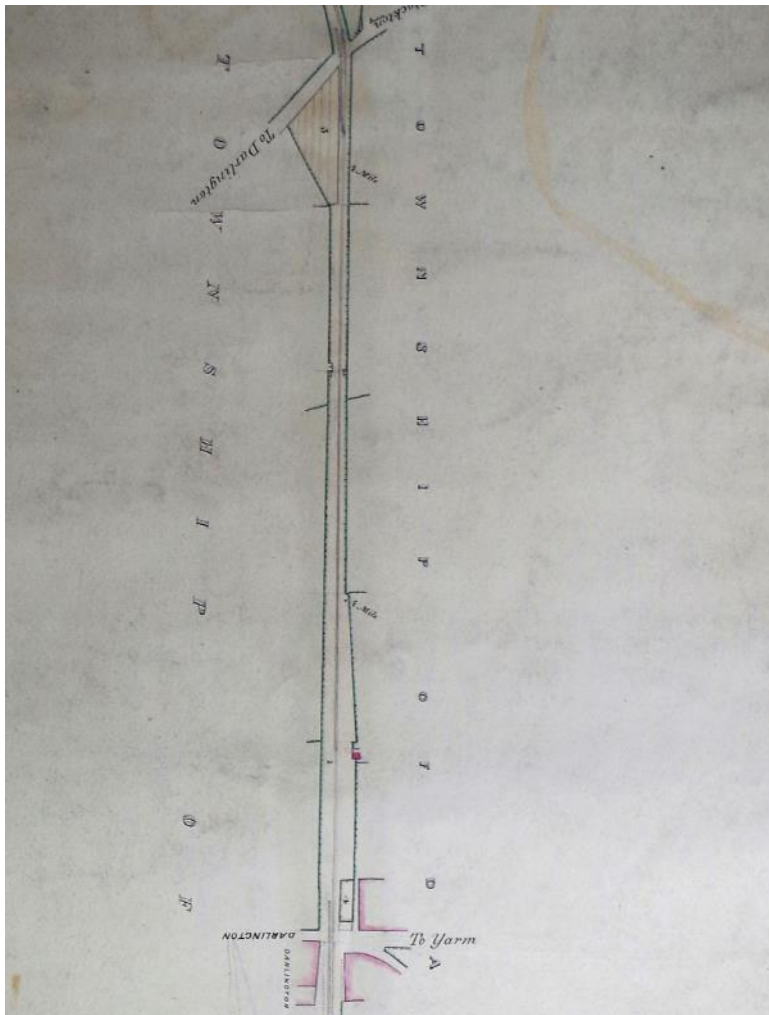


Figure 19. Thomas Dixon's plan surveyed in 1838 (RAIL 1037/455)

Thomas Dixon's plans surveyed in 1838 show the line as it was just before being taken over by the GNER. A set of sidings over Houghton Road created a brief stretch of double track, when it reverted again to the single track it was designed to have in 1829. Routes across the track between fields were provided with a simple level crossing based on a five bar gate on each side of the track. The locations of these crossing points had been subsumed under sidings by the late 19th century and are not likely to survive.

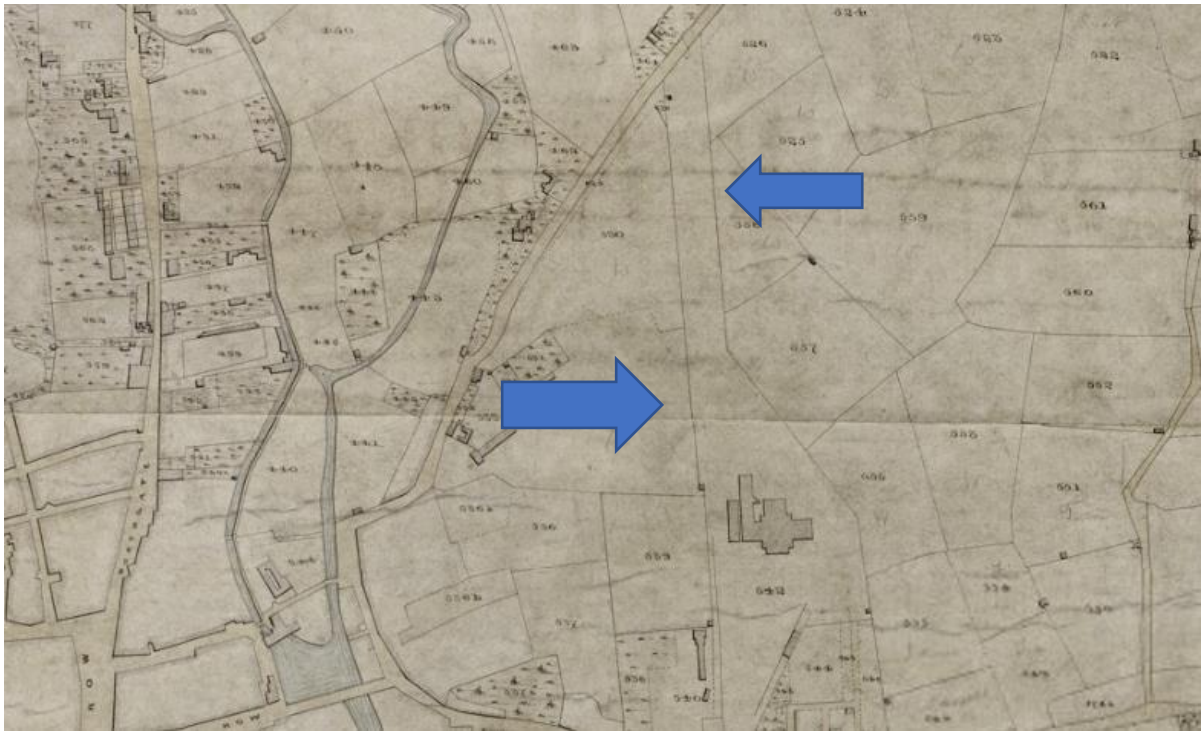


Figure 20 Tithe map 1847 (DDR/EA/TTH/1/71)



Figure 21. 1st ed OS map 1855



Figure 22. OS map revised 1912 showing sidings to the Engine Shed and Fitting Shops at their full extent.

What survives and how do we protect it?

S&DR property boundary on Haughton Road (S&DR 877)

The line here has been through so much change since 1829 it is inconceivable that any property boundaries might survive from the earliest days of the Croft branch line, but there is a possible survival on the south side of Haughton Road. The Dixon plan (fig 19) and the tithe map (fig 20) both show a small triangle of land between Haughton Road and the trackbed. That boundary appears to survive today and is not developed, although it may have had sidings on it by the early 20th century. It was depicted as being S&DR land on Dixon's plan but it is not clear what it was used for. Should proposals arise in the future to develop this land, trial trenching should test if any early evidence survives from the branch line.



Figure 23. A relict property boundary from 1838 to the turn of the century

Mileposts (S&DR 879-880)

The Dixon plan (fig 19) depicted the ¼ mile and ½ mile positions on the track between Haughton Road and Yarm Road. These would have been marked with S&DR milestones; it is unlikely that they would have survive the subsequent expansion of the line. Their locations

have been plotted on to modern mapping as part of the enhancement of the Historic Environment Record.



Figure 24. Aerial photograph from 1945 showing the sidings and engine fitting shops at their full extent. Steam from the power station chimneys near Borough Road obscures much of the view west of the line.

Engine Fitting Workshops, Railway Turntable/ Engine Shed and Sidings (S&DR 845, 847)

Engine Fitting Workshops were depicted on the tithe map dating to 1847 and remained in various forms until the mid-20th century (see fig 24). Although the buildings no longer survive, the site is currently being developed. When similar sites are the subject of a planning application, opportunities should be taken to assess the survival and significance of below ground remains and to determine to what extent the new development can reflect the railway heritage of the area.

Coal depot (S&DR 884)

A coal depot was located on the west side of the Croft branch with an approach from Parkgate/ Yarm Road. It was not shown on Dixon's plan of 1838, but the area was shown as a separate enclosure on the tithe map of 1847. The coal cells were shown on the 1855 OS maps and the outer walls remain intact today (2019). Further the sidings which approached the coal drops at a higher level also survive as earthworks. If this area is to be developed a heritage statement should inform the design of the development with a view to retaining significant features. Pre-determination trial trenching should test survival of coal depot and siding remains before decisions are made on development design or the granting of permissions.

Access

This is a stretch of live line with limited options to enhance access to the branch line. There are two options, one of which would require the agreement of Network Rail and the other would use the existing road/ path network away from the site.

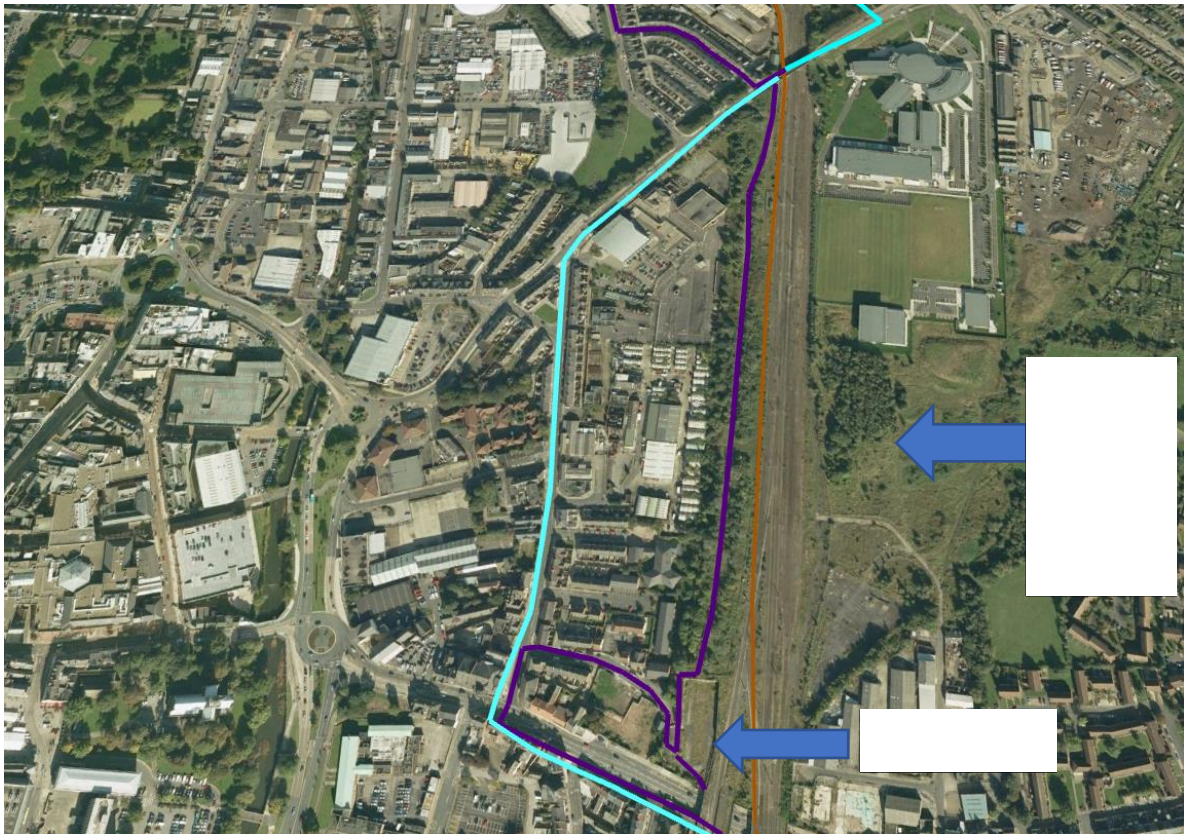


Figure 25. Possible routes to enhance access to the Croft branch. Option 1 purple. Option 2 turquoise

1. As the railway track has shrunk considerably in size since the first half of the 20th century, there is a substantial corridor running west of the line that is now tree covered, but still has a path running through it. It is separated from live line by many trees and the vacant land appears wide enough to ensure there is no risk of users drifting on to live line (assuming it would also be fenced). This would provide an attractive off-road alternative to the busier urban streets. A suitable access on to this area of sidings would be required at Houghton Road and Parkgate. Houghton Road appears to already have a gated and ramped access. Parkgate has inherited some more difficult ground level issues and subsequent development that might require capital works to create more accessible links to Parkgate. This route could also divert people to the Hippodrome for refreshments (although the cafe closes on Sundays).

2. Use Houghton Road then Borough Road to join up with Parkgate. This is off line with very few views of it. It does however have the attractive fire station, the Hippodrome and its café, and the local commemoration of residents who served in the First World War at Middleton Street. There are also some original Nissan huts in the area.

Both options could view the sidings and the coal depot, subject to what happens to them in the future.

Management and Protection

- 📍 A possible parcel of former S&DR land lies now undeveloped on Houghton Road. Should proposals arise to develop here, the planning process should be informed by archaeological evaluation.
- 📍 When post-industrial relict landscapes are the subject of a planning application, opportunities should be taken to assess the survival and significance of below ground

remains and to determine to what extent the new development can reflect the railway heritage of the area. For example, the base of a railway turntable could be incorporated into landscaping.

- 👉 If the former coal depots are to be developed on Parkgate a heritage statement should inform the design of the development with a view to retaining significant features and pre-determination trial trenching should test survival of coal depot remains. As above, new development should seek to reuse structural elements and reflect the railway heritage of the area.

Bank Top to Parkside

This stretch runs from the present Bank Top Station approach on Parkgate to the Accommodation Bridge at Parkside. There is a considerable amount of railway heritage here to appreciate, but less surviving of the 1829 Croft branch. However, there are some remains that an enthusiastic visitor with a desire to do some detective work, will uncover. This is a route that will appeal to the general railway enthusiast, but perhaps less to those simply looking for an attractive walking experience. The route is entirely live line forming part of the East Coast Mainline, therefore no access was possible to the trackbed to check for any surviving remains from 1829.

When Dixon surveyed the route in 1838 this stretch of line had seven crossing points (S&DR 885-8 and 891-3) each fitted with either a five-bar gate level crossing or a bridge. The line was single track but had sidings at Bank Top. There were two milestones (S&DR 889-90), one for the $\frac{3}{4}$ mile mark and one for the 1-mile mark (from the mainline to Croft Depot). Given the significant growth of the railway after the 1840s until the 20th century it is unlikely that these features will survive.

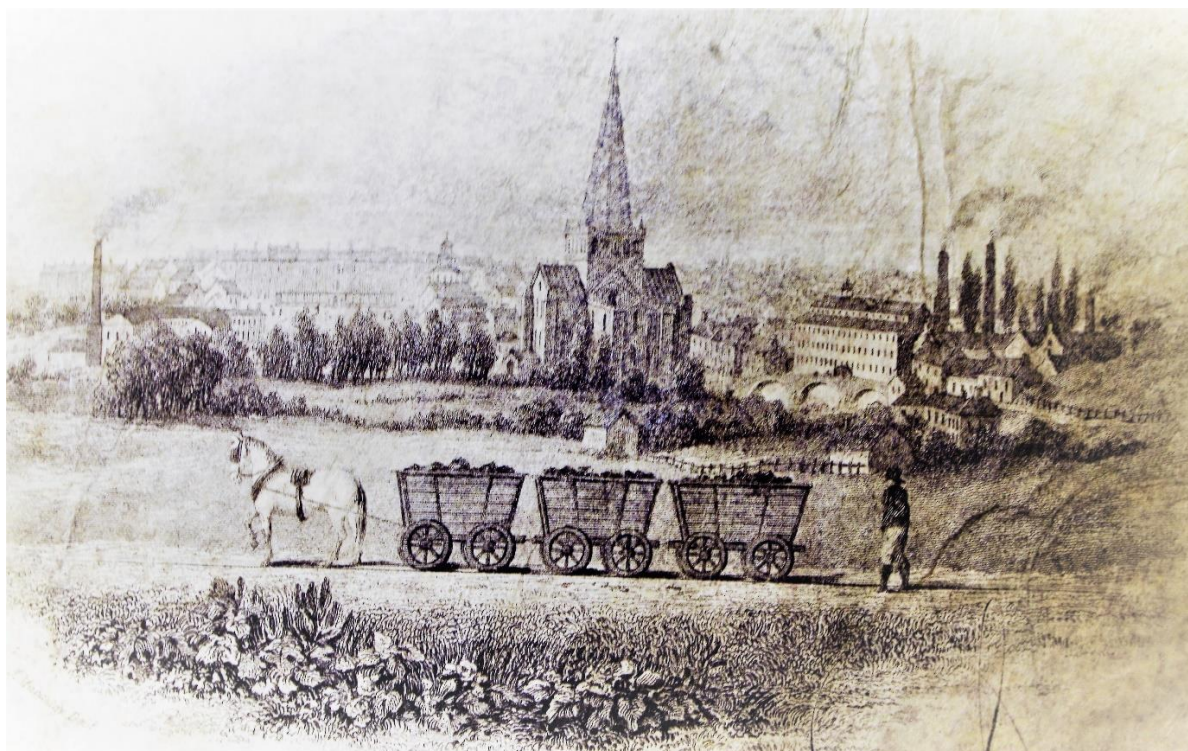


Figure 26. The Croft branch line in use as shown on S&DR share certificates as a decorative header. The most prominent buildings in the distance are St. Cuthbert's Church and Pease's Mill. This particular share certificate dates to 1840 by which time the Croft branch no longer belonged to the S&DR however the header had clearly been retained.

When first constructed and even until the GNER purchase, the surrounding countryside would have been rural with views from the high ground of Bank Top across the Bishop's parkland (that gave Parkgate and Parkside its name) towards Darlington. This view was captured in official S&DR headed notepaper where Pease's Mill could be seen along with St. Cuthbert's Church. The same view is now impossible (figure 26).

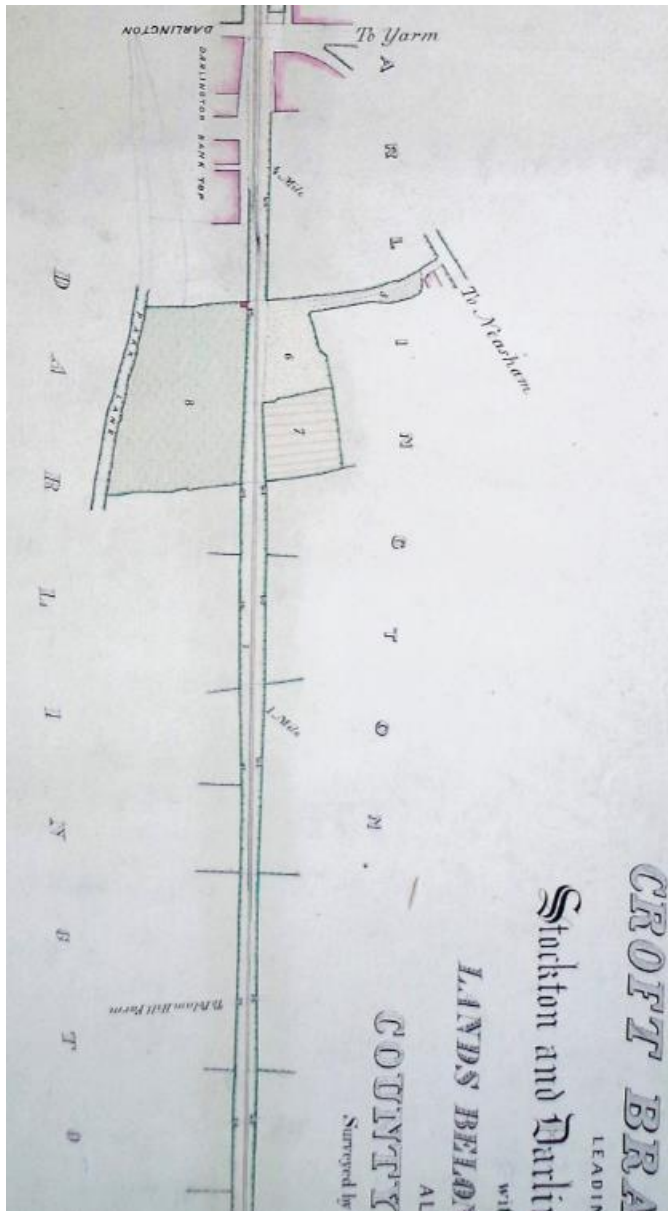


Figure 27. Dixon's survey of 1838 showing S&DR owned land

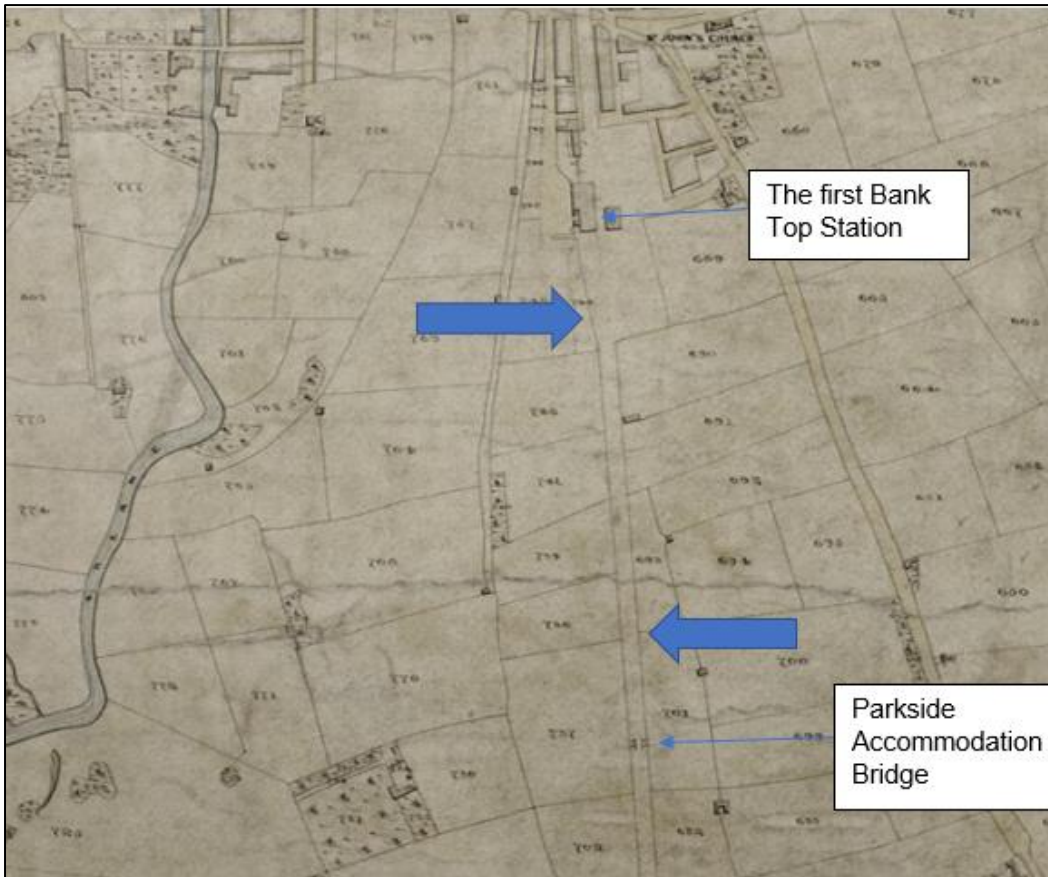


Figure 28. The title map of 1847 (arrows point to the branch line)



Figure 29. The OS 1st ed 1855. The old Croft Branch had now expanded considerably but much was still agricultural in character.

What survives and how do we protect it?

Parkgate Bridge

The approach to Bank Top from Parkgate goes under the railway bridge, much widened, which carried trains over Parkgate Road. In 1838 the tracks went over the road, but it is not clear if this was by bridge or whether ground levels permitted a level crossing. The present bridge is not original to the branch line but has the town's crest on it featuring Locomotion No.1 and some vintage railway signs of interest to the railway enthusiast.



Figure 30. Darlington's town crest featuring Locomotion No.1 on the bridge at Parkgate

The Railwayman's Church

St John's known as the Railwayman's Church, was a consolatory commission after John Middleton ceased working as the GNER's architect in 1847. It became known as the Railwayman's Church because it was built in response to the growing population around the station which led to the creation of a new parish in 1853. Before the church was built, the railway company had set aside one of their own buildings for services of worship. The foundation stone of the church was laid by George Hudson, the 'railway king' when Lord Mayor of York on September 10, 1847.⁴²

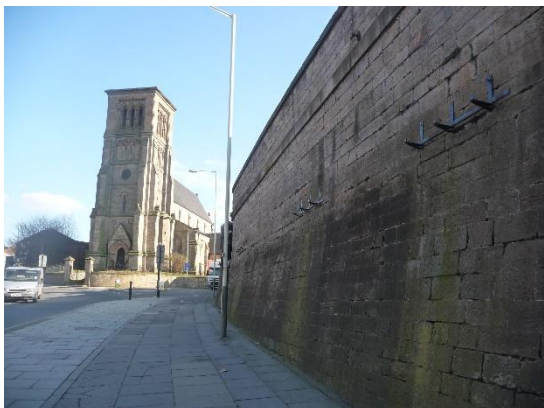


Figure 31. The Railwayman's Church seen from Parkgate

Bank Top Station

The first station at Bank Top can be seen on the tithe map of 1847 and the 1st ed OS map of 1855. This was relatively small and located slightly north compared to the present-day station. Comparing the exact position of the first station and the present day one, there

⁴² Darlington District Civic Society 1975, 65



Figure 32. Bank Top's clock tower

appears to be no possibility of any parts of the first station being incorporated into the structure.

The present-day station was designed by William Bell for the North Eastern Railway Company and opened in 1887. It replaced the 'mean shed' which had been used since the 1840s⁴³ and which had left Queen Victoria distinctly unamused when she alighted the train in 1849. She pointed out that for the main line station of the very place in which the railway had been born to look so down-at-heel was just not good enough.⁴⁴ The development of this station triggered the growth of the wider area, creating a railway 'colony'.

Croft Branch Key Character. William Bell, Architect for Bank Top Station



William Bell was born in Darlington in 1846 and with wife Fanny and son Robert (born in 1879) lived in Elton Terrace. His office was in West End Buildings, Skinnergate. He started as architect in the North East Railway Company in 1857 and became Chief Architect in 1877 - 1914. He was the architect of railway buildings in Darlington and throughout the country. In 1887 he built Darlington Bank Top Station and also added various elements to the North Road engineering works between 1884 and 1910 (Cookson 2003, 121). Besides the prize-winning Head Office in York he also designed the stations at Alnwick, Stockton, Hull, West Hartlepool, Whitley Bay, Tynemouth, Thornaby and many others. His *piece de resistance* was the first-class refreshment room at Newcastle Central Station, designed in 1892. In 1893 he persuaded the NER directors to clad the refreshment room in faience from Burmantofts in Leeds which provided a durable washable surface. In 1887 William Bell sold up his premises in Darlington.

The contents, auctioned off at Watsons, were impressive and included several paintings of the Westbrook Villas by artist Samuel Elton. William Bell died in Whitby in 1919 (Archaeo-Environment 2010,62).

The station, listed Grade II*, is largely unaltered since its construction. Its two immensely high and wide arches were designed to permit the passage of carriages of the wealthiest first-class passengers, with their coachmen sitting aloft. These arches opened into a porte cochere, four bays deep and large enough to enable carriages to enter by one arch, swing round and depart by another. The vestibule is protected by the train shed style roof, in

⁴³ Flynn 1994, pl 8

⁴⁴ Emmett 2007, 22

imitation of those above the station proper. On either side of the arches are two smaller arches for foot passengers.

In between a soaring Italianate clock tower over 27m high is Bank Top's crowning glory. It can be seen from every part of town with its windows and galleries opening to Victoria Road surmounted by a pyramidal roof with a round window in each gable and crowned by a gilded fleche. Historically the clock was set to run five minutes fast to ensure passengers always caught their trains. The bell no longer rings in the tower and is now being displayed on a station platform.

The main down line is one third of a mile long. The train shed roofs are supported on parallel rows of 80 massive cast iron Corinthian columns. Each spandrel of the arches is decorated with painted and gilded shields of arms amounting to 158 spandrels in total containing 948 coats of arms.⁴⁵

The view along Victoria Road to Bank Top Station is no accident. When the North Eastern Railway opened its new station, the Council went to great expense in purchasing Feetham's Road to enable a direct route to be made to the front of the entrance of the station.⁴⁶

Further along Parkgate the railway building includes the LNER's Engineer's Department dating to 1932 in an attractive Art Deco style.

The terraced houses in this area were built for railway workers with the larger end terraces for foremen and their families.

The station at Bank Top is one of the main gateways to access the railway heritage in Darlington and therefore its appearance and accessibility are important first impressions for visitors. Current interpretation at the station is only accessible to ticket holders and is located in a little used space. The station space is an opportunity to welcome people to the town that gave the world the railway and can also be used to orientate visitors and point them towards other railway interests.

Railway Bridge on Smithfield Road (S&DR 856, 857)

This bridge is a relatively modern replacement for an earlier one built between 1847 and 1855. The stone copes and caps on the wing walls appear to have been reused from the earlier bridge. The curved stone wall on the approach from Parkgate includes a number of reused and split two hole sleeper blocks.⁴⁷ The stone wall on the NE side also includes reused sleeper blocks. These are likely to have come from the original 1829 trackbed. The NE side also has a cattle ramp leading up to railway sidings (S&DR 858). This is shown on the OS maps revised in 1912 but is not original to the Croft branch.

⁴⁵ Wall 2001, 157-9

⁴⁶ Flynn 1983, pl102

⁴⁷ You can see that they have been split because the holes can be seen as a cross section



Figure 33. The bridge on Smithfield Road. A modern replacement but incorporating earlier stone walls which have reused sleeper stones from 1829 used as building materials



Figure 34. Left: reused and split two hole sleeper blocks from the 1829 trackbed incorporated into pre 1855 stonework. Right: a later 19th c cattle ramp giving a livestock route on to the cattle pend and sidings

Parkside Bridge (S&DR 859)

This bridge gives every appearance of being an original 1829 accommodation bridge that has gone on to be extended in order to accommodate the larger GNER trackbed. Its narrow size and architectural style fit nicely with other early S&DR bridges. However, it is not shown on Dixon's plan of the Croft branch which was surveyed in 1838. Instead, he depicts the most basic of level crossings defined with two opposing five bar gates on either side of the trackbed. The bridge is however shown on the 1847 tithe map.

Then and now.....



Figure 35. Parkside bridge west side (Centre for Local Studies, Darlington Library)



Figure 36. Parkside Bridge west side 2019

This suggests that either Dixon was mistaken or that the bridge is later than 1829. Dixon's plans are generally very accurate, and a bridge would be difficult to miss. It therefore seems that it might be a later addition. If so, how late?

A list of expenditure by the Company for 1832-3 lists a cost for a bridge on the Croft Branch, but if that was built in the years that followed, it would have been shown on Dixon's plan of 1838. It is more likely that the Parkside bridge was built after 1838 and was therefore part of the trackbed improvements for the GNER; works on this started in November 1839 and continued until the opening in 1841.

Access

Bank Top Station is on the Croft Branch, but much later, dating to 1877. Inside there are many fine Victorian details to appreciate and it may also be the point of arrival for people wishing to visit the place where the modern railway network was born, particularly in 2025, the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Stockton & Darlington Railway.

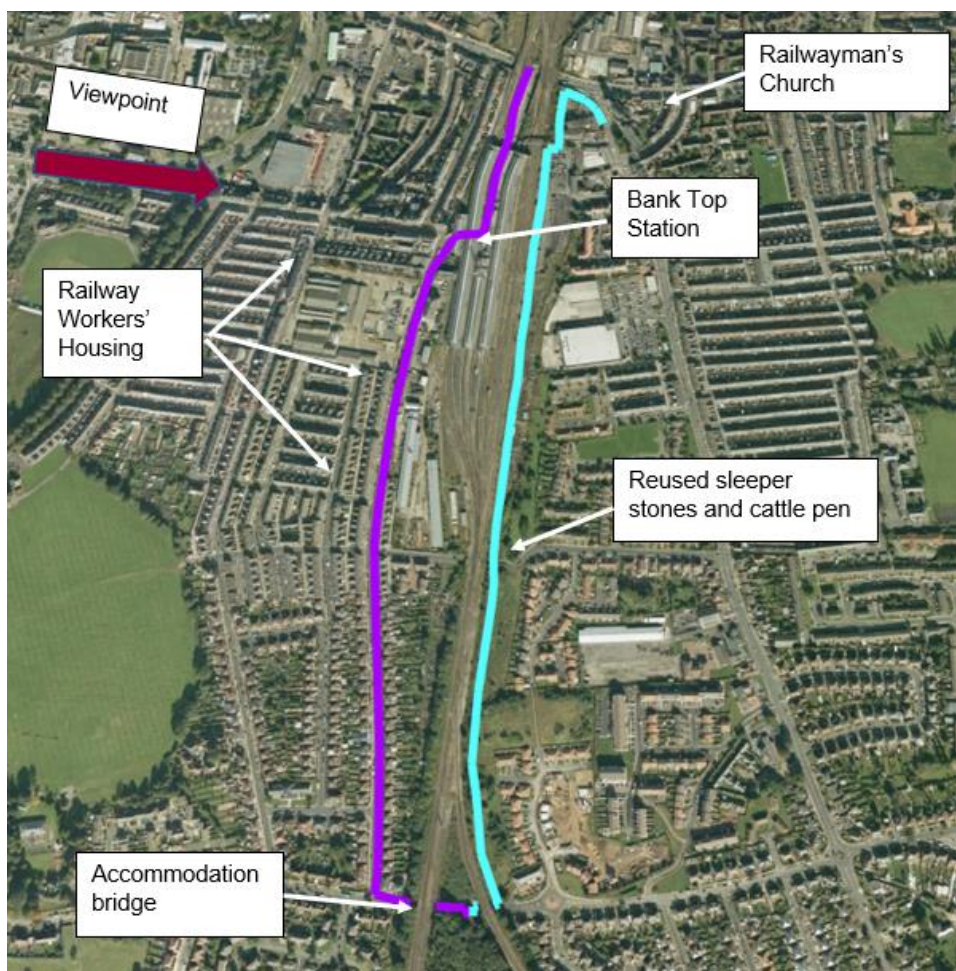


Figure 37. Options for access. Option 1 (purple) – use existing road and pavements along Park Lane. Option 2 (turquoise) acquire former sidings land to the east of the line to create new purpose-built access.

Considerable capital works are due to be carried out prior to 2025 to improve the station facilities. This will ensure that the station sets the appropriate tone for railway heritage visitors and this could also be a location for interpretation and pointing to other places of interest. However for the station to be a hub for travelling and information, it also needs to have a more open access than the current ticket only approach to the platforms.

The only possible current safe access is to walk parallel to the line along Park Lane. There is no cycle route here. Optional diversions to Smithfield Road to see the sleeper stones and Cattle Pen are possible. Access would involve going under the Parkside Accommodation Bridge which would be hazardous for cyclists.

If investment in new access is required, there is a substantial amount of disused or little used land running parallel and east of the east coast mainline from Bank Top Station to Smithfield Road and Parkside. This starts with the station car park and then continues along the site of former sidings. It can then terminate at Geneva Woods.

Management and Protection

- 👉 Bank Top Station is an opportunity to welcome people to the town that gave the world the railway and can also be used to orientate visitors and point them towards other railway interests.
- 👉 The streets lined with railway workers' housing are littered with take-away packaging. If Park Lane is to be used to access the heritage interest of the Croft Branch, this road is unwelcoming and unattractive.
- 👉 Victoria Road would be a potential main route from Bank Top Station to the town centre and the railway quarter near North Road. Developed with a sense of Victorian pride, it is now run down. The loss of traditional windows and shop fronts and railings to the street frontage have eroded much of the architectural interest of this street. If visitors are to be encouraged down this road, what can be done to improve the streetscape?
- 👉 The railway bridge on Smithfield Road contains sleeper blocks from 1829. This is a reminder that apparently recent structures may have evolved reusing materials and along the line, structures should be checked for reused architectural fragments before alterations are proposed
- 👉 The bridge at Parkside is of considerable historic and architectural interest. As a major bottle neck there may be pressures to have it replaced. This is to be resisted. The patchwork of makeshift repairs are unsightly and the bridge deserves better. Now might be the time to assess all the poor-quality repairs and additions (such as modern red brick) and consider whether something else could be done to unify the frontages and protect the arches from damage which will inevitably continue.

Parkside Accommodation Bridge to the A66 (Croft Junction Goods Yard)

This stretch of the branch line offers the first opportunity to see the branch line as disused line separate from the GNER and East Coast Mainline. As such the chances of survival are considerably higher. It was on this stretch that the new (in 1841) line headed off on a slightly different trajectory, so from Parkside Accommodation Bridge to Croft Junction, the Croft branch and the East Coast Mainline are one and the same. Then the track splits so that the Croft branch continues southwards as a disused railway line. It is here that survival is better.

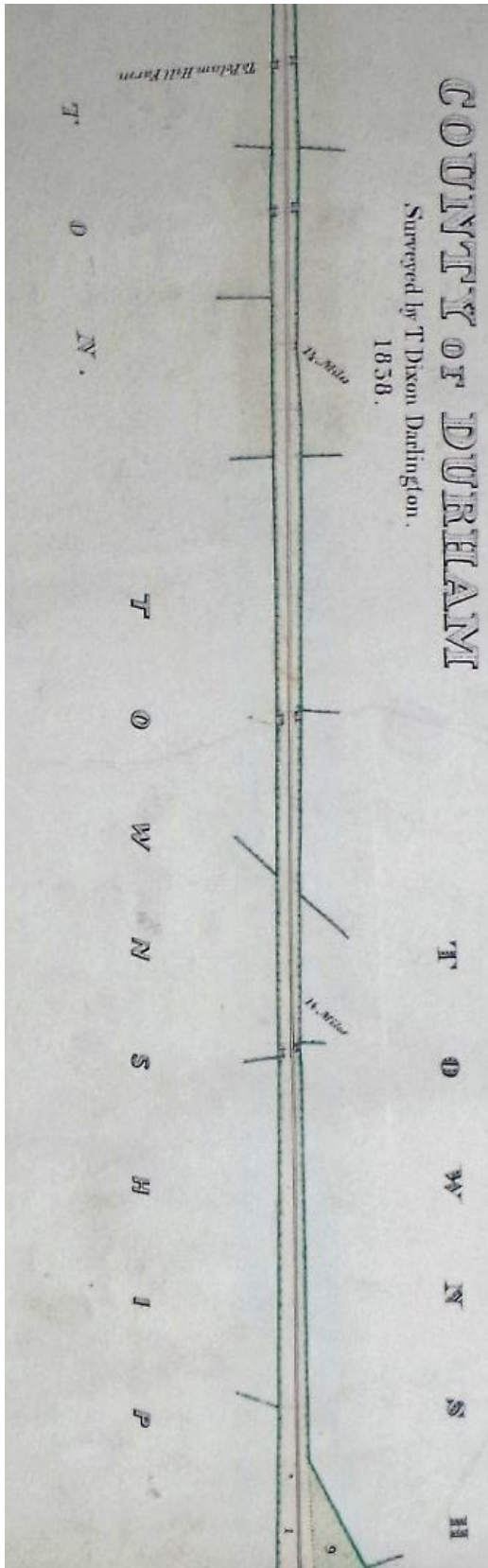


Figure 38. Dixon's plan of the Croft branch surveyed in 1838

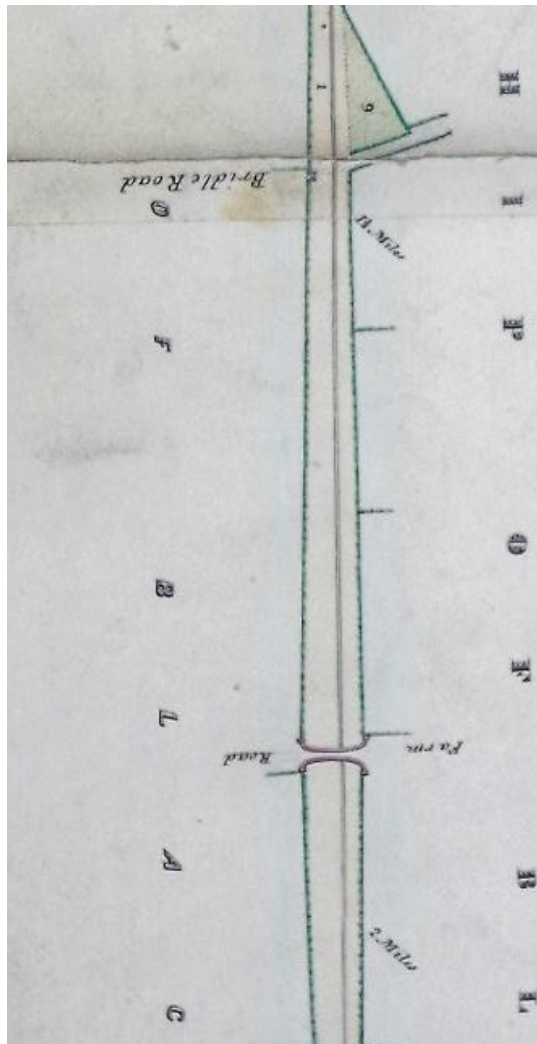




Figure 39. The Darlington tithe map of 1847 with the Parkside Accommodation Bridge to the north (circled). (DDR/EA/TTH/1/71)



Figure 40. The tithe map for Blackwell Township 1848 (DDR/EA/TTH/1/21)



Figure 41. OS 1st ed 1855. The Croft branch was now the Coal Branch and the GNER line separated and headed towards Northallerton and York.

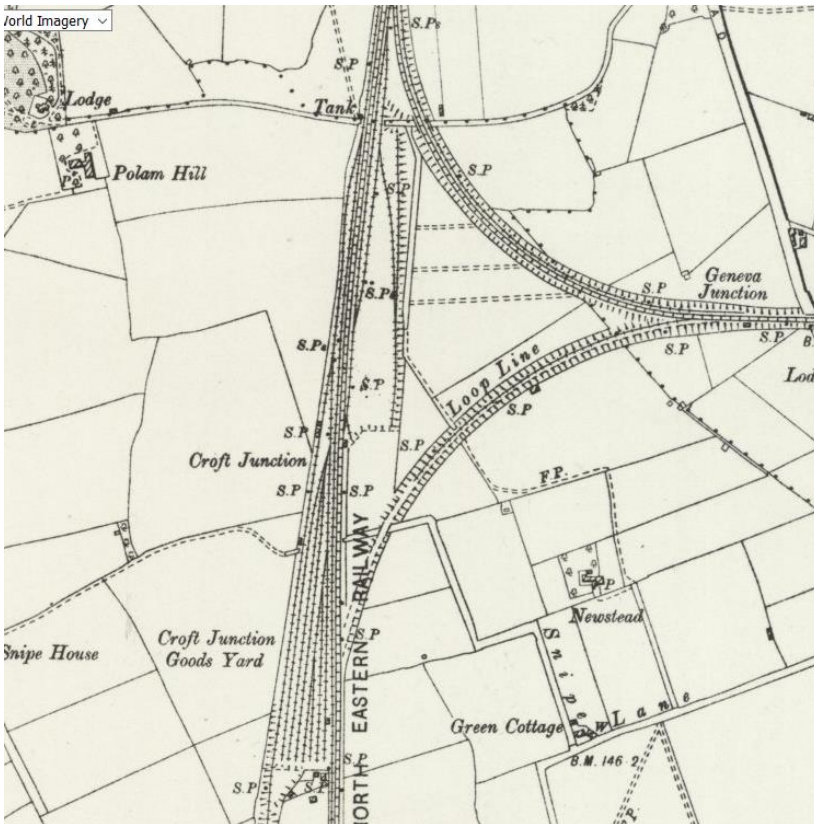


Figure 42. OS revision surveyed 1912

The first 545m on this stretch runs to the rear of private back gardens on Shakespeare Road and Esk Road and so access to the line here was not possible. However, it can be glimpsed through the safety barriers on the east side of the East Coast mainline in Geneva Woods.

What survives and how do we protect it?

Branch Line Trackbed and Associated Railway Features

Access to the disused line is possible between Geneva Woods and the A66. Here the branch line survives as earthworks or cuttings within a regenerated woodland. It is even possible through differential moisture conditions in the ground to see where wooden sleepers lay across the track prior to 1964 when it was the Coal Branch.



Figure 43. The route of the Croft branch line. Differential drying conditions highlight the ghosts of wooden railway sleepers running across the track



Figure 44. The Croft branch line in a cutting looking south towards the A66 and the Croft Junction Goods Yard

The visible railway features apart from the trackbed are former fence posts, mostly concrete posts from 20th century railway use, although some wooden fence posts may pre-date this. The live line can be seen through the trees and there is an accommodation bridge running under the live line which links back to Geneva Woods. The accommodation bridge appears to have reused some earlier stone copes on its wing walls; it was originally designed to allow access below the line to the ancient Bridle Road.



Figure 45. Left: Reused earlier stone copes to the East Coast Mainline accommodation bridge (S&DR 895). Centre: Fly tipping is a problem in this area. Right: A later County Boundary marker stone (S&DR 894) in the scrubland to the rear of gardens at Esk Road

Croft Junction Goods Yard

Just north of the A66 the earthworks open out to a large area which equates to the terminus of sidings shown on the 2nd edition Ordnance Survey map revised in 1912. This was the Croft Junction Goods Yard (S&DR 896) and can still be made out as earthworks. The embankment for the A66 has buried the site of earlier signal posts and railway buildings at the end of the goods yard.

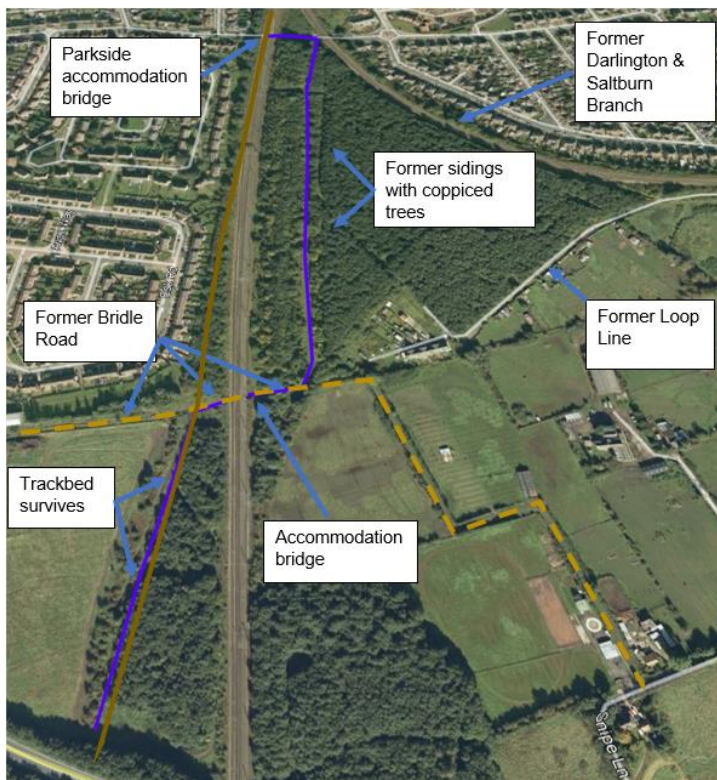


Figure 46. Recommended access route (purple) to appreciate the 1829 Croft branch line and features of interest (Croft branch is a dark brown line)

Access

Access along this stretch of line is possible from the accommodation bridge on Parkside by entering through Geneva Woods. The woods are located on land east of the East Coast Mainline (former Croft branch) and west of the Darlington and Saltburn branch line which is now used for freight. The trains using the East Coast mainline can be glimpsed through the trees and a walk through the woods is accompanied by the sound of trains.

The woods have grown on land formerly used for sidings. These are still in evidence because the trees are in regimented rows along the sides of the former sidings where they were consistently coppiced to prevent them overhanging the tracks when still in use. The sidings themselves have survived as wide well used paths through the woods. As such it is a very attractive woodland environment with evidence of railway heritage and modern train travel on both sides – a near perfect combination for anyone interested in trains and walking. If enhanced access to the Croft branch was required, not a single tree would need to be felled in Geneva Woods, but the waste bins would need emptying more often than they are now.



Figure 47. Former sidings form woodland paths through Geneva Woods and coppiced trees are evidence that once tree growth was managed to avoid causing obstructions to trains

The woods join an accommodation bridge to the south that carries the East Coast Mainline over the top, but walkers can pass below on the route of the ancient Bridle Road (S&DR 863) and join the disused Croft branch line. From here it is possible to head south along the 1829 route in a woodland scrub environment as far as the A66. Sadly, this area is blighted with fly tipping especially to the rear of Esk Road and the bridge is vandalised.

There is no safe approach over the A66 which sits on a high embankment that becomes a bridge over the East Coast Mainline. The A66 is probably the largest most dangerous obstacle to accessing the whole line.

Management and Protection

- Legal rights of way exist in Geneva Woods already, but the paths through the woods to the south are not designated rights of way. They are however clearly well-used. Extending the path network formally would enhance access to the branch line

- 🗑️ Bins are not being emptied in the woods and are over-flowing
- 🗑️ Fly tipping is a problem that needs addressing especially at the back of Esk Road
- 🗑️ There are no obvious solutions to crossing the A66. It is a barrier to access and solutions will be expensive. The engineering works to carry the A66 over the branch line and the mainline will already have destroyed any archaeological interest either side of the A66 for 45m.⁴⁸

A66 to Black Banks Farm [incomplete survey]

Much of the original branch line has been destroyed in this section by the A66 and by the subsequent new access to Black Banks Farm – both have required considerable earth moving works. This includes the loss of a farm road with accommodation bridge (S&DR 899) which went under the trackbed at this point and was shown on Dixon's survey of 1838 and the 1st ed OS map of 1855, but appears to have been subsumed by the sidings and the goods yard to the north and the A66 embankment.

What survives and how do we protect it?

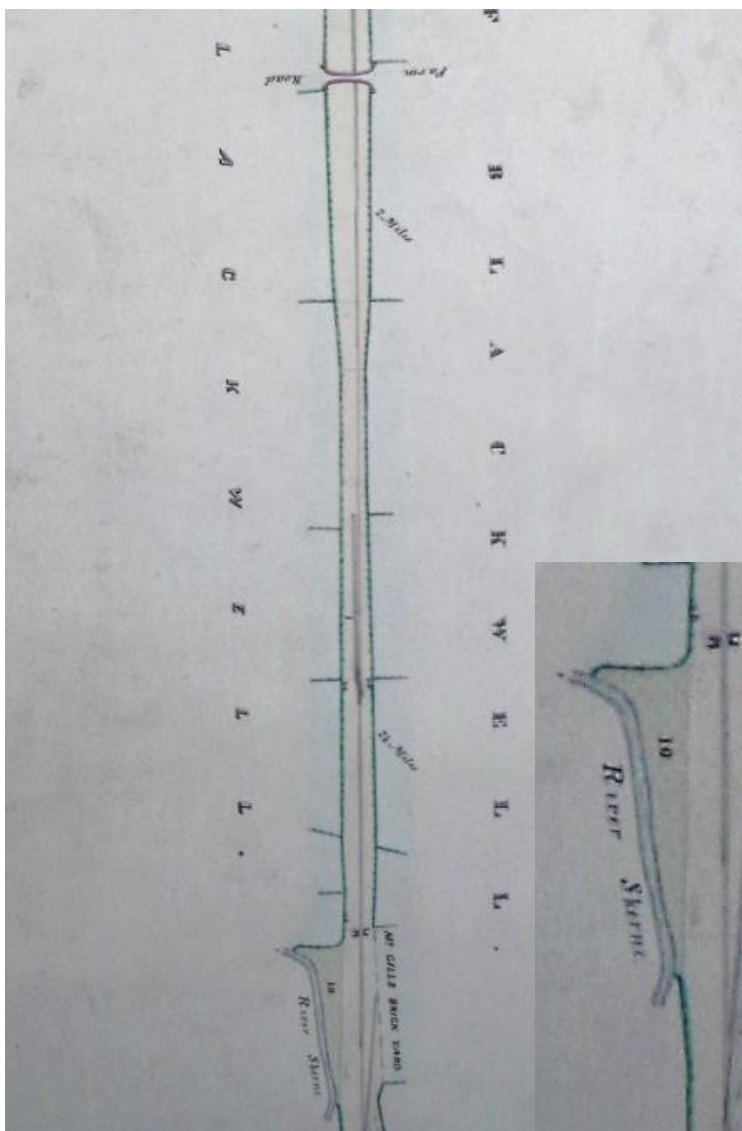


Figure 48. Dixon's survey of 1838 with Mr Gill's Brick Yard to the south (and detailed inset). A stretch in the centre of this section had sidings and a farm access just before the 2 ½ mile mark was served with a simple level crossing consisting of opposing five bar gates. The brickyard had its own set of sidings too (RAIL 1037/455).

⁴⁸ The road pre-dating the A66 was crossed over the branch line by a bridge with curved wing walls. There is an outside possibility that the bridge was buried rather than demolished but it would be below the current road

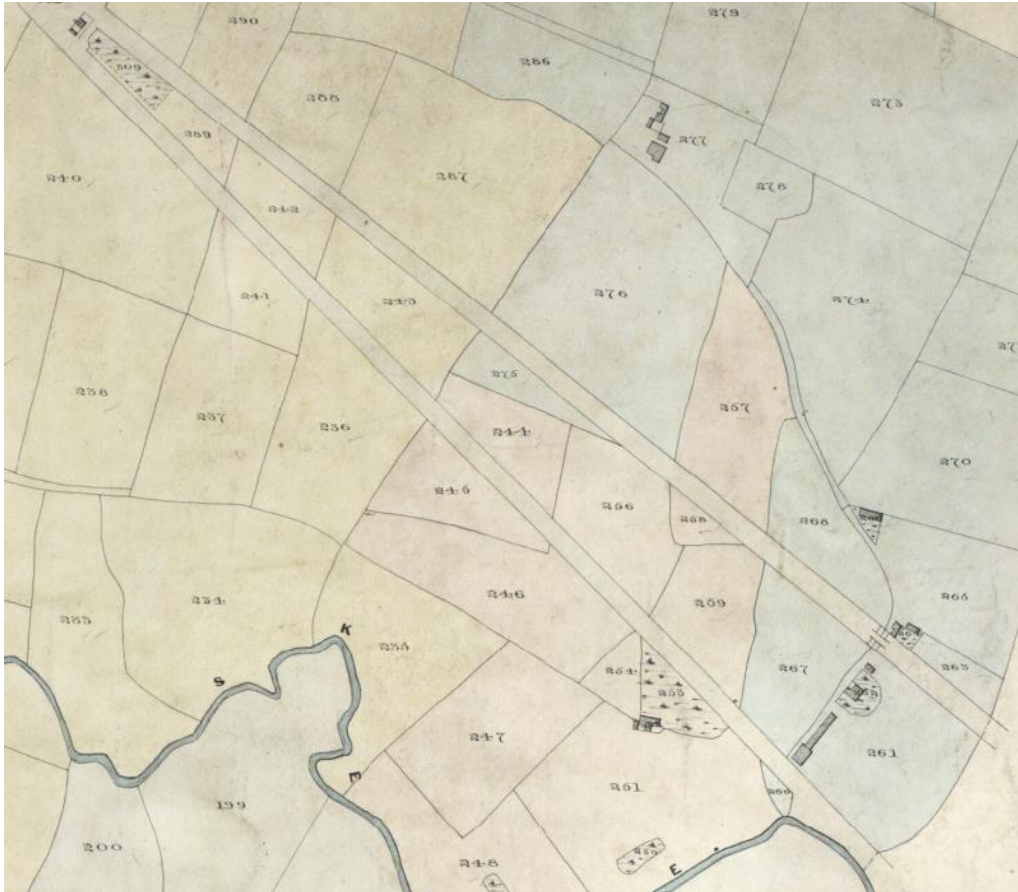


Figure 49. The Blackwell tithe map of 1848 (DDR/EA/TTH/1/21). The Croft branch is the line below; the top route is the GNER line to York. The group of buildings between the two lines is Black Bank Brick and Tile Works



Figure 50. The cutting for the Croft trackbed just south of the A66 and north of Black Banks.

Trackbed – cutting

South of the area of ground disturbance and north of Black Banks, the Croft branch survives well as a deep cutting within regenerated woodland. This cutting contains debris from 1960s rail structures such as old gateposts and some stone revetment work (SDR 905), but nothing appears to date to 1829 apart from the cuttings themselves. The ground surface is mostly grass and brambles, but the sides of the cuttings are still covered with clinker and ash from its 20th century railway use.



Figure 51. Stonework positioned around the base of a tree (S&DR 905). This is not a field boundary, so might simply be a mechanism to support the tree.

Just north of Black Banks Kennels and Cattery, the trackbed within a more modest cutting survives well with the stone revetments visible at the edges of the cutting. The embankments above the revetments however are being quarried for soil and so the trackbed appears to sit within a level area. The active quarrying here is threatening the trackbed's survival. Permission was not obtained to walk over the land in the ownership of Black Banks House (the former kennels) but based on aerial photography dating to 2018, the extraction is taking place along the entire length of line in this ownership.



Figure 52. The cutting as it levels towards Black Banks. Stone revetments can be seen on the left side and these presumably continue to the south but are buried by woodland vegetation. The embankments to the left seem to be subject to quarrying for soil.



Figure 53. Detail of the stone revetments along the trackbed



Figure 54. Areas of current extraction of trackbed earthworks at Black Banks (marked with arrows)

Brick and Tile Yard and Chemical Works (site of)

Black Bank Kennels and Cattery is the site of the former brick yard belonging to Mr Gill in 1838 (S&DR 866 – see Dixon plan). Mr Gill lived here when the Croft branch was still run by the S&DR, although he was not listed as an owner or an occupier when Stephenson carried out his survey in 1821. In August 1836 he made an application to run a coach along the line twice on Sundays so that he could take his family to church at Croft. He was granted permission the following month in return for 2 guineas a year.⁴⁹

By 1848 he was not listed as the owner or the occupier of the brickyard in the tithe apportionment. The landowner was listed as the Right Honourable George, Earl of Beverley (as he was in 1821) and the occupier as ‘Naters’, presumably a surname.

The brick and tile works were still there in 1855 and it had a siding running parallel to the line creating a brief length of double track where shunting of wagons could take place. By the turn of the century, the site was being used for a Chemical Works and had its own sidings. In 1922, part of the site was turned over for wagon repairs. In 1929, the LNER’s working timetable showed that the works were a scheduled calling point for a Pilot Train leaving Croft Depot at 5.15am every working day (5.30am on a Monday) for the chemical works only. Also, each working day a pilot train departed North Road at 10.30am calling at Croft Junction Goods Yard, the chemical works and the depot. It then made the return trip at 1.25pm. By 1952, the depot was only served by one train a day, the 2.45pm from Croft Yard.⁵⁰



Figure 55. Black Banks in 1855 (OS 1st ed 6 inch)

⁴⁹ RAIL 667/ 9

⁵⁰ Coulthard 2018, 37



Figure 56. OS revision dated 1912 to the 2nd edition map. The brick works were now used as a chemical works.

By the 1960s the two sidings at the chemical works were still in evidence. The longer siding passed below a timber loading gantry and the shorter one terminated inside a large corrugated iron shed.⁵¹

Today the chemical works have gone, and the site has greened over. The present-day kennels and cattery occupy the top NE corner of the chemical works site.

Administrative boundary (S&DR 306)

The boundary between the townships of Blackwell and Hurworth runs across the Croft branch in an east-west direction. Some administrative boundaries were marked with stone boundary markers, although none have been noted here. Such markers usually have the initial of the parish or township on the side facing the named place.

Access

There is currently no access to this part of the branch line as it is on private land. However the north section it is not currently used for anything being entirely woodland scrub. If the necessary consents were put in place the cutting could be a possible route for access, although the wildlife interest would need to be assessed – there are substantial burrows in the revetments.

⁵¹ Coulthard 2018. 39



Figure 57. Access options between the A66 and Black Banks (purple is preferred) but turquoise would be less intrusive on current occupiers

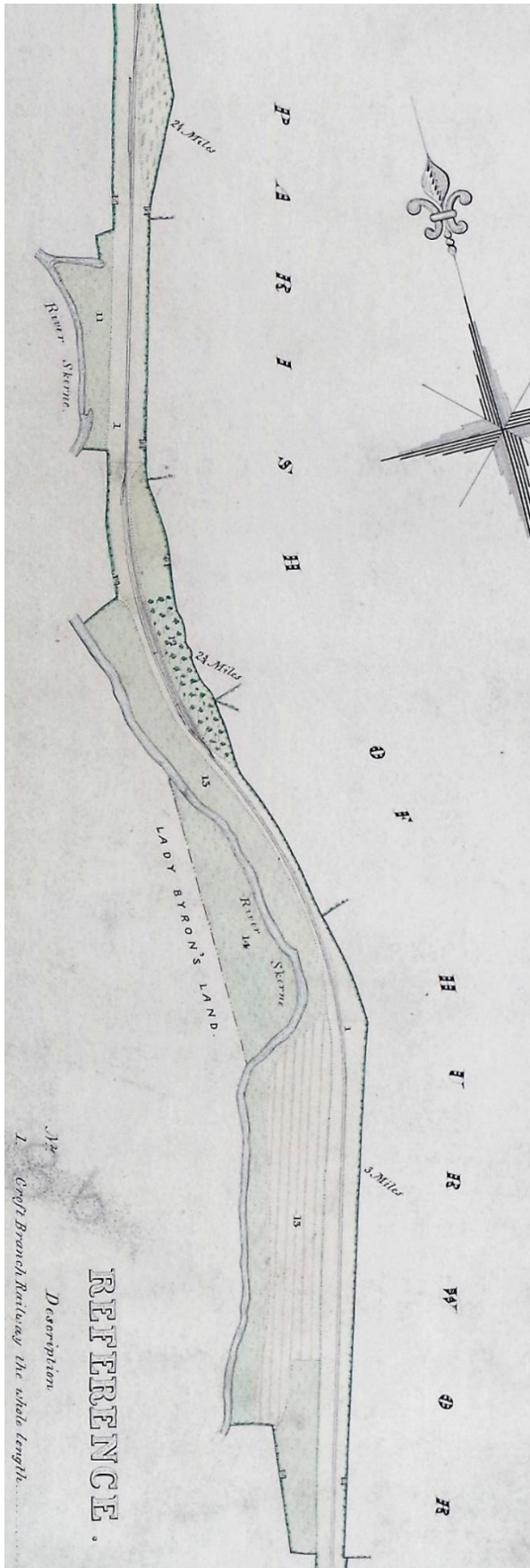
Once south of the woodland, the land is used for grazing, but the trackbed revetments are being quarried for soil. The area is also used to dispose of unwanted horse manure.

Management and protection

- 🚧 The route of the branch line is currently inaccessible due to scrub growth south of the A66 and Snipe Lane. Access through here would require some tree clearance, but much could be retained
- 🚧 The ecological interest needs to be identified
- 🚧 There is a high potential that there are buried remains associated with the line here.
- 🚧 The land on the north side of Black Banks Kennels and Cattery is being actively used as a quarry for soil. This is damaging the branch line and will lead to total loss if it continues
- 🚧 Some of the line is being used to store unwanted building materials.
- 🚧 The survival here of the branch line merits legal protection.

Black Banks Farm to The Coal Depot

This part of the route meandered along the banks of the Tees towards Hurworth Place. According to Dixon's survey it should have had boundary stones at the 2 ½, 2 ¾, 3 and 3 ¼ mile positions. It had five crossing points marked with opposing 5 bar gates, although where the line was close to the river, only one gate was provided. Where the line had a gentle bend in it to follow the course of the river, the single track doubled, then became single again,



before doubling on the approach to the depot. In 1838 the surrounding fields were grass or arable but some were cut off from the rest of the farmland by the railway track.

Figure 58. Dixon's plan of S&DR land surveyed in 1838 (RAIL 1037/455)



Figure 59. By 1855 some of these level crossings had been doubled in size to link with the 1841 GNER line (NER by 1855)

What survives and how do we protect it?

The trackbed survives well through this pastoral landscape, although some parts are now heavily wooded and the surface is occasionally churned by tractors and a cow feeding station. As the ground levels drop towards the south, the trackbed gradually rises on a substantial earthwork embankment as it approaches Linden Lane and the Croft Depot. Sidings can be discerned where there are linear gaps between the trees and the area is littered with former wooden sleepers reused as gateposts while the line was active and now are themselves redundant (SDR 879-80, 884, 886). Some wooden sleepers are still *in situ* but now earth and grass covered (SDR 876). Demolition debris scattered in various places is mostly 20th century, consisting of concrete slabs and brickwork with the amounts increasing towards the site of the former brickworks and chemical works (SDR 885). The bridge shown on maps on the township boundary south of Black Banks Farm and photographed by John Proud in 1971 appears to have been demolished, however as access to the entire line was not granted, it is possible that it survives elsewhere. However the area where it appears to have been located is now very disturbed (viewed from a distance).



Figure 60. The trackbed south of Black Banks



Figure 61. Railway bridge near Croft in 1971 (not seen during incomplete site visit) (photo: John Proud)



Figure 62. The embankment of the Croft branch line just before it reaches the coal depot.



Figure 63. In situ wooden sleepers



Figure 64. Demolition debris near Black Banks



Figure 65. Soil extraction immediately east of the trackbed

At Oxneyfield Bridge the track bed was served with a ramp on its west side to access across the line. This is still in evidence and the historic mapping shows that having crossed the line, it then ran parallel to the east side of the line until dog legging to go under the GNER track just south of Black Bank (now Hill Top Farm).

The quality of survival on this stretch merits protection through designation.



Figure 66. There is no current right of way along the branch line. If access was to be enhanced it could be along the trackbed, although large numbers of horses or cycles could damage the trackbed surface

Access

There is no current right of way along the branch line on this stretch and no existing rights of way that could be used. The nearest right of way is the Teesdale Way which runs from Stressholme golf course to Oxneyfield, crossing the Skerne at Oxneyfield Bridge. This is about 1km from the branch line and on the other side of the Skerne. It would afford no views of the branch line and would add to the length of the journey considerably.

The sewage works are located quite close to the Skerne and so are also quite close to the branch line. This unfortunate choice of location was bemoaned as long ago as 1881 when the walk from Croft was “by no means so pleasant or fragrant as it used to be. The sewage farm, no doubt laid out in the most utilitarian way, and certainly in the most hideous one, has destroyed much of the beauty of the walk”.⁵² One has to hope that sewage treatment has

⁵² Nicholson 1881, 69

advanced sufficiently to restore at least the smell if not the view which has been mitigated by tree cover.

Management and protection

- 👉 The quality of survival merits protection of the trackbed and associated crossing points including the ramp on the west side near Oxneyfield Bridge.
- 👉 The planning status of the soil extraction taking place on the trackbed north of Black Banks and adjacent to the trackbed south of Black Banks should be ascertained.
- 👉 The disused line appears to be of high wildlife value, and this could be adversely impacted by enhanced access if not designed carefully
- 👉 A small length of line from Back Banks to the south was not visited due to lack of consents. Should permission be granted in future, this stretch would merit inspection for surviving railway features.
- 👉 There is a small amount of rabbit burrowing along the embankment. A cattle feeding station is located here but does not appear to be causing any damage. Cattle do graze this stretch but in sufficient low numbers not to be causing damage to the trackbed.

The Coal Depot

The branch line terminated at the Coal (and Lime) Depot at Hurworth Place near Croft Bridge. The coal being transported along the Croft branch line originated at several collieries and each one had at least one coal cell at the Croft Bridge depot. Lists of coal and lime deliveries set out which collieries used the depot and how many cells they had. In 1830, coal came from collieries at Old Black Boy (4 cells), Shildon (4 cells), Eldon (3 cells), Old Etherley (3 cells), New Etherley (3 cells), Witton Park (3 cells), Deanery (1 cell) and Coundon (1 cell) with Old Etherley producing by the far the greatest quantity. This suggests that there were 22 cells in use at that time.⁵³ Another list of coal and lime sales from the depot gave the total amounts of coal and lime delivered between the opening of the branch in October 1829 and October 1835 as over 102,199 tons of coal and cinders and over 519 tons of lime (and no lime being delivered at all in 1830), suggesting that coal was far more productive than lime.

The coal (or whatever freight was being purchased here) was sold by weight so the depot had to have weighbridges or weigh machines operated by the depot agent and his staff. The S&DR depot agent was Thomas Longstaff in 1830 and he lived nearby.

The depot expanded over time. New cells were added to the easternmost sidings by June 1830 and by 1922 it had a goods yard, a goods siding, a gas works of 1858 (the building of which entailed the demolition of some of the cells) fed by sidings and the coal cells.⁵⁴ The 1922 track diagram for the line also referred to 'Banner's Warehouse'; this may have been two 12 ton van bodies mounted on concrete blocks.⁵⁵ By the time the site closed in 1964, there was an assortment of structures, used and disused including a platelayer's hut constructed from railway sleepers and corrugated iron.⁵⁶

⁵³ Durham Chronicle 19 June 1830

⁵⁴ Coulthard et al 2018, 34-5

⁵⁵ Coulthard et al 2018, 37

⁵⁶ Coulthard 2018, 38

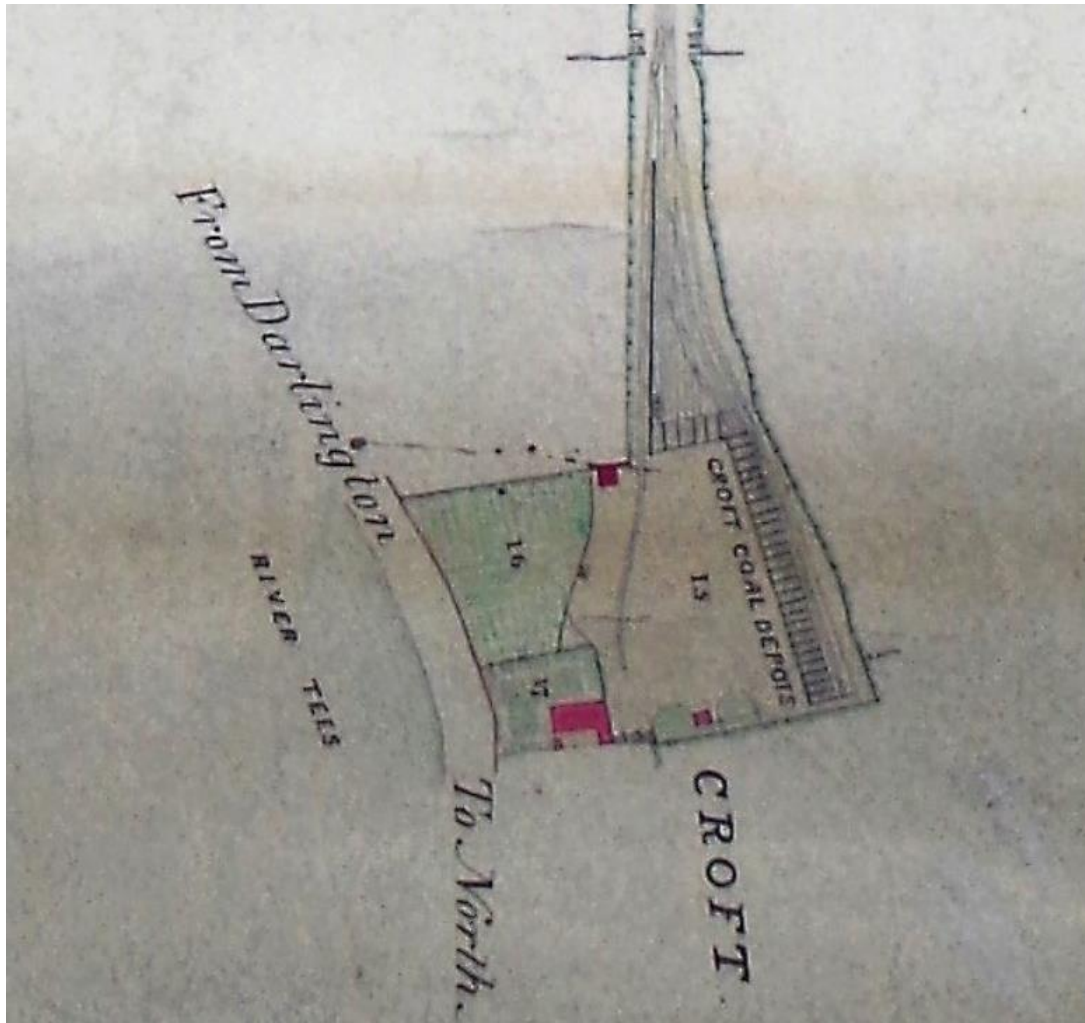


Figure 67. Dixon's plan of Croft Depot surveyed in 1838 (RAIL1037/455). The long row of cells was probably for coal, the shorter row for lime. Other buildings would include the agent's house and weigh house – the agent's house probably being no.17 which was marked as being a house and garden in the bottom left of the yard.



Figure 68. The tithe map of 1840 (DDR/EA/TTH/1/136)

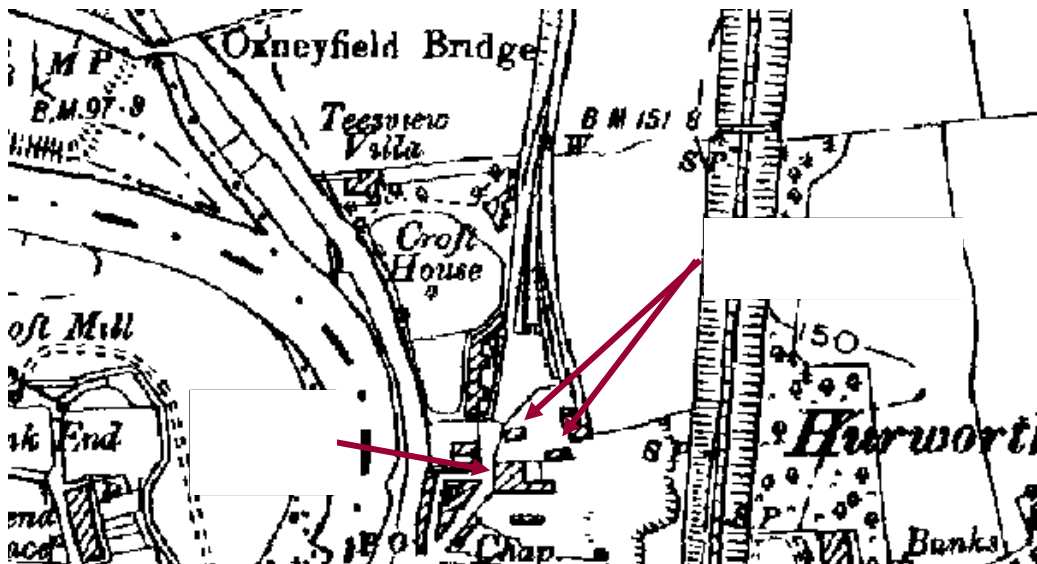


Figure 69. The 2nd ed OS map 6 inch 1897.



Figure 70. The weigh house and probable accommodation for the depot agent (no evidence of this building surviving, it appears to have been demolished to build Linden Court's predecessor buildings). To the rear was the weighbridge also now demolished (photo: R. V. Webster)



Figure 71. The Coal Drops and Yard Gates at Croft Depot in 1964 just before closing (photo R. V. Webster)



Figure 72. The top of the coal drops where coal was dropped into cells below from wagons on the higher trackbed. The wooden platforms on either side of the drops were for depot attendants to stand and help unload the wagons. More cells to the left have lost their overhead tracks. Image dated 1964. (Photo R. V. Webster).



Figure 73. A similar view in 2018 (compare to fig 72)

What survives and how do we protect it?

Most of the coal cells have been demolished and built over, but there is still some survival at the depot. These remains are fragmentary but should be protected from further development.



Figure 74. Left: the longest siding which once terminated at the gas works but now terminates at Linden Court. Right more sidings in the woodland scrub on Linden Drive. These are enclosed with a low stone wall, presumably a former depot wall.

Sidings

The earthwork remains of the sidings can still be seen amongst the trees on the approach to the depot. Several lines of sidings can be seen including the longest ones serving the gas works. It is likely that remains from the gas works will survive under the open green space next to Linden House and so if this is the subject of development, it may need to be informed by a heritage statement and pre-determination trial excavation. Track diagrams from 1922

also suggest that there was a Goods Siding at the 1 mile 57 chains point of the track. The sidings should be left intact along with access to them.

Depot walls

A substantial stone wall in front of the 1970s properties on Linden Drive appears to be part of the depot boundary wall. The same stone walling at a lower level encloses the surviving sidings. This wall should be protected along with the sidings behind it.

The Comet

The S&DR recognised the need to provide workers at the depot with refreshments. It was also the case that customers would appreciate a rest stop and a drink before embarking on their return journey which might be some distance to Northallerton or Richmond. Normally an inn would be constructed near the depot (as at Darlington, Stockton, Yarm and Aycliffe Lane) but there was already the Comet Inn at Hurworth Place which had functioned as a coaching inn. The Comet now purchased its coals direct from the depot but must have also benefited from its proximity to the depot. The Comet remains as an inn today.

The Comet is a late 18th century building with some 19th century alterations. It is listed grade II.⁵⁷

The Croft Spa Hotel

This hotel is where the Croft Branch was formally opened on the 27 October, 1829 with a ceremonial "cold collation". It is now known as the Croft Hotel and is listed grade II.⁵⁸

The hotel is a relic of the heyday of Croft Spa which was given a significant boost by the provision of a passenger train service. The sulphurous mineral waters of Croft were first noticed early in the C17, and the first bath was erected in 1688. By 1713 the waters were being sold in London in sealed bottles at high prices. The first hotel was built in 1808. A new suite of baths was built c.1815 at the Old Spa by Sir William Chaytor, followed c.1827 by the New Spa, which had hot and cold baths. The coming of the railway brought more visitors, and the later GNER station was called Croft Spa Station. To accommodate visitors to the "Wells", a large number of lodging houses were built.⁵⁹

The building was remodelled in 1835. The owner then was Sir William Chaytor and the architect Ignatius Bonomi. Chaytor was a committee member of the S&DR and a major landowner in north east England. He owned Witton Park from 1816 at the start of the mainline and the estate of Witton Castle, within which he developed the Witton Park Colliery. Chaytor was made a baronet in 1831. He served as a Whig Member of Parliament for Sunderland from 1832 to 35 and was a supporter of Earl Grey and of the Reform Act 1832. He was appointed High Sheriff of Durham in 1839.⁶⁰

The architect Ignatius Bonomi redesigned the S&DR's Skerne Bridge in Darlington after George Stephenson's original designs were abandoned. He was also employed by Chaytor to extend Witton Castle and built the now-demolished Clervaux Castle near Croft.

⁵⁷ List entry no. 1185925

⁵⁸ List entry no. 1179487

⁵⁹ Bulmer 1890, 414, White 1840, 414

⁶⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_William_Chaytor,_1st_Baronet [accessed 270319]

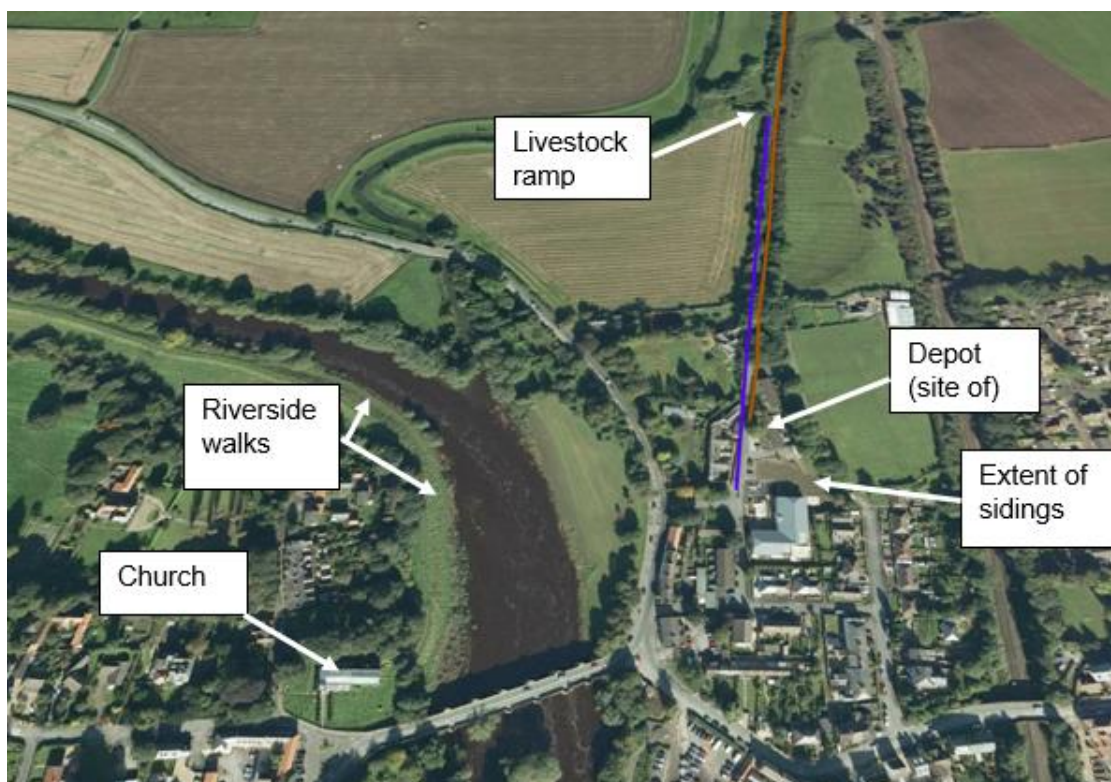


Figure 75. Preferred access (in purple) would be along the disused trackbed.

Access

The disused trackbed on the approach to the depot is in good condition, but much of it is in private land. There is a public footpath running from the depot heading north along the trackbed until it currently reaches a locked gate. This is the point where there is an access ramp suitable for livestock allowing them to move across the trackbed. Access from the trackbed to the depot is therefore restricted by the lack of accessible land. The most obvious potential route is along the trackbed if such access can be negotiated.

An alternative is to approach the depot from Hurworth Place but as a visitor experience without an associated walk along disused trackbed, there is little to recommend it. However, with the added services provided by the Croft Hotel and the Comet Inn (not open during the day however), and riverside walks and the other heritage interests of Croft including the church and associations with Lewis Carroll,⁶¹ then there may be sufficient added value to visit the depot as part of a wider package.

Management and protection

- 👉 There is not enough to see of the former depot to merit a special visit to Hurworth Place without an associated walk along the trackbed which is largely in private ownership. There are however several other features of interest at Hurworth Place not directly related to the railway
- 👉 There are issues of fly tipping along the trackbed from the depot site (Linden Drive)

⁶¹ Lewis Carroll attended St Peter's in the 1840s when his father was rector of the church; he also spent part of his childhood in the adjacent Rectory. Many items inside the church have been cited as inspiration for characters from Carroll's work; the grinning cat on the sedilla is believed to have inspired the Cheshire Cat. Carroll also owned a model railway in the Rectory gardens.

- 👉 Sidings and boundary walls do survive from the depot and should be protected from further development or demolition
- 👉 There may be buried remains of the gasworks on the grass area adjacent to Linden Court. If there are proposals to develop this area, some trial trenching and a heritage statement should explore the survival and significance of the remains
- 👉 The ramp leading to the trackbed should also be protected from damaging operations
- 👉 The quality of survival of the trackbed and ramp is sufficiently good to merit designation

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CROFT BRANCH

Significance can be assessed under different themes; the National Planning Policy Framework suggests that significance is the value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. That interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic. The setting of a heritage asset can also contribute towards its significance. Significance in this section is graded from Considerable at the highest level, to Some, Limited and None.

The Croft branch line is significant because of its historic, archaeological and architectural interests. Nothing on the branch line has been identified as being of particular artistic interest.

Historic interest

The Croft branch line is of **considerable historic interest**. At first glance, the Croft branch was a relatively simple, short, single track, horse drawn railway with a depot that focused on coal traffic and other forms of freight. However, it also used locomotives at various times, and it carried passengers at least until 1833. Importantly it was part of the Stockton & Darlington Railway whose opening triggered the growth of railways around the world. It falls within the pioneering days of the S&DR between 1825 and 1830 when it was ahead of all other companies and was testing and running a fully-fledged railway network complete with branch lines. Croft Branch was part of this pioneering network.

While the 1825 S&DR was parent to the modern railways that followed, the Croft Branch was the parent to the GNER. The GNER wasn't seen as a threat to the S&DR; instead its very existence had been anticipated in 1818 and was part of Joseph Pease's vision from 1835 and implemented by S&DR engineer Thomas Storey. The sale of the branch to the S&DR also had the benefit of giving the S&DR access to the upgraded track at the north end of the line and the new Bank Top station.⁶² The creation of this new company was an important leap forward in the provision of a national railway service with the linking together of various private companies.

The fact that the northern section of the line has been continuously operated as a railway since 1829 also adds to its historic interest.

Archaeological interest

The archaeological interest varies along the length of the line.

Parts of the line are now the East Coast Mainline and so have been continuously running since 1829. While this is of historic interest, its continual use and development mean that it is of **limited archaeological interest** because little survives from those pioneering days. Despite that, the continual use of Parkside Accommodation Bridge from early GNER days is

⁶² Wall 2001, 147

good, but it is extended, patched up, scraped by tall vehicles and positively bashed about, but there it sits, part of the modern-day highway and carrying the latest high-speed trains north and south. It should be protected, and processes put in place to ensure that future repairs better reflect its significance. As bottle necks go, this is one to be proud of. It is of **considerable archaeological interest** because its patchwork of repairs and extensions record the development of the railway from a modest branch line to a national rail network.

It is surprising to find reused split two-hole sleeper blocks on Smithfield Road – a little reminder of 1829 and one worth cherishing. The north half of the Croft branch line is therefore of **limited archaeological interest**, although as the discovery of sleeper stones at the site of the former coal depot on John Street shows, even an area of much change can still retain archaeological evidence of the 1829 trackbed.

The post-industrial urban environment of Darlington retains a number of larger architectural features such as the coal depot on Parkgate, but these post-date the branch line. They are however part of the railway history of Darlington and contain information on how the railway line evolved after 1829. They merit careful consideration when exploring future uses. They are of **some archaeological interest**, but this would need to be explored further through heritage statements.

In areas that have not been used since 1964, survival is better and so the southern half of the branch line is of **considerable archaeological interest**. There are tangible, fully sized stretches of trackbed surviving as cuttings or embankments that preserve the construction methods and adaptations of the line over time. In areas of cuttings, there may be buried culverts running parallel to the line. At Black Banks there are also stone revetment walls running alongside the trackbed edge. These are best seen between the woods to the back of Paddock Lane just north of the A66 and Croft Depot. On the southern half of the line there is also evidence of sidings surviving amongst trees that have been allowed to grow since 1964. This length of the branch line all the way to the site of the depot merits designation to protect it.

Architectural interest

The route of the branch line was relatively simple and did not require large pieces of engineering or architecture. A few accommodation bridges were built and where they survive they are of **considerable architectural interest** because we have so little nationally that survives from this pioneering period.

There are relict remains along the line which post-date the S&DR's management of the line, most notably in Darlington itself. However, few of the surviving structures make a positive contribution to the streetscape as many are un-managed and subject to vandalism. But such structures contribute towards the setting of the branch line and contribute towards the railway character of the town.

Overall significance and protection

Based on survival, archaeological potential and historic interest, the following areas should be considered for designation to protect them from further disturbance (see fig 76). Designation in the form of scheduling or Conservation Area status would achieve the most appropriate level of protection for a heritage asset with very little in the way of upstanding structures, but which is vulnerable to ground moving operations, un-managed tree felling or self-seeded tree growth, and inappropriate development to its setting.

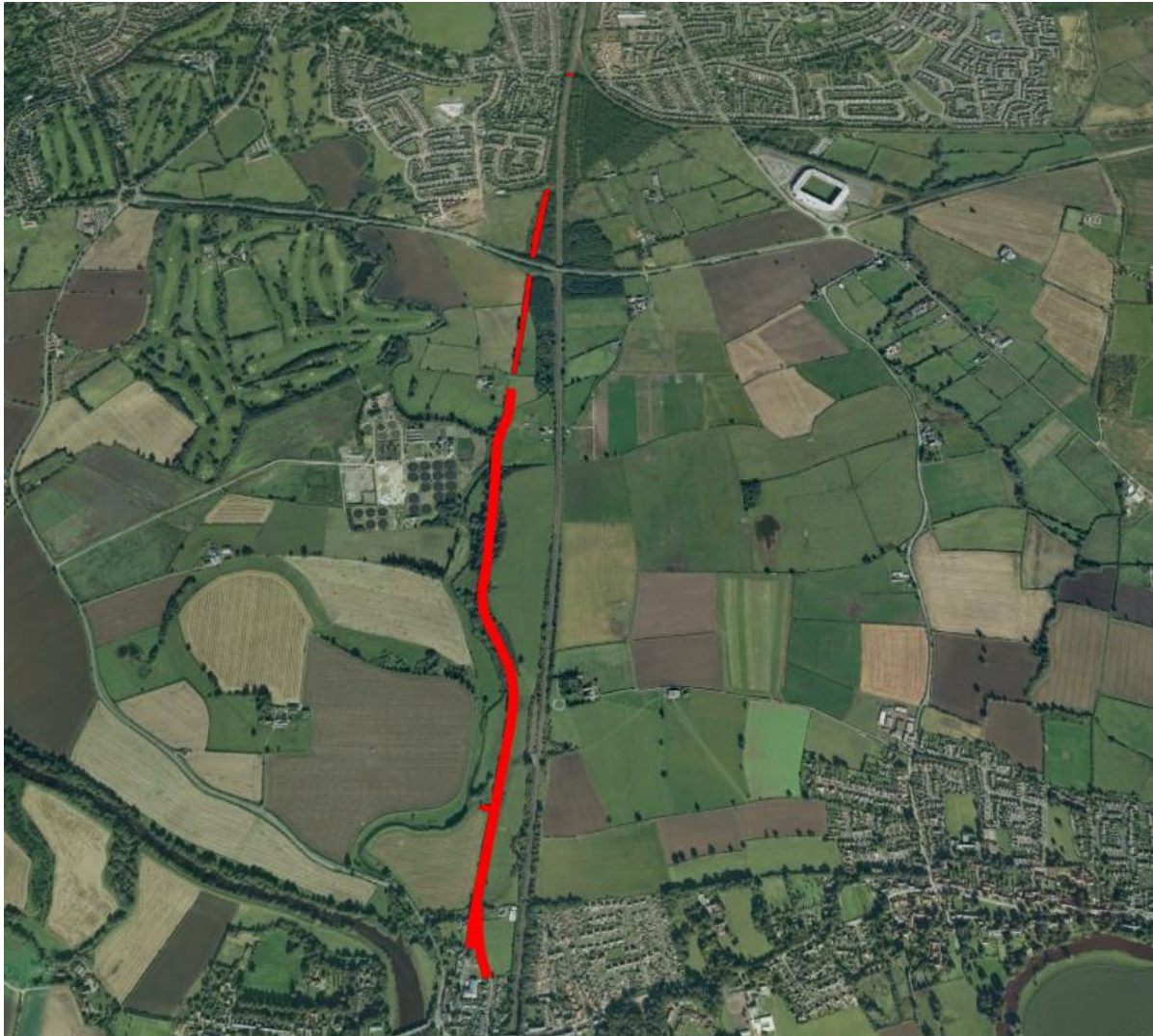


Figure 76. Areas where survival of the Croft branch may merit designation. This includes Parkside Bridge, all areas where the trackbed survives, sidings at the depot and the ramp leading to the trackbed north of the depot

CONCLUSION

At first glance, the Croft branch was a relatively simple, short, single track, horse drawn railway with a depot that focused on coal traffic and other forms of freight. However, it also used locomotives at various times, and it carried passengers at least until 1833 and occasionally thereafter. Importantly it was part of the Stockton & Darlington Railway whose opening triggered the growth of railways around the world. It falls within the pioneering days of the S&DR between 1825 and 1830 when it was ahead of all other companies and was testing and running a fully-fledged railway network complete with branch lines. Croft Branch was part of this pioneering network.

While the 1825 S&DR was parent to the modern railways that followed, the Croft Branch was the parent to the GNER. The GNER wasn't seen as a threat to the S&DR; instead its very existence had been anticipated in 1818 and was part of Joseph Pease's vision from 1835. The creation of this new company was an important leap forward in the provision of a national railway service with the linking together of various private companies. It is part of the site's significance that the northern half has remained in continual railway use since 1829.

The survival of original features associated with the branch line varies along the route. It can broadly be summarised as being poorer where the line became part of the GNER and is now part of the East Coast Mainline. It is inevitable that constant changes to the line will have removed what went before. That is not to say that evidence of the line has wholly been swept away. Parkside accommodation bridge, not an 1829 structure, but probably one from the 1838-41 NER works, has survived despite a constant battle with today's traffic. The reused sleeper blocks at John Street and Smithfield Road also indicate how archaeological evidence can survive.

This urban northern end also contributes towards the setting of the line. The railway attracted industry and it generated more buildings of its own in the form of engineering works and coal depots. Even when these are much later in date, they reinforce the railway character of the town and merit conserving in a way that reflects their heritage but adapts them for 21st century use. Many are derelict and vandalised; new uses which build on their railway associations, can help to make their contribution to the townscape, the Parkgate Conservation Area and the branch line's setting, a positive one.

Improving access to the heritage interest of the line so that it can be better appreciated is challenging in this urban environment. Post-Croft branch line development has created private gardens close to the line, or has generated busy, noisy roads that are not pleasant walking experiences. Here the existence of pavements and urban cycle ways in the general vicinity create an option of sorts.

There are other possibilities in this urban environment. The railway has shrunk since its turn of the century size and as a result there are wide areas of former sidings, now unused scrubland, or in the case of Geneva Woods, a nature reserve with clear evidence for the sidings and railway woodland management techniques. Turning such areas into spaces that can be shared with walkers and wildlife, and maybe cyclists too, could provide an attractive walking environment accompanied by the sounds of trains without detriment to the high safety standards of Network Rail. Such former sidings have the potential to create new accessible areas east of Borough Road and Bank Top which would link into Geneva Woods. From here there is a well-used network of paths east of Paddock Lane, but they are not formal rights of way. The main obstacle to improving access along the entire length of line is the A66. There are no easy or cheap solutions to creating a safe crossing.

South of the Parkgate Junction the branch line takes on a different character because this becomes that part of the line that was retained as a modest freight line until 1964. Alterations were minimal and the structures seen today reflect the structures built in 1829 with just a few additions. The setting too reflects the setting of the branch line when first set out in 1829. The route is easily discerned and consists variously of embankments or cuttings and sidings. Much of this section of the line merits protection through designation and the planning process.

Most of the southern section is on private land and so private ownership is the biggest obstacle to enhanced access. Very little of the trackbed is developed and most is now overgrown. The greatest threats to the line here are ground moving operations and developments which require no planning permission.

At the terminus of the line, there are fragmentary remains of the depot walls and sidings. These should be protected, as they are also vulnerable to ground moving operations and developments which require no planning permission.

Fly tipping is also creating unattractive additions to Linden Drive and to parts of the privately-owned line near where there is road access (Snipe Lane and Esk Road for example). If

access to the line was to be enhanced, landowners would need reassurance that more fly tipping would not follow.

Overall there is enough surviving of the branch line and within a setting that reinforces the railway heritage to merit pro-active conservation and enhanced access. This is underway now for the 1825 mainline with a view to improving the conservation, interpretation, access and long-term maintenance for the 200th anniversary in 2025. The Croft branch line was not built until the revenues from the mainline and the Black Boy Branch Lines had generated sufficient income and confidence to proceed, although some acquisition of land took place from 1825. If the process of working towards 2025 is successful, it will generate opportunities for the Croft branch line too, but the timetable here could be set for 2029, its 200th anniversary, which would allow the investment to be staggered – much as the Stockton & Darlington Railway Company did nearly two hundred years ago.

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