

THE FLIXTON FOOTPATH BATTLE



The Bottoms Path today

Published by **The Peak and Northern Footpaths Society**

To commemorate 150 years of footpath protection work in and
around Manchester 1826-1976

Compiled by Donald W. Lee

Dedicated to the memory of the original committee of 14 who
met at the old Manchester Town Hall on
November 15th 1826 when they resolved to form
the Manchester Society for the Preservation of
Ancient Footpaths

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Illustrations (By David Corrie, Mancass Photographic Sect.)

- Front cover* 1. "The Bottoms" path today (FP 19) looking towards Penny Bridge. On the left is the ex-Cheshire Lines main Manchester-Liverpool Railway opened in the 1870s which altered the path's alignment. On the right, providing the open aspect, is the local golf course.
- Centre pages* 2. Flixton Church path (FP 39) leading to the church and pub.
3. The mystery underpass looking from FP 19—a forgotten right of way? (see text).
4. Flixton House—Wright's villa and the centre of his park. Now owned by Trafford Council.
5. Flixton Railway Station looking towards Manchester with Penny Bridge in the distance. On the left is Wright's one-time "Park" now council-owned. The Bottoms path, not visible in this view, runs parallel to the line on left as far as Penny Bridge.

1. Setting the scene—Flixton in the 1820s

One hundred and fifty years ago Flixton, seven miles to the west of Manchester, must have been similar to hundreds of other villages on the fringes of a rapidly developing city. With a focal point based on church, pub, cross-roads and shops, Flixton also took in a scattered area of hamlets and farms and as these developed it naturally followed that traditional ways were formed by the villagers going about their daily tasks which in due course became recognised by all as rights-of-way. Such by-ways and field paths would be vital to a rural community whose only method of travel would be by shank's pony and were in any case a pleasant, safer, drier alternative to the noisy, odorous, dangerous high-ways with their frequent horse traffic, whilst significantly this advantage was not lost on the inquisitive city dwellers who ventured out from Manchester seeking, even then as now, blessed relief at weekends.

In the early years of the 19th century, Flixton would still be basically feudal in outlook and as a natural ingredient of all good footpath battles, there was a selfish local tyrant to stir things up. This stubborn old man, Ralph Wright, having made his money, built Flixton House (see illustration) in 1806 and seemingly wanted to enlarge his already extensive estate and stop people, by fair means or foul, from using the public paths crossing his land. He must have been a worry, if not a curse, to the villagers, but he could hardly have conceived that when he started blocking off these obscure Flixton paths for his own whims just what sort of popular reaction he was engendering. On reflection perhaps today's footpath preservationists should be glad of men like Wright and his ilk for he and they, by their path-pilfering, provided the catalyst for one of the world's first amenity societies, The Manchester Society for the Preservation of Ancient Footpaths.

Anyone now going back to the original source material will perhaps be confused by all the twists and turns in the Flixton Footpath battle, but above all one path stands out as being at the centre of the trouble. Known as "The Bottoms Path," (it was fairly low lying but still higher than was the main road, an important point as will be explained later) it ran from Flixton Church to connect with other subsidiary paths by the Woefield to Shaw Hall Lane (see centre page map). Amazingly, despite all the great changes Flixton has seen in its metamorphosis from outlying village to commuter suburb, The Bottoms Path is still there in 1976, a little changed maybe, but now as then proving a pleasant short stroll with open views as the illustrations show.



2. "Vegetable" Wright of Flixton and the 1826 Society

Wright was a man subject to footpath persecution mania—an affliction as prevalent in 1976 as it was in 1826—and for anyone able to delve into contemporary reports of the affair, a lively and humorous, if at times pathetic, drama will unfold itself. Since the purpose of this pamphlet is to present a broad picture only of the battle, and to try to show its subsequent importance in footpath history, a point-by-point evaluation though it would be of absorbing interest to dedicated footpath enthusiasts, is not possible here (though material is being collated with a full book in mind, should there be a demand).

Fortunately, the notable contemporary writer, editor and radical Archibald Prentice was keenly interested in the Flixton path issue and since he ran the weekly *Manchester Gazette* he gave extensive coverage to the antics of "Vegetable" Wright as he liked to call him. Around 1850 Prentice, who was a founder member and leading light in the 1826 Footpath Society, set down the essence of his experiences in a best-selling book, *Historical Sketches and Personal Recollections of Manchester* and so socially and environmentally relevant is his contribution to the footpath issue, that it is worth quoting at length:

"In the year 1826, in which the deep distress of the poor and the timely benevolence of the wealthier classes were alike memorable, a society was established, having for its object the preservation of a right of considerable importance to the former. The volumes of smoke which, in spite of legislation to the contrary, continually issue from factory chimneys, and form a complete cloud over Manchester, certainly makes it less desirable as a place of residence than it is as a place of business; and the enjoyment of the inhabitants would be greatly increased, could they breathe a purer atmosphere, and have a brighter and more frequent sight of the sun. But, to counterbalance the disadvantage, they have the privilege of walking unrestrainedly through the fine fields of the vicinity; and thousands and tens of thousands, whose avocations render fresh air and exercise an absolute necessity of life, avail themselves of the right of footway through the meadows, and corn-fields, and parks in the immediate neighbourhood. There are so many pleasant footpaths, that a pedestrian might walk completely round the town in a circle, which would seldom exceed a radius of two miles from the Exchange, and in which he would scarcely ever have occasion to encounter the noise, bustle, and dust of a public cart road or paved street. The beautifully undulating country between the valley of the Irk and Cheetham Hill; the fine valley of the Irwell, with its verdant meadows; the slope from Pendleton to the plain, which, commencing between the extremities of Hulme and Chorlton-upon-Medlock, extends south and west over the greater part of Cheshire; all this scenery, which in any country would be admired, but which has a hundred additional charms to him who is condemned, day after day, month after month, and year after year, to toil in the dirt and smoke of a great town—all this

delightful scenery lies open to the pedestrian; and while he strays along through the open field, or wooded park, or the narrow and retired lane, and breathes the pure air of heaven, he feels that all these fields, and parks, and lanes, are as open to him, and to those who hang on his arm, or play by his side, as if they were his own, to have and to hold, as long as trees grow or water runs.

But there are "tyrants of the field"—men who imagine that that which runs through theirs must needs be theirs; and they must be withstood. About some twenty years before the period of which we write, a Mr. Ralph Wright, of Flixton, a parish a few miles south-west of Manchester, possessed an estate partly purchased and partly inherited, which had the usual complement of hedges, along which ran certain footways, and by which they were concealed from his house. Being desirous of giving to his property, which did not consist of more than fifteen or sixteen acres of land, a more park-like appearance, he levelled the hedges and fences; and finding that this brought the footways more in sight of his mansion, he began to use means to prevent the vulgar part of his neighbours coming between the wind and his nobility. One way, which went right across his little park, he shut up altogether, without the formality of any magistrate's order. Another, which formed part of a church road for several farm-houses, he diverted to a distance considerably farther from his house. To these encroachments his neighbours, unwilling to be thought quarrelsome, peaceably submitted; but another effort met with determined resistance: this was to divert the roads to beyond the boundary of his own grounds, so that his property might not be traversed at all. He was a magistrate, and he obtained orders signed by two brother magistrates; but, without waiting for the confirmation of the orders at next quarter sessions, he stopped up the entrance to his grounds, ploughed up the old footway, and sowed the land with oats. Mr. Samuel Wood, a farmer in the parish, like the spirited old shoemaker of Bushy Park memory was unwilling to leave the world worse than he found it, and, assisted by his neighbours, broke down three several times the obstructions that had been put up, and restored the original road to the public by treading down the oats.

The magistrate proceeded hesitatingly. In 1824 he obtained another order: this was appealed against; but when the applicants were ready with their witnesses it was abandoned. Another order immediately followed, but it was quashed on a point of form. A third order was more successful, being confirmed at the spring quarter sessions. All this was attended with expenses which were too heavy to be borne by a few persons of the class of country farmers. Thomas and Richard Potter had aided; but it was desirable that some association should be formed for the purpose of preventing this and similar encroachments, and removing from individuals the persecution to which they might be exposed in resisting the encroaching spirit of powerful country gentlemen. A meeting was accordingly

held in the Town Hall, November the 15th, 1826, at which was formed a Society for the Preservation of Ancient Footpaths, and the following gentlemen were appointed a committee to carry its objects into effect:—

Joseph Armstrong	Edward Baxter	Robert Hyde Greg
Thomas Heywood	Thomas Hilton	John Kenworthy
Edward J. Lloyd	Robert Millington	Richard Potter
Archibald Prentice	John Edward Taylor	Robert Tebbutt
J. B. Wanklyn	George Wm. Wood	

A pleasant association this of tories, whigs, and radicals, and one which, in the successful results of its resistance in many attempted cases of encroachment, spread amongst the country gentlemen a wholesome terror of transgressing against the right of the poor to enjoy their own, without any one to make them afraid.

The Flixton people, having now the sanction and countenance of men holding at least as good a station in society as Ralph Wright, Esq., resolved to make another effort for the recovery of their right of road. They sued out a *certiorari* and removed the case into the Court of King's Bench, and after many motions and counter-motions, the order of the sages of the quarter sessions for confirming the order to stop up the footways coveted by their brotherhood of the bench, was quashed; and on Monday, the 14th of June, 1827, several respectable inhabitants of Flixton, accompanied by some of the Manchester society, who were desirous of witnessing the renewal of a privilege of which the public had been for two years deprived, went in procession to open the roads, and the application of a saw gave them ingress to Mr. Wright's "park". The ground was covered with a very fine crop of grass, nearly ready to be cut; and the path, consequently, was not very obvious, but here and there it was indicated by the growth being shorter, and it was easily traced. The party having crossed the park, cut down the fences on the other side, and having thus asserted their and the public right, retired peaceably. I happened to arrive a minute or two after the procession had crossed the park, but, though I missed the satisfaction of seeing the unlawful impediments cut down, I experienced a higher pleasure in observing the fresh marks of the saw, the little two-feet wide opening, and the newly-made track through the tall grass, than such sights might be thought capable of giving. They spoke the triumph of an ancient law over the grasping and monopolising spirit of modern times. When I reached the middle of the large field which, by the destruction of two or three hedges, had been raised into the dignity of a "park", I could not help being struck with the bad taste, to speak of it in the gentlest terms, which sought a solitary greatness by the exclusion of every mark of rustic neighbourhood.

These contests cost the appellants nearly £600, and, as they must have been equally expensive to Mr. Ralph Wright, it might have been supposed that he would desist from any further attempt at encroach-

ment. But the magistrate was bent upon his purpose, and on the 14th September four orders were signed by Robert Fielden and James Brierley, Esqrs., for stopping up these paths. The persecuted inhabitants of Flixton entered another appeal. It was tried at the quarter session, on Monday, October 29th, lasting nearly all day, and ending in the final discomfiture of Mr. Wright, but at a cost of £750 to the spirited vindicators of a public privilege."

3. The Prentice Victory Pamphlet of 1827

At its climax in October 1827, the Flixton footpath battle was taking up many more column inches of newsprint than important international intelligence or the details of grisly murder cases which papers of that day seemed to delight in printing. Indeed after the court had conclusively decided against Wright and "The Bottoms Path" was finally safe, Archibald Prentice and *The Manchester Gazette* issued a sixty page victory pamphlet which brought together all the salient points and included extensive verbatim court exchanges together with several cutting editorials which read like a 19th century *Private Eye*. Once again this fascinating document—surely the first ever footpath publication—is worthy of complete reprinting and detailed annotation but for our present purposes a few extracts, alternately humorous, interesting and revealing, will have to suffice.

One of Wright's witnesses (being on the local bench he was able to rely on many of the local affluents to speak on his behalf, though some had been so plied with liquor that when their turn came to give evidence they were too drunk to stand!) was William Eccles, the governor of Flixton workhouse: "I think use of 'The Bottoms' encourages vice. I only see disorderly ones going that way," then he slipped up by adding in the next breath, "I once saw Mr. Stevenson the clergyman going that way to church".

On a more serious note, evidence on the incorrect posting of legal notices (a practise still prevalent in 1976) was brought out, as was Wright's previous illegal activity in blocking up other paths on his estate. And this brings us to a very interesting disclosure. One of the paths referred to briefly in evidence (and on a plan which accompanied the 1827 pamphlet) ran from "The Smithy" (see 1826 map in the centre page) across Wright's path to join the Bottoms Path and it seems that this was eventually conceded as public by Wright. When the railway was built about 1870 an underpass was constructed, clearly with the intention of connecting the realigned "Bottoms" path (see illustration) with land where the old path to the Smithy once ran. This route seems to have been lost completely for many years but as far as we can gather no path has been formally closed, so the Peak and Northern Footpaths Society is now collecting evidence for its re-establishment and if this can be achieved it will be directly due to the 1827 pamphlet.

Finally, in our all-too-brief look at the invaluable publication we find the answer to a problem which must have set dedicated footpath enthusiasts wondering. Looking at the map, by no stretch of the imagination—pleasant though it is to use—can The Bottoms be thought of as a short cut between Shaw Hall and Flixton Church, yet most of the local evidence in favour of retention sought to argue this. Why? Well in the 18th and 19th century, before the Manchester Ship Canal was built in 1894 and changed the drainage hereabouts, the nearby River Mersey used to flood its banks regularly and run

over Shaw Hall Lane, thus making it impassable on foot. "The Bottoms" being somewhat higher then formed the natural and quickest route to Church and if that was to be closed the only way during flooding would have been to walk round by Smithy Lane (or Flixton Road as it is now), a mile extra, so truly The Bottoms was a vital short cut. This is an outstanding example of a map not telling the whole of the story and proves, as footpath enthusiasts know, that no matter how innocent something looks on paper there is no substitute for detailed site inspection.

4. Flixton footpaths 80 years ago

To Wright's credit, he accepted the 1827 court ruling and there was no further trouble from him. He died in 1831, aged 78, and left no children, being buried in the Parish Church where there are tablets recording his firmness and acuteness, perhaps accurate enough words to use. "The Bottoms" continued in use and its route was altered, as was much else in Flixton, by the coming of the railway in the early 1870s. Rapid urban development followed which has continued unabated to the present time, involving the unfortunate loss of many rural paths.

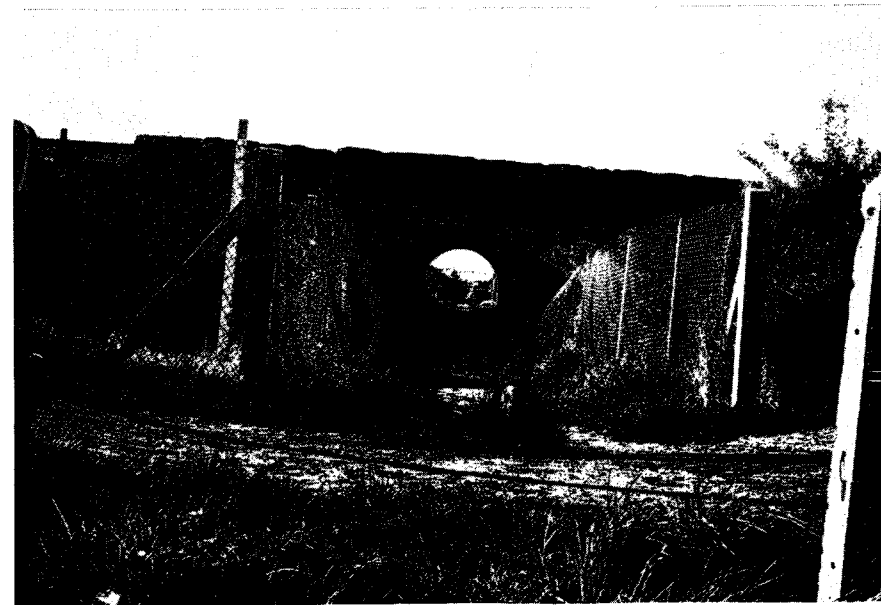
As early as the 1890s local historian D. H. Langton recorded the changes brought about by development and quite apart from his version of the footpath troubles it is well worth reproducing his chapter on "Roads, Lanes and Footways" from his 1898 book *A History of Flixton, Urmston and Davyhulme* to record the several name changes of roads and lanes which urban developers seem to find necessary. Also he provides a few details of other local paths, bridges and fords and explorers armed with current maps can still have a splendid day's safari tracing little known paths that lie dormant awaiting eventual rediscovery by future generations.

"The roads, since the opening of the railway in 1873, have undergone a great change both in Flixton and Urmston, not only a material change, but most of the old names are changed too. So much so, that if ever the Gamershaw boggart walks again, he will hardly know where he is. The Gamershaw, where the boggart used to appear, is now known by the name of Stretford Road. It extended from close by Matthew Swift's house to the Tennis Ground. Proceeding towards Urmston, it was called Urmston Lane. Back Urmston now rejoices in the name of Higher Urmston; Ciss Lane and Jack Lane have survived, but presently, no doubt, they will be re-christened, to suit the fastidious taste of suburban villa owners. The road from Urmston Station to Flixton formerly went by the names of Cockedge Lane and Smithy Lane now called Flixton Road. From Newton's Corner, where the much-admired holly hedge still delights everyone with its high wall of green to the fingerpost, Woodsend Road, was Miller's Lane, and from there was called Boat Lane; now the whole length is called Irlam Road. The Green Lane is now Woodsend Road. The Flash and Moorside go by the name of Moorside Road. Church Lane was formerly called Shaw Hall Lane, and Chassen Lane has superseded Penny Lane.

The old footways, too, are very much changed, a lot of them chiefly by the opening of the railway and making of the Ship Canal. The tract of land lying between Flixton Road and Church Road was covered with a network of footways. There was one from Newton's Corner went almost in a straight line to the village. Another entered Mr. Wright's park from exactly opposite Western Road (which itself was a footway between high hedges till the making of the Canal).

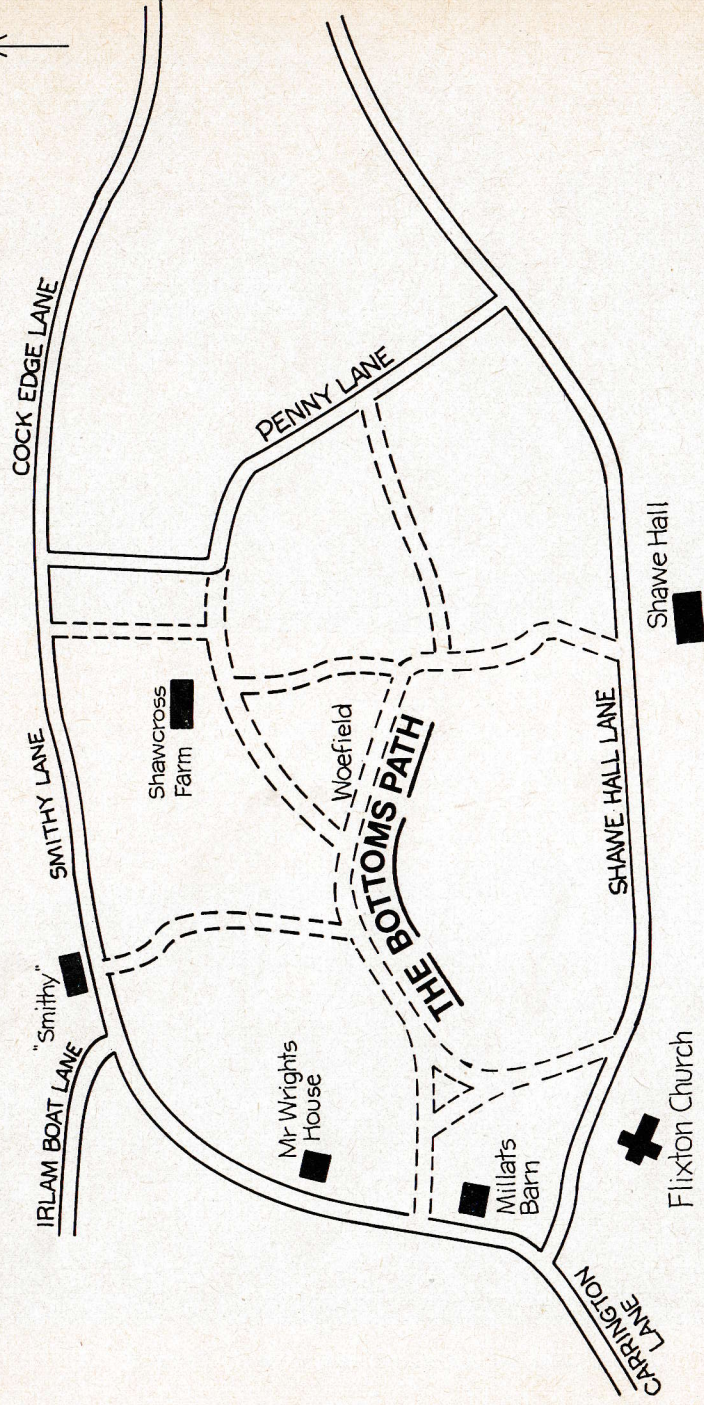


The Church Path



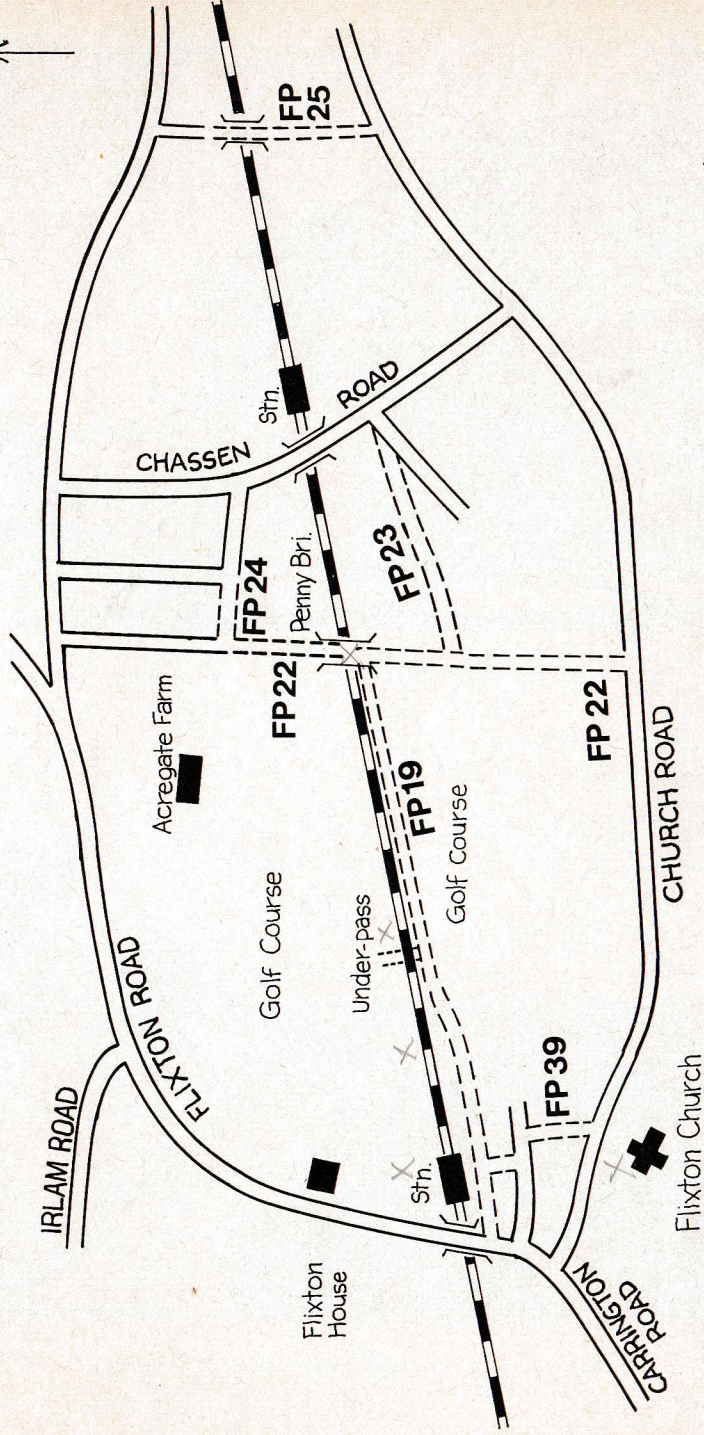
Mystery underpass, a forgotten right of way? (see p. 8)

1876

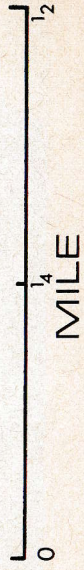


DWL 8.76

1976



DWL 8.76





Flixton House—home of Vegetable Wright



Flixton Station (showing the railway which altered the local footpaths)

This footway, after crossing the one from Newton's Corner, came to a point near the centre of the hollow. There was another footway went parallel to this from the left of the old barn post-office and joined the last mentioned in the hollow past the Station, and then onward to where the first railway bridge from Flixton Station stands. From this point it zig-zagged one way to Shaw Hall and another way into Penny Lane. Yet another entered the fields from the Smithy and took a rather roundabout course to the Church gate. These footways have been the cause of much litigation in the past. An order was made in 1824 by two magistrates, at Mr. Ralph Wright's instigation, to stop some of the footways which traversed his park. An appeal was entered at the Sessions in 1825, and the appellants were ready to go to trial when the order was abandoned. Another order was made by the same magistrates, and an appeal was made against it at the following Sessions, at which the appellants took objection to the form of the order, and the Court quashed it. A third order was shortly afterwards signed by the same magistrates (Mr. Norris and Mr. Brierley), and an appeal was again made in 1825 and tried before a bench of eight magistrates, of which four were for confirming and four for quashing the order. The appeal was adjourned to the next Sessions, when the order for stopping the footways was confirmed.

The appellants shortly afterwards sued out a *certiorari*, and removed the case into the King's Bench, and on the 9th of June, 1826, obtained judgment in their favour, and the order for stopping up the footways was quashed for the following reasons:—

- (1) Because the Justices had not set out the different lengths and breadths of the several footways directed by the order to be stopped up.
- (2) Because they had not directed the soil of the said footways to be sold, pursuant to the provisions of the XIII. George iii., cap. 78; and
- (3) Because in several places in the order the road was described as passing over the lands of Ralph Wright, Esq., without specifying in what parish those lands were situated.

On this intelligence being made known in Flixton, a party proceeded to open out the footways. Accompanied by several members of the Manchester Society for the Protection of Ancient Footpaths, they applied a saw, and having made a track through the growing crops, cut down the fences on the other side.

On the 14th September, 1827, four orders for stopping up these paths were signed by Robert Fielding, Esq., and James Brierley, Esq. Still another appeal was made, and occupied all one day and part of another in hearing the case. A great number of witnesses were examined and testified to the usefulness of the roads, until the Bench, convinced that the roads were useful to the public, said they thought it unnecessary to waste further time. Mr. Wright, on this expression

of opinion, yielded, and three of the orders were quashed; the fourth, which related to a few yards of unnecessary roads, was confirmed. The whole cost of these trials to the public reached the sum of £750. (*Trial at the Salford Michaelmas Sessions, 1827.*)

Flixton, before the advent of the railway, was an extremely out-of-the-way place. A few Manchester men, fond of country life, lived here. An omnibus journeyed by a roundabout way from Flixton to Stretford, the nearest railway station. There were few large houses, mostly country people, farmers, or market gardeners; and a few fustian cutters and handloom weavers among the cottagers. The district was secluded, owing to no direct highway traversing it. Roads, such as they were, were stopped by the Irwell and Mersey forming the boundary, and only the ferry boats of Carrington and Irlam, and Hulme's Bridge on the Irwell.

Some charming walks are still left in Flixton; a network of field paths remaining in several parts of the township. One from near Walkden's farm, by de Brook farm on towards the Canal, and either coming to an end in Boat Road, or, after devious twistings and turnings, returning towards Flixton and ending at the bridge in the lane leading to Carrington.

There were three crossings communicating with Flixton. Carrington Old Bridge, pulled down about 1840, must have been over 200 years old if it be true (as tradition states) that it was erected by a Lady Carrington to enable her tenants to attend Flixton Church, for the old hall passed from the Carringtons early in Elizabeth's reign. It was a footbridge only, and carts had to pass by the ford. In the order for the repair of bridges in 1746 it is referred to as a wooden bridge. Another ford was opposite Flixton Church, and the third near Shaw Hall. Miss Leech says that fords were often close to churches. Access could in this way be obtained from one church to another without using military roads, and after establishment of the turnpike system the avoiding of tolls would furnish another reason for using them. The Flixton ford is called in a 17th century deed "The Stone Ford". A field near, belonging to the church, was called before its purchase by the Railway Company "The Parson's Stamford".

Near Hillam farm was another crossing. Miss Leech was puzzled to understand the fact disclosed by the church registers that the youths of Ashton-on-Mersey often wedded the lasses of Urmston, and vice versa, and inquiries among the people brought to light the existence of the ford. Then there is Irlam Ferry, shown as "Erlom Ferry" in a map of 1712, and named in the order for repairs of bridges and ferries in 1746. Holmes Bridge, named in the same map, and referred to in the same order as a wooden bridge, is also shown in Morden's map of Lancashire, 1704, on the road from Manchester to Irlam. (*"Ancient Fords, Ferries, and Bridges in Lancashire," by Wm. Harrison.*)

Speaking generally, Mr. Harrison is right in saying that in the days of the old wooden footbridge carts had to pass by the ford, but empty carts were frequently taken across by removing a wheel and sliding the axle along the parapet of the bridge.

In an old map of 1598 a bridge is shown across the Mersey just east of the church, and there are still remains of an old bridge in the field called the Trealem.

The Irlam ferry, during the construction of the Ship Canal, was crossed by a bridge made by the contractor. It has now been taken away and the ferry resumed. There is a small boat for passengers and a horse boat.

At Hulme's Bridge, a ferry has superseded the old bridge, which was for foot passengers only, just below the weir."

5. "The Bottoms" today

The name seems to have dropped out of use, which is a pity for old names add interest and charm and give a reminder of rural links to any area. Therefore the Peak & Northern Footpaths Society is endeavouring to arrange for special signposting of "The Bottoms" together with some commemorative plaques recording the significance of the path as a piece of footpath history.

Until then, however, we must use the impersonal numbers given to the various lengths of path by the Urmston U.D.C. who in the early 1950s helped to compile the rights of way map under the provisions of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. (The survey is now the responsibility of the Greater Manchester Council whilst Trafford Borough Council are delegated highway authority for maintenance purposes.)

The 1976 map in the centre pages defines the present day Bottoms path as follows:

F.P. 39 This well used short path (see illustration) runs from opposite the parish church gate (O.S. Ref. 748940) and Church Inn to an estate road, The Grove, whilst a cul-de-sac end contains a passage which gives access to F.P. 19 and Flixton Station (GR747941). As such, this way would be the old church path, running from what was known in 1826 as Millats Barn. Since Flixton Parish Church dates back to the 12th century it seems reasonable to assume that this path too is at least 800 years old. Wright's monument is in the churchyard.

F.P. 19 Another very well used path, half a mile long, running from Flixton Village at Flixton Road (GR746941) to Penny Bridge Lane at Penny Bridge (GR753943). It serves a dual purpose as a utility and amenity path, providing as it does access to the railway station and shops at Flixton Village on the one hand, whilst in the other direction walkers are provided with a pleasant stroll with a golf course on one side, and for railway enthusiasts the main Manchester (Oxford Road) to Liverpool (Lime Street) railway. Beyond the line is further open space, now part of a municipal golf course but once part of Wright's private park. The path is undulating and at a slightly higher level than the parallel Church Road which was in times past subject to flood and, as explained earlier, it was then that the Bottoms became a vital link to the community. The mystery underpass (see chapter 3 and illustration) which may be an unclaimed right-of-way, branches off from F.P. 19 at GR750942 and gives access to the back of Flixton House grounds, the one-time home of 'Squire' Ralph Wright but since 1935 owned by the Council. His 'park', once strictly closed to the public, is now public gardens, playing fields and a new council golf course, so the wheel of fate has indeed turned full circle.

F.P. 19 is the most important surviving part of the "Bottoms" path which before the building of the railway would have run a little to the north side of the railway by what was "The Woefield".

F.P. 22 This path is actually called Penny Bridge Lane and runs from Flixton Road (GR753946) and as far as the Bridge is used as an access road (GR753943) but from there southwards—the old "Bottoms" path—becomes a footpath only (F.P. 23 running off towards Chassen Road) with a golf course on one side and development on the other until it joins Braemar Avenue, running alongside this estate road as an earth path to emerge as a path once again on Church Road (GR753940) opposite the Shawe Hall housing estate, the Hall having been demolished some time ago. A fragmented path, very well used.

All these paths, which together form the re-aligned "Bottoms" path still have their uses, either for utility or amenity, and are as valid today as they were 150 years ago. They could, like so many others, have been lost so easily but for a fortunate combination of factors and if that had not happened Flixton would be a poorer place environmentally than it is.

6. Footpath preservation—1826–1976

Research by Tom Stephenson—well known veteran Rambler and chief architect of the Pennine Way—has revealed that there was an even earlier footpath group than the 1826 Manchester Association, for in 1824 a York Footpath Society was formed and the record shows that they assisted the Manchester enthusiasts during the 1826 Association's formation. Unfortunately little further is known about the subsequent fortunes of the York society and it is probable that having made a particular point it faded away.

Not so the Manchester Association for, flushed with the success and the national fame that the Flixton victory brought them, they went on to oppose illegal and unfair closures of footpaths throughout what is now Greater Manchester. There were notable battles at Pendleton, Unsworth, Northenden, Heaton Norris and Tyldesley, to mention only a handful and here again there is a mine of important and stimulating information waiting to be quarried by future footpath historians in the old Association minutes. The Association was called upon to assist in the cause from all over England, such was their renown, and where appropriate, new footpath societies were set up or given assistance during their formation in such scattered places as Liverpool, Northallerton, Preston, Chislehurst, Boston Spa—and Hayfield.

The formation of the Hayfield and Kinder Scout Ancient Footpaths Association exactly 100 years ago, in September 1876, proved to be a significant milestone in footpath history. The spread of Victorian affluence and the desire of the gentry for their "sport" had resulted in several old tracks crossing the Kinder Scout plateau being threatened with closure by grouse-shooting interests and this splendid little society was not wanting for supporters from the cities, some of whose inhabitants were beginning to get their first taste of moorland air with the development of cheap excursion facilities by rail. However, though they had some notable successes, victory on the vital Hayfield–Snake Inn footpath always eluded them.

In the early 1890s changes in local government law, which for the first time introduced district councils responsible for footpath protection, encouraged the formation of many new footpath groups which could now add the force of law to their demands for the re-opening of pilfered rights of way. One of these groups, in 1894, was the Peak District and Northern Counties Footpaths Preservation Society, having their declared intention of initially fighting for the Hayfield–Snake Inn path, since the Hayfield society had by this time lost its impetus.

In the meantime the Manchester Association, by now the victim of ageing and inactive membership, realised that the fledgling Peak District Society needed all the moral and financial support it could get so in 1896 the Association was wound up and the funds trans-

ferred to aid the Peak's fighting fund. This shot in the arm provided a means for achieving quickly the initial goal. After three years' hard work and the expenditure of about £400 the path was conceded by the landowners and formally opened on May 29th 1897. As the years went by many new victories were notched up and once again the case histories make fascinating and significant reading. Certainly the footpath abolitionists learned to fear the Peak and Northern Society's intervention in disputes.

The spread of the open-air movement between the wars proved beneficial, bringing with it the formation of the Ramblers' Federations and later the Ramblers' Association with whom we enjoy a very cordial, close and co-operative relationship.

We shortened our name to the Peak and Northern Footpaths Society in the mid-1960s and doubled our resolve to expose the new breed of footpath thief by frequent appearances at court and at public inquiries to defend rights of way and now much of our efforts are taken up with the attention to detail and hard work that brings its own rewards.

Since the pamphlet started with Flixton it is fitting that we should end there and take a brief glance at what has happened since "Vegetable" Wright's defeat. Very little, in fact, for the discomfort Wright suffered was a strong deterrent to other local landowners who might otherwise have been tempted to close paths. The inevitable rash of development that started with the coming of the railway in the 1870s which changed Flixton from an isolated village to a commuter suburb and which has continued unabated since, has naturally taken its toll of footpaths. Still as with the "Bottoms" there are numerous examples of useful and pleasant old footpath survivals in Flixton so that even in 1976 some fascinating permutations of walks can be taken. For would-be explorers a street map and the new 2nd Series 2½in. O.S. map SJ69/79 titled "Eccles" (published 1976) will be found invaluable.

The story of footpaths is a continual one and the ever-present need for eternal vigilance is well illustrated by two current files we have on problem paths at Flixton. One concerns a house-on-a-path row on F.P. 13 off Irlam Road (GR734944) and another at F.P. 23 (GR755943) is threatened with unnecessary closure where it runs between allotments. In due course we shall be taking appropriate action.

It all serves to keep us on our toes and footpaths in the public eye!

Further Reading/Source Documents

“Trial at Salford Michaelmas Sessions 1827” *or* Appeals against orders of two magistrates for stopping up footways in the Parish of Flixton.—*Manchester Gazette* 1827.

“Historical Sketches and Personal Recollections of Manchester.—Archibald Prentice 1851.

“A History of Flixton, Urmston and Davyhulme”.—Richard Lawson 1898.

“A History of Flixton, Urmston and Davyhulme”.—D. H. Langton 1898.

“A History of Flixton Parish”.—Flixton Parish Church 1969.

“Path Used by Disorderly Ones and Clergy”.—Article in *The Telegraph* (Local) 3/11/1950.

“The Manchester Association for the Preservation of Ancient Footpaths.”—Article by Harold Wild in *Manchester Review*, Winter 1965/66.

Manchester, Sheffield & Lincolnshire Railway (Extension to Liverpool) Acts 1865/66.

Various contemporary newspaper reports 1824–27.

Maps

O.S. 6in. Editions of 1845, 1893 and current edition.

O.S. 1:25,000 (2nd series) Sheet SJ69/79 “Eccles” published 1976 showing Rights of Way.

Greater Manchester Council Draft Revised Definitive Rights of Way Map 1975.

A–Z Street Map of Manchester 1973.

Acknowledgement

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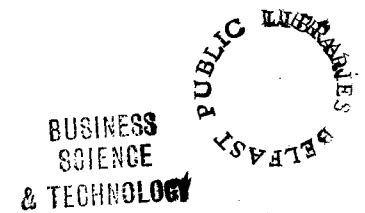
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We need you

You must be more than casually interested in footpath work if you have read this far, so if you believe that it is important to protect footpaths for future generations, we invite you to join and help in carrying out the necessary work.

Membership costs very little as all work is done on a voluntary basis. Most of the money is used in day-to-day administration inspection work, signposting, liaison, but most of all in legal and other expenses in connection with court hearings and public inquiries.

A leaflet and/or further details from Mrs. M. Freeman, General Secretary, Peak & Northern Footpaths Society, 10 Albert Road, Eccles, M30 9QJ. (Tel. 061-789 6546)



About this publication

The heated battle waged by Flixton villagers against their greedy squire who wanted to close a favourite path, "The Bottoms", which ran across his private park, is not only a classic of its type, but is of great historic significance since the controversy formed the catalyst for the formation in 1826 of one of the world's first amenity societies, "The Manchester Association for the Preservation of Ancient Footpaths".

This pamphlet outlines the stages of the fight from the first illegal moves by Squire Wright to his crushing defeat at Appeal Court. There are some contemporary quotes to add a period flavour whilst a reprint of a description of the district's footpaths as they were 80 years ago will be fascinating to local historian and rambler alike. Explorers are catered for by a brief guide to the Bottoms Path today, which despite all the development Flixton has seen still survives as a well-used pleasant walk, thanks to the preservationists of long ago.