

Railways of Stoke-on-Trent - **Potteries Loop Line**

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Demise of the Loop Line

1850 to 1976

From the 1920s the line began to fall victim to road competition, and by 1961 there were just five passenger trains daily from Stoke-on-Trent to Hanley and Tunstall, and none at all outside the peak hours. In addition, most of the goods traffic had been transferred to road as the 1950s dawned.

The Market Street Halt station at Kidsgrove was the first casualty - it closed in September 1950. In 1959 the Newfields Branch closed and the closure of the Sneyd and Hanley Deep Pit collieries in 1962 reduced the amount of freight trains on the line.



Hanley station slowly rots away summer 1975

photo: © Loose_Grip_99/Peter Hackney

Beeching:

The loop line was in terminal decline and the 'Beeching Axe' signalled the final blow for passenger services, and services were withdrawn on 2 March 1964.

Freight workings continued for some years afterwards. In 1967 trains were frequently diverted onto the Loop Line between Longport and Kidsgrove via the Pinnox branch during the electrification of the West Coast Main Line, the upgrading of which involved construction of a new line avoiding Harecastle tunnel.

At the northern end the 'Third Line' remained busy with the Birchenwood traffic, but apart from the diversions there were no booked trains between Tunstall and Kidsgrove, and this section slumbered between the occasional occupations of the main line for engineering purposes. In 1965 the up line from Etruria to Newchapel & Goldenhill was taken out of use, and the down track became a single line.

Despite the electrification works on the main line still not being complete, the Loop Line was closed between Waterloo Road and Kidsgrove on and from 3 January 1966, Cobridge and Tunstall goods yards closing at the same time.

The remaining traffic at the southern end, to Walkers oil refinery at Waterloo Road had stopped and the section of the Loop between Etruria Junction and York Street Wharf Waterloo Road, was taken out of use on and from 31 July 1969.

Lifting the track:

The loop line track was allowed to fall into disrepair, and track lifting started early in 1967 starting from Waterloo Road. The section between Etruria and Waterloo Road remained in use, as did the 'Third Line' at Kidsgrove, but Hanley goods yard had closed on 1 August 1966, and by May 1968 the former up line between Etruria and Waterloo Road had been lifted.

The section between Newchapel & Goldenhill and Kidsgrove was left, pending some possible opencast coal workings in the Goldenhill area. Otherwise, by May 1968 all the track had been lifted.



at Twelve Row, Kidsgrove sleepers form the house boundary

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Park Farm opencast mine:

The Park Farm opencast coal workings, as they came to be known, commenced on the site of Newchapel & Goldenhill station in 1970, and a large rail loading bunker was erected just north of the former station site. The loading facility was located midway between the Birchenwood plant and the former 'Newchapel and Goldenhill' station.

The section of the Loop from Kidsgrove to this site was brought into use again, and run-round facilities were installed at the bunker site.



Park Farm Opencast loading point

photo: © Renown

Traffic ceased in 1976 with the exhausting of the coal reserves at Park Farm. In the meantime the Birchenwood coking and chemical plant closed, early in 1973, and the last rail traffic, consisting of formerly stockpiled coke, left the site in July 1973. Thereafter, the best sections of the Loop Line and 'Third Line' were slewed together, to provide the best track for the heavy Park Farm opencast coal traffic. This final northern section of the Loop was 'officially' taken out of use from 25 August 1976, some eight months after the coal traffic actually ceased, and it was very soon lifted.

The building of the loop line was in fits and starts and the demise was the same, from the first station closure in 1950 to the last train in 1976.

Bennett's last journey:

"So has passed a section of line which provided for so many years the main local transport artery for the 'Five Towns' folk, and as such famous in literature as well as fact, through his writings, as we have already seen, of Arnold Bennett. So famous indeed, that the 'Loop Line', in capital letters, was universally familiar to all as *the* North Staffordshire line. It would seem very appropriate therefore, for the Pottery son, who so immortalised his home towns, and who was buried in the family grave at the mother town of Burslem, that his ashes, following cremation in London, were brought in 1931, by train from Euston to Stoke, and finally by Loop Line train from Stoke to Burslem using the very trains that had formed the transport background to his classic 'Five Towns' stories."

"The Potteries Loop Line" - A.C. Baker

What became of the loop line?

Much of the section between Etruria and Hanley has been swallowed up in road improvements. The cutting in the vicinity of the Hanley station site has been filled in, as has

that on the approach to Cobridge tunnel, along with the tunnel itself. The line onwards to Newchapel & Goldenhill was obliterated by the opencast coal workings.



view of the site of the disused Tunstall Railway Station now converted into a Greenway.

photos: c.1992 (John Reilly)

The area around Burslem station has been landscaped, and a pathway has been created along the Kidsgrove - Birchenfield route. There is a greenway from Tunstall to Scotia Valley and Burslem to Cobridge.

A set of locomotive driving wheels set in a concrete bed mark the opening of the Pitts Hill section dating from 1972, and a smoke-box and chimney off Scotia Road do a similar duty for the Burslem section which first opened in 1973.

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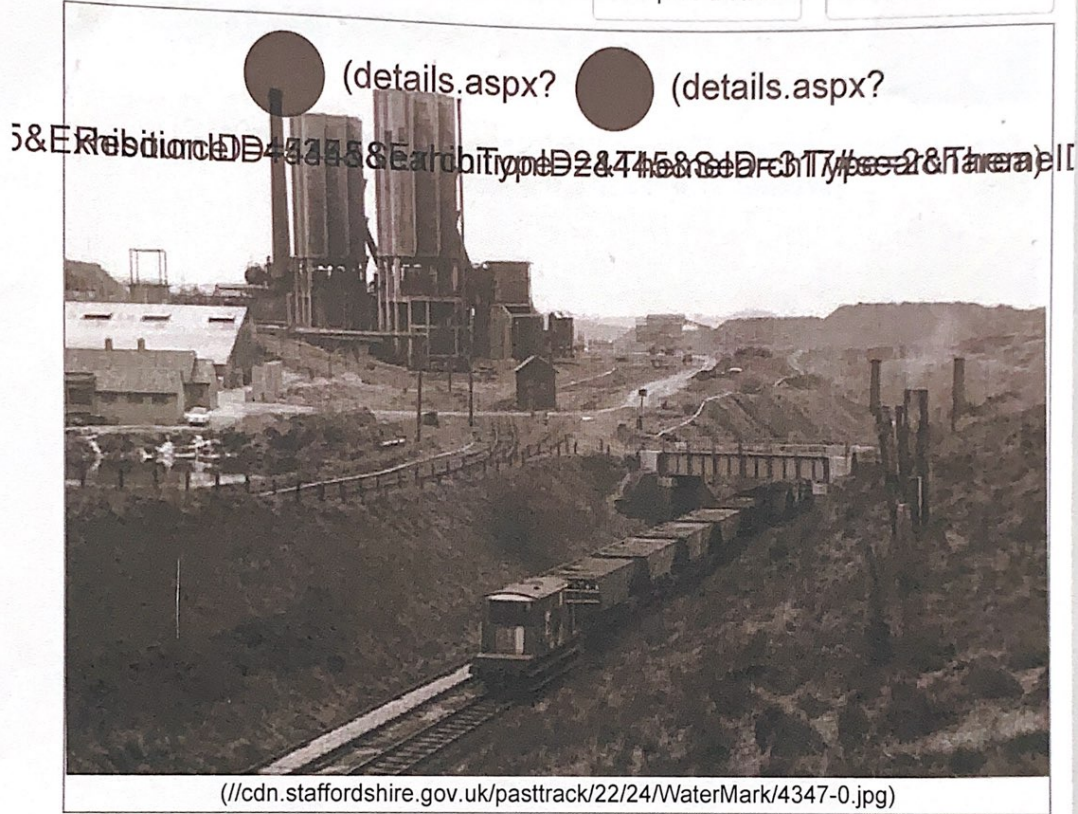
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View of Birchenwood Colliery, Kidsgrove

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Move your pointing device over the image to zoom to detail

Date: 1973

Description: Birchenwood colliery opened in the 1890s, most of the coal being used for coke and other by-products. The colliery actually closed in 1932, but coke and other by-product production continued by using coal from other collieries. However this production also ceased in May 1973.

Exhibition

Click on an item to view details for that resource



Birchenwood Colliery, Kidsgrove

Miners from Birchenwood Colliery standing in front of a bonfire that was constructed to celebrate the ...

Exhibition Details - Staffordshire Past Track

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View of Birchenwood Colliery, Kidsgrove

Birchenwood colliery opened in the 1890s, most of the coal being used for coke and other by-products. ...

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Birchenwood Beehive coking ovens

A view of the coking ovens at Birchenwood, called Beehive ovens for there obvious likeness to Beehives....

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Birchenwood Brickworks, Kidsgrove

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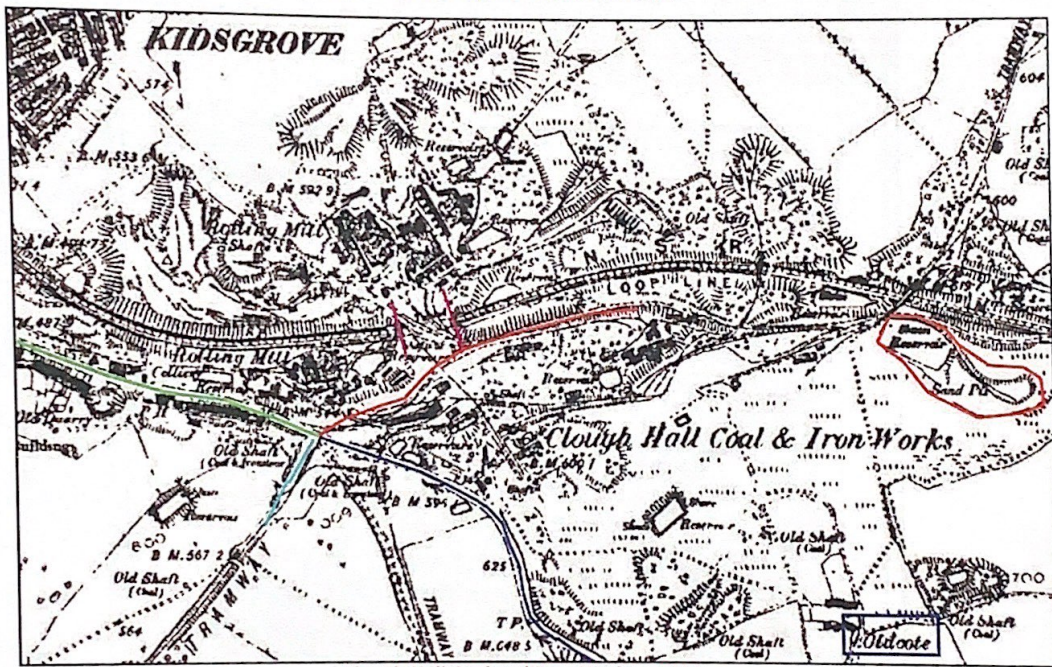
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Clough Hall Coal and Iron Works c.1890
the loop line runs left to right across the centre of the map
the two purple lines are the short Birchenwood tunnel
to the right, the red area showing a reservoir and sand pit still exist as ponds at Birchenwood Country Park

- the junction of roads on the left are as follows:
- blue - Kidsgrove Bank
 - green - Liverpool Road
 - light blue - Stone Bank Road (was a tramway)
 - red - Birchenwood Way (was a tack into the works)

Birchenwood
Clough Hall Coal and Iron Works
Birchenwood Colliery
Birchenwood Brickworks
Birchenwood Gas and Coke Ltd

Birchenwood was the largest industrial site that the Tunstall and Newchapel area has ever known.

The origins of the estate:

A freehold estate in Oldcott called Broadfield was held by the Colclough family from at least 1549. Colclough Lane, still the name of the Goldenhill end of the road to Newchapel, was in existence by 1535.

Discovering coal when building Harecastle canal tunnel:

During the excavation work for the first Harecastle tunnel, the wealth of coal underground was discovered and it became apparent that the whole area was rich with coal. Thomas Gilbert who represented the Duke of Bridgewater, was the first to set up the collieries that would mine the area on a massive scale.

1833 and the first blast furnaces:

Iron ore was also found to be in plentiful supply and in 1833 the first blast furnaces were built to produce pig iron.

1871 and coking ovens:

The iron and steel works were steadily expanded and by 1871 there was a new addition in the form of 78 beehive ovens for the production of coke.

The Heath family:

Robert Heath (who ran the Biddulph Valley furnaces) also owned a large part of Clough Hall estate which owned the land that the Birchenwood site occupied. After he died in 1893 his two sons inherited the business - when the operating company at Birchenwood closed the iron and steelworks, leaving the coal and coke as the only business, the Heath brothers stepped in and purchased the whole site.



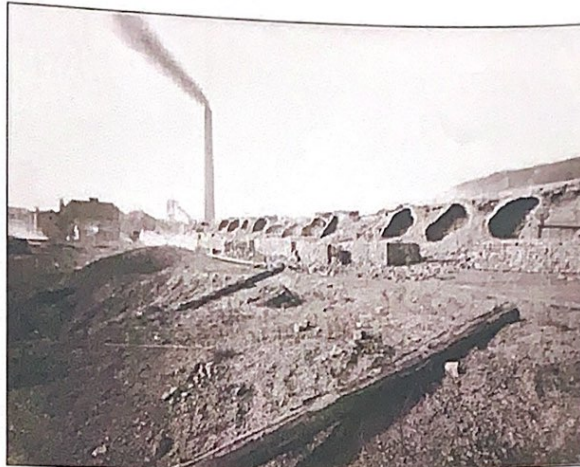
Birchenwood Colliery - 1900

"Birchenwood colliery opened in the 1890s, most of the coal being used for coke and other by-products. The colliery actually closed in 1932, but coke and other by-product production continued by using coal from other collieries. However this production also ceased in May 1973"

photo: © Kidsgrove Library - Staffordshire Past Tracks

The growth of the coking plant:

In 1896 the original ovens were replaced by 124 new beehive ovens - now nearly all the coal mined was now used for coke which the Heath's were using in their ironworks.



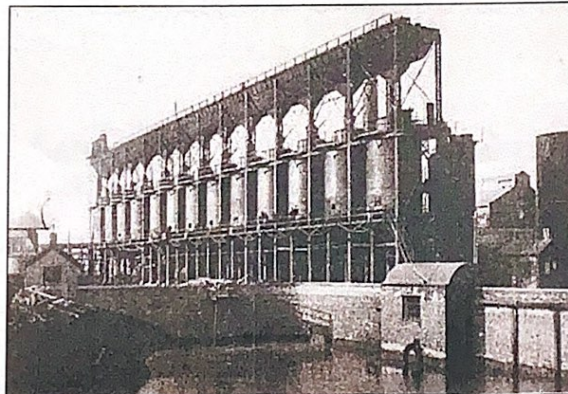
Birchenwood Beehive coking ovens - 1911

A view of the coking ovens at Birchenwood, called Beehive ovens for their obvious likeness to Beehives. In this picture the ovens are being demolished, having been replaced in 1909.

photo: ©Borough Museum and Art Gallery, Newcastle under Lyme;
Miss Barnard, Staffordshire Past Track

Over the next few years they would invest a staggering one million pounds in building what was to become the leading coke/by-products plants in the country.

New ovens were added, a rail network built to link all of the sites, locomotives to transport the coal and coke, and houses for their employees were just some of things that contributed to a very prosperous partnership between the Heath's and Birchenwood.



In 1909 a range of 13 Mond gas producers were installed at Birchenwood

"Before Natural Gas was discovered, Town Gas produced from coal was used. The process consisted of heating coal in enclosed retorts, where the gases were led through pipes and treated in a variety of ways.

Coke was the main by-product of gas production, along with a huge variety of other by-products, including coal tar, benzol, pitch, creosote, nylon, solvents for paints and varnish."

photo: © Keele University - William Jack Collection
Staffordshire Past Track

The industrial advances meant that there were now more uses for the by-products from the coking process and a special recovery plant with 84 ovens was built in 1909, this was followed by gas producers in 1910 and the replacement of the now outdated beehive ovens in 1912 with 72 Carl Still type ovens.

Royal Visit:



Visit of King George V and Queen Mary in 1913

photo: ©Borough Museum and Art Gallery, Newcastle under Lyme;
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On April 23rd 1913, King George V and Queen Mary visited the plant. They were shown the impressive new equipment that was turning 7000 tons of coal into 4500 tons of coke each week, and all the remaining by-products dealt with in the recovery ovens.

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