

Manchester Bolton & Bury Canal: Nob End

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Aims: A walking tour to investigate the remains of the central section of the Manchester Bolton & Bury Canal, and its associated structures and industries.

Starting point: Moses Gate Country Park, Hall Lane, Farnworth (A6053). From Moses Gate station (Manchester-Bolton line), turn left out of station, right at traffic lights and continue down Loxham Street to the Park.

Estimated time: 1¼ hours (3 miles / 5 km); can be extended to 2 hours (5 miles / 8 km).

Further information: See the Manchester Bolton & Bury Canal Society website: www.mbbcs.org.uk

The Society has published books relating to the canal, including:

Hindle, B. P. (2009) *Manchester Bolton and Bury Canal Towpath Guide*

Tomlinson, V. I. (1991) *The Manchester Bolton & Bury Canal*

Fletcher, J. & M. (1992) *Circular Walks on the Manchester Bolton and Bury Canal*

Chester-Browne, R. (1995) *The Manchester Bolton and Bury Canal – History in Pictures*

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_Gate_Country_Park

Maps: The Alan Godfrey Ordnance Survey 25" reproductions are invaluable. www.alangodfreymaps.co.uk

Three sheets cover this trip: Lancashire Sheets 95.02 (Moses Gate 1908), 95.03 (Little Lever 1927), 95.07 (Stoneclough & Ringley 1907).

Date of last revision: December 2010

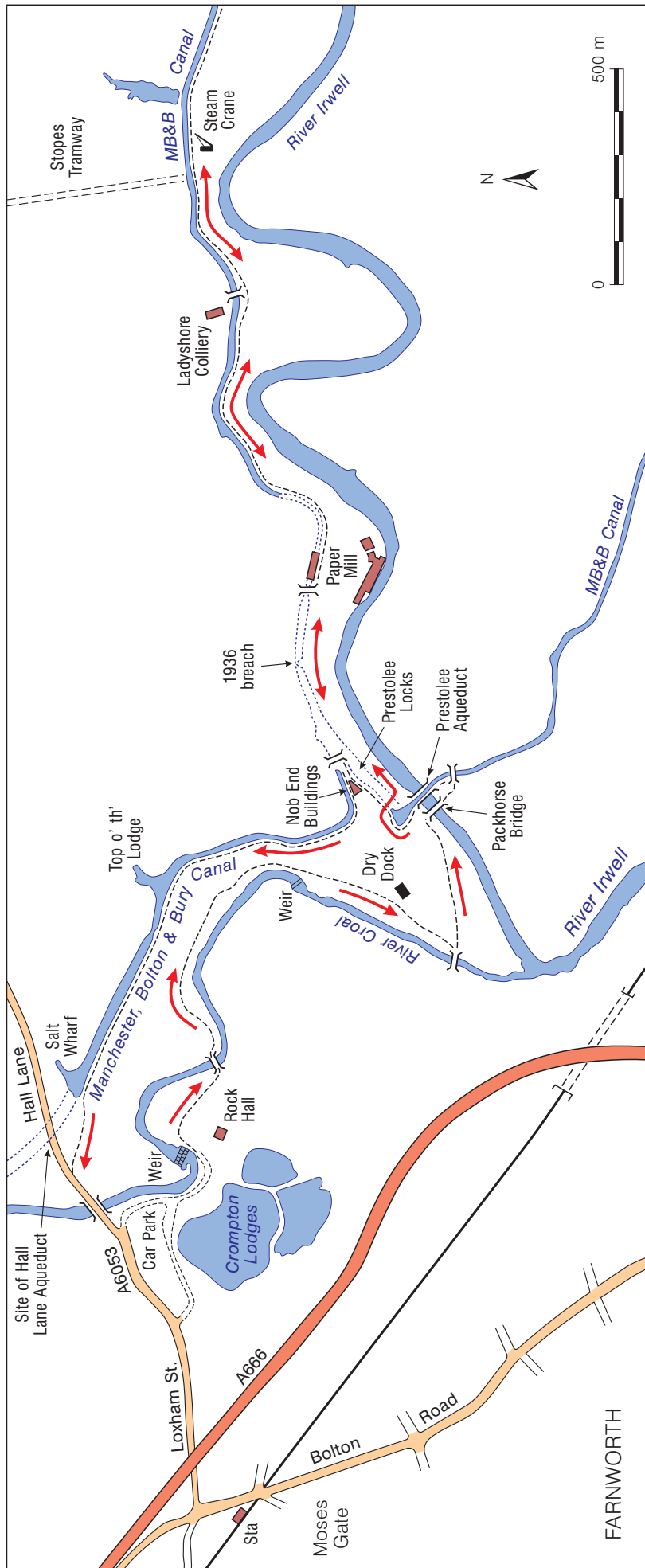
Introduction

The Manchester Bolton & Bury Canal obtained its Act of Parliament in 1791, and was completed in 1796 (though it was not connected to the River Irwell in Salford until 1808). From Salford the canal runs up the Irwell valley, crossing the river twice, to reach Nob End. Here it climbs the impressive Prestolee Locks, and then splits into two branches leading to Bolton and Bury. The canal was built principally to serve the many collieries in the area, as well as to transport many other cargoes such as stone and timber. There were also passenger boats which covered the distance from Manchester to Bolton in three hours. Once built, many collieries and factories were built on its banks, or linked to it by roads and tramways. The canal company almost turned itself into a railway in 1831, but instead built and opened the Manchester to Bolton line by 1838. By 1846 a parallel railway had been built to Bury, and the canal went into decline. The Bolton arm went out of use in 1924, though with some minor use until 1947. The Bury arm suffered a catastrophic breach just above Nob End in 1936, but the then isolated Bury arm continued to be used until 1951, principally because of the

canalside Ladyshore Colliery. The final section of the canal was officially closed in 1961, and much of it was filled in. The Manchester Bolton & Bury Canal Society was formed in 1987, and in 2002 its full restoration was announced by British Waterways; restoration began in 2007 and the first restored length in Salford was opened in 2008.

Walking Tour

In Moses Gate Country Park, go between Crompton Lodges and the River Croal. The lodges were formerly reservoirs for Farnworth Paper Mill and are now used for model boats and for wildlife. Ahead is Rock Hall, restored in the 1982 as an Information Centre. The area between Rock Hall and the river was once the site of Farnworth Paper Mill, dating back to 1674. It was run by various members of the Crompton family, notably Thomas Bonsor Crompton in the nineteenth century. The Cromptons had built Rock Hall in 1807; T B Crompton however preferred to live at Vale House, which formerly stood by the weir, near the present toilets. On the death of T B Crompton in 1883, the mill ceased making paper, and was reopened as Farnworth Bleachery in 1894



by J B Champion; it closed in the 1930s and nothing now remains. Follow the main path, away from the river, towards the red footbridge.

After crossing the bridge keep turning right, on paths close to the river. After a short descent cross a drain from the canal above. The weir in the river to your right was formerly surmounted by Oakes Bridge; this carried a tramroad from the Croal Brick & Tile Works on the opposite bank, across the river to the canal. The centre arch of the bridge collapsed in the 1940s and the final arches were demolished in 1987.

After a short ascent, go through the gate straight ahead. As you come out of the trees, the path divides into three less well-defined ones; take the middle one. After a short distance the remains of a rectangular brick-walled canal dry dock are hidden in the undergrowth on the left. The stones on which the boats rested while maintenance was carried out can still be seen in the bottom of the dry dock, when not obscured by vegetation. A sluice gate allowed water to be drained into the River Croal. From here the end of another footbridge across the River Croal can be seen. Make for it, but instead of crossing it, turn left on a broad double path; take the right hand one.

This whole area was formerly occupied by Prestolee Chemical works; it was begun by Benjamin Rawson in 1805 to make chemicals for use in bleaching and printing; it was taken over by Edward Wilson in 1844 who made washing soda too. The works closed in 1875, and the site was levelled. However large amounts of alkaline waste had been tipped on the site, and this has given the area an unusual flora, including orchids. It is a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Just before you reach some fencing bear slightly right towards the concrete arch, and go through the fence. Turn right and go over the packhorse bridge crossing the River Irwell. In medieval times the predecessor of this bridge was part of the main route from Bolton to Manchester. Indeed, until the canal was built, packhorses were the only form of transport available to the fledgling industries. The photograph below was taken in 1928, and shows the packhorse bridge with the aqueduct behind.



There is now a concrete bridge carrying sewer pipes to the left, with the canal aqueduct beyond. At the far end of the bridge, climb the banking then turn left to reach the canal towpath. On your right is a canal bridge known variously as Seddons Fold, Prestolee, or Silver Hill Bridge. This is an original brick arch built in the 1790s and featured in the James Mason film *Spring and Port Wine*. Turn left again onto the towpath, re-crossing the River Irwell, this time on the higher canal aqueduct, which carries the navigation 38 feet (12 m) above the river on four solid arches.

Beyond the aqueduct skirt the canal basin, noting the remains of the bottom lock (of six) which once raised the canal 64 feet (19 m) in a distance of 200 yards (180 m). Cross the old footbridge, which once spanned the canal arm leading to the dry dock seen earlier, and to another short branch.

The path beside the locks is reached by bearing right and over the remains of a stile. Immediately you cross the infilled bottom lock. The six locks were arranged in two staircases of 3 locks, with a passing basin between. Little can be seen of the lower staircase locks, as they were partially demolished and filled-in in the 1950s. The remains of the lock house can still be seen by the basin. The photograph below shows the upper locks when still in use. The outline of the passing basin, and much of the masonry of the upper staircase locks have been cleared by members of the Manchester Bolton and Bury Canal Society.



It can clearly be seen how, in a staircase, one lock leads directly to the next, with a common gate between them. However, plant growth continually tries to hide these details and they will not appear to full advantage until they are in full working order. Continue to the top of the locks where there are good views of the Irwell gorge. A bridge formerly spanned the top lock.

The next section (*in italics*) is optional; it adds 2 miles and takes about 45 minutes.

At the top of the locks continue straight ahead beside the dry canal, this section was cleared with the help of the Waterway Recovery Group in 2010. Milestone 8 is on the right after a few yards; here the canal is supported high above the valley by massive brick retaining walls, mostly constructed in the 1890s. Soon you have to descend into the canal bed to skirt the breach.

The breach occurred on 6th July 1936, and water pressure carried away 20 yards of towpath and canal wall, depositing them in the valley below, and emptying the canal.



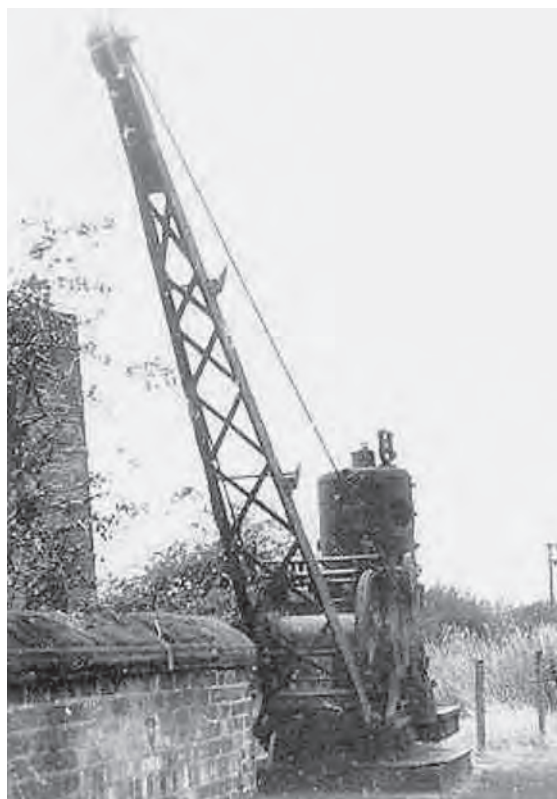
Because there was no through traffic the breach was not repaired, and there have been further minor slips since. In the breach you can see the high quality massive construction of the canal wall. Looking into the breach railway lines can be seen on the right which were used to strengthen the embankment in the 1881. Near the path is a water pipe which was installed after the breach so that the canal could continue to supply factories further down the valley with water.

When you have passed the breach the path rejoins the towpath. After you have gone under Bailey Bridge (a 1891 replacement of an earlier bridge), you come to a paper mill building constructed in 1956 directly over the canal's route and the towpath is just to the right of this building, under a lean-to loading area. Immediately before the loading area is milestone 8¼ with the numerals facing away from the towpath.

The canal was built on the top of this hillside because it had already reached the height required to continue to Bury without further locks. The dry canal bed sweeps to the left and in 200 yards you reach a brick dam, built after the 1936 breach, to permit the canal from Ladyshore to Bury to continue in use. From here the canal is in water all the way to Bury. You pass the 8½ milestone and then the site of Ladyshore Colliery on the opposite bank is marked by a black and white sign 'CANAL AT LADYSHORE'. Ladyshore was originally opened in the 1830s, and became (in)famous for being the last pit in Lancashire still to use candles for illumination and ponies for underground transport. In the 1890s it had three shafts, the deepest being 360 yards (330m). But by the start of the

Second World War it was the only colliery remaining on the whole length of the canal, most of its production being taken by canal. It had its own fleet of boats and as late as 1941 it sent over 50,000 tons of coal by boat to Radcliffe and Bury. It closed in 1949 and now only the colliery offices (now a house) and the stables survive.

Ladyshore Bridge (an 1891 blue brick replacement of an earlier timber bridge) provided access to Lever Bank Bleach Works in the bend of the river below. Pass milestone 8¾, then the canal widens at the site of the wharf which marked the end of a tramway, which led to several collieries around Stopes, half a mile to the north. A short distance further along is Mount Sion Steam Crane; it is used as the logo of the Canal Society. It was built c.1884 by Thomas Smith & Sons of Rodley (Leeds) and it was used to lift containers of coal from boats and lower them into the yard of the Mount Sion Works below. Milestone 9 is behind the fencing just beyond. Return to the top of the locks.



At the top of the locks, cross the canal, and go onto the towpath of the Bolton Arm. Across the canal are the former Nob Inn, and the tall Wellfield House. The road leading to the left down to the bottom of the locks dates from the time before the railways were built, when passengers used the canals to travel by fast packet boat to Manchester. This path was covered and passengers walked this path between boats, to save the water and time it would take a boat to pass through six locks. Pass in front of the old workshops, which were in use until the 1950s and consisted of an office, and blacksmiths' and carpenters' shops. They may well become a visitor centre when the canal is restored. The canal here has clear water and is of good depth, despite disuse from 1924 and the legal abandonment of this part of the canal in 1941. The photograph below shows the workshops (left) and the cottages.



The route of the canal turns sharply to the right, hugging the top of the hillside, almost 100 feet (30 m) above the river. After a short distance the canal narrows and there are grooves in the bank at the narrowest point – one on the far side, and two on the nearside. These were to accommodate stop planks, used when part of the canal was drained, and which part was drained depended on which nearside groove was used. The sluice control, when raised, allowed water to escape down an overflow channel, over “Red Rocks” and down to the river. Water could also be fed off to the left through another sluice to the bottom of the locks.

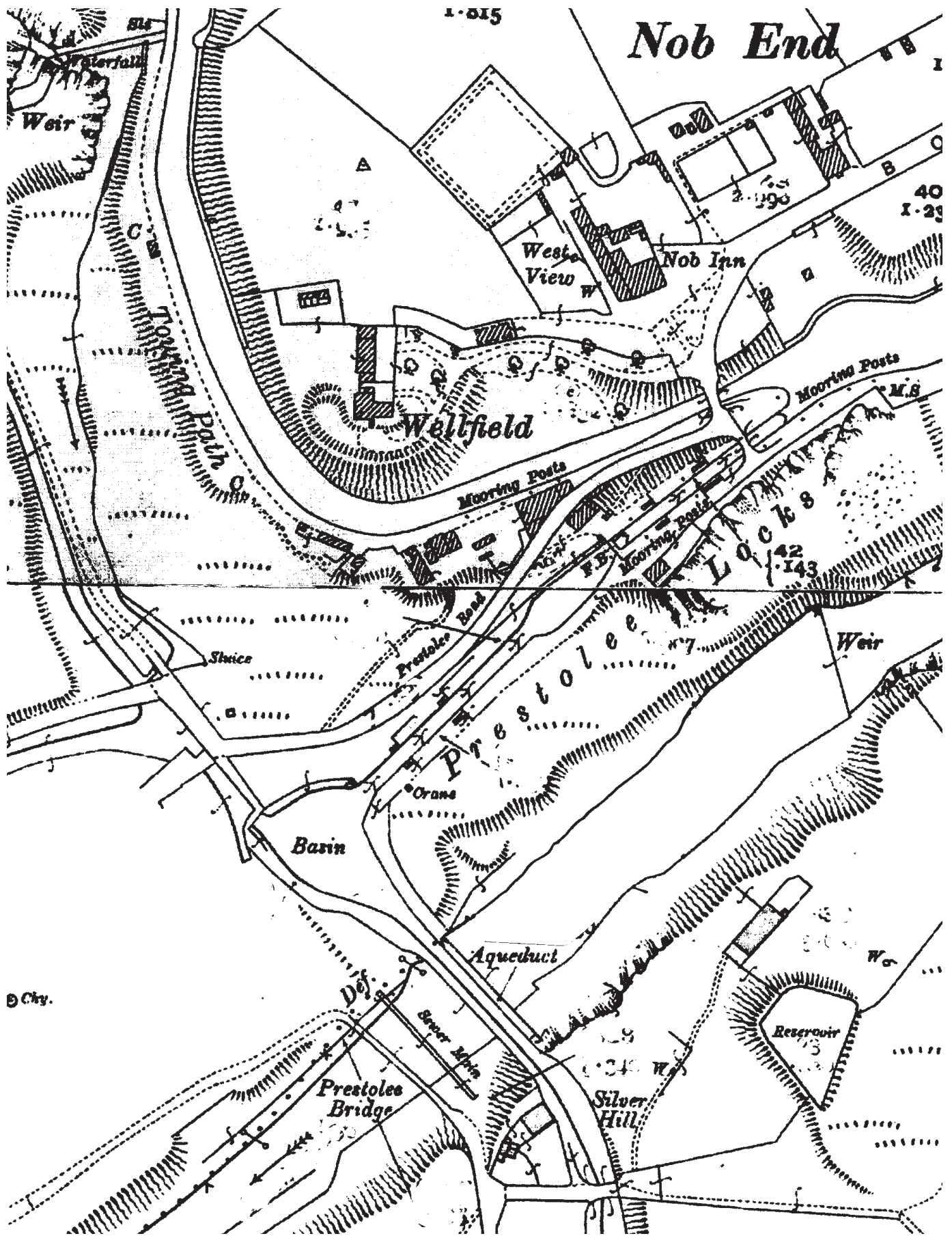
The canal widens at “Top o’ th’ Lodge” where there used to be a boatyard and depôt for the coal mining firm of Andrew Knowles, and then there is another narrowing, although this time with single stop plank groove on each side. Beyond here the final section in water is very wide and impressive. It is supported by a substantial embankment faced with blue bricks, and is known as the ‘Blue Wall’ length; it must have been a very impressive sight from below in the days when there were fewer trees in the valley.

All along this section the towpath is marked with yellow-painted numbers, and as you reach number 2, a boundary stone can be seen across the canal, belonging to the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Company, one time owners of the canal. Here is another wide area of the canal, the Salt Harbour, so-called because boats from Runcorn unloaded salt and other chemicals here for the works nearby. Just before you reach the end of the canal in water the 8¾ milepost is behind a fence on the left. Farnworth Bridge Colliery was just below the canal here; it closed around 1900, though it was used as a pumping station for many years, and its headgear stood until about 1950.

The first stage of restoration is intended to stop at this point, and there are plans for a marina here. The line of the canal used to continue straight on; follow the old line of the towpath, ignoring a gate to the left and go straight ahead through a gap in the fence. The path slopes down; go through a gate to reach Hall Lane. On the opposite side of the road, just to the right, is all that remains of the blue brick northern abutment of Hall Lane Aqueduct. It was built in 1884-5 to replace one damaged by colliery subsidence. The aqueduct (seen below) was demolished in 1950 to allow Hall Lane to be widened from 16 feet to 24 feet.



Just beyond the aqueduct was the Hall Chemical Works of E P Potter, opened in 1870; it made dichromates, used in tanning, dyes and chromium plating. It was demolished in 1969, leaving a heavily polluted site which has since been cleaned up and landscaped. Turn left along Hall Lane, across the River Croal on Farnworth Bridge (which carries a plaque commemorating its rebuilding in 1990). Turn left into Moses Gate Country Park or continue uphill to Moses Gate Station.



Ordnance Survey 25" (1907/1927) showing Nob End and Prestolee Locks. The Bolton arm passes between Wellfield and the canal cottages and workshop (near the Mooring Posts). The Bury arm goes off to the right. The six locks descend to the Lower Basin, and the canal continues across The Aqueduct to Silver Hill Bridge.