

Exploring Greater Manchester

a fieldwork guide

Web edition edited by Paul Hindle



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Manchester Victoria to Bury: an historical trip on Metrolink

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Aims: A journey on the Metrolink tram to study the origins and development of this former suburban commuter railway line.

Starting point: Victoria Station, Metrolink platform.

Estimated time: 1 hour (return tram trip).

Advice: Avoid rush hours.

Further Information:

Marshall J, *The Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway*, David & Charles, Newton Abbot, 3 volumes, 1969-72 (esp. Volume 2)

Metrolink: www.metrolink.co.uk

Heaton Park: www.heatonpark.org.uk

East Lancashire Railway: www.east-lancs-rly.co.uk

Bury Transport Museum: www.burytransportmuseum.org.uk

Maps: For detailed historic maps the Godfrey Edition 25-inch OS maps are excellent: 88.09 Bury, 95.04 Radcliffe, 96.05 Whitefield, 96.09 Prestwich, 96.10 Heaton Park, 96.14 Broughton Park & Crumpsall, 104.03 Harpurhey, 104.06 Manchester NW, 104.07 Manchester NE. These are available from www.alangodfreymaps.co.uk. First edition 25-inch maps of the whole line, c. 1890, can be seen on CD, available from Digital Archives Association, 3 Cedarways, Appleton, Warrington, WA4 5EW. (Lancashire Disk 2, £20 plus postage). For modern maps most of the line is on OS Pathfinder maps 712 and 713, and all of it on OS Explorer map 277.

Date of last revision: March 2015.

History of the line

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries communications between Manchester and Bury improved steadily. The first turnpike (toll-road) was Bury Old Road, begun in 1755, running via Crumpsall to Besses, and from there to both Bury and Radcliffe. The Manchester Bolton & Bury Canal was open from Salford to Bury in 1797, permitting heavy and bulky goods to be transported more easily. Bury New Road was built in 1826, taking the direct Roman line from Manchester to Besses.

The first railway line to link Manchester and Bury was the East Lancashire Railway line, via Clifton Junction and Radcliffe, which was opened (through to Rawtenstall) in 1846, and later continued to Accrington and Bacup. However, this line did not serve the newly growing suburbs of Cheetham Hill, Crumpsall, Heaton Park, Prestwich and Whitefield along Bury New Road and Bury Old Road. The Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway obtained an Act for a new line from Manchester to join the earlier line at Radcliffe in 1872. It took the company two years to acquire the land, and construction began in 1876 at a projected cost of £293,500. The length of the line was just less than 10 miles (16km). Two expensive sections were the Heaton Park tunnel and

the Whitefield cutting. Two loops were built at Radcliffe to allow trains to go through to Bolton and from Bolton to Bury.

Passenger trains began operation in 1879. Originally the line had only five intermediate stations: Crumpsall, Heaton Park, Prestwich, Whitefield and Radcliffe; the other three (Woodlands Road, Bowker Vale and Besses o' th' Barn) were added later. The first mile of the line was completely re-routed in 1905 when the Collyhurst tunnel was opened, which brought the Bury trains into the former bay platforms close to the present Metrolink platforms. Before this the trains had used platforms at the far side of the station, where the Manchester Evening News Arena now stands. A map of the Manchester-Bury lines in 1916 is on page 4.

The arrival of electric trams in the early years of the twentieth century prompted the railway to consider electrifying some of its lines. It had already electrified the Liverpool-Southport and Bury-Holcombe Brook lines, and in 1916 this line was converted to electric operation. The power was generated at Clifton Junction, and supplied to the line by substations at Victoria and Radcliffe. The trains ran on 1,200 volts direct current, which was picked up by side contact on a third rail. Because of the high voltage the third rail was encased in jarrah, a durable timber which

does not burn easily. The new trains were a great success, and passenger journeys increased from 1.9M in 1907 to 2.5M in 1916. The line experienced the usual problem of commuter lines in having most of its passengers travelling in the rush hours, and being lightly loaded at other times. The new trains were very distinctive, being of all metal construction. But they were scrapped in 1960 (before the railway preservation movement had got going) and none has survived. Although threatened with closure by the Beeching Report, the line continued in operation until August 1991 when it was closed for conversion into the Metrolink light railway. It was opened in this new guise in April 1992.

Victoria Station

The first station was opened in 1844, and it was enlarged throughout the rest of the century. Bury trains used platforms where the MEN Arena now stands until the Collyhurst Tunnel was opened in 1905. The present station buildings were completed in 1909. Outside there is an awning listing a variety of places to which one might travel. Next to the booking office is a large tiled map of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway which curiously omits many lines of other companies; looking at this map one would not realise that there were direct lines from Manchester to Huddersfield and Sheffield! Mosaic tiling announcing various former station services can be seen just round the corner, to the right. Few people realise that the River Irk runs beneath the Metrolink platforms, or that just to the north, underneath the adjacent railway platforms, lies Walkers Croft graveyard. The Station has undergone a major refurbishment due for completion in 2015.

The Route

[The description assumes you are facing forward]

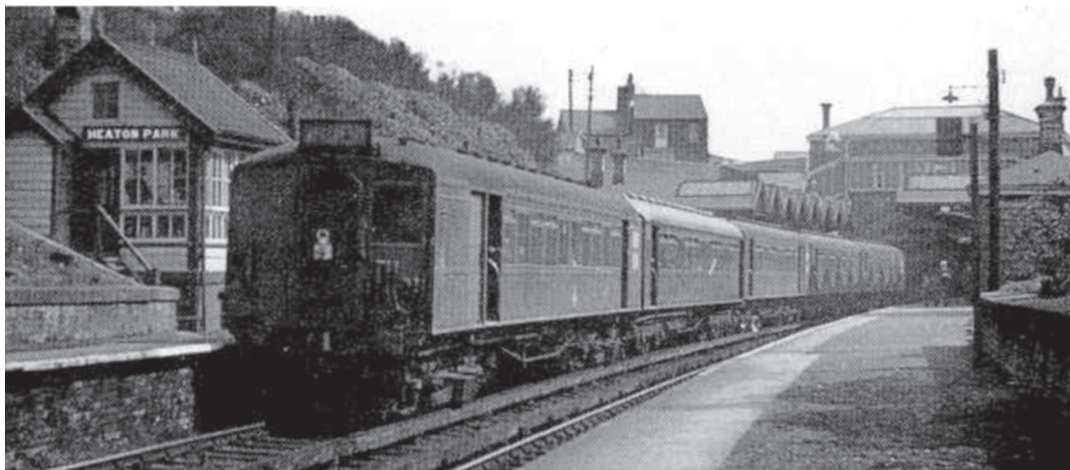
The line goes beneath Ducie Bridge and then starts to climb the Miles Platting incline. Immediately to the left the original route of the Bury line can be seen behind the 'Manchester Victoria East Junction' sign; there are no longer any rails on this route. After half a mile the line drops down into the 426-yard (390m) Collyhurst Tunnel, which turns 90° to the left to go under the incline, before emerging high above the River Irk. As the line crosses Collyhurst Road and the River Irk, an old connecting loop branches off to the right; from 2011 this was used again as the start of the Metrolink line to Oldham and Rochdale. The Bury line then goes down its steepest section (1 in 44) stopping at the new **Queen's Road** station which opened in 2013.

Beyond Queens Road Bridge the tracks entering on the left from the depot are on the line of the original route. The line starts to climb and soon passes the site of the now closed Woodlands Road station, opened in 1913. Immediately beyond, a goods line formerly led off to the right, serving Crumpsall Vale Chemical Works (later ICI). A new station at **Abraham Moss** opened in 2011. **Crumpsall** station once had a large goods yard (on the right beyond the bridge - note the extra arch on the right hand side). Like most of the former goods yards along the line it is now occupied by housing.

After Crumpsall, the River Irk valley reappears on the right and the train reaches **Bowker Vale** station, opened in 1938. The telecommunications tower in Heaton Park is visible to the right. The line then goes through the 713-yard (652m) Heaton Park Tunnel. This is in fact more correctly described as a covered way, it was not tunnelled but dug



Victoria station, c.1910



Original electric train at Heaton Park station

out and then roofed over, at the insistence of Lord Wilton whose park it ran beneath. The tunnel added £8,000 to the cost of the line. A short section of daylight leads to a 73-yard (67m) tunnel below Bury Old Road and straight into **Heaton Park** station. Heaton Park was owned by the Egerton family (later Earls of Wilton) until it was bought by Manchester Corporation in 1902. The park is well worth a visit; it is a square mile in extent, and is the largest municipal park in Europe. Facilities include the hall, gardens, farm, boating lake, trams and a golf course.

There is much suburban housing alongside the middle section of the line, almost all built because the line provided a fast and cheap service. The line continues to climb to **Prestwich**, which formerly had a goods yard and a bay platform (on the right) where trains could terminate. Just before crossing the motorway the line reaches its summit (at just over 370 ft (113m) above sea level), having climbed some 260ft (80m) since leaving Victoria. The massive concrete bridge over Bury Old Road and the M62 (now M60) replaced a road bridge when the motorway was constructed in 1970. **Besses o' th' Barn** station was opened in 1933; its unusual name refers to a woman called Bess who once ran an inn here.

The tower of All Saints Church at Stand can be seen to the left; it was opened in 1826 as one of the churches built after the Napoleonic wars. The line descends to **Whitefield**, where, once again there was once a goods yard. The 153-yard (140m) tunnel (another covered way) takes the line under Bury New Road, and into the deep mile-long Whitefield cutting, which was difficult to dig due to waterlogged ground. The line drops 90 feet (27m) to **Radcliffe**, much of it at a gradient of 1 in 50. Emerging from the cutting the line then crosses the River Irwell on a high viaduct. St Thomas's Church can be seen to the left. Radcliffe was formerly a centre of the cotton industry, and

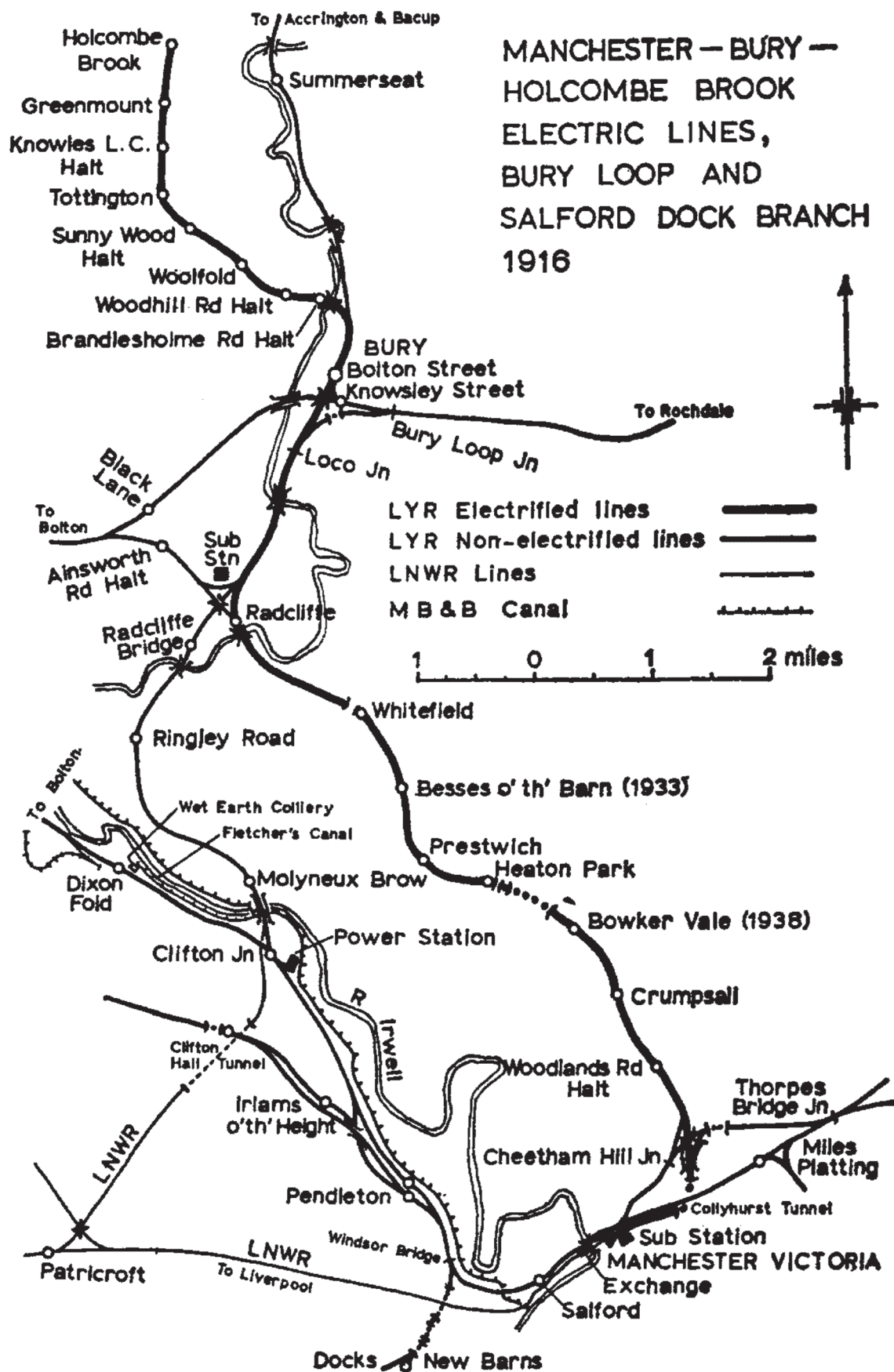
also had several paper mills.

At Radcliffe station a line to Bolton formerly led off to the left. The Metrolink line then turns to the right, and there was yet another goods yard to the left; a former school (now a sports centre) occupies the site. The original ELR line from Clifton Junction and the second loop from Bolton used to join on the left just after this point. The embankment of the Bolton loop is still visible. All these lines are clearly seen on the 1927 O.S. map on page 5.

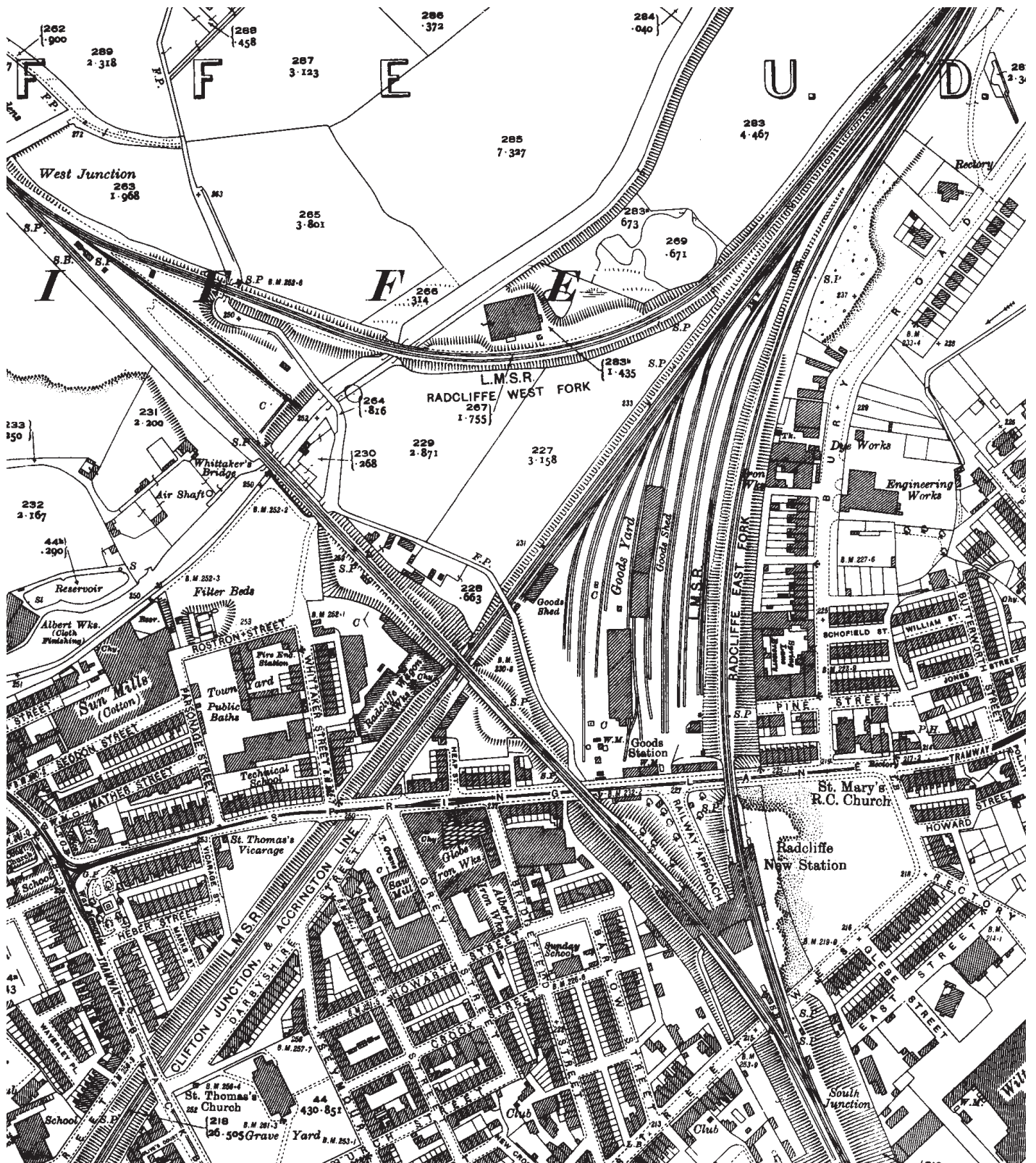
Between Radcliffe and Bury there were formerly several collieries. The Manchester, Bolton & Bury Canal can be glimpsed on the left; it was opened in 1797, and is due to be restored. As the line crosses the River Irwell again, the embankment of Elton reservoir can be seen to the left; it was built to supply the canal. The original line into Bury Bolton Street station went straight on past engine and carriage sheds, but a new station was built in the town centre in 1980. The line now turns right to take what was formerly a loop line to Heywood, passing under Manchester Road before turning left into the Metrolink **Bury** terminus and bus interchange. The original Bury Bolton Street station is now the terminus of the preserved **East Lancashire Railway**; up to nine trains a day run to Rawtenstall, and just opposite is Bury Transport Museum. Bury in 1908 is seen on page 6.



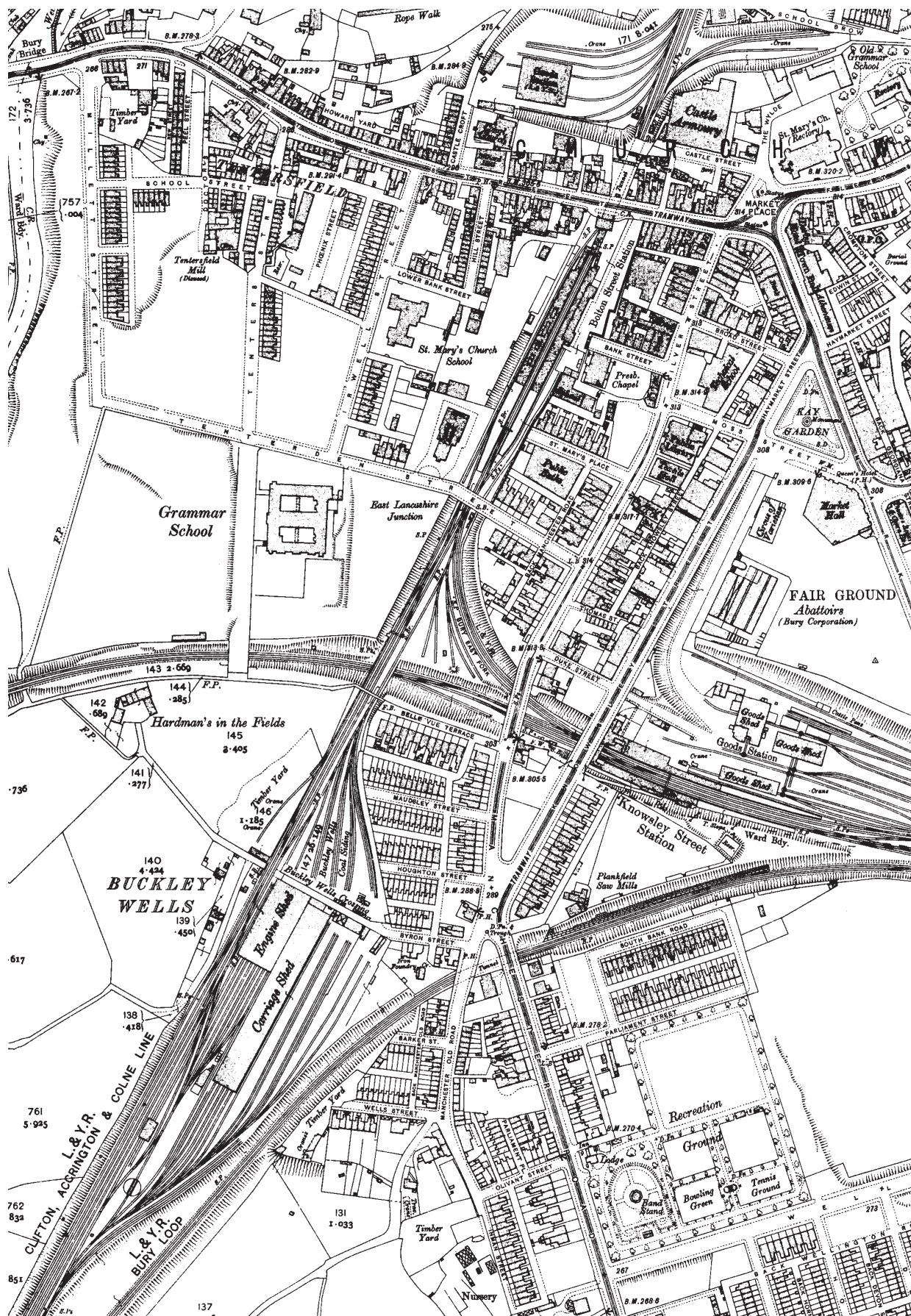
Whitefield station, c. 1929



Map from Marshall, vol. 2, p.171



Ordnance Survey 25" (1927) Radcliffe. Metrolink uses the Radcliffe East Fork Line. The line from bottom left to top right is the East Lancashire Railway, and the lines to top left go to Bolton.



Ordnance Survey 25" (1908) Bury. Metrolink now uses the Bury Loop into the new station where the map shows a Fair Ground. The line originally went into Bolton Street Station. Just across the road, the square building in plot 171, described as a Goods Station, is now the Bury Transport Museum.