

Glenfield Tunnel - Over The Top

Start location: Jowett Close, New Parks LE3 9LZ (via footpath off Groby Road, A50)

Time taken: 1 hour 55 minutes (approximately, steady pace) **Distance:** 3.8 miles 6km **Circular**

Description:

This walk passes through the residential housing estates of New Parks and Glenfield, which were built over the top of the historic Glenfield Tunnel. The tunnel was completed in 1832 for Leicester's first railway line, which transported coal from the Leicestershire coalfields. This walk starts near the tunnel's eastern portal and passes some of the ventilation shafts which mark the tunnel's subterranean route. Along the way, we reveal a little history of the tunnel and the Leicester to Swannington Railway, finishing our story at the site of the former Glenfield Station. The route then returns to the start. For a more detailed story, check out the virtual walk video on our website.



- Main route
- Return route
- ① Stage / waypoint
- A Point of interest

*Time is calculated at a steady pace of 2mph

This route was developed by staff and volunteers for Leicester City Council:

www.choosehowyoumove.co.uk/walks



Walk starts:

On Jowett Close, New Parks, LE3 9LZ (via footpath leading off Groby Road A50, opposite Gilroes Cemetery)

To plan your journey visit: www.choosehowyoumove.co.uk

Safety tips:

Take care crossing roads. Use pedestrian crossings where available.

The footpath off Loxley Road is narrow – look ahead before entering to ensure there are no oncoming walkers.

Remember to observe the guidance on social distancing.

Background:

The Leicester to Swannington Railway line was completed in 1832 to transport coal from the Leicestershire coalfields in the north west of the county. Prior to this, transport via horse and cart along poor roads was unreliable and costly. Leicestershire mine owners needed a more efficient means of transport in order to compete with the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire coalfields who (via the canals waterways) could supply coal to Loughborough and Leicester at a price the Leicestershire companies could not match. The Charnwood Forest canal was built in 1794 but this did not prove a long-term solution for Leicestershire colliers. By the 1820s, with an increasing demand for coal in factories, Leicestershire mine owners wanted a cheaper, more efficient method to take coal from the pits to the Westbridge canal wharf in Leicester. The solution was to build a railway. It was to be Leicester's first and was called the Leicester to Swannington Railway.

Route directions:

1. Facing away from Groby Road walk along Jowett Close, passing an area of green space to your left, near bungalows.

Ahead through the trees is the last house in Copeland Avenue. If we stood here between 1832 and 1966, we would be overlooking the eastern portal of the Glenfield Tunnel (on Copeland Avenue). There is little to see now. The tunnel enabled the Leicester to Swannington Railway line to pass through the Gilroes ridge. Some residential roads in this area have been named to commemorate key people involved in the building of the railway or tunnel. Jowett Close is named after the Daniel Jowett and Copeland Avenue is named for a Mr Copeland. Both were key contractors during the tunnel's construction.

Continue to the end of Jowett Close and turn first right onto Stenson Road. Continue to the corner of Amhurst Close where ventilation Shaft No. 13 can be seen.

[A] Stenson Road is named for William Stenson, a key person in the tunnel's story. In the 1820s, Stenson opened a colliery in Coalville. Like others, he recognised the importance of getting coal to market quickly and economically and was inspired by the Stockton and Darlington Railway (of 1825), engineered by George Stephenson. Stenson conducted the initial survey for the route of the Leicester to Swannington railway line. To pass through the Gilroes ridge, a tunnel was required and shafts like this one were used to survey below ground, to see what material the tunnelers would have to go through. The shafts are numbered 1 to 13, starting from the Glenfield end.

2. Cross Amhurst Close and continue onto Dillon Road. After a short distance turn right onto Dillon Way (there is no road name here, but it is opposite Dhillon Green). After a short distance turn right onto Weatherburn Close and continue to the Shaft No. 12, around the corner on the right.

[B] Weatherburn Close is named for Robert Weatherburn, a mining engineer and engine driver from the north who worked with George Stephenson. When the Leicester to Swannington railway opened in July 1832, Weatherburn and Stephenson drove the first train. This inaugural trip attracted much attention and the new coal waggons carried over 300 people, mostly dignitaries, keen to experience the event.

3. Retrace your steps to Dillon Way, turn right and continue to its junction with New Parks Boulevard. Cross New Parks Boulevard and continue to busy New Parks Way. Cross New Parks Way with care at the pedestrian crossing and enter Kemp Road. Cross Kemp Road to the Shaft No. 11 on the corner of New Parks Way and Kemp Road.

[C] Shaft 11 is larger than the others we've seen because it was a 'working shaft', where men and materials passed to and from the working level. Tunnel construction began in late 1830 with a budget of £10,000. The contract was overseen by George Stephenson's son, Robert, and awarded to contractors with expertise. Many of the workers involved in the tunnel's construction would also have worked on canal and railway projects around the country. During work in 1831, an unexpected seam of sand was discovered. For support the tunnel had to be lined with 3-4 layers of bricks, at additional cost. The project finished c.£7,000 over budget.

4. Enter Kemp Road and walk all the way along it to its junction with Lammen Road, facing the park. Turn right and continue to the end of Lammen Road. Turn right onto Holmwood Drive. Continue for a short distance to Holmwood Court on the right. Shaft No. 9 is located a short distance up this road (please note the road is private).

[D] In 1987 the shafts and tunnel entrance were made Grade II listed structures. Shaft No. 9 was demolished by a builder who was then forced to rebuild it.

5. Continue along Holmwood Drive to its junction with Groby Road, opposite Glenfield Hospital. Turn along Groby Road. Take the next left, Glenfield Frith Drive. Continue forward and take the first right onto Fairfield Crescent. Note the numbers of the lampposts as you walk along this road. Between lampposts 6 and 7 on the left, can you spot Shaft No. 4 which is hidden by a hedge in a front garden?

[E] Up to the early 20th Century, this was mostly an area of open countryside. In the late 1960s Leicester Corporation bought the Glenfield Tunnel for £5. The residential housing estates of New Parks and Glenfield were built on top of the tunnel so some of the shafts ended up in people's gardens and cannot be seen from the road. The tunnel was reinforced in 2007 to ensure its stability.

6. Continue to the end of Fairfield Crescent and turn left onto Faire Road. Continue forward to the end of Faire Road and its junction with Glenfield Frith Drive.
7. Turn right and continue across Whitesand Close to take the next right onto Loxley Road. Continue as far as the left-hand bend in the road then take the footpath on the right. **Note – this is a narrow footpath enclosed by hedge and fences. Look ahead before you enter, to avoid meeting oncoming walkers on this narrow path.** Continue to the view of the western portal of Glenfield Tunnel.

[F] The Western and Eastern portals looked very similar. Note that the façade of the portal is very plain. The original intention was for decorative facings, but as the project ran over budget they instead opted for a simple finish. The tunnel dimensions are small, as the line was built as single track. The railway was built with one primary purpose – to link the Leicestershire coalfields with the canal wharf at Westbridge – and there was no plan to futureproof it, to link with any other line. To fit the tunnel, locomotives here had to have narrow cabs.

8. Retrace your steps and turn right onto Loxley Road. After a short distance turn right onto Newquay Drive and then almost immediately onto the footpath. Continue through Station Park to Station Road, opposite the Railway Inn. Turn right and continue forward to Stephenson Court and the site of the long-gone Glenfield Station and coal wharf.

[G] The station opened in 1832 with limited facilities. The line was mainly used for freight and was not designed for passenger traffic. Not more than 60 people per day travelled on the railway. In 1876 the station was built with a single platform, waiting room and ticket office. Prior to this tickets were obtained from the Railway Inn across the road. The station closed in 1928. As you look up Stephenson Court, Glenfield coal depot was on the left and used by merchants to distribute coal in the local area. Goods such as coal, granite, oil, lime and wood helped keep the line going until its closure in 1966.

If you like walking old railway lines, there is a good walk along the disused railway line from Glenfield to Ratby, known as the Comet Way.

Here ends the information about the tunnel and railway. To return to the start, follow direction 9.

9. Continue along Station Road to the large traffic island. Turn right along the A50 (Grobby Road) and walk up the hill past County Hall and Glenfield Hospital, both on the left. Continue over New Parks Way using the pedestrian crossings. After a short distance down the hill you can take a footpath on the right to return to your start point, Jowett Close.

Acknowledgements:

Thanks to volunteer John, for researching and developing this route.

The publications of the Leicestershire Industrial History Society provide an excellent history of Glenfield Tunnel and the railway. Details on their website: www.lihs.org.uk