

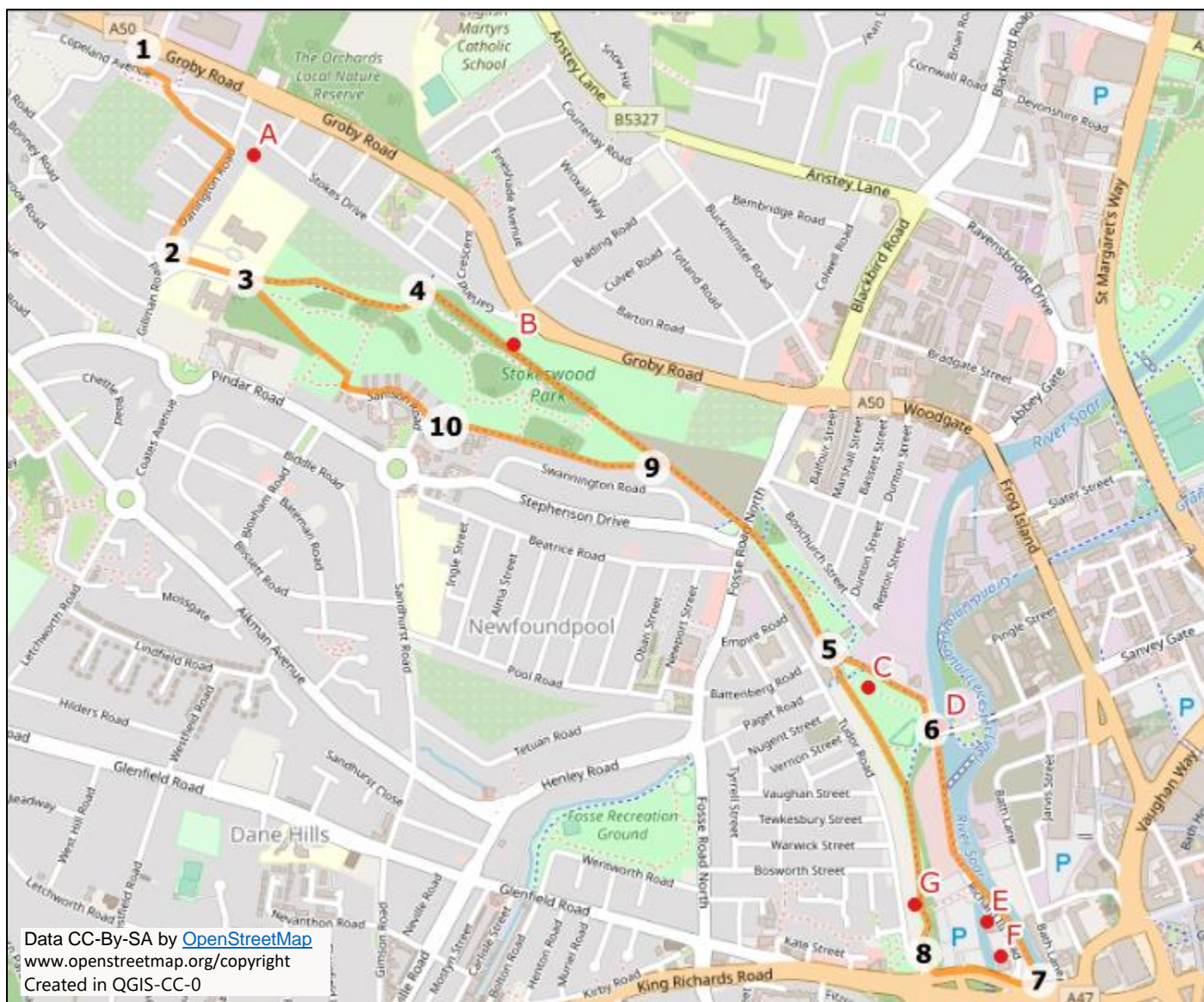
# On the Trail of the Old Railway – Stokeswood Park & The Rally

**Start location:** Bus stop on Groby Road, opposite the Heathley Park Pub & Grill, LE3 9QE.

**Time taken:** 1 hour 48 minutes (steady, pace)\*    **Distance:** 3.6 miles    5.8 km    **Circular route**  
1 hour 30 minutes (medium pace). Allow additional time for information stops.

## Description:

This walk takes in both Stokeswood Park and The Rally as it follows the route of the long disused Leicester and Swannington Railway line to its terminus at West Bridge.



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

\*Time is calculated at a steady pace of 2mph, if walked without stopping. Allow extra time to look at points of interest and read the information.

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

[www.choosehowyoumove.co.uk/walks](http://www.choosehowyoumove.co.uk/walks)



## Walk starts:

From the bus stop on Groby Road, opposite the Heathley Park Pub & Grill (near LOROS), LE3 9QE.

Alternatively, you may prefer to start the walk at the entrance to Stokeswood Park at number **3** or at the entrance to The Rally Park at number **8**, then follow the numbers in sequence.

## Safety tips:

- Take care crossing roads.
- Watch for cyclists throughout Stokeswood Park and The Rally, both are popular cycle routes.
- The route mostly uses firm surfaces but some sections may become muddy after heavy rain.
- In places, some paths are cracked or uneven and there may be protruding tree roots hidden by wet leaves or mud, so tread carefully.
- Stokeswood Park can feel quite isolated so walkers may prefer to walk here in company.
- Remember to observe the guidance on social distancing.

## Introduction:

The Leicester to Swannington Railway line was Leicester's first railway and the first in the Midlands. It opened in 1832 to transport coal from the Leicestershire coalfields (in the north west of the county) to town. 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 sell their coal at competitive prices. The colliers of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire had access to the canals waterways and 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 the Industrial Revolution in progress and an increasing demand for coal in factories, the Leicestershire colliers 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.

## Route directions:

1. From the bus stop, leave Groby Road via the footpath to Copeland Avenue. Cross Copeland Avenue and turn left on the footpath which leads through the green space leading to Brunel Avenue. Then continue ahead along the road to the junction with Darlington Road.

### (A) Route of the former railway line

The line opened on 17 July 1832 to transport coal from the mines located in Bagworth, Whitwick, Long Lane (Coalville) and Swannington as well as granite and stone from the Groby quarry. Its primary purpose was to transport these goods, but at the same time a rudimentary passenger service began.

Look at the houses on the far side of Darlington Road. The railway ran through what is now their back gardens. If you were standing on this spot between 1832 and 1966 you would be standing in the path of oncoming trains. The railway closed in 1966 and the line was cleared. Shortly afterwards residents were offered the chance to buy the railway land to extend their gardens at a cost of £100.

Several road names in this area have a 'railway' theme. Read how these names reflect the local (and national) history of the railways in the additional information section at the end.

Turn right and continue forward up the hill, passing side roads. Pass two sets of bollards in the road and reach the road junction at the top of the hill.

2. Turn left onto New Parks Crescent and continue ahead, passing the school to your right.
3. At the end of the road pass through the A-frame metal gates to enter Stokeswood Park and take the left-hand path which follows a line of street lights. This is 'Forest Way' and it is a cycle route. Continue through the park.
4. Just before the exit (to Stokes Drive) turn right to follow the straight cycle/pedestrian path bordered by trees and shrubs. Continue all the way to the footbridge over Fosse Road North.

#### **(B) Stokeswood Park**

This wooded, straight section of path follows the route of the long disused railway line and is popular with walkers and cyclists between the city and New Parks. The park is rich in nature.

Cross over the bridge to enter The Rally Park and soon pass a path on the left. Watch for cyclists throughout The Rally. Continue forward to the children's playground.

#### **(C) The Rally park**

The Rally is a wedge of land sandwiched between Tudor Road and Bonchurch Street and lies close to the River Soar/Grand Union Canal. It is now a city park but The Rally was once part of the historic Leicester and Swannington Railway and this whole area was for a time the largest goods yard in the world. Besides coal the railway transported granite stone, lime and latterly oil and petrol. The goods yard would have been a hive of activity with the arrival of goods wagons to be sorted and trains of empties returning to the mines and quarries. Very little evidence of this activity remains.

After the closure of the railway in 1966 the area degenerated. Part of the site was taken over by Kirby and West Dairy in 1980. Then in July 2011, work began on a £75,000 scheme to regenerate the area with trees, hedges and a play area. The wharves where coal was once trans-shipped have been gentrified. The Rally park includes the Queen Elizabeth Walk, laid out in 1986 with 60 oak trees to commemorate the Queen's 60th birthday. The Forest Way cycle path is integrated into the park (following the route of the old railway) and there is a small nature area by the St Augustine's Road entrance. There is also a junior football pitch and a casual BMX trail.

5. Bear left at the playground and continue on to reach the River Soar and Soar Lane bridge.

#### **(D) Soar Lane and Pingle Wharves**

One of the few remaining artefacts is just in front of us. The piers in the river carried the line over the River Soar to the Soar Lane and Pingle wharf branch. Just a little bit further is the site of Stephenson's lifting bridge (no longer here). The bridge was raised to allow canal boats to pass beneath and lowered to allow wagons into the wharves. This branch of the line carried household coal to 24 coal merchants as well as lime, timber and general goods to businesses on the other side of the canal. Steam engines were too heavy for the lifting bridge so wagons were pulled by horses until the 1950s, when a converted tractor was used. Interestingly a pair of rails have survived as a reminder. The lifting bridge was moved to Abbey Pumping Station and then to Snibston Discovery Park. After closure of the Snibston site the bridge was dismantled with the timbers being burnt. Fortunately, most of the ironwork was kept.

#### **(E) West Bridge Wharf**

This is where the coal from the mines and minerals from the quarries were brought in by the trains and offloaded. The minerals were then transferred to the barges for onward shipment to the south and west. Here would have been located a wharf shed and joiners shop next to the company's offices.

**(F) Site of the original Leicester West Bridge Station, opened July 1832**

The original railway buildings were a wharf shed, joiner's shop, company office, engine shed, workshop and smithy. Freight was the railway's primary purpose, so carrying passengers was not a priority. This is the approximate site of the original station which is reckoned to be the third oldest in the world. In its original form it had no platform so passengers had to climb up steps to board the primitive accommodation in wagons. In 1840 some alterations were made to the office to provide an area for passengers. A narrow platform was erected later in 1876. This station was replaced in 1893 with one near Tudor Road (G).

Passenger demand took the directors by surprise as they were focused on building the railway to transport coal. Increasing demand led to a number of carriages being constructed. Passenger destinations would have been to the villages served by stations at Glenfield, Ratby, Braunstone, Kirby Muxloe, Desford and various places to Coalville. Initially the line carried about 60 passengers a day. Passengers received a token upon payment of their fair which was given up of the destination. The line was never busy with passengers and by 1838 only 443 people a week travelled compared with 11,000 a week on The Liverpool and Manchester Railway.

6. From the Soar Lane bridge, pass the benches to follow the pedestrian/cycle path beside the Grand Union Canal. Continue on the canal path all the way to West Bridge. Take care to watch for cyclists.
7. Just before the bridge take the footpath up the slope to join St Augustine's Road. Turn right and continue forward over Richard III Road and continue to the next set of traffic lights.
8. Here, turn right onto Tudor Road and very soon turn right again to enter The Rally park. Continue forward on this path, 'Queen Elizabeth's Walk'. Pass a section of track and old signal by the 'West Bridge Station' sign and continue all the way through The Rally.

**(G) Site of the second West Bridge Station, opened in March 1893 and closed in September 1928.**

This second station near Tudor Road was purpose-built. It had a platform complete with waiting room, ticket office and staff accommodation. It also had a Station Master complete with top hat! The remaining section of track and signal that we see here now was constructed in 1987 by the West End Environmental Group in recognition of the park's history, but it's uncertain how much is original to the Leicester and Swannington Railway Company. The passenger service stopped in 1928. The transport of coal, oil and other goods continued until the line closed in 1966.

Cross the footbridge over Fosse Road North and continue ahead a short distance.

9. At a path junction turn left onto the Fosse Lane pedestrian/cycle path. Continue up the hill. After passing blocks of flats, Fosse Lane becomes Comet Close. Keep to the right-hand pavement to pass bungalows and join Samson Road, passing more bungalows.
10. Near the end of Samson Road turn right past the yellow metal fence to enter Stokeswood Park. Keep left at the first path junction, then keep ahead through the park to exit at the metal A-frame gates onto New Parks Crescent. Continue ahead for a short distance and then turn right onto Darlington Road. Continue down the hill to retrace your steps to the start.

We hope that you have enjoyed discovering the places and history associated with Leicester's first railway. There is also a different route which looks at the construction of the Glenfield Tunnel. You may also be interested in this and other walks available to download from the Choose How You Move website: [www.choosehowyoumove.co.uk](http://www.choosehowyoumove.co.uk)

## Additional Information:

### Some local road names reflect key players in the local and national history of the railways

A number of road names near the start of the walk have a railway theme. Darlington Avenue is named to reflect the Stockton and Darlington Railway of 1825 which connected collieries in north-east England. You might guess who Brunel Avenue is named for. Copeland Avenue is named after Mr Copeland, one of the engineering contractors who built the Glenfield Tunnel through which the Leicester and Swannington line passes. Not far from here are Jowett Close and Stenson Road. The former is named after the tunnel's first contractor, Mr Jowett, who had a fatal accident during construction when he fell down a working shaft.

Stenson Road reflects William Stenson who was both a collier and qualified surveyor. Like others, Stenson recognised the importance of getting coal to market quickly and economically and was inspired by the Stockton and Darlington Railway (1825), engineered by George Stephenson. It was Stenson who conducted the initial survey for the route of the Leicester and Swannington railway line in 1828. Stenson and two other surveyors, Harris and Whetstone, gained support for the concept from the prominent Leicester landowner, John Ellis (latterly of Belgrave Hall). In turn, Ellis consulted the engineer George Stephenson on how to make the project a reality. In February 1829, a number of Leicester's influential people met at the Bell Hotel in Leicester. They all saw the steam railways as a new age and the Leicester and Swannington Railway Company was formed. One of the directors was Thomas Stokes; Stokes Drive has been named after him. Young Robert Stephenson (25) was appointed as the engineer to oversee the contractors and Thomas Miles the agent to survey and cost the project. Work began in 1830 and completed in 1832, around £7,000 over budget (a huge amount at that time) due to unforeseen issues with the construction of the Glenfield Tunnel.

## Acknowledgements

With thanks to John Alton for planning and researching this route and providing photos.



Stokeswood Park



Soar Lane



The Rally

## References:

### West Bridge Station

The Story of Leicester website includes information about West Bridge Station and includes old photos and a map of the former railway station and coal wharves.

<https://www.storyofleicester.info/a-working-town/west-bridge-station/>

### Leicester and Swannington Railway:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leicester\\_and\\_Swannington\\_Railway#20th\\_and\\_21st\\_centuries](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leicester_and_Swannington_Railway#20th_and_21st_centuries)

The Leicester and Swannington Railway, by C.R. Clinker:

[www.le.ac.uk/lahs/downloads/RailwaySmPagesfromsmvolumeXXX-4.pdf](http://www.le.ac.uk/lahs/downloads/RailwaySmPagesfromsmvolumeXXX-4.pdf)

### Leicestershire Industrial History Society publications:

These provide an excellent history of Glenfield Tunnel and the railway: [www.lihs.org.uk](http://www.lihs.org.uk)