

Fairfield Station by Paul White

Part 1: .. and the Fallowfield Loop

Fairfield Station on the Woodhead line was opened by the Sheffield, Ashton and Manchester Railway in 1841 and as such was one of the original stations on the line. It was first situated on Mansshaw Road, off the A635 Manchester Old Road in Higher Openshaw, right on the border of Manchester and Audenshaw. Fares to Manchester at the opening were 1st- 8d, 2nd - 6d and 3rd - 4d. Unaccountably the 1st class fare only was raised to 9d on 28th December 1842. The original station building was probably a wooden shelter as by January 1846 Henry Worth of Sheffield was given a contract for buildings at Fairfield, Hadfield, Penistone and Oughtly Bridge for £94 each. However, towards the end of 1847 even these modest works were temporarily stopped due to the company's financial problems.

What form the permanent 1846 version of the original station took is unknown to me - I have never seen an illustration of it. We may assume that it was a small affair, probably constructed of stone like its contemporaries. However, it was destined to have quite a brief life, as in 1886 the proposal for a new line from Fairfield Junction to Chorlton Junction, known as the Fallowfield Loop or Manchester Central Station Railway, was given Parliamentary approval. This line was to meet the Midland at Chorlton Junction, the continuation via Chorlton-cum-Hardy via Throstle Nest Junction and on to Manchester Central Station being incorporated in the Cheshire Lines Committee. The plan was to involve the resiting of Fairfield station to its present site, about 500 yards east of the original station. The new station opened on May 2nd 1892 having been constructed at a cost of £13,025 by J.D. Nowell, the contractor who had built the branch at a cost of £138,088. It had four platforms, two for the main line and two for the branch. Widening and re-signalling of the GC main line between Ardwick and Hyde Junction between 1905 and 1907 resulted in Fairfield Station having six platforms.

The great length of the platforms and their large number gave rise to a local legend that the station had been built so generously in order to accommodate race traffic from a racetrace to be built on the site of Fairfield Golf Course (of which more later), but I have never been able to find solid evidence of this. Despite closure and resiting over 120 years ago, reminders of the original station remain in the shape of "The Railway" on the short Mansshaw Lane, a magnificent and thriving Joseph Holt pub with a slightly inappropriate sign depicting a 'Black 5'. At the junction of Mansshaw Lane and Ashton Old Road there is a parade of shops bearing the name Station View!



The Fallowfield Loop platforms and station building on Booth Road in 1976.



Detail over the entrance to the station building on Booth Road in 1976.

As with many such schemes in the later years of railway expansion, the local services provided by the line could not really compete with the more convenient trams, and more recently the buses, and services between Fairfield and Manchester Central were considerably reduced by the LNER in the lean years of the 1930s. However, the line was extensively used for through passenger services, especially those with an east-west orientation, in particular the Harwich-Sheffield-Manchester-Liverpool boat trains. The Fairfield-Hyde Road-Gorton triangle was used for engine-turning purposes and with the 1954 electrification an ultra-modern maintenance depot was opened at Reddish (near Hyde Road on the Fallowfield Loop) to service the EM1 and EM2 locos and the Class 506 EMUs. Consideration was given to electrifying the branch all the way to Manchester Central Station but was in the event not undertaken. In fact the line began to go into a decline from the mid-fifties with the sparse local passenger service being withdrawn in 1958.

Right up until the closure of Manchester Central in May 1969 passenger trains used the Fairfield Loop to gain access to this, one of four main line stations in Manchester at the time. With the closure of the Woodhead line in July 1981 Reddish Depot lost most of its work, having been the dumping ground for a number of years for redundant EM1 locos in various states of disrepair, and was finally closed in 1983. The Class 506 EMUs were serviced at Longsight for their short remaining lives, all being withdrawn in December 1984 following the conversion of the Hadfield-Glossop-Manchester section to 25,000V AC traction. The site was cleared and redeveloped for housing some years ago.



Fairfield station in 2013 with just two platforms on the main line. The steps down from the bridge are in the same position as in the 1976 view but there is no station building and the Fallowfield Loop lines are long gone. The other two main line platforms were to the right.

The line has two other claims to fame. The Granada TV programme "Blues and Gospel Train" was broadcast from Wilbraham Road Station on May 7th 1964. When the train

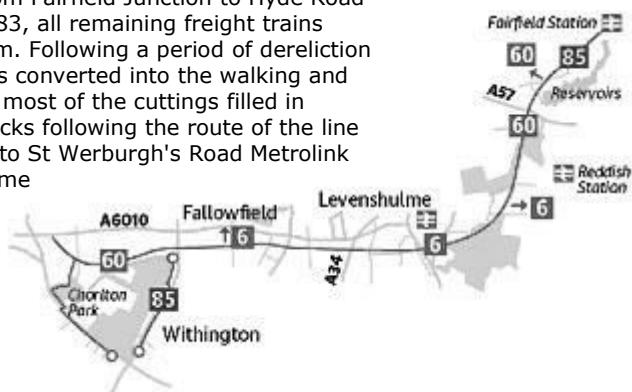
pulled in at Wilbraham Road, the audience poured out and found seats on the platform. The opposite platform, decorated to look like an old railway station in the American South, served as a stage for a line-up of blues artists including Muddy Waters, Sister Rosetta Sharpe, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee, Cousin Joe, Otis Spann and Reverend Gary Davis. This concert is still available to watch on DVD, and shows little regard for health and safety!

Its second claim to fame was its use in March 1987 as a demonstration track open to the public to see how the "Project Lightrail" would look in practice. A tram, borrowed from the new Docklands Light Railway carried passengers along a 1.6km length of track under a temporary overhead power line between Hyde Road signal box, where a temporary Debdale Park Halt had been constructed, to Reddish Depot and back. The demonstration was opened by the then transport Minister, David Mitchell, and ran over a period of five days. The tram was stored in a siding overnight to allow the remaining freight traffic on the line, mainly freightliners from Trafford Park, to pass by. There was also a small exhibition built on the site where models and maps of the Manchester tram system proposal could be seen.



Debdale Park Halt and a Docklands Light Railway tram in March 1987.

In 1988, the year following the tram demonstration, the Fallowfield Loop finally closed. The section of the triangle from Fairfield Junction to Hyde Road had been out of use since 1983, all remaining freight trains proceeding via the Gorton arm. Following a period of dereliction after track lifting, the line was converted into the walking and cycling route it is today, with most of the cuttings filled in and gently graded tarmac tracks following the route of the line from Debdale Park in Gorton to St Werburgh's Road Metrolink station in Didsbury. The scheme was built by Sustrans and is part of Routes 6 and 60 of the National Cycle Network.



Part 2: ...and the J.G. Robinson connection

The late David Jackson wrote briefly of the Robinson's domestic arrangements following his appointment to the GCR in his book *J.G. Robinson - A Lifetime's Work*. On p183 he states that "on his appointment....he moved his extended family...into *Lorneville*, a large detached residence opposite the LNWR's Heaton Chapel Station in Manchester, convenient for London Road, a change of trains onto the GCR and then a short ride to Gorton". Convenient enough, but it wasn't long before the family moved to an even more convenient company-owned home. That home was *Boothdale*, next door to Fairfield Station and but one stop away from Gorton and Openshaw station. The house is described as "... set in its own grounds in open, unspoiled countryside and only a moment's walk from the station". The Robinsons lived at *Boothdale* from 1902 to 1914. When Frank Williams, the retired accountant for the company, but still acting as a consultant, died, the Robinsons moved into *Mere Bank*, Williams' old house, which was next door to *Boothdale*. They lived there until Robinson's retirement in 1922.

When I first visited Fairfield Station in 1976 I was unaware of the above information. The station appeared to be much too generous for its location - there was a small estate of houses on Booth Road, but this finished at the station - beyond was the Golf Club and a wooded area. By then the station buildings were on their last legs. Similar in many ways to the buildings on the London Extension, it had its name and building date of 1892 carved into the stonework on the Booth Road frontage and MS&L delicately carved in decorative lettering in the woodwork over the entrance. By then in a ruinous condition, the booking office staff were protected from the leaky roof by a temporary corrugated iron structure built inside the building, which was demolished in 1979. Such was the "crumbling edge of quality", to use Sir Peter Parker's memorable phrase, on BR at the time. *Boothdale* is now the clubhouse of the Fairfield Golf and Sailing Club. so I approached the Secretary with a request for information.



Boothdale, the Robinson family home 1902-14. (Photo from *Fairfield Golf and Sailing Club 1892-1992 Centenary Programme*.)

The Club Secretary, Mr John Paton, could not have been more helpful and showed me around the clubhouse. There have been a number of alterations over the years, most notably the rear extension overlooking the golf course which was opened on April 24th 1971 by Sir Matt Busby. This rear extension totally alters the rear view of *Boothdale* depicted on p184 of *J.G. Robinson* The *Fairfield Golf and Sailing Club Centenary*

Programme from 1992 provided some brief information of the building's connection with the GCR and its successors. According to the booklet *Boothdale* was built in 1872 by Henry Hall, a solicitor and the steward of the Manor of Audenshaw. He moved to Styal in 1888 and the house was left vacant until it was purchased by the MS&LR in 1895. The house was purchased "...for use as a residence...for senior executives at Gorton Locomotive works". According to the Centenary Booklet "...it was used for this purpose until 1920 when Fairfield Golf Club took over the tenancy".

By 1920 the Robinson family were in residence at the next-door house *Mere Bank*. In 1960 the Golf and Sailing Club were offered both houses and their land for the paltry sum of £3,500. *Mere Bank* was demolished many years ago, and sadly there seem to be no photos extant of the building in its latter years, but at present the gate posts bearing the name still stand.

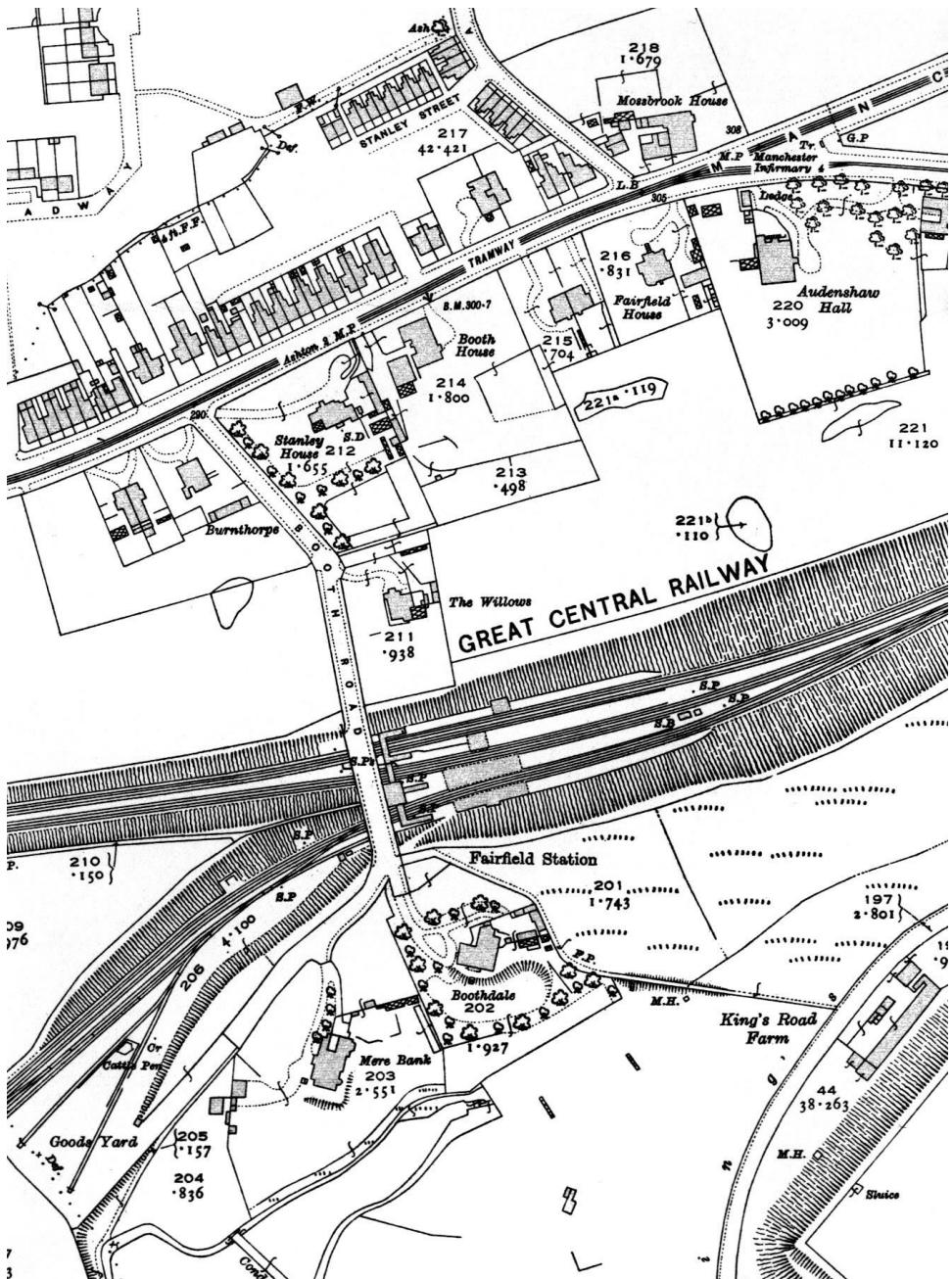


The surviving gate posts at Mere Bank

Mr Paton took me on a conducted tour of the clubhouse, which is a strange mixture of ancient and relatively modern. It is obvious that the public areas of the building have had a good deal of money spent on them over the years, but when one explores the further reaches an all-pervading sense of Victoriana seeps in. Many of the upstairs rooms have been used for no more than storage over many years, and still bear traces of antiquated painting and decorating. Most of the rooms have fireplaces, the pattern of which seems to follow the curved pattern of the outside windows. There are reminders of what a grand house it must have been with its own staff when one sees a laundry room, obviously disused for many years, two sets of stairs, one probably "back-stairs" for staff, and a dumb waiter. In places coloured and decorated glass remain in the windows. One may still imagine Robinson pondering some aspect of cylinder design or superheating in an out-of-the-way room in this great house surrounded by trees, with the sound of the company's own trains disturbing a rural calm a mere couple of miles from the noise of Gorton Loco Works.

All this is due to change in the not too distant future. Mr Paton mentioned that the club was seeking to build a new clubhouse and in early July of this year the local paper carried the headline "Plans for more than 100 new homes are given the go-ahead". Fairfield Golf Club was to be the site of 27 of them, involving the demolition of *Boothdale* and the building of a new clubhouse. So of the Robinson residences while he was at Gorton, one, *Mere Bank* is long gone, while another, *Boothdale* may have been demolished by the time this article is read.

However, his first Manchester residence, *Lorneville* survives and prospers, albeit under another name. According to David Jackson "...when Robinson took up his appointment at Gorton Works.....he moved his extended family into *Lorneville*, a large detached residence opposite the LNWR's Heaton Chapel Station". On visiting the area recently I found the house with some difficulty. It was in fact an enormous semi-detached house, the other half being *Roseleigh*. The two houses are now merged into one very extensive



The cluster of well-to-do houses around Fairfield station can be appreciated from this 1922 OS map.

and upmarket apartment block with its own car park, going under the name of *Roseleigh Court*. However, at the further end of the building is a bricked-up driveway entrance, bearing on both gate pillars the name *Lorneville*.



Half of the present day 'Roseleigh Court' was once 'Lorneville'.

photos: Paul White

It was an interesting and enlightening experience tracking down the Robinson residences and to be re-acquainted with Fairfield Station, and I am glad to have caught up with *Boothdale* before its imminent demise. A shadow of its former self in so many ways, Fairfield station still gives the impression of great length, and is still set in sylvan surroundings. Its timetable has shrunk to virtual non-existence, only the Marple and Rose Hill services now calling. Though the legendary racecourse never appeared there was a local speedway track later used for "trotting" races at Moorside, and this may indeed possibly be the basis for the racecourse story. A further local story has it that the station is haunted by a green EMU that disappears if you approach it while a disembodied voice calls out "Mary"! It is certainly a very quiet and eerie place between trains.

References and acknowledgements

George Dow *Great Central Vol 1* pp36, 40, 82.

George Dow *Great Central Vol 2* pp57, 29.

David Jackson *J.G. Robinson A Lifetime's Work* pp183-185.

Fairfield Golf and Sailing Club 1892-1992 Centenary Programme

The article "A Commuter on the Great Central Railway" by Paul White in *Forward 9* (June 1976).

I would like to thank Mr John Paton, Secretary of the Fairfield Golf and Sailing Club, for his help in supplying me with information about *Mere Bank* and *Boothdale*, and for giving me a tour around the clubhouse.