**Trail Four Howe Bridge & Atherton**

**An approximately one hour circular driving route of 13 miles / 22 km. with 19 stops so total time required around 2.5 hours**.

**START**

1. **Lancashire Mining Museum/Astley Green Colliery** (1908-70) The Clifton and Kearsley Coal Company sank the two new shafts off Higher Green Lane using the German Drop-shaft method, the first to do so in England, because of the water and quicksands encountered. The Drop-shaft or Sinking Drum Process involved forcing a cylinder through the heavily watered peat and loose layers to the rockhead and excavating within it.

**IMAGE 1.1: Looking up the Shaft at Astley Green** [https://lancashireminingmuseum.org/old-astley-green-photos/#jp-carousel-437](https://lancashireminingmuseum.org/old-astley-green-photos/%2523jp-carousel-437)

The seams went under Chat Moss which meant water was continually dripping down, making work very wet and hot. The standing Headgear, one of two formerly here, is the last surviving of the former South Lancashire coalfield.

**IMAGE 1.2: End of Shift at Astley Green** [https://lancashireminingmuseum.org/old-astley-green-photos/#jp-carousel-335](https://lancashireminingmuseum.org/old-astley-green-photos/%2523jp-carousel-335)

A colliery railway moved coal from the screens to the Liverpool and Manchester Railway but some coal was transported to power stations at Trafford Park and Stretford using the Bridgewater Canal. Sadly, there was a mining accident at Astley Green on 6th June 1939 when five men, including the manager, died in an explosion of firedamp. But in 1956, 36 year old deputy, Alf Hughes received The Daily Herald Order of Industrial Heroism (or ‘Workers V.C.’) for rescuing 30 year old electrician, Brian Walker when he was being dragged into a mechanical coal cutting and conveying machine. Alf was presented with his medal at Astley & Tyldesley Miners’ Welfare Institute (Gin Pit Club). Outside of the Museum, now a village green, once stood the pithead baths, canteen and medical centre designed for the Miners' Welfare Committee by architect C. Kemp. They were built in 1935–36 at a cost of over £24,000.

**IMAGE 1.3: New Pithead Baths at Astley Green** [https://lancashireminingmuseum.org/old-astley-green-photos/#jp-carousel-475](https://lancashireminingmuseum.org/old-astley-green-photos/%2523jp-carousel-475)

*Leave the museum, drive up the road and turn right onto Higher Green Lane.*

*Continue to the traffic lights on the East Lancs Road.*

*Cross over the East Lancs Road to continue on Higher Green Lane, then turn left onto Manchester Road.*

*At the mini-roundabout, take the first exit to continue along Manchester Road the, at the next mini-roundabout, take the second exit onto Princes Avenue.*

*Continue along Princes Avenue until it becomes Astley Street then cross the Guided Busway and turn left at the end of the street at the traffic lights.*

*Drive along Elliott Street, which bends to the right and becomes Castle Street, then take the first exit at the mini-roundabout.*

*Continue along Castle Street, which becomes Tyldesley Road as it travels through Hindsford.*

*Turn left into Hamilton Street and turn left at the War Memorial onto Leigh Road.*

*Continue along Leigh Road then turn left just after the next set of traffic lights into Eckersley Fold Lane.*

*Turn into the car park for Atherton Cricket Club.*

2. **Atherton Cricket Club, Eckersley Fold Lane, Atherton, Manchester M46 0RQ** has been in existence since at least 1872. In the early 1900s its name was changed to Howe Bridge Cricket Club by the Club’s benefactors, the pit-owning Fletcher family. The club’s first ground was on the ‘Old Chain’, a patch of grassland between Lovers Lane and the bypass, but the present square was laid by striking miners in 1926. Following nationalisation of the collieries in 1947, the club became part of the Atherton Collieries Joint Welfare Association (A.C.J.W.A.) and became Atherton Collieries Cricket Club. ‘Collieries’ was dropped from the title in 1965 following the closure of the pits and the club returned to its original name. Higham Park is named after Bill Higham who, during 60 years at the club, was first team captain, club president, chairman and groundsman. The club has produced several England cricketers. In the past, the area featured a colliery reservoir, whilst there were also shallow pits at Eckersley Fold. The South Shaft went down 152 feet, intersecting the Bulldog Mine and the Bin Mine. One of the shafts was later used as an upcast ventilation shaft for the Crombouke Day-Eye and Howe Bridge Victoria Pit. Ventilation was provided by a Waddle Fan which was a large, early centrifugal fan with no external casing veins.At 40 feet in diameter, it would have been an impressive sight mounted in the open air and attracted many sightseers. It was driven by a 32 x 48in single cylinder engine with condenser, running at 58 rpm.

**IMAGE 4.1: Waddle fan** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waddle\_fan#/media/File:Waddle\_fan,\_National\_Garden\_Festival,\_Ebbw\_Vale\_-\_geograph.org.uk\_-\_926592.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waddle_fan%23/media/File%3AWaddle_fan%2C_National_Garden_Festival%2C_Ebbw_Vale_-_geograph.org.uk_-_926592.jpg)

Visit for refreshments & WC.

The original area known as **How Bridge** (without an ‘e’) was centred around the small bridge just past the entrance to Eckersley Fold Lane, which crosses a tributary of the River Glaze.

*Leave the car park and drive back up Eckersley Fold Lane.*

*Turn left onto Leigh Road then take the second turning on your right into Johnson Street.*

*Drive to the bottom and turn the vehicle round then park on the right hand side where there are no double yellow lines.*

3. The Costcutter store was once**The Oak Tree Root pub**. The building was originally four houses which date back to at least the 1870s, but the end one was demolished. You can still see evidence of this in the different roof lines. The pub’s name is thought to come from a fossilised oak tree which was found in the area - a common find down coal mines. But, in the past, alehouses were mostly known informally by the name of the landlord. In the early 1900s the Oak Tree Root was called ‘Owd Tabby’s’ after the then landlord, who was very fond of his pigs. He fed them a hot mash of oatmeal, buttermilk and small potatoes in their skins, which the hungry local children would dip into whilst his back was turned. In those days women were not encouraged to sit with the men in the tap room so Owd Tabby’s wife would entertain the local housewives in her kitchen, serving them with ale, porter or stout. The pub closed in 2008 but the name was retained by the new occupiers of the building.

Coal had been mined in the area via shallow shafts for many years. In 1776, Robert Vernon Atherton of Atherton Hall (at Lilford Park) leased the coal rights of his land, except that under his hall, for 99 years to John Fletcher from Bolton and Thomas Guest of Bedford. John Guest, the son of Thomas Guest, later sold his share of the colliery to Ralph Fletcher, son of John Fletcher, in 1803. The Fletcher Mining Company went on to develop the Howe Bridge Collieries and sank three shafts in this area in the 1840s. The Volunteer was an up-cast ventilation shaft, sunk to the Seven Feet mine. The Puffer Pit, also sunk to the Seven Feet mine, was the pumping shaft powered by the ‘Colonel’, a 60in x 10ft stroke equal beam pumping engine with condenser. The Victoria Pit was known locally as the ‘Bicycle Pit’ due to the appearance of its timber headgear, which was erected in 1879. Its Four Foot seam was given the nickname the ‘Hell Hole mine’. Coal winding was carried out at the Victoria, but the original access wasn’t by cage but by kibble, a large metal bucket. A horse drawn Mineral Railway Line connected the colliery to the Bridgewater Canal, crossing Leigh Road, Orchard Lane, The Avenue and Holden Road, then going underground at Gamble Street. The tunnel emerged at the Bedford canal basin at the bottom of Wharf Street. In 1861 a new, more direct route was created using a standard gauge line, but the Ellesmere and the Lilford locos had to be specially built to fit the existing tunnel.

**IMAGE 4.2: Coal picking at Howe Bridge Colliery during the miners' strike, Atherton, 1893** [https://archives.wigan.gov.uk/archive/photograph-collections/atherton/153445-pc20103938?](https://archives.wigan.gov.uk/archive/photograph-collections/atherton/153445-pc20103938)

Behind the terraced houses on Johnson Street was the former site of **Howe Bridge Collieries**’ ‘lodge’ or reservoir. Local residents remember it as being warm and full of goldfish. In 1872, Liverpool entrepreneur Abraham Burrows joined Ralph Fletcher (junior) to become a partner in the new Fletcher Burrows and Company, which controlled the Howe Bridge Collieries and other pits in Atherton, Chanters and Gibfield. It is here that the Battle of Howe Bridge took place in 1881. The 1880 Employers’ Liability Act had forced coal owners to compensate workers for accidents where the employers were negligent. So, the coal owners insisted that the miners pay 75% of a subscription to the Miners Permanent Relief Fund, which guaranteed compensation after injuries or death at the pit. However, as their wages had already fallen by a third, the miners rejected the package. They were told that there would be no increase in pay unless a sliding scale of coal was adopted, so around 50,000 men and boys at Lancashire pits went on strike. More enlightened coal owners Fletcher Burrows negotiated a better wages agreement with their workforce and embraced the Employers’ Liability Act. So, after showing their support for three weeks, the Howe Bridge miners went back to work. But in February 1881 a mass meeting was organised in Leigh, attracting 6,000 miners from Haydock, St. Helens, Ince, Hindley and Wigan. The Leigh Local Board requested that a detachment of the Hussars, a cavalry regiment of the British Army, and an Infantry regiment, be sent to the neighbourhood in case of outbreaks of disorder. The mob surged down Church Street to the Market Place where the miners greeted the Hussars with stones and snowballs and a fight broke out. The Riot Act was read at the obelisk, which meant that if the mob failed to disperse within an hour, anyone who remained was guilty of a felony, a very serious crime, punishable by death. Some of the miners ran away but most of them were driven by the mounted Hussars towards Howe Bridge where they were met by more policeman and a Company of the 8th Regiment Infantry. When the Howe Bridge men came up from the Crombouke Pit, they were stoned and called ‘Knobsticks’. The Riot Act was read again, and the troops charged, the men fled, then reformed. The troops charged again, and the pattern continued for an hour or so, until all were dispersed. A crude medal, the ‘Chowbent Battle of Howe Bridge 1881’ was later struck locally for the Officers involved and a few participants, as an ironic gesture of their ‘victory’. Several cases later came before the magistrates. The strike dragged on for seven weeks until the miners gradually returned to the pits. But at the end of it the Lancashire and Cheshire Miners Federation trade union emerged. Robert Isherwood, secretary and agent for the Tyldesley Miners' Association, became its first treasurer. The three Howe Bridge pits were nationalised in 1947. Howe Bridge Colliery, which was the biggest, closed in 1959.

**IMAGE 4.3: Battle of Howe Bridge https///** [engole.info/battle-of-howe-bridge](http://engole.info/battle-of-howe-bridge)

The entrance to the **Crombouke Day-Eye pit** was in this area, near to the Oak Tree Root. It opened in 1870 and was the only ‘drift’ mine in Atherton. This meant that access was above water level and generally on the slope of a hill. The entrance was located at the outcrop of the Crombouke coal seam. The mine then dipped down under Leigh Road and was ventilated by the Waddle extraction fan on Eckersley Fold. The coal extracted was good but the mine was very wet, with water running through it and dripping from above, so it closed in 1907. This may have been foreseen by some former residents of the pit. When Joby Yates, a colliery fireman was doing a 4am inspection of the workings with his two oil burning safety lamps, he suddenly noticed a lot of tiny specks of light coming towards him. They were reflections in the eyes of hundreds of rats which had inexplicably decided to leave the pit! How did they know the pit would be closed shortly afterwards?! Its extractor fan continued to be used by Victoria Pit at Howe Bridge Colliery.

*Drive to the top of Johnson Street and turn left onto Leigh Road. Drive past Colliers Corner.*

4. **Colliers Corner** was formerly the site of the Railway Hotel Public House and bowling green which closed in 1967. After it was demolished, United Utilities used the land for access to the public sewer system, meaning that it can no longer be built on. When The Bridgers Community Group was formed in 1998, they approached Wigan Council for permission to develop the land as a community project. It was called Colliers Corner to commemorate the mining history of the village, the wheel being a scaled down replica of the Howe Bridge Colliery winding wheel. Colliers Corner has won many awards, including Gold in the RHS North West In Bloom competition and regular Green Flag Awards. The Bridgers have also won a national award for a QR Coded Heritage trail, with over 25 locations around the village. The corner is maintained by members of the Gardeners Bowling Club and members of The Bridgers/Atherton Environment Projects.

**IMAGE 4: Railway Hotel** <https://www.bridgers1999.co.uk/7-colliers-corner>

*Look across to the green hill opposite.*

5. The maintained land is planted with different arrangements of plants to commemorate special occasions. TheHowe Bridge Badge has become a regular feature. On this site stood the **Congregational Mission Church & Sunday School,** dedicated to St Michael and All Angels. It opened in 1869 and served local residents until the new St Michael’s church was built. A new Congregational church was opened in 1904. The buildings stood in Fan Lane, presumably named after the Waddle fan. Howe Bridge Leisure Centre opened in 1976.

*Go straight through the traffic lights and continue along Leigh Road until you reach Old Manor Park on your left.*

*Turn into Old Manor Park, turn the vehicle around and park before the double yellow lines on either side of the road.*

6. Behind the trees to your right, stands**Hindles Cottage,** which was built around 1911. It belonged to the Fletchers and was occupied over the years by various members of the family. The last was James Clement (Jim), who was the final Fletcher to be the manager of the collieries when they were nationalised in 1947.

**IMAGE 4.5: Hindles Cottage** <https://ifthosewallscouldtalk.wordpress.com/2020/04/04/long-lost-histories-the-hindles-howe-bridge/>

The new estate was built on land formerly occupied by **The Hindles**, home of several generations of the Fletcher family. It was originally part of the much older Hindles Farm, which explains why it became such a mismatch of buildings. Ralph Fletcher (Junior), who was known as ‘young Rafe’, took over the business after his father retired to Southport. He and his family lived at The Hindles but they also had a second home in the Lake District, where they could escape the noise and dirt produced by their own mines and mills. However, Ralph was, like his father, a generous benefactor and played an active role in local civic society as a magistrate and councillor, etc. The Hindles was later occupied by Ralph’s sons, but when Clement married, Ernest moved next door into Hindles Cottage, leaving the newlyweds alone to raise their family. When they left the house in 1920, it was divided into two properties: The Hindles and Hindles Lodge. The Hindles was demolished in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Hindles Lodge survived a little longer but all the remaining buildings from Hindles Farm were gone by the early 1990s. The old wooden 2nd Atherton Scout Hut stood in the grounds of The Hindles.

**St Michaels and All Angels Church** opposite dates from 1875-7. The Grade II\* church was designed by renowned Lancaster based architects, Paley and Austin, and is the only stone building in the Howe Bridge conservation area. It was part of Howe Bridge Model Village, which was built in the mid-1870s by Fletcher Burrows and Company for its workers. At the time the Chairman was Ralph Fletcher (senior). His father, Colonel Ralph Fletcher was a signee of the document which declared the meeting at St Peter’s Fields in 1819 illegal, effectively justifying the Peterloo massacre, which left 18 dead and several hundred injured. This may have been a moral burden, or perhaps an inspiration for his son, who became a devoted churchman, philanthropist, and model employer. The model village included the church, houses, a public bath house, shops, a social club, bowling green, cricket ground and school. Fletcher Burrows and Company also supported the formation of Atherton Collieries Football Club in 1916, to provide welfare for those at home during WW1. Apart from the church, the rest of the buildings were designed by architect brothers James Medland Taylor and Henry Taylor who were influenced by Dutch and French architecture of the medieval period.

*Continue to the end of Old Manor park and turn left onto Leigh Road.*

*Take the next turning on your right into Bowling Green Row, drive into the car park and turn the vehicle round.*

7. The blue engineering bricks on Leigh Road are all that remain of **Howe Bridge railway bridge**. The timber-built station stood on the church side of the road on an embankment which was accessed by steps. It was originally called Chowbent when it was opened in 1864 by the London and North Western Railway Company (LNWR) on the Manchester to Wigan Line. The line’s main cargo was coal, and it provided a connection to Fletcher, Burrows and Company’s Chanters Colliery. The station was renamed Howe Bridge in 1901, and closed in 1959. The ticket office was in the end house of the terraced row ahead. The bridge separated the original village of the ‘Down Loners' from the miners’ estate village or ‘Up Loners’ part at the ‘top’. The new ‘Up Loners’ were not accepted by the ‘Down Loners' for many years and conflict often erupted in the local pubs. On the opposite side of the road, an early pit called Red Delph was worked on the land beyond the railway bridge, along with a sandstone quarry.

**IMAGE 4.6: A view of Howe Bridge Railway Station before it closed, Atherton, circa 1907.** [https://archives.wigan.gov.uk/archive/photograph-collections/atherton/153353-pc20103562?](https://archives.wigan.gov.uk/archive/photograph-collections/atherton/153353-pc20103562)

This large building in the middle of the Village housing on the left side of the road was the **Bath House** which opened all day Friday, and on Saturday mornings. Female baths were on the top floor and male baths downstairs. It was a penny a bath for all miners and their families. The bath house was converted into a house years ago. The elevated platform on the right hand side of the road is known as the ‘Promenade’. Here you will see the shops and the ‘Atherton Collieries Village Club’ which was built in 1873. It is reputed to be the oldest working man’s club in the country. All these properties are larger than those in the surrounding streets and were built mainly for the officials, namely the undermanagers, fireman or deputies, the craftsmen, engine-wrights, mechanics, blacksmiths etc. The back streets were for the mineworkers who paid around 4/- per week, which was deducted from their pay. The Howe Bridge pits attracted men from North Wales, the Forest of Dean and the North Staffordshire coalfield. The National Coal Board (NCB) inherited the houses and, at the end of the 1970s, sold them to Wigan Council. Some are now privately owned but many are still social housing.

The houses opposite the school are built on the site of the former **Oak Pit Colliery,** which appears on a map from 1849. **St. Michael’s CE Primary School,** which you will see on your right, was built in 1887 by Ralph Fletcher Junior, who dedicated it to his wife, Fanny. It was rumoured that he gave 10% of his income to charity, along with lots of other anonymous donations. Although the building has been altered over the years, it still has its original tall, decorative chimney stacks and wooden bellcote.

*Continue along Leigh Road and cross Hope Fold Avenue.*

*Stop opposite the large building on the corner.*

*This replaced the former Briarcroft building.*

8. **Briarcroft** was originally a pair of semi-detached villas built in 1870, named Stanley Terrace. By the time Colonel Philip Fletcher, the younger brother of Ralph Fletcher Junior, was living here in 1881 it was one property. He altered and enlarged it several times and renamed it Brookfield House then, later, Briarcroft Hall. When he retired to Southport around 1922, he gifted Briarcroft to the Atherton Collieries Joint Association to be used as a clubhouse. A hall extension was added in 1935, part funded by the Miners’ Welfare Fund. Briarcroft was used as a boy’s club and youth club/community centre until the late 1980s. After it closed, it was damaged in a fire, and demolished in 1998. The present flats were built in the early 2000s.

**IMAGE 4.7. Briarcroft, 1981** <https://ifthosewallscouldtalk.wordpress.com/2020/04/04/long-lost-histories-the-hindles-howe-bridge/>

**The Scout Hut** was built in 1978. Home to 2nd and 3rd Atherton Scouts and Guides, Beaver and Cub groups, its grounds are all that remain of Briarcroft’s former grounds.

*Continue along Leigh Road.*

*Stop on the left to look at the war memorial.*

9. **Atherton War Memorial** was officially opened in 1922 by Mr J. W. Rylance, a blinded ex-soldier of the 1/5th Manchester Regiment. It was designed by Arthur John Hope of Messrs. Bradshaw, Gass and Hope, architects of Bolton, who built several town halls but were also specialists in the design of cotton and other textile mills. In the early 19th-century, a small coal seam ran below the site of Hamilton Street.

*Continue along Leigh Road.*

*Stop on the left to look at the entrance to the park.*

10. The site now known as **Atherton Park**, or **Central Park**, off Hamilton Street was a large field leased to the Atherton Local Board in 1887 by Lord Lilford, for the nominal rent of 10 shillings per year. He then gifted £300 for the fencing of the site to make it safe. In 1905 it was proposed to split the site and to create a formal park, which was completed in 1912. It originally had a bandstand and a water fountain and several cottages within its grounds. Like many local parks, it was described as 'the lungs of the town’, as it offered working class people somewhere to relax away from the pressures of their jobs and life in general. But it was also a popular place for talks and demonstrations by local political organisations and community groups.

*Continue along Leigh Road and turn left at The Punch Bowl onto Wigan Road.*

*At the mini-roundabout, turn right onto Mealhouse Lane then take your first left into Sumner Street.*

*Continue along Sumner Street then take a right turn onto Factory Street West.*

*Cross Bag Lane into the dead end section of Factory Street West and turn the vehicle round.*

11. **Howe Bridge Mills** once here. The Fletcher Mining Company (later Fletcher Burrows and Company), built six mills and named them after the main area of their mining operations. No. 1 Mill was built in 1868 to provide jobs for the wives and daughters of the men employed in their collieries, and stood where Belong Village is now. This building burnt down in 1876 with the loss of 250 jobs, but was replaced within a year with a new No. 2 Mill, designed by the architects J.J. Bradshaw & Gass. As productivity increased, a new engine was installed in an extension to the building, along with a purpose-built reservoir. In 1887 there was another fire, but the new ‘fire proof’ design meant that most of the damage was actually caused by the water used to put it out. Fortunately, everyone got out safely with no serious injuries. A new mill was added in 1890 making the Howe Bridge Spinning Company the 4th largest company in Lancashire. Their last mill was built in 1919, along with new office blocks on Gloucester Street. Like at Howe Bridge village, Fletcher Burrows looked after their workers and provided social activities and recreation facilities. Land was purchased off Flapper Fold Lane to create a football and athletic ground, a tennis court, a putting green and a bowling green. In 1929, the Howe Bridge Spinning Company, along with many other local mills, merged with the Combined Egyptian Mills to cut costs, and Howe Bridge Mills became the company’s headquarters. In the 1950s, the name was changed to Combined English Mills, which was later taken over by Carrington Viyella. No. 3 Mill closed in 1956 followed by No. 4 a few years later, with the loss of 500 jobs and no redundancy pay. No. 2 and No. 5 Mills were demolished in 1964-65, along with the 211ft tall chimney. Although a modern building was added in the 1970s, and millions were invested in No.6 Mill, it had closed by 1999.

**IMAGE 4.8: Map of Mills** <https://ifthosewallscouldtalk.wordpress.com/2017/02/12/long-lost-histories-howe-bridge-mills-atherton/>

*Turn left off Bag Lane into Mealhouse Lane.*

*Continue along Mealhouse Lane, past Fletcher Street, then turn left at the lights into Flapper Fold Lane.*

*Stop part-way down down Flapper Fold Lane to see the Howe Bridge Mills War Memorial set into the wall on your left.*

*Continue along Flapper Fold Lane until you reach the mini-roundabout and turn left into Gloucester Street.*

*Stop near the large old building on your left.*

12. The offices are all that remain of **Howe Bridge Mills.** The remaining No. 3 and No. 6 Mills were used for a range of retail and leisure activities before being demolished in 2014. The chimney of **Ena Mill** can still be seen above the houses. It was built in 1908 by G. Temperley & Son architects of Bolton, opened in 1913 and closed in 1999, the last of the large textile factories in Atherton. It is now a retail outlet.

*Continue along Gloucester Street then turn right at the lights into Bag Lane.*

*Take the first left into Brook Street and turn the vehicle around.*

*Stop near the top of the street.*

13. **Brook Street** is named after **Collier Brook** which is diverted under Bag Lane. This isn’t named after local miners but after the Collier family which farmed this land in the 18th-century. **Edward Davies** was born in Liverpool and moved to Atherton around 1833 when the town was becoming famous for its manufacture of nails, nuts and bolts, all in great demand due to the industrial revolution. Davies was initially apprenticed to his uncle, Thomas Blakemore, who had introduced bolt-making into the town in 1826, but he later set up his own bolt works on Bag Lane, opposite. It closed in 1994 and is the last bolt works building left in the town. The brick wall facing the former bolt works is where Colliers Brook Farm once stood. Sadly, although the farmhouse dated from the mid-18th century and was Grade II listed, it was demolished in 2020.

*Continue along Bag Lane.*

*Cross Russell Street and Nelson Street.*

*Stop outside no 220, Prestwich House.*

14. **J. C. Prestwich** **Snr** founded Prestwich’s Smithy, a nut and bolt works in Bag Lane in 1856, which later became Prestwich, Parker Ltd. His son, J. C. Prestwich Jnr went on to become an architect and developer, designing and building most of the finest buildings in Leigh. Prestwich House was the offices for the company whose bolt works stood behind and to the side of the house, later known as the Atherton Screw Bolt Works.

**IMAGE** 4.**9: Apprentices at Prestwich Parkers' Foundry in Bag Lane, Atherton in around 1890** <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10211993944108541&set=gm.893589224115943>

A little further along, on your right, you will see **Coal Pit Lane** which used to lead to old ladder pits and later, **Gibfield Colliery,** which was positioned just north of Wigan Road, and was originally called Gib Field after the area in which it stood. The shaft was sunk to the Trencherbone mine in 1829 by Colonel Ralph Fletcher. It was conveniently located next to the Bolton and Leigh Railway Line. The colliery was expanded in 1872, with a new shaft to the Arley mine, which is one of the lowest seams in the Lancashire Coal Measures and produced good quality coal. A third shaft was sunk in 1904 with the original shaft used for ventilation. The colliery closed in 1963.

**IMAGE 4.10: Gibfield Colliery, Atherton, 1935** [https://archives.wigan.gov.uk/archive/photograph-collections/atherton/153245-pc20101958?](https://archives.wigan.gov.uk/archive/photograph-collections/atherton/153245-pc20101958)

On the right-hand side of Coal Pit Lane were the railway line and sidings, plus the **Edward Ormerod & Co Ltd.** factory, which still manufactures and export the Detaching Hook safety device at its Gibfield Works, along with other lifting and handling equipment. Edward Ormerod was a mining engineer at Fletcher, Burrows and Company’s Gibfield Colliery in Atherton. The advent of the steam winder and wire ropes meant that miners could go deeper and bring more coal to the surface, but this made the job of ‘winding’ harder and more dangerous, and there were many over-wound cages and accidents. So Omerod, supported by chief engineering foreman, James Rothwell from Hindley, devised and tested a Detaching Hook safety device, which disconnected the cage from the winding rope and prevented it from falling back down the shaft. The device was patented in 1867 and manufactured in a small forge adjacent to Gibfield Colliery. It became known in mining circles as a “butterfly” and was awarded a Gold Medal at the Manchester Mechanical & Industrial exhibition of 1875, followed by a Silver Medal at the Franco British Exhibition in 1908. The hooks saved many lives and never failed in service, which is why they are still manufactured in Atherton today. Omerod is buried in Atherton Cemetery.

On the left-hand side was Gibfield Colliery. In 1878, George Henry Evans, a surgeon from Leigh who was fascinated by new technologies, connected by wire Gibfield Colliery to the Bedford Basin of Fletchers' Colleries and spoke over the line, a distance of two and a half miles. The event created a stir in the neighbourhood.

*Cross Coal Pit Lane and continue along Bag Lane.*

*Stop on the left opposite the old Railway Hotel.*

15. **The Railway Hotel** was built in 1878 to refresh and accommodate travellers on the 8-mile Bolton & Leigh Railway (B&L), which ran north of Railway Street, originally via a level crossing. The pub replaced an earlier building which stood on the opposite side of the road, next to the station. When the single-track line opened in 1828, initially for goods, it was the first public railway to open in Lancashire, and connected the manufacturing town of Bolton to the Leeds and Liverpool Canal at Leigh. The line was later extended to Kenyon by the Kenyon & Leigh Junction Railway (K&LJR), and opened to passengers in 1831. Bag Lane Station opened in 1831, but was renamed Atherton Station after only ten years or so. With a growing demand for rail travel, the line became a double track in 1880 and the level crossing was replaced by a bridge, Bag Lane being diverted, via Railway Street, to cross beneath it. A subway was also provided to access the station and the furthest platform. Sidings connected the goods yard to Gibfield Colliery. The rise of the car and lorry led to a gradual decline, and Atherton Bag Lane station closed to passenger trains in 1954, though it was still used for holiday specials and excursions, e.g. from the mills. The station closed completely in 1963, the line was lifted in 1969 and Bag Lane was restored to its previous alignment shortly afterwards.

**IMAGE 4.11. Atherton (Bag Lane) Station:** <http://disused-stations.org.uk/a/atherton/index.shtml>

*Continue along Bag Lane, turning left at the roundabout into Gibfield Park Avenue.*

*Drive to the end of Gibfield Park Avenue and turn left at the roundabout into Gibfield Park Way.*

*Stop on the left near the top of Gibfield Park Way Cross to look at the sculpture on the roundabout opposite..*

16. The **‘Climbing New Heights’** seven metre tall steel sculpture was created by artist Clare Bigger, a member of the Royal Society of Sculptors. The artist from Africa, explains, “Birds rising on thermals are symbolic of Wigan Borough’s movement from its mining roots and toward a new future. The birds also highlight the conservation work in the area and the restoration of previously mined areas to more natural habitats. I chose terns which can be seen on both the Wigan and Leigh Flashes as an appropriate example for my design.” The sculpture was installed in 2011 and stands off-centre on the roundabout because it is standing on one of the former railway bridge supports.

**The Talbot pub** opposite, which opened in 2005, is built on the former Gadbury brick yard which took its name from Gadbury Fold Farm which stood behind it. The brick works were established by Fletcher Burrows and Co. Ltd. around 1914 and closed shortly after Gibfield Colliery in 1964. During a dig in 2003, archaeologists from Manchester University discovered that open cast mining had taken place on the site since at least the 14th-century, and the remains of a Roman road were discovered. Visit for refreshments & WC.

*Turn left onto Wigan Road.*

*Turn left into the other end of Coal Pit Lane, drive to the end and turn the vehicle round.*

*Look at the gable end of what is now Trumble’s Motor Engineers.*

17.This was originally **Gibfield Colliery Pit Head Baths**. The Coal Miners Act of 1911 ruled that coal owners must provide pit head baths if a ballot of the workforce showed that they were wanted. One shilling out of every 20 shillings that was paid for mining royalties went to the Miners’ Welfare Fund for the creation of pit head baths.Fletcher Burrows & Co. Ltd. did not wait for a vote but went to visit similar facilities in France and Belgium, and became the first UK coal mining company to provide purpose-built baths for its employees. Notice the stone tablet set into the wall with the initials FB & 1913. Inside there were shower cubicles and overhead pulleys and ropes on which the men hung their work clothing. These were pulled up to the ceiling, all the windows were closed, and the temperature raised to 100°F to dry the work clothes ready for the next day. The baths were not always a hit with workers: “One story goes that washing your back weakened it, and some workers liked to go home and be scrubbed by their wives as it probably would have led to some hokey pokey by the fire.” The plaque on the building was installed in 2010 but, unfortunately, the name of the firm is incorrect. It was unveiled by Jim Fletcher, then 97, a former manager of Gibfield and the last member of the much-respected Fletcher family to be active in coal mining. They were considered to be generous and humane employers and, as a result, many of their employees spent their whole working lives with them. Gibfield was known as the ‘Turkey Pit’ as, at Christmas, they gave all of their employees a large turkey, or a parcel of festive foods, and the undermanagers and other underground officials, were also allowed to select a suit from the local tailor at the company’s expense. Fletcher Burrows & Co. Ltd. continued to mine successfully in the area until 1927, when Robert Burrows proposed a merger of several local colliery companies, including the Atherton Collieries. Manchester Collieries was formed in 1929. In 1947, it became part of the National Coal Board's Western Division, No1 (Manchester) Area.

**IMAGE 4.12: Pit Head Baths, Gibfield Colliery, Atherton, no date** [https://archives.wigan.gov.uk/archive/photograph-collections/atherton/153259-pc20102029?](https://archives.wigan.gov.uk/archive/photograph-collections/atherton/153259-pc20102029)

*Drive to the end of Coal Pit Lane and turn right onto Wigan Road.*

*Turn left into Gadbury Fold.*

*Cross Gadfield Grove and continue to the end of the road.*

*Park up to look at the sculpture opposite.*

18. *‘***The Last Shift’** sculpture was designed and created by international public artist Andy DeComyn in 2009. He said: “It depicts two miners and a deputy, emerging from the shaft for the final time. Sorrowful but with their dignity intact, the last workers ascend in the cage to the pithead before closure.” The sculpture was included in the terms of the planning approval for the site and was commissioned by Morris Homes through an initiative by Wigan Council and in partnership with Taylor Wimpey.

*Drive back up Gadbury Fold and take the first exit at the roundabout onto Atherleigh Way (A579).*

*At the traffic lights, turn left onto Lovers Lane.*

*Pull into the gap between the houses on Lovers Lane, opposite St Michaels Avenue, or turn into St Michaels Avenue, turn the vehicle around and stop near the top of the avenue.*

*Look to your left along Lover’s Lane.*

19. Further along Lover’s Lane, beyond the bypass, where Howe Bridge Crematorium now stands, was the site of **Lover’s Lane Colliery.** The original colliery was only a shallow pit, but a second, sunk by John Fletcher and others around 1845, was the first of Atherton’s deep pits. It was known locally as ‘Old Endless Chain Pit’ and was connected to the Bolton and Leigh Railway at Fletcher’s Sidings. The mine was 300 yards deep to the Gibfield coal. Three shafts were sunk but, towards the end, only one downcast shaft appears to have been in use. This was used for winding men and materials, and also for ventilation, but was only ten feet wide. In 1872, 27 men and boys were killed when an explosion of firedamp (gas) occurred, four hundred yards from the pit eye in the Five Feet Mine. The blast was heard up to two miles away. A rescue party was quickly organised by Ralph Fletcher Jnr. but there was difficulty in reaching the victims, the youngest of which was only 12 years old. 14 men were also injured. The rescue party was led by the colliery’s consultant engineer, Herbert Fletcher, who had designed an ingenious ventilation system using long iron piping. This was criticised at the inquest by the Coroner who concluded that the gas had accumulated due to insufficient ventilation and been ignited by a shot. After Ralph Fletcher, Jnr. admitted that he had dismissed the underlooker about two years before for allowing men to work where there was gas, the Coroner recommended that firemen be appointed to control the use of gunpowder. The colliery closed in 1898.

The **Gardeners Pub,** near the top of Lovers Lane, opened as The Gardeners Arms around 1910. The bowling green behind it first appeared on Ordinance Survey maps in 1888. The garage opposite opened as **Howe Bridge Mines Rescue Station** in 1908. Britain's first mines rescue station opened in Yorkshire in 1902 making Howe Bridge the second, and the first on the Lancashire Coalfield. Before then, coal owners relied on their pit managers and volunteers to fight fires, rescue the injured and recover the dead. Rescue stations had been recommended from as early as 1886 but only became compulsory after the 1911 Coal Mines Act was passed. When the Lancashire and Cheshire Coal Owners Association (made up of 27 different colliery companies) formed in 1906, Fletcher Burrows proposed Lovers Lane as the site for the new Lancashire and Cheshire Coal Owners’ Rescue Station. There is a blank patch on the wall between the two houses where the sign for the rescue used to be, and the right-hand section, including the garage opening, was originally single storey. The station was designed primarily for training rescue teams rather than undertaking actual rescue work, but the garage housed two emergency rescue vans containing vital equipment such as regenerators and oxygen cylinders. The large training hall at the rear had a short tramway of wagons running round three sides of the building in an ‘experimental gallery’, which represented a section of underground workings. The wood and glass gallery was airtight so that it could be pumped full of smoke and sulphurated hydrogen in such a way that volunteer colliery workers could be trained to use apparatus in the suffocating atmosphere. The first equipment was the Siebe German Proto breathing apparatus. It provided the men with pure air for six or eight hours, during which, under ordinary conditions, they could travel 10 miles, but it weighed 28lbs and had to be strapped on the back, resting on the hip. A smaller modified version enabled the men to travel two hours through particularly dangerous atmospheres. The first superintendent, Sgt Major Hill, who lived on the premises with his family, claimed that ‘Two hours with the bag is as beneficial as a day at the seaside’! Volunteers received certificates for proficiency for one year’s work in a rescue team. It was hoped that every colliery would eventually train up a team and provide emergency assistance wherever it was needed in the Lancashire Coalfield. Teams from the Howe Bridge station attended the disasters at the Maypole Colliery in Abram in 1908 and the Pretoria Pit Disaster in 1910. The station closed in 1934 when Boothstown Mines Rescue Station became the central rescue station for Lancashire.

**IMAGE 4.13: Inside the Howe Bridge Mines Rescue 1932** [https://archives.wigan.gov.uk/archive/photograph-collections/atherton/153389-pc20103163?](https://archives.wigan.gov.uk/archive/photograph-collections/atherton/153389-pc20103163)

*Turn left onto Lover’s Lane then turn left at the traffic lights onto Leigh Road.*

*Turn right into Hamilton Street at the War Memorial.*

*Drive to the end of Hamilton Street and turn right at the traffic lights onto Tyldesley Road*

*Follow it as it reaches Tyldesley and becomes Shuttle Street.*

*Follow it to the right as it becomes Common Lane.*

*Follow it to the left as it becomes Manchester Road.*

*Turn right at the traffic lights into Hough Lane.*

*Drive down Hough Lane, crossing the Guided Busway, and follow as it becomes Hen Fold Lane then Church Road until you reach the roundabout.*

*Take the first exit onto Manchester Road then take the third turning on your right onto Higher Green Lane.*

*Continue to the traffic lights on the East Lancs Road.*

*Cross over the East Lancs Road to continue on Higher Green Lane, then turn left to return to the Lancashire Mining Museum.*