

BEDFORD to BROMHAM Cyclist's Geotrail

Imagine when there were no smartphones, MP3 players, games consoles, and televisions – *just how did people fill their leisure time?*

When portable recorded music needed a wind-up gramophone, the size of a sofa cushion and weighing the same as a supermarket bag of potatoes - it used a steel needle to 'read' a black 'plastic' 30cm disk and played the sound through a metal trumpet.



When taking a picture meant loading a cardboard 'box' camera with film, then pressing a real button and winding onto the next picture. After just eight pictures you opened the camera, removed the spool of paper-backed film and took it to the chemist to be processed in smelly chemicals in the dark; next day you collected your eight (6 x 8 cms) black-and-white photos and pasted them into an album.



Imagine when coal-gas fuelled most streetlights and house lights burned it or lamp oil (paraffin).

When most men publicly smoked 10-20 cigarettes a day - gentle women only smoked in private; it all smelled a bit like a newly tarred road.

When most roads were cart tracks, their gravel and dirt surfaces potholed and often flooded. Horse-drawn carts were all that was usually seen on the roads; and the strong smell in summer, and all the flies, literally due to the movements of thousands of horses travelling over town and country roads.

When bicycles were single-speed heavy steel-tubed, almost twice the weight of modern aluminium hybrid bicycles, novelties. Rarely a 'phutt-phutting' motor car made its slow way from one big house to another, or a town.

WHEN it took up to two hours to get, by steam-train, from Bedford to London; train carriages often had no heating and dim lighting; and their sprung bench seats were hard and usually stuffed with horsehair.

Imagine when collecting butterflies, flowers, or rocks and fossils were really big hobbies; lots of people joined natural history societies and went on field trips to look at geology and wildlife.

Welcome to Edwardian Bedfordshire and a geology excursion from the mid-1900s!!!

Originally it was available to cyclists, but it appears that all the excursionists rode in horse-drawn carriages, with some walking, to get around the route on 27th May 1905.

The route, led by the eminent geologist H.B. Woodward, took them on from Bedford Railway Station, off the 11.15 a.m. train, towards Bromham and is mostly the one you can follow on the map (*see overleaf*).

1. Bedford (Midland) Station:- Around the corner from the station, by a min-roundabout, is a painted advertisement for a monumental (stone) mason. However, the excursionists went straight to...



2. Franklin's Pit:- to which *"They were driven [from the station] first of all through the town, and about a mile northwards to Mr. Charles Franklin's pits by the waterworks."* In the pit they saw some shallow marine Jurassic rocks:

Kellaways Beds (28 ft/c.9m)

Cornbrash (thin band of)

Great Oolite Clay (9 ft/c.3m)

Great Oolite Limestone (12 ft/c.3.75m)

The red bricks the pit produced were used to build in about 1899 'Franklin's Cottages', on Clapham Road; they originally housed some of its, probably managerial, workers. They stand above the site of the former brickworks, which opened in about 1869 and had closed by about 1940. The track into the former brickworks with its remaining face, now a private sports facility which cannot and must not be visited for safety reasons, lies to the right of the last cottage. Anyway, it was next on to...



3. Oakley (Mr Jarvis's) Gravel Pit:- when *"After driving through the village of Clapham the party stopped at a gravel pit on the road to Oakley, a short distance to the east of the Midland Railway. Here a small anticline in the [Jurassic] Great Oolite Limestone, and overlying Great Oolite Clay, was exposed ... The gravel was largely ...of pebbles of Oolitic limestone, with also quartz, quartzite, jasper and flint."*

Its site, closed by the mid-1950s by which time it extended to both



sides of the old A6, now lies immediately north of the new A6 bypass and Oakley Road junction; like most of the Bedford area pits, it has been filled in and restored as farmland. Next it was on to...

4. Oakley Bridge:- when *"The party now proceeded to Oakley Bridge [and past St. Mary's church, with its Saxon tower], where Mr R.*

Hill drew attention to a flood-mark 6ft. [c.2m] above the floor of the bridge; date, November,



1823. After crossing the Ouse the party were driven through Bromham, where they dismissed the vehicles [to walk to a couple of sites]." – *but didn't visit the church, originally built between the 13th and 15th centuries, in Bromham Park. Now, it was on to...*

5. Bromham Park road cutting:- where *"In the road-cutting south-west of Bromham Park the Great Oolite Limestone was seen to dip northwards at an angle of 5 or 6 degrees...."* Modern road



widening has obliterated the cutting, but loose blocks of the limestone can still be seen; the busy minor road makes it safer to continue on to The Swan! And so, on to the...

6. Swan Inn, Bromham:- *"The Swan Inn at Bridge End, Bromham, was next visited [for light refreshments]..."* After refreshments it was then that the...



7. Limestone Quarry, Stagsden Road:- *"...the party were conducted to the limestone-quarry about half a mile distant on the road to Stagsden. Here a succession similar to that seen in Mr. Franklin's pit...was opened up. Ostrea Sowerbyi [a large fossil oyster] was abundant in the Great Oolite, which comprised nearly 12 ft [c.3.75m], of shelly blue-hearted limestones ... some of them minutely current-bedded."*



The site of the quarry, opposite the Brookside Caravan Park, has been

filled in returned to farmland. Then it was to where...

8. Bromham Bridge:- *"The members [crossed] the old bridge at Bromham, where attention was called to the meandering of the river..."* but not the Medieval bridge! And, then it was on to...



9. Deep Spinney:- *“Thence the party walked on [some distance!] to the large gravel-pit in the Deep Spinney at Biddenham, on the high road to Bedford. Here about 18 ft. [c.5.5m] of gravel was exposed...”* and parts of a fossil elephant's tusk were shown to the excursionists by a workman.



The pit, off the A428, was developed in the 2000s as a housing estate. The entrance (usually locked!) to its only preserved face is just off Malcote Close.

Near here (although major Palaeolithic finds were made at Deep Spinney in 1867) James Wyatt (1816-1878) discovered, in 1861, the first ever Palaeolithic flint implements found in the UK; about these implements the great geologist Charles Lyell (1797-1873) wrote: *“I am laid up for a day or two after an excursion to Bedford with Prestwich and Evans, to see a section where a Mr. Wyatt ...has just found two fine hatchets ... They occurred in working a gravel pit at Beddingham [Biddenham].”*

The exact gravel-pit - now a wooded hollow (see right) surrounded by a new housing and a basketball court - in which Wyatt found the implements is, on the other side of the A428.

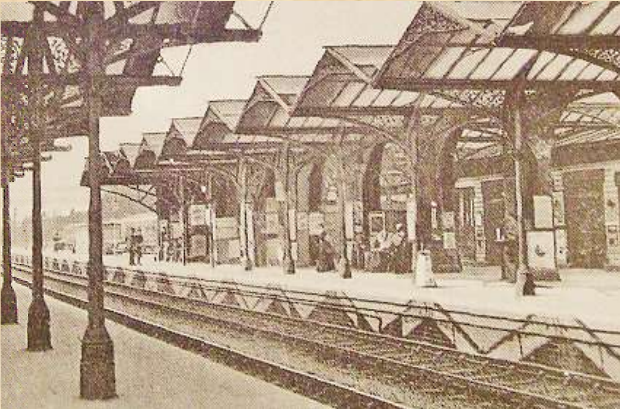


Wyatt also obtained many land and freshwater snail shells - together with the fossil bones and teeth of elephants, mammoths, rhinoceroses, hippopotami, horses and aurochs (large ancient cattle). The excursion report noted that: *“... implements are now obtained at Biddenham Pit, but they are more often found at Kempstone [Kempston] , on the southern side of the river, and those purchased from the workmen may have come from one or other locality.”* Anyway, it was...

10. Back to Bedford:- and *“The party were now conducted through the picturesque village of Biddenham to Bedford.”* [but they didn't visit the church, originally built between the 11th and 16th centuries of local Jurassic limestone, which is well worth a visit!]

After they had finished looking at the geology sites they returned to Bedford and visited the Museum of the Bedford Modern School; this had a good general collection of fossils and many examples of rocks and fossils from the local Jurassic rocks, together with fossil mammal bones and teeth from the local river gravels. They then looked at the collection of local Stone Age flint implements in the collection of the Bedford Literary & Philosophical Society.

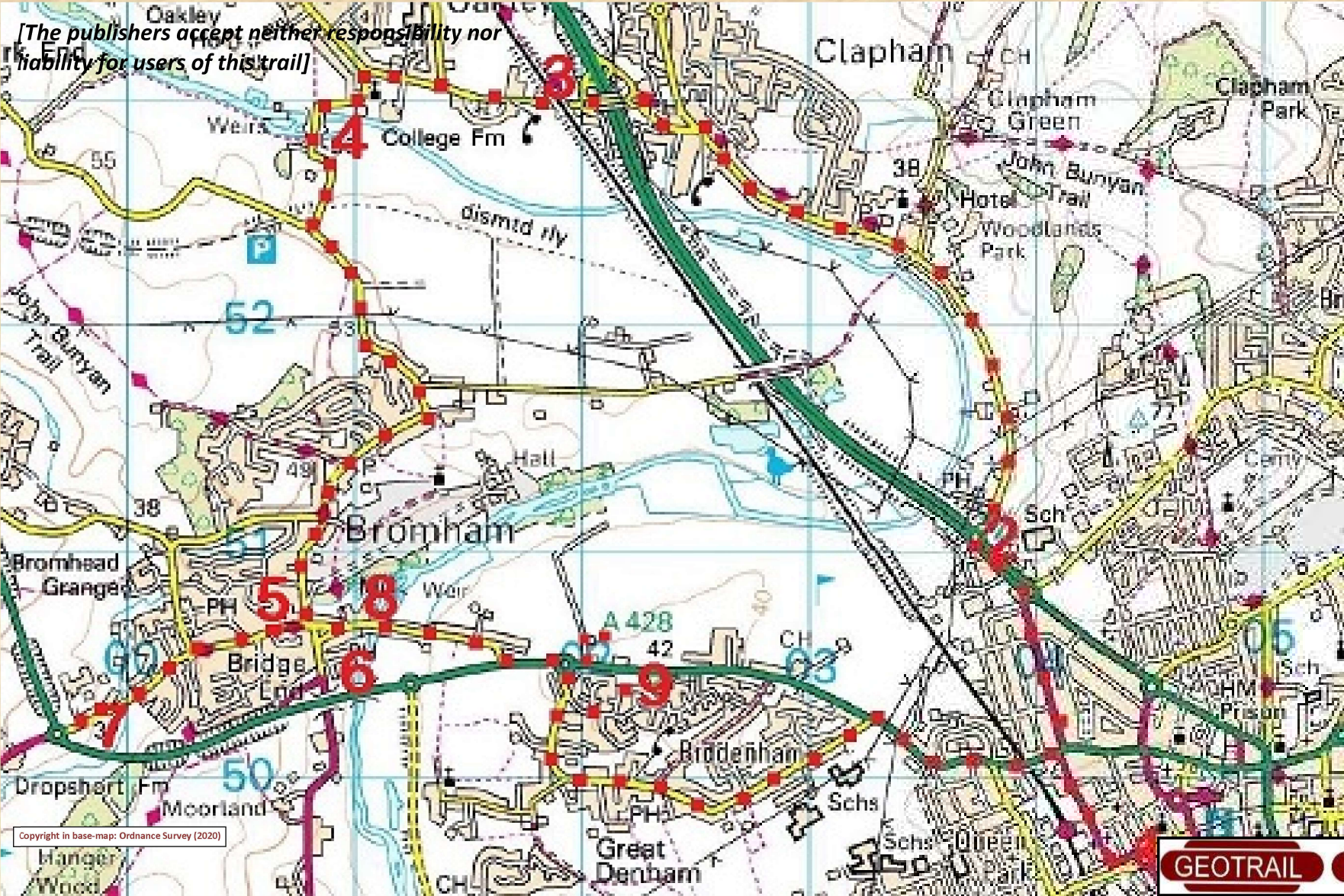
The day was completed with a meat tea which cost them 1 shilling and 3 pence (6p and at today's process about £5-50) at 6.30 p.m. in the Harpur Restaurant, Harpur Street. Later, several members visited the Bunyan Meeting House (as you can) before the whole party walked to the station; returning to London, by the 7.36 p.m.



train, from what was then called the Bedford Midland Station; then it looked exactly as seen in the mid-1900 picture postcard (see left), So, originally it was a day's trip, including the train journeys, of some 12 hours.

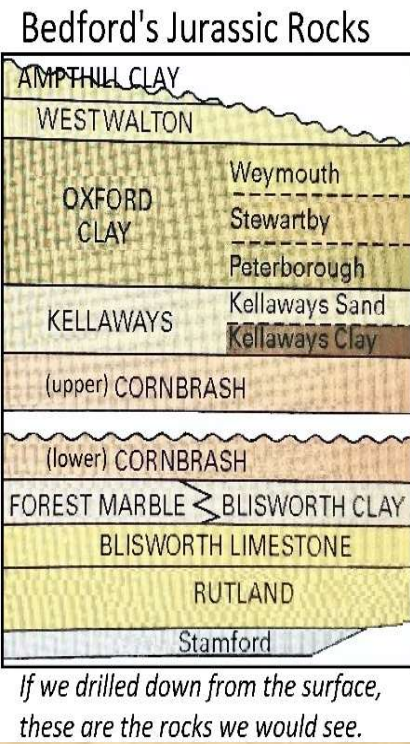
This cyclist's geotrail, mainly presented in the words of the excursion report, published in the 1905 *Proceedings of the Geologists' Association*, has been updated for changes and with some additional notes.


The original tour by horse-drawn carriages, of some 6 miles [9.5 km] cost the original excursionists just 2 shillings (10 pence, which at today's prices would cost around £8-80). It was suggested that cyclists could follow the same route as the carriages, which is what you've done today. The carriage ride, to the Oakley and




Bromham areas, let the excursionists visit various quarries, pits, road cuttings, bridges and buildings – some of which you've seen today. You too, like the original excursionists of 1905, were welcome to have 'light refreshments' at the Swan Inn in Bromham!

There just remains the matter of the geology seen, then and now, on the excursion; the solid rocks are mainly clays and limestones - best summarised in the imaginary rock section (see left) we'd see if we cut down through them in and around Bedford.





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