

FROM NORWAY TO NARROWAYS: A SHORT HISTORY OF NARROWAYS HILL IN ST WERBURGHS, BRISTOL

By Harry McPhillimy

Early History

Narrowways Hill is the southernmost outlier of the Purbeck Ridge in N.E. Bristol. It is a hundred foot high hill composed of red Keuper Marl – a sticky red limey mudstone. Once the entire region was covered by oakwoods. Neolithic farmers probably began the woodland clearances, opening up the first fields. Roman finds were made at nearby Mina Road; the Roman road, the Via Julia from Sea Mills to Bath probably crossed the River Frome at Baptist Mills. There are ancient Strip Lynchetts (medieval terracing) on the slope above Boiling Wells valley, running obliquely up and down the valley. There was once a large medieval mound nearby.

The area we now know as St Werburghs was formerly part of an estate called Asselega, later Ashley. The Name comes from the old English ‘aesc’ an Ash tree, and ‘leah’ means a wood, woodland or clearing. This suggests that by medieval times, the oakwoods had substantially gone, to be replaced by the faster seeding Ash trees, which are well adapted to the basic soils of the area and predominate to this day. A charter of 1170 records that Earl William of Gloucester gave his lands at Ashley to the monks of St James Benedictine Priory whose church still stands in the Haymarket. In 1184 at the Assize of the Forest, Henry II decreed that no penalties should be imposed on the monks for asserts, i.e. the grubbing up of trees and bushes for agriculture at Ashley.

Henry VIII confiscated St James Priory estates in 1544 and granted them to Henry Brayne, a London tailor and church plunder-broker for £667.7.6 and a yearly reserved rent of £3.10.9. From Henry Brayne it passed first to his childless son Robert, then to daughters Eme and Ann, who married Sir Charles Somerset and George Winter respectively. In 1579 they carved up the estate between them which at that time was mainly countryside, both enclosed and open, with two mills, some farm buildings and two substantial houses, Ashley Manor and Lower Ashley House (both since demolished).

Since the 13th Century, the neighbouring high ground towards Purdown, the Heath House Estate, belonged to one of the smaller religious houses of Bristol, the Hospital of St Bartholomew, whose western edge was the Boiling Well. By 1561 the St Bartholomews Hospital was dissolved and the estate passed to the Thorne family. The Walter family then brought it in 1572 for £100.

In 1626 Thomas Walter expanded the Heath House Estate to take in part of the former St James Priory lands. A deed refers to “ *other land including...the tythes, profitts and fruits of a certain hill and land called Northeway*”. This seems likely to be what became known later as Netherways and later still Narroways Hill. (Northeway presumably described a northward leading path. Netherways suggested a far-off place and Narroways perhaps referred to the width of the path or to the railways.) A further part of Northeway field was purchased in 1668 for £2 and a deed of 1691 referred to “*a certain hill and lane called Norway*” – possibly the same hill.

In 1767 the enlarged estate passed into the hands of the Smyth family of Ashton Court. Jane Smyth wrote in 1813 to a neighbouring land owner “ *I beg leave to inform you a person of the name of Thomas Woolford, a butcher in Bristol, has enclosed a piece of waste ground in the lane leading from Baptist Mills to the Glass Mill*” (i.e. Mina Road) “*which has much contracted a driving way from a field of mine called Netherways hill inasmuch as to prevent a loaded wagon with corn or hay to be taken through.*” Not wishing to confront an important local landowner, the butcher backed down. Much of Narrowways Hill was still in the possession of Jane Smyth’s heir, Sir John Henry Greville Smyth, when the railway companies formed in mid-19th century and started to plan their routes through there. Other local landowners of this time were J & H Nash, John Clerk, John Hemmings and William Player.

The arrival of the railways

The major change to the local landscape was the construction of the railways in the late 19th century. The carving of deep cuttings and building of substantial embankments must have left the ground looking raw and obtrusive for years after, much as with the modern construction of trunk roads. The engineer Charles Richardson described how he set about building the cuttings and embankments of the South Wales railway. The line was cut deeply through the new red marl and rock beds of Narrowways, then crossed Boiling Wells Valley upon a high embankment. With Brunel’s approval Richardson took cautious measures to prevent landslips on the embankment- he took the red marl extracted from the Narrowways Hill and sunk it in two ten foot deep trenches under each side of the embankment for foundations before building it up further. This line to South Wales was opened on the 8th of September 1863, built originally on a single broad gauge for Great Western Railways. Later, extra passing loops were provided at Narrowways.

An 1870 bill approved the extension of the Port and Pier Railway from Sea Mills to the South Wales line at Narrowways-two companies were involved- The Great Western and The Midland Company. The line came in through a tunnel built below Montpelier, over a large embankment crossing the then marshy Ashley Vale. This embankment early on suffered serious landslips which caused the railway arch at Mina Road to need major repair. The Great Western line was curved to join the South Wales line at Narrowways while the Midland line crossed an iron bridge over the South Wales line and opened a further cutting through Narrowways on its way to Fishponds. In 1873 the South Wales line was converted to narrow gauge and doubled to receive the new line which opened for passengers on 1st October 1874.

Narrowways Hill was used for various working class leisure pursuits in the 19th Century – people used to gravitate to the hill for prize-fighting and Rev. Rawnsley of St. Agnes organised football matches up there. Inner city Bristol was becoming increasingly overcrowded and social reformers were pressing for open spaces to be provided to improve the health & morals of the poor. Land on Narrowways Hill belonging to Sir J.H.Greville Smyth was considered by the public parks committee of Bristol city corporation in the 1870’s but despite the accessibility and prospect of the site it was rejected.

So by the end of the last century, Narrowways Junction was the meeting place of three railways lines crossing through deep cuttings in the rolling countryside of hedged fields stretching North and East of there. Arthur Salmon described how “*the sides of*

the cutting and of the embankment, once a yellowish earth-colour, have for many years been thick with grass and boys, in spite of all prohibitions, love to scramble around them. Sometimes in summer the grass is fired” (as still happens) “and the green crumbles away before a low red flame... there are great black patches.... the grass grows better for it in the end.” The usual cause was burning cinders from the stream trains. Charlie Portingale remembered how as a young lad between the wars, he and other children used to place 1/2d on the rail track at a point where trains slowed down so they ran over the coins flattening them as big as 1d, hence fitting the gas meter.

The Church Path alongside the track up to Ashley Hill still has some old gas lamps, one still working. A white wicker gate used to restrict access along this path every Good Friday when a way-leave fee was levied.

Narrowways was the scene of a serious crime on the 27th January 1913. Ted Palmer murdered his fiancé Ada James on the footbridge over the Severn Beach line. They had gone for a lovers walk but a row broke out and Ada threatened ‘to go on the town’ and threw off her engagement ring. Palmer became violently jealous and slit her throat. She managed to stumble over the stile that was once there and down the hill to Mina Road by the church. Here she was found, still alive and she just managed to scribble Palmer’s name on a scrap of paper and speak her last words, ‘my fiancé did it’. Palmer was caught and executed two months later. The lane by the church was known for some time as ‘cut-throat lane’.

Before WWI, the only allotments in the St Werburghs area were behind what is now the site of the Ashley Vale self-build housing project. Where there is now scrubland, there was also an orchard including apple and plum trees. At this time, the other slopes of Ashley Vale were picturesque, grassy, wooded estates until the land was turned over to growing vegetables on allotments for a country at war. There was even an allotment with strawberries on top of Narrowways Hill. The rural nature of the area



Narrowways hill in the 1950s

was being lost. On the site of the old Watercress beds a stoneworks and firelighter-making factory were set up, to be followed by the SGB scaffolding yard. Garages were built in the early 20’s where a small wood and lake once were. The Sweet Brothers bottle-washing plant, then Tower scaffolding were constructed on what became the city farm new barn site (burnt down in 1992). The field by the church became the Wren family’s allotment.

Around 1920 there was a terrible accident on the South Wales railway line when half a dozen railway workers stepped out of the way of one train and into the path of an express. Only one man survived. There have been other fatal accidents on the railway lines nearby. During WWII the railways had an essential role in the country's transport system. Some remember the carriages full of Dunkirk survivors returning back to Bristol in 1941. Despite Narrowways Junction being an obvious strategic target for German bombers, many people chose to shelter in Mina Road tunnel each night, apparently feeling safe there.

Since the War

Just after the war, in 1948, the railways were nationalised and British Railways Western Region took over. The ash on which the Midland line had lain was replaced with ballast. With competition from road transport, the railways started their gradual decline. In 1963, Dr Beeching proposed that all passenger services on the Avonmouth line should be withdrawn. Opposition and a reassessment by the British Railways Board preserved the Avonmouth line, but the Sunday service was cut by April 1965.

The Midland line to Fishponds closed entirely by January 1970. Material from the line between Ashley Hill and Narrowways was reused at Filton in 1971, the iron bridge over the South Wales line was removed and the deep cutting later filled in by dumping. By the late 60's, the last scheduled steam trains had also gone (although occasional 'specials' still pass through). A subsidy from the Avon County Council was by now necessary to keep the Avonmouth service going.

In the 1970's, Narrowways was infrequently visited although one local resident kept a small herd of goats up there.

Modern Times

Bristol City Council produced a policy report for the Lower Ashley Vale area in February 1980. It recognised the value of the open space at St. Werburghs (although it described the railway cutting and gas tower as unsightly features that needed screen planting) and they recommended more access to Narrowways Hill by the footpath network.

By now the city farm at St Werburghs was being built, reclaiming derelict land in the area. By the mid-80's British Rail, under increasing commercial pressure, attempted to get planning permission to build a couple of three storey blocks on the field by the church, once the Wren family's prize allotment, but now overgrown. Local opposition and the council's area plan ensured this proposition was rejected but it created an awareness of the need to protect the open space in the area. The city farm negotiated with British Rail to rent the 'church site' and the whole of Narrowways Hill. British City's Parks Department offered to construct the necessary fencing around the site- originally 720 metres of 3 bar post and rail fencing but B.R. insisted upon 6ft chainlink and so it was. This high fence on the skyline produced some local resentment- the fence was vandalised and was for some time a source of controversy. It was at this time that the track to Narrowways from near the second tunnel was built, to bring the fencing materials onto the hill.

For a while the farm grazed its donkeys and sheep in the field above the church and took the goats up to Narrowways to browse the brambles but a savage attack by dogs on

the sheep meant the farm animals had to be kept safely within sight. A further threat to Narrowways as open space came from the Advanced Transport for Avon Metro scheme, in December 1989. They announced that they wished to compulsorily purchase 5 acres of the hill as their storage depot for heavy equipment and lorry access. A local coalition formed to resist this and wildlife surveys by Avon Wildlife Trust revealed the astonishingly rich flora that existed. By February 1990, resistance from St Werburghs and elsewhere stalled the progress of the half-baked A.T.A. scheme and it collapsed.

Meanwhile, the Countryside Commission and the City Council had been doing a lot of improvement work to the network of footpaths, surfacing them, signposting and putting up information signs designed by the former local arts group, Vizability. The Parks Department neighbourhood renewal assessment stated the need to protect wildlife sites, wildlife corridors and protected species and habitats and Narrowways was denoted as a site of nature Conservation Interest. The vulnerability of urban wildlife sites was shown when developers used bulldozers to destroy part of nearby Royate Hill but public protest and eventual nature reserve status helped to inspire St Werburghs people to form Narrowways Action Group in 1996 to afford similar protection to Narrowways.

In 1997 Rail Track tried to sell Narrowways in an open auction but Narrowways Action Group helped to get people organised. Thousands of local people signed petitions and 800 demonstrated on the hill on 9th February 1997. People raised funds and with the help of Bristol City Council the land was saved. It became a Millennium Green in March 2000, safe for the next 1,000 years. Some site improvements have been made and way marker signs, interpretation boards and a sculpture are being installed but Narrowways Hill will remain a little fragment of wild space in the city, cherished by local people.

References

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- ❖ Uptonway, Lewis John, *Account of the Heath House Estate, Stapleton, Gloucestershire* (Bristol & Glos, Archaeological Society, 1912)
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- ❖ Charlie Portingale (oral history interview)

And thanks to local residents who shared their knowledge.

Place names referred to:

- ❖ **Northway, Norway, Netherways, Great Northway Field** – probably all refer to Narrowways Hill.
- ❖ **Baptist Mills** – Southern end of St Werburghs, divided by M32
- ❖ **Mina Road** - The lane from Baptist Mill to Glass Mill
- ❖ **Boiling Wells** – the valley and former lake North East of Narrowways Hill
- ❖ **Heath House Estate** – area of land south of Purdown near Stapleton

- ❖ **Asselega, Ashley** – area formerly called Ashley Vale, now St Werburghs
- ❖ **Glass Mill** – former watermill next to where Mill Cottage remains at the end of Mina Road.