

Carlisle edgelands walk

“Anyone who has spent a childhood mooching around the fringes of English towns and cities, where urban and rural negotiate and renegotiate their borders might have come up with the word [edgeland]. If you know those places where overspill housing estates break into scrubland, wasteland; if you know these underdeveloped, unwatched territories, you know that they have ‘edge’”

“At their most unruly and chaotic, edgelands make a great deal of our official wilderness seem like the enshrined, ecologically arrested, controlled garden space it really is. Children and teenagers, as well as lawbreakers, have seemed to feel especially at home in them, the former because they have yet to establish a sense of taste and boundaries, and have instinctively treated their spaces as a vast playground; the latter because nobody is looking.”

Paul Farley & Michael Symmons Roberts

Edgelands: journeys into England's true wilderness (Jonathan Cape, 2011)

Our edgelands walk is upstream, alongside the River Eden, from the Carlisle suburb of Belle Vue into the city centre by way of Willowholme and Caldewgate. Until the 1950s and 60s much of the land was covered with railway tracks and sidings, locomotive sheds, signal boxes and warehouses. The North British Railway's Waverley line to Edinburgh, via Hawick and the Scottish Border towns, crossed the river over a stone bridge which still stands, sadly blocked to pedestrians. The line opened in 1862 and it closed – to much protest – in 1969.

These railways were built over the site of Carlisle's canal basin and even along the route of the canal, which opened in 1823. It was nearly 12 miles long and it connected Port Carlisle, on the Solway estuary, with Carlisle. Because the rise of canal level from the sea to the city was 70ft there were 9 locks. There were no bridges so coastal boats could sail into Carlisle Basin where there was a large brick warehouse and a timber yard. When the railways arrived the canal was filled in, in 1854, and a railway was laid along the same route. The idea was that Silloth, where the railway ran, could develop as a ferry port for Belfast and Dublin. The line opened in 1856. Silloth grew quickly as a small resort and port but the expected traffic never came. The line closed in 1964. Our walk crosses remains of the former canal and railways. Much of the cleared former canal basin, and railway yards, is now occupied by the Port Road Industrial Estate.

You need water to fill a canal. In Carlisle the canal was supplied by leats which flowed down from the River Caldew. You can still trace the channel of the old Mill Race, and its associated sluices and other works. The leat was cut for the Canal Company in 1824-25. A pump lifted more than a million gallons of water into the canal every day. But these works could lead to flooding, as the name 'Willowholme' [flat land beside a river] suggests. Carlisle sewage works and the Stagecoach bus depot were flooded in the Great Flood of 2005. The bus depot, incidentally, was built on the site of Barwise Nook, Carlisle's first council houses.

One of Carlisle's major industries is the McVitie's biscuit factory. It started in 1834 as Carr's of Carlisle. Jonathan Carr (1806-84), a Quaker miller, opened a biscuit bakery close to his flour mills which were next to the canal basin; that's why the biscuit works are where they are. Carr's breakthrough was to mechanise biscuit-making using presses. This increased production. With the railways and secure packaging from the Metal Box Company, Carr's could market biscuits across Britain and overseas. The bakery ovens are busy all the time; you can smell the spicy scent of baking if you walk along a small side lane down to the holme.

Before all this industry, the Romans built Hadrian's Wall along the south bank of the Eden. We cross and follow parts of Hadrian's Wall long distance way in our walk. ATB 2014