

Hesketh with Beconsall Heritage Trail



Hesketh Bank Boatyard

- Moderate
- Village, river bank and public footpath
- Distance 4 miles



Enjoy a varied and interesting 4 mile walk within the village and surrounding countryside providing abundant historical interest in a pleasant rural setting. The trail is largely flat and easily accessible, although the river section can be muddy in winter when stout footwear should be worn. Two short sections of the trail require access via steps, but in each case an alternative has been provided. We hope you will enjoy learning about the village and its history as you follow the trail.

The trail begins at Booths Supermarket on Station Road. There is a bus stop just outside (Preston – Southport No. 2 Service). The Booths Store also has cycle parking facilities within the car park as well as a café and toilets.

Start the trail by leaving Booths car park and crossing over to the opposite side of Station Road via the nearby pedestrian crossing and then turn right to head almost due north. Until the coming of the railway there weren't any shops here and the local settlement was called Beconsall. The use of the name Hesketh Bank only came into use for this locality with the coming of the railway. Prior to the coming of the railway the road is believed to have been known locally as Broadway and had been a part of a long-standing north-south route along the low boulder clay ridge through the marshlands to a crossing of the Ribble sands and into the Fylde. Head past the shops and over the former railway bridge.

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HESKETH BANK RAILWAY STATION

This station was probably the busiest intermediate station on the line from Southport to Preston which was opened to here from Hesketh Park in Southport in 1878. From the crest of this former bridge steps led down to the two platforms of the station. As you walk down from the crest of the bridge you pass some new steps with ramped access and then a children's play park. This is where there was another access to the station, with a roadway into the once very busy goods yard.

What is now a street called Cherry Vale was once the site of Hesketh Bank Railway Station.

Completed through to Preston in 1882, the West Lancashire Railway Line went eastwards across the River Douglas initially via a swing bridge to allow for the passage below of tall masted ships, although it later converted to a fixed bridge when the use of sail powered ships declined.

The line was well-used and was worked by steam trains with fully staffed stations and signal boxes until it sadly fell victim to the "Beeching axe" and was closed in 1964. Strong opposition to closure came from Hesketh Bank but on 6th September the last trains called. 300 people gathered to see the last train and these included the Hesketh Bank Silver Band and the local Vicar, who got on the train to Preston. Within a very short period the tracks were torn up and the bridge over the Douglas demolished!

This was surely a short sighted measure, as many disused railway lines now provide wonderful green routes for walkers and cyclists to enjoy and there have been many calls for the provision of a replacement bridge across the Douglas. Indeed a bridge design was recently produced in response to a competition organised by Lancashire County Council. After the children's play park you will reach the entrance to a new housing development called Beconsall Gardens.

THE BECONSALL HOTEL

Beconsall Gardens is built on the site of the former Beconsall Hotel. The fan stone, which was above its front door when it was a three storey building and had been preserved by a local resident, is now installed at the entrance to Beconsall Gardens. The initials are TGFH – Thomas George Fermor Hesketh who built it. The Sheave of Corn is from the Hesketh coat of arms and the Griffin from the Fermor coat of arms.

Thomas George was one of the main promoters of the West Lancashire Railway Line and he owned much of the land on the route. The line took a strange southerly diversion between Hundred End and Hoole making it pass immediately adjacent to the Beconsall Hotel which Thomas George had built a few years earlier as his hunting lodge, effectively giving him his own station. In fact the inaugural journey of the line from Hesketh Park in Southport to Hesketh Bank concluded with refreshments at "The Becc" as it became popularly known.

In its heyday the Beconsall Hotel was one of the finest and best known hostels between Preston and Southport. With almost seven acres of grounds it was once seen as having the potential to become one of Lancashire's leading sporting centres and towards the end of the nineteenth century it was used as a special training ground by Bolton Wanderers FC.

In December 1931 the hotel suffered a disastrous fire resulting in extensive damage to the top floor of what was originally a three storey building (see photo). It was reconstructed as a fine two storey building, which remained almost unchanged until its demolition in 2012.

Continue in a northerly direction along Station Road for approximately 200 yards until you reach the crossroads at the junction of Newarth Lane and Beconsall Lane. At the corner of Newarth Lane once stood another, small public house, known as The Bay Horse. Little else is currently known about this particular hostelry, save that it no longer exists. Lamentably, this theme will be repeated as your journey unfolds. The name Newarth is a corruption of the former name Newearth Lane which implies a lane leading out onto the then recently reclaimed moss land.

Taking care for any traffic, cross Station Road and proceed along the left hand side of Beconsall Lane. After about a quarter of a mile the road begins to slope downhill revealing extensive views of the East Lancashire fells. As you survey the panorama ahead you will notice a white painted farmhouse further downhill on your left.

BECONSALL HALL

The farmhouse lies just off a private road on the site of the former Beconsall Hall from which it takes its name. Beconsall is said to derive from "Beacon's Hill." This 'hill' is on the west bank of the River Douglas, which further north runs into the River Ribble. It is an artificial mound made in ancient times to defend the river crossing. Although a quiet spot today, this area was once a busy thoroughfare for travellers by ferry over the river Douglas going to Hoole, Longton and Preston.

The Beconsalls were probably the earliest family to occupy the hall with records going back as far as the thirteenth century. Little is known of the original hall other than that its ownership was the subject of a family dispute which was settled by trial at Chorley in 1541. The Hall passed by marriage to the Molyneux family of Sefton and a stone, now lying at end of an outbuilding, records "John and Lucy Molyneux built this house Anno 1667"

Looking downhill from Beconsall Hall you will see the artificial mound on which now stands Beconsall Old Church. This was formerly the site of a smaller chapel of ease which was built to serve Beconsall Hall.

Continue a short way down Beconsall Lane until you reach The Ferry House on your right.

FERRY HOUSE

This attractive old house dates back to the 17th century and, as its name suggests, was the departure point from which travellers were taken by boat across the River Douglas to Hoole and Longton.

One frequent traveller was the Rector of Croston Church, who, before Beconsall Church became a benefice in its own right, used to make regular journeys to lead the services and used the Ferry House to change into his vestments.

According to local anecdote, the last owner of the ferry was a formidable lady who carried a stick to ensure she received proper payment for taking people over the River. In the days when the river was a busy avenue for shipping trade the house immediately behind Ferry House (Douglas Bank Farm) was occupied by a Customs Officer.

BECONSALL OLD CHURCH

From the Ferry House the Old Church is clearly visible in its picturesque setting amidst the gravestones and trees of its peaceful graveyard.

The present church was rebuilt and enlarged in 1765 on the site of an earlier chapel dating from the 16th century which was used as a domestic chapel of ease by the Beconsalls of Beconsall Hall.

Although no longer used as a regular place of worship since the building of the new church in 1926 (All Saints CE on Station Road), the old church has been restored and is now owned by the Historic Churches Trust and managed by a local voluntary group. It now holds a considerable body of historical information and exhibits which can be viewed on its open days.

The graveyard is well worth a browse. Close to the church, on the right as you face its entrance, is the gravestone of James Blundell, a guide who helped travellers across the river and marshes, but who, in 1894, fell victim to the dangers of this trade. His epitaph is still legible with a little effort and is wonderfully philosophical about the nature of his demise.

An annual payment of £2.16s.5d has been paid by the Duchy of Lancaster since 1535 for prayers to be said in Hesketh-with-Beconsall Chapel for mariners on the River Ribble. This payment is still made to the church today. Sadly for the church it was not inflation-proofed!

A number of the headstones towards the front of the church are clearly disfigured. These were damaged by the shrapnel from one of several bombs which were apparently dumped by a German war plane on its return from a bombing raid over Liverpool. One piece of shrapnel even made its way into the Ferry House and is still embedded in the mantel piece above the fireplace!

Take the footpath which runs along the inside perimeter of the graveyard with the hedgerow to your right and walk down towards the boatyard. Then follow the footpath as it turns left and proceed along its bottom edge. This will bring you to a short stairway which descends towards a kissing gate on the edge of the boatyard. A short path then brings you to an embankment which follows the route of the River Douglas for the next three quarters of a mile.

Note Anyone who is unable to use the stairway should instead go out of the graveyard and turn left down the road leading to the boatyard. After passing through the boatyard gates, turn immediately left and the kissing gate will come into view after about 50 yards.

HESKETH BANK BOATYARD

Now known as the Douglas Boatyard, this part of the River Douglas has for hundreds of years provided a safe haven for boats due to its sheltered position in the lee of the ridge of boulder clay on which Hesketh Bank stands.

The River Douglas technically changes its name in its lower reaches around Tarleton and Hesketh Bank to the River Asland or Astland, although these names are not now in such common usage as they once were.

Shipping activity increased considerably when the industrial revolution began to gather pace and the major landowners with coal interests decided to promote the Lower Douglas Navigation which received its Act of Parliament in 1720. Through the introduction of locks, they were able to make the whole of the River Douglas from the sea to Wigan navigable by 1742 so that the cost of transport could be reduced and Wigan coal thereby secure a larger market. The first part of the 19th century was probably the busiest period with over 400 ships using the port in one year (100 of them engaged in overseas trade).

By the end of the 19th century, commercial shipping was in decline due to competition from road and rail transport. However, leisure sailing was on the increase and Southport boat builder, Robert Lathom, decided to relocate to Hesketh Bank, as the Douglas offered better conditions for launching new boats and for maintenance work. He chose to establish the new boatyard at its current location as he saw it as the ideal spot for a yard, being downstream of the railway bridge and sheltered from the west and from the north by the bluff upon which Beconsall Old Church stands. In recent years a pontoon and link span has been constructed in the River channel just downstream of the boatyard. This allows boats to remain afloat at all states of the tide.

Proceed through the kissing gate and a nearby metal gate onto the embankment heading in an easterly direction. This stretch offers views across the marsh to the pontoon and moored sailing craft on your right.

Keep to the embankment top as the banks of the Douglas are muddy and steep sided. This coast has one of the highest tidal ranges in the country; something which enables the Douglas and Ribble to be navigable. The water is deep and fast flowing when the tide ebbs and flows. After about 600 yards the embankment turns sharply to the left as it follows the River Douglas in a northerly direction towards its confluence with the River Ribble some two miles on. To your right the panorama extends to the east Lancashire fells of Bleasdale and Longridge and beyond to Pendle Hill. In the foreground just across the river is an elevated green pasture, which offers little evidence of being the reclaimed former waste landfill site at Hoole.

About half a mile further north you will pass a sewage treatment plant screened by trees on your left. Shortly after this you will see another kissing gate on the left below the embankment from which you will access a wide track running to the west. Proceed along this track, ignoring the path that bisects it and follow it as it winds left and then approaches a walled farmhouse. At this point you will see an unmarked and unadopted road. Turn right and this road brings you back towards the village. Perhaps not surprisingly it is called Marsh Road (although locally it developed the more sinister tag of Dead House Lane for reasons that will become apparent)

Continue heading in a westerly direction on the lane through highly productive arable farmland which characterises the area around Hesketh Bank, passing a few farm buildings on your left and scattered houses on your right. After about half a mile, as the road begins to rise slightly, you will come to the second of three small detached brick buildings on your left with a "No Tipping" sign in front of it. (The first building, some 150 yards before the other two, is a pumping station and the third is an electricity sub-station).

THE DEAD HOUSE

Unlike its neighbours, the second building has a pitched roof and contains no sign to tell of its origin or purpose, although, significantly, it is fenced off and its windows bricked up. Obviously, this is because it is no longer in use, but what is not at all obvious is that it was built as a mortuary (hence the name Dead House Lane).

The mortuary was built by West Lancashire Rural District Council on land owned by Lord Hesketh for which they took out a 99 year lease in 1910 at an annual cost of 10 shillings (50p). It ceased to be used when improved transport and communication allowed for the more timely transport of bodies to the mortuary at Ormskirk Hospital.

With no identified replacement use to date it is slowly being reclaimed by nature and stands as a haunting reminder of the need to deal with the aftermath of a local sudden death. One common such incident would be for the victim of a local drowning to be washed up on the banks of the River Douglas, commonly at Wratch Corner where the river makes a sharp turn west towards the Boatyard.

Continue uphill along the now tree arched lane until you reach a public seat at the junction of Marsh Road and Shore Road. At this point you are more than half way down the hill which descends from Tarleton along Station Road and turns west into Shore Road going towards Southport. This area is quite a famous local landmark: the bank of high ground facing you was once the south bank of the Ribble estuary, which, before the enclosure of the marshes, was three miles wide.

Prior to the wide scale construction of embankments and sluices which began in this part of the Ribble estuary in 1834, the stone wall on the opposite side of the road was once lapped by sea water at high tide. The remains a marker indicating the high point achieved by a spring tide in 1833 are still visible today. It is said that the unusual rounded stone posts at the top of the wall were mooring points for boats.

HESKETH ARMS

This wall is in fact the boundary wall of what was once a thriving hotel, previously known as The Ship Inn. This fine old inn and coach house stands at the northern end of Station Road and was once a busy stopping point for travellers and horse drawn coaches going over the sands at low tide across the Ribble to Freckleton, Lytham, Kirkham and beyond so as to save the long detour through Preston.

On the opening day of the railway from Southport a number of guests on the first train walked to this hostelry for refreshment as part of their tour of discovery of Hesketh Bank. Around the end of the First World War, Lord Hesketh, the then owner of the Hesketh Arms, held a public meeting in All Saints School to determine whether or not to retain its license. Despite the fact that the Beconsall was the only other Public House in the village, there was an overwhelming majority in favour of the hotel being closed down ... and so it was!

Head west along Shore Road in the direction of Southport. The road is so named as it runs along what was formerly the beach at the toe of the small cliff on which the older houses of what was the original Hesketh Bank village stand. On your right you will pass Guide Road (so named after the person who guided travellers over the Ribble sands to the Fylde). Looking upwards on the left side into the group of old cottages on higher ground behind the houses which front directly onto Shore Road one can still get a sense that this was once a small fishing community. (The walk comes back to these old cottages later.) Walk on for approximately a quarter of a mile until you reach a car park on your right just after passing Beffield Drive on your left. As the sign at the front of the car park says, this is the entrance to The Poor Marsh Allotments.

POOR MARSH ALLOTMENTS

When the marsh land was reclaimed by enclosure through the construction of embankments as mentioned earlier, the Government Commissioner who oversaw and approved this scheme made an award in 1870 of 5 acres of land to be allocated for the use of the labouring poor of the Parish of Hesketh with Beconsall with an annual rental of £10.00.

This 5 acre field became known as the Poor Marsh and was for years divided into 20 strip plots, each running the full length of the field – some 220 yards or 10 chains in old money! Some of the marker posts which divided the original plots still remain in place behind the houses that back onto the Poor Marsh.

In 2010 the site was redesigned to create almost 60 smaller plots with a central area of about one acre set aside for the establishment of a Community Garden to be run along Permaculture lines. Since then the site has been redesigned, a new car park has been provided and the New Shoots Community Garden has been created, featuring an apiary, wetland area, wildlife pond, wildflower area and forest garden

Do take the time to wander around this award winning development.

On leaving the Poor Marsh car park, look right across the road and you will see All Saints CE Primary School. Dating back to 1871, this is the oldest school in Hesketh Bank and is still a thriving hub of the community. A trail through the records of the school's Governor meetings reveals that around the turn of the last century it had an award winning choir, but that it struggled to maintain good attendance records at harvest times as many children would be kept at home to help with the harvest.

Cross over the road, turn left and walk back towards the old Hesketh Arms. Shortly before reaching the brow you will see a sign for a public footpath pointing up a flight of steps. Take this path.

Note If you are unable to manage the steps, cross over to the other side of Shore Road and head east back towards Marsh Road. At the junction proceed up the hill along Station Road and cross back over the road when you come to the Brow. You will then be able to proceed west along the Brow to the point where you can look down a sloping path to the stairway you avoided.

THE BROW

This delightful shortcut rises up a moderately steep hill, the top of which was historically known as Hesketh Brow. It is now known simply as The Brow and the shortcut is known locally as The Titmouse. The path takes you up past a diminutive row of three former fishermen's cottages on your right. These simple cottages are amongst the oldest houses in the village, dating back to the seventeenth century. As you look at the cottage on the left of the row you will notice a sign saying Old George and Dragon. This was once the fourth of Hesketh Bank's local hostleries, which, like the others, is no more.

At the top of the hill the path levels off into a quiet cul de sac which takes you left, via another row of attractive cottages, to the back of the old Hesketh Arms before you emerge onto Station Road. Not surprisingly, The Brow has been designated a conservation area.

On leaving the brow cross back over the road, turn right and head south along Station Road back towards Booths. During this half mile or more stretch you will pass the following features all on your left:

The Alms houses: Although clearly among the oldest houses in the village the former Alms houses at 142 and 144 Station Road are undated and number 144 has been significantly altered. This attractive pair of houses now occupies what would originally have been a small row of several Alms houses which were traditionally built to provide a charitable refuge for the elderly poor who could no longer work to pay their rent.

The Centenary Sports Ground: With a football pitch, two bowling greens and a cricket pitch, this impressive sporting facility will achieve its centenary in 2020. The cricket club has long been one of the strongest in the Southport & District Amateur Cricket League. The football team also now boasts a floodlit 3G All Weather Pitch located behind Capricci's Bar and Grill.

Hesketh with Beconsall Village Community Centre: Enjoy a sit down in the newly paved and planted community garden, where you can also view a map of the many Public Footpaths in Hesketh with Beconsall.

The Rectory: South View Lodge, a care home for the elderly, now occupies the impressive former residence and grounds of the old rectory to All Saints Church.

All Saints Church and Church Hall: This very attractive stone built church looks much older than it actually is. It was built as a replacement for Beconsall Old Church featured earlier in this trail and completed in 1926. The adjoining Church Hall was added in the late fifties. The Hesketh family coat of arms is visible over the church doorway and the weather vane is in the form of a golden fish indicating Hesketh Bank's links to the sea. The village memorial to those who died in the First World War stands in the grounds.

After passing All Saints Church Hall, continue along Station Road until you reach the entrance to Alty's just before the old railway bridge. This is clearly the entrance to a large site, the full extent of which can more easily be viewed from the top of the bridge, or better still, from within Booths Car Park.

ALTY'S BRICKWORKS

Perhaps the only remaining evidence of its past as a thriving brickworks and the major employer in the village is the chimney that still stands in the middle of the site, together with the former kiln and pug mill.

The ridge of boulder clay on which Hesketh Bank stands provided a ready source of raw material for brick making which had taken place on a small scale for a long time. This clay, together with the means of transport via river, canal and railway made this site the perfect location for large-scale brick making. Coal to fire the kilns could be brought in from Wigan via barge and rail and the bricks and land drainage tiles that were produced could be carried by both river and rail transport to the rapidly expanding towns of late Victorian Lancashire.

However, it was not Alty's who first developed this site. It was in fact built by the Ainsdale and Skelmersdale Brick Company when the railway came. However, not long afterwards a 21 year old Henry Alty from Rufford took the business over and developed it very successfully to a point where it employed over 100 people and had its own railway sidings and jetty on the river. At its peak in the 1930s it was producing over half a million bricks per week.

Sales declined in the 1960s with the advent of breeze blocks and the brickworks closed down in 1970, although the business continued to operate as a supplier of building and horticultural materials.

After more than a hundred years, Alty's are in the process of relocating the business and plans are afoot to create a mixed housing and employment development on the site which will also offer the prospect of developing a Linear Park running through the site and extending along the river bank to provide increased leisure and recreation opportunities for residents and visitors.

WEST LANCASHIRE LIGHT RAILWAY

At the entrance to Alty's you will notice a sign for this popular tourist destination, which lies within the Alty's site. It is operated on a voluntary basis by a group of enthusiasts (now a charitable trust) and is open at weekends.

It was begun in 1967 by six schoolboys, all of whom are still involved in one way or another. The Railway was conceived as a working museum for preserving and operating narrow gauge (2 feet between the wheels) locomotives and rolling stock in the North West and this is still its purpose today.

As part of the planned re-development of the former brickworks site, mentioned earlier, the WLLR have ambitions to create a stronger visitor destination by extending the railway line to the riverbank to a station close to Beconsall Old Church and providing a railway museum alongside visitor facilities for the development of the Linear Park where the interesting history of the area can also be interpreted.

There are many more lovely walks and rides within the area covered by VISIT, please see our website at www.visitseftonandwestlancs.co.uk for more leaflets and ideas for walks, cycle rides and days out.

VISIT – Visitors In Sustainable Integrated Transport

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Hesketh with Beconsall Heritage Trail

Start/Finish Booths, Station Road, Hesketh Bank
 Distance 4 miles
 Terrain River bank and public footpath



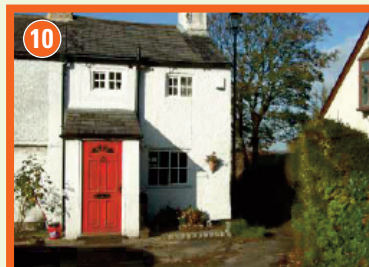
The Hesketh Arms



The Dead House



Poor Marsh Allotments



The Brow

KEY

- Hesketh with Beconsall Heritage Trail
- Steps
- Kissing gate



Hesketh Bank Boatyard



Beconsall Hall



Ferry House



Beconsall Old Church



Alty's Brickworks



West Lancashire Light Railway



The Beconsall Hotel



Hesketh Bank Railway Station

