**“The train now arriving at Middleton Central…”**

Unfortunately that announcement was never heard, as Middleton – a thriving industrial town in the 1840s – was by-passed in the great period of railway expansion, when vast sums of money were invested in schemes across the country. There wasn’t to be a connection to the town until the branch line of 1857 through from Middleton Junction.

The Middleton Research Group have found one local man of note, Charles Edward Cawley (1812-1877) who played a part in that early railway period and we wonder if he could have brought a mainline to the town.

His childhood home was Gooden House[[1]](#footnote-1), Hopwood, opposite the present St John’s church, an area now incorporated into Heywood. Then however Gooden[[2]](#footnote-2) was only a hamlet, distinguished by this large georgian house, and part of Middleton parish[[3]](#footnote-3), so the family would properly have attended St Leonard’s. Charles’ baptism,aged two and a half, was there in September 1814.

His father Samuel is noted as a *Gentleman*, correctly befitting the occupier of the well-appointed Gooden House. His wealth came from coal, as mining by then was an established part of the economy and very much a recognisable feature of the landscape. There were numerous small pits locally[[4]](#footnote-4), and though many were fairly short lived, as deep extraction methods were still developing, there was certainly money to be made for the owners.

The extensive Hopwood family estate had control over a good number of mines, maybe 6 or 7 or more on their immediate land that were profitably worked throughout the 19thC. There were also Hopwood partnership ventures in other collieries, such as Chamber Hall in Oldham, worked right up to the 1920s.

The getting of coal was dirty and dangerous, far from romantic, but the brief time that poet Lord Byron spent as a guest at Hopwood Hall in 1812 was occasioned by his selling his title as Lord of the Rochdale Manor, in order to settle his large debts. The underground mineral rights gave the transaction an attractive value.

Transporting the coal and the other heavy materials such as stone, sand and lime that became so necessary to sustain the industrial revolution was a major challenge, as carts lumbering on unmade roads were slow and often bogged-down, clearly not satisfactory. Horse-drawn or gravity-run tramroads could give short links and there were a number locally [[5]](#footnote-5) but these couldn’t provide longer distance movement that the canals were to offer.

The Bridgewater Canal taking coal from the underground mines at Worsley had opened in 1761 and reached the heart of Manchester at Castlefield by 1765. The greatly reduced transport costs - and increased profits – for coal owners wanting to access growing urban markets prompted the development of a great many schemes in a period of entrepreneurial enthusiasm - *canal mania*.

Whilst many of the proposed routes in this time of ambitious speculation weren’t built, those that were successful could take years of negotiation in acquiring land, securing parliamentary approval and raising necessary capital.

Plans for the Leeds and Liverpool canal were launched in 1766 and a group of businessmen met in the Union Flag Inn[[6]](#footnote-6) in Rochdale to propose a route via their town. James Brindley, the Bridgewater surveyor, was then the go-to name and duly commissioned to survey two routes: one via Bury and another more directly via Heywood, which was estimated to be considerably cheaper.

For various reasons these early plans were shelved for 25 years until 1791, when Rochdale interests and finances were again a driving force. The route, largely similar to Brindley’s, was set out by another noted engineer, John Rennie. Getting government approval took until 1794, when construction could start and the section from Manchester to Rochdale opened in 1799.

Although some 40 locks were installed to make that climb, there are some attractively level sections, not least between Slattocks and Castleton as the route follows a wide and flat post-glacial trough.

Another 5 years were needed to cross the Summit section with the route finally through to Sowerby Bridge in Yorkshire by 1804.

[The main objections to building canals with locks – which could use vast amounts of water as they were opened to different levels - came from the owners of mills depending on regular river supply for both power and process; hence the massive reservoir at Hollingworth Lake – the *Weighver's Seaport,* finished in 1800, to keep the canal topped up.]

Middleton was however effectively sidelined by the Canal and although there were a number of wharf points between the Rose of Lancaster by the Irk valley aqueduct and the Slattocks locks, connections and trans-shipmemt remained by inefficient horse and cart, doubtless to the disgruntlement of local business.

Overall though the Canal proved to be a success in its early period and between 1830 and 1832 carried over 500,000 tons per year, rising to almost 900,000 in 1839. Some very small portion of this was likely contributed by a range of Middleton collieries east of the town, from Boarshaw to Tonge.

By contrast Heywood was to have a dedicated canal spur as returns looked good to shareholders, the land could be bought without dispute so no parliamentary act needed and the line was level throughout the one and a half mile length, thus no expensive locks to be built with their consequent demands on water. The branch opened in April 1834, finishing just beyond the present Green Lane, and coincidentally passing only 250 yards east of Gooden House !

Middleton’s position and geography, it seems, didn’t offer a comparable and easy-to-construct branch, even though trade would have matched Heywood.

Charles Cawley was 22 that year, and having completed his local education at Middleton Grammar School, was gaining professional experience assisting in his father’s colliery business on the Hopwood estates,

He would however have been also very much aware of the potential opportunities offered by the next transport revolution then emerging.

George Stephenson’s success with the Liverpool to Manchester which had opened just a few years before in 1830 prompted, like the earlier canal mania, an explosion of schemes for routes that could enable the movement of goods and people at speeds vastly greater than the canal boats could manage[[7]](#footnote-7).

A Trans-Pennine railway was soon being considered, linking Lancashire and Yorkshire and before the Heywood Branch Canal opened, the Manchester & Leeds railway had been surveyed and so successfully progressed that it reached approval by Act of Parliament in July 1836.

First ground was broken in August 1837 and the line opened on the Lancashire side between Manchester and Littleborough in July 1839.

A remarkable achievement – fulsomely praised in this 1840 report of the Leeds Mercury.

*The engineer by whom the line was planned and under whose superintendance it has been executed, is the celebrated George Stephenson, whose genius and unparalled works we have so often had occasion to notice with high admiration. Under him Mr Gooch[[8]](#footnote-8), one of his pupil, has been employed as the resident engineer, and has displayed abilities equal to the execution of the greatest undertakings. The Managing Director, who has given up his whole time to the superintendance of the work, is Robert Gill Esq[[9]](#footnote-9)., to whose remarkable energy, zeal, and talent the company are very greatly indebted for the completion of the work within so short a period.*

A significant reason for the rapid construction of much of the railway[[10]](#footnote-10) was that for much of the route it faithfully followed the line of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal – indeed one proposal briefly considered had been to convert the canal line to a trackbed.

There was still the need to get over the tops of course and there were a good number of inclines to reach the crossing height but it was a known route and there was some record of negotiations with the many land owners involved.

One name however missing from the glowing press account above is that of Charles Edward Cawley.

He had been appointed by Stephenson and Gooch as a superintending engineer on the M & L, undertaking route surveys and with a particular brief to ease passage through the Hopwood family Estates.

Canals may have threatened water supply but they were quiet and had later become welcomed as a picturesque aspect of the rural scene.

Railways were altogether different – a noisy and dirty blot on the landscape.

It seems that Cawley rose to the task though and the railway, as now, cut through the east of Hopwod land and even if the Hall itself was sheltered from the smoke, a piercing whistle would surely have carried the half mile from where it passed close by the ice house in Lord’s Wood.

And having accepted that intrusion- not even the consolation of a station or even a modest request halt, perhaps by Slattocks, for the convenience of the busy and socially well-connected Gregge-Hopwoods !

Heywood meanwhile continued to ensure a connection to this modern world.

Castleton didn’t properly exist in 1839 but there was a station on the main line provocatively named *‘Bluepits for Heywood’*. The onward conveyance was by dedicated canal packet boat that traversed back down the Leeds & Liverpool then along the Heywood branch to the town. This operated from 1839 for 9 years until 1848 when the railway from Bury to Castleton junction was built.

In 1842 the M & L completed the planned link to Oldham ascending a fearsome incline to Werneth. This left the main line near Foxdenton at the obviously named Oldham Junction.

A full 15 years later, only in 1857, this became Middleton Junction when the short branch of just around one mile finally brought the railway to town.

Charles Cawley moved in 1843 along with Thomas Gooch to survey the Manchester, Bury and Rossendale line that later became the East Lancashire Railway.

A few years later he was able to set up in private practice in Salford as a consulting civil engineer.

Cawley became an alderman for the city and then a conservative MP for that constituency in 1868, elected again in 1874. He died aged 65 in 1877 at his home in Kersal, where a certain elevation allowed residents to live above the smoke of Manchester and Salford.

It seems Middleton Central wasn’t to be.

1. Possibly located at site of the present Heywood Unionist Club [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Guldene* is in the 13th C Heywood charter and the de Gulden family was mentioned in records from 1282 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. No Anglican church then in Heywood – St James 1838, St Luke’s 1860, St John’s 1881 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See <http://heywoodmonkey.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/the-dirty-history-of-coal-mining-in.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. One 19thC alignment from the pit just east of Top o’ th’ Hebers down to the canal dock at Heywood can still be traced today. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The building still stands, later as Lloyds Bank on Union Street [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. An average railway speed of 20 mph was some 4 times what a horse drawn canal boat could manage, and that without the time taken to pass through locks. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thomas Gooch (1808-1882) had been apprenticed to Stephenson from age 15 and was only in his early twenties when he took on the Manchester & Leeds work [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gill was certainly adriving force on the railway build and as an enterprising developer. He started the Palatine Buildings at Hunts Bank as a speculative scheme before the great Victoria station was built. The Palatine Hotel of 1844 fronted Chetham’s School. It is now being demolished (Spring 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The biggest challenge was Summit tunnel – 1.6 miles long completed in 1841 and then the longest in the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)