**A Walk along old Packhorse Trails from Otley to Huby**

Otley and Knaresborough were linked for centuries by an interest in the linen industry, and trains of pack-horses would take goods between the two towns, using rough tracks over the open moors and commons, as there was no direct road suitable for wagons and other wheeled traffic. Other traders used the same tracks to visit farms and settlements on the way. The opening in 1838 of the turnpike road (now the A658) from Pool to Buttersyke Bar on the Leeds-Harrogate road meant that wagons could use the existing turnpike between Otley and Pool and the new one from Pool to Buttersyke. The new road between Huby and Buttersyke followed the existing horse tracks but the section between Pool and Huby was a completely new route. The pack-horse trains were replaced by wagons which could use the new roads more efficiently. The old route between Otley and Huby lost most of its traffic and fell into disuse, though it remains marked as footpaths and bridleways.

In this section I describe a walk which follows as closely as possible the route of the old Otley to Knaresborough road as far as Huby, with photographs of how it is today.

Begin at the southern end of Otley bridge and cross it. There has been a bridge there since mediaeval times. The present one dates from 1776. Take the first right (Farnley Lane) and continue past houses and then Wharfemeadows Park to an unmade road on your right. This road leads to Farnley Park. *Before the present Farnley Lane was built around the outside of the Farnley Hall estate, the way to Knaresborough (and to Farnley) went more directly through Farnley Park.*

*The entrance to Farnley Park is now flanked by an impressive pair of lodge houses, West (or Otley) Lodge, said to have been designed by the artist J.M.W. Turner in about 1818 (though the coats of arms are dated 1618). The road to Knaresborough went along a track through the park parallel with the river but on the drier and higher ground some way from it, heading towards Hasling Hall (now a farm). Owners of large estates often objected to travellers passing near their houses and one purpose of the lodges was to discourage that. In 1656 Mary Fawkes of Farnley Hall was brought before the Quarter Sessions for obstructing the highway from Otley to Knaresborough which had been in use ‘since time out of mind’. In due course the route was diverted to run alongside the river, which is what we must do.*

So, pass between the lodges and keep right, soon re-entering Wharfemeadows Park, and follow the path around the perimeter of the games area to the river, and turn left along the bank to exit the park with rugby pitch on your left. Continue for about one mile, with the vast open field of Farnley Park to your left, eventually spotting Farnley Hall and then Hasling Hall Farm. *Here there was a ford where an alternative route joined. Those who lived at the east end of Otley could travel south of the river on the long-established road to York, as far as Knotford. There a track left the road and led diagonally over the fields to Hasling Ford, almost directly south of Hasling Hall.*

Our path now leaves the river after a stile and goes slightly left to join the Leathley to Farnley road. *Until about 1920 that road was just a minor track branching off the path we are on, which was the main road, called Wharfe Lane.* Exit field by a gate, go straight along the road to cross Leathley bridge, and arrive at a T-junction with the B6161. *This was an ancient highway going north from Pool over the hills to Beckwithshaw and Killinghall. It had been turnpiked in 1753. The small house at the junction, now named Leathley Lodge, is sometimes taken to be a lodge for Farnley Hall, but in fact it was the toll-bar house for the turnpike, collecting fees from travellers coming from Otley or Farnley. The Farnley Hall lodge on this side is over half a mile away, much nearer the hall and built in a different style.*

*By the wall opposite the junction is a shaped stone about a foot high. It is usually covered by undergrowth and the lettering is illegible, but it is an old guidepost, probably pre-dating the turnpike.*

Turn left along the road for a few hundred yards to Leathley church, taking great care on the bends, as this can be a busy section. You will first pass the Manor House on your left and then the village pump on your right.

*Outside the church are a mounting-block and the whipping-post and stocks.*

Just before the church turn right along a lane heading north-east towards Stainburn. *The almshouses on your left were built in 1769 by Ann Hitch of Leathley Hall in accordance with the will of her brother Henry Hitch. Leathley Hall had been inherited by the Hitch family in 1669, and the present hall is traditionally said to have been built in 1715.*

Continue along the narrow winding lane (almost traffic-free, but take care on bends), gradually climbing. After half a mile, at Hilltop Farm and Glebe Farm, follow the road downhill for 100 yards to a large silage clump covered with old tyres, then turn right through the right-hand one of two gates, into a track (Riffa Lane). *As late as 1920 Riffa Lane was of equal importance as the road we are just leaving, though originally both must have been much narrower than they are now, as can be seen from the paving-stones which are still visible at several points on Riffa Lane. It was suitable for travellers on foot or horseback and for packmen with their trains of horses, but the surface, though paved, was not suitable for carriages. When Leathley parish was enclosed in the mid-18th century, Riffa Lane, like others in the parish, was improved by widening and drainage so that it was able to take carriages and other wheeled traffic.*

This attractive green lane, with views to Almscliff Crag, can be uneven in places underfoot. After about ¾ mile the lane enters a field. The track carries on along the right edge of the field but we turn left along the hedge, descending to Thrispin Beck.

*The original track took a sharp left turn in the previous field, becoming an unimproved track fit only for horses, down to the beck. The track then ran along the beck for a short distance before crossing it, either by a footbridge or a ford, into Riffa Wood*.

Cross the beck via the stepping-stones (which can be under water after heavy rain), and climb the track through Riffa Wood, noticing the paving-stones worn in their centre by the packhorse hooves over the centuries.

*About halfway up there is a memento of the more recent past, a carving of a Native American, reputedly done by an Italian prisoner of war in the 1940s.*

Exit Riffa Wood by the gate at the top. In front of you is the former Castley Moor, not enclosed into fields until 1818. With the gate behind you, go half left over the field towards the line of trees and fence on the horizon, keeping well to the left of a lone tree. You will reach a small ridge running across the field. *This ridge marks the boundary between the parishes of Castley and Leathley. Four parishes, Castley, Leathley, Stainburn, and Weeton, meet at the point now called Gravelly Hill where there was a public quarry, presumably free to the inhabitants of all those parishes.* Follow the line of the ridge leftwards until it meets the fence, then with fence and then wall on your right, descend the field to an opening near the bottom. Pass through, follow broken wall on your left and make your way through any convenient gap into the field on your left. Climb half right to a metal gate. *The old quarry, now filled in, is the bracken-covered area on the right edge of the field.* Exit through the gate (Round Hill in front of you) and turn right down the track (Gravelly Hill Lane). We are now back on the ancient route until the lane bears sharply right, which is as far as we can go on the old road. *At this point the ancient track went straight on to Huby, but when Weeton parish was enclosed in 1793 a new road, 40 feet wide, was made to replace the old track in a different place. This is the lane now called The Sleights, which joins Gravelly Hill Lane a little farther on.* So, if you wish to go to Huby, continue along Gravelly Hill Lane and turn left up The Sleights. Otherwise, continue for ¼ mile to the A658. Buses to Otley pass along here every hour. (6 ¼ miles)

Those who prefer a longer walk could do this instead of going to Gravelly Hill:

On exiting Riffa Wood, turn right along the wood for a few yards, then re-enter the wood over a stile. Follow the path through the wood and exit on to the access drive for Riffa Manor. Follow the drive to the A658. Turn left along the pavement for ¼ mile past Riffa House, then take the drive on the other side of the road to a farm. *This was part of another major highway since medieval times for travellers from Leeds and Bradford to Knaresborough and the north, via Bramhope and Castley Ford.* Pass to the left of the farm (follow signs) and continue in same line over three fields to emerge at Ings Farm. Make your way around the buildings and take the access drive out to the minor road (Castley Lane). Turn right along the lane for a short ½ mile. After crossing a bridge enter the field on the left and follow the path along the river to Pool Bridge. Turn left over the bridge past the petrol station and catch the X85 bus back to Otley. (7 ½ miles)

If you are feeling really energetic and wish to walk back to Otley, on reaching Pool Bridge cross the road with care and take the footpath opposite. Follow it half left across the field to emerge in the B6161. Cross the road and take the footpath up the field with hedge on your left. At top of field cross into next field and follow left edge into a third field. After this field the path forks, but both paths take you to Hall Lane. Turn left and follow the lane past Leathley Hall to Leathley. Then retrace the outward route back to Otley. (11 ½ miles)