



Milnsbridge Meander

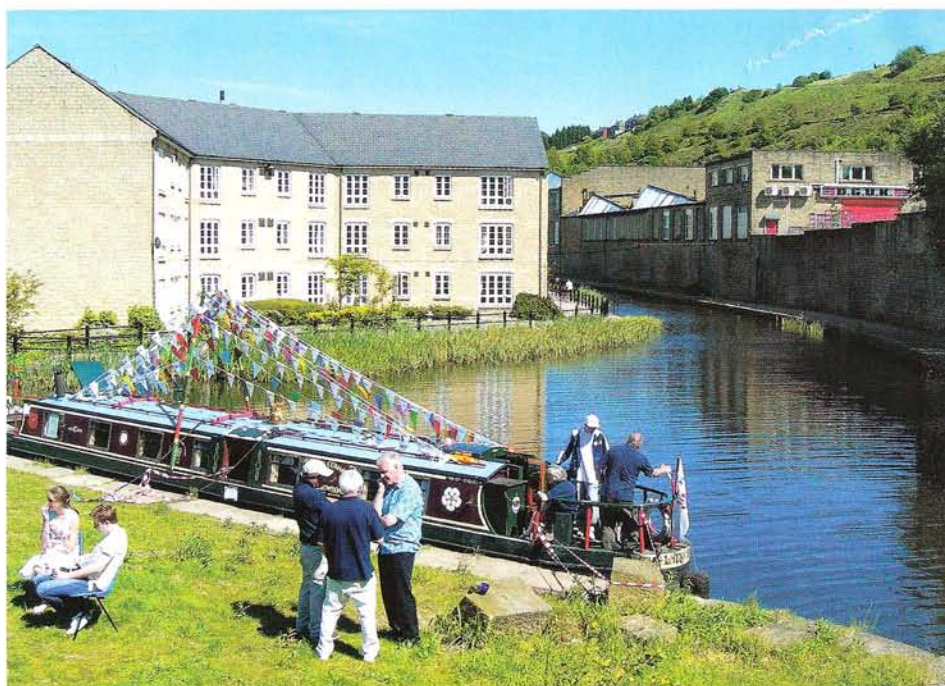
By Abi Bliss

Among the villages of the Colne valley, Milnsbridge is something of a Cinderella. Of course, we're not saying that Slaithwaite, Marsden or even Golcar are ugly sisters - far from it - but whilst its neighbours preen and prettify themselves for visitors, Milnsbridge is all too often left quietly sweeping up the cinders of the industrial past, its charms overlooked.

One reason is that Milnsbridge's position on the edge of Huddersfield leads to it being considered more a minor part of the town than a place in its own right. Go there, however, and you'll discover a village as important to the Colne valley's history as Slaithwaite or Marsden; one where a heritage of canals, railways and mills lives on in bold landmarks at the same time as nature's green softens the edges.

I live in Milnsbridge, and I'd be the first to admit that it's still a bit dowdy in parts. But instead of waiting for a fairy godmother to wave her wand and apply an instant makeover, Milnsbridge has slowly been transforming itself over the past few years. Whilst businesses and property developers have been scrubbing up the soot-blackened old buildings and converting empty mills into flats, groups of volunteers have been planting trees, cleaning away litter and brightening up the streets with hanging baskets.

One of the best ways to enjoy the Milnsbridge of both past and present is by taking a walk along the area's waterways, the River Colne and the Huddersfield Narrow Canal. Local community organisation Milnsbridge Enhancement Group have devised a circular route, which should take you



Milnsbridge Wharf Open Day

Photos by Alex Thompson

about 45 minutes at a gentle amble, and one where the view is always a mix of heritage and nature, where you're as likely to spot bluebells and butterflies as fascinating - and at times, surprising - industrial relics.

The name 'Milnsbridge' is thought to have come from the 17th century, when a corn mill stood in the village. The settlement has been here much longer, however, with records from 1297 referring to a bridge crossing the Colne, on an ancient road connecting Almondbury and Elland. But like most of the surrounding villages, Milnsbridge really took off after the Industrial Revolution and the valley rapidly filled up with factories and workers' housing. Local mills produced tweeds, worsteds and flannels, khaki and blue-grey fabrics

for the British and French armies and, during World War I, a special cloth used for covering ships' portholes. Future Prime Minister Harold Wilson was born here in 1916; the site of his former primary school on New Street is now an ornate bench - a much more restful commemoration than the busy-looking statue in central Huddersfield!

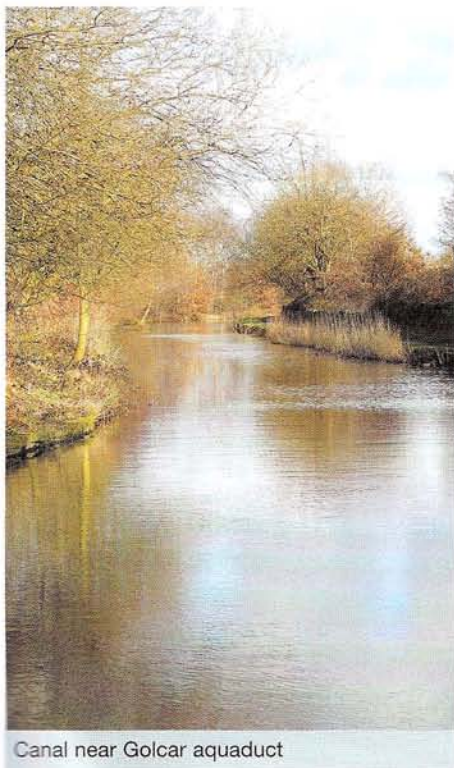
Photos from 50 or more years ago show a dramatically different view to the present day, with tall factory chimneys crowding the valley and a cloud of pollution obscuring the rooftops. But, inevitably, as the mills declined so did Milnsbridge. Once key to the area's success, many of the most noted factories were demolished. Where Botham Hall Mills once stood at the bottom of Scar Lane, there is now a



Milnsbridge House: plans are afoot to renovate the property

Somerfield supermarket, which is where our ramble starts.

Look towards the bottom of River Street next to the Somerfield car park and you will see a sign marked 'Riverside Walk' pointing to the right. Follow the path



Canal near Golcar aquaduct

along the riverbank: on one side is a patch of grassy wild ground that is a haven for wildflowers and butterflies, whilst on the other, across the river, you will glimpse factories. Luckily, they no longer manufacture the same product as they did in 1902, when John W Leitch & Co Ltd were the first in the UK to make the explosive TNT. Things are somewhat more peaceful around here nowadays, and on reaching the stone circle at the end of the path you may well meet a fisherman or two enjoying a meditative moment whilst waiting for a bite. Turn right here and climb up towards Britannia Road - once a move reserved only for the most agile, it's now easy to ascend thanks to the efforts of MEG, who tamed the muddy bank with a set of steps and two picnic tables.

At the top, turn left onto Britannia Road for about 500 metres. Pass Stanley Mills and then head left at the turning for Holm Mills Industrial Estate, which drops down to join the canal. Cross the bridge and turn left onto the towpath.

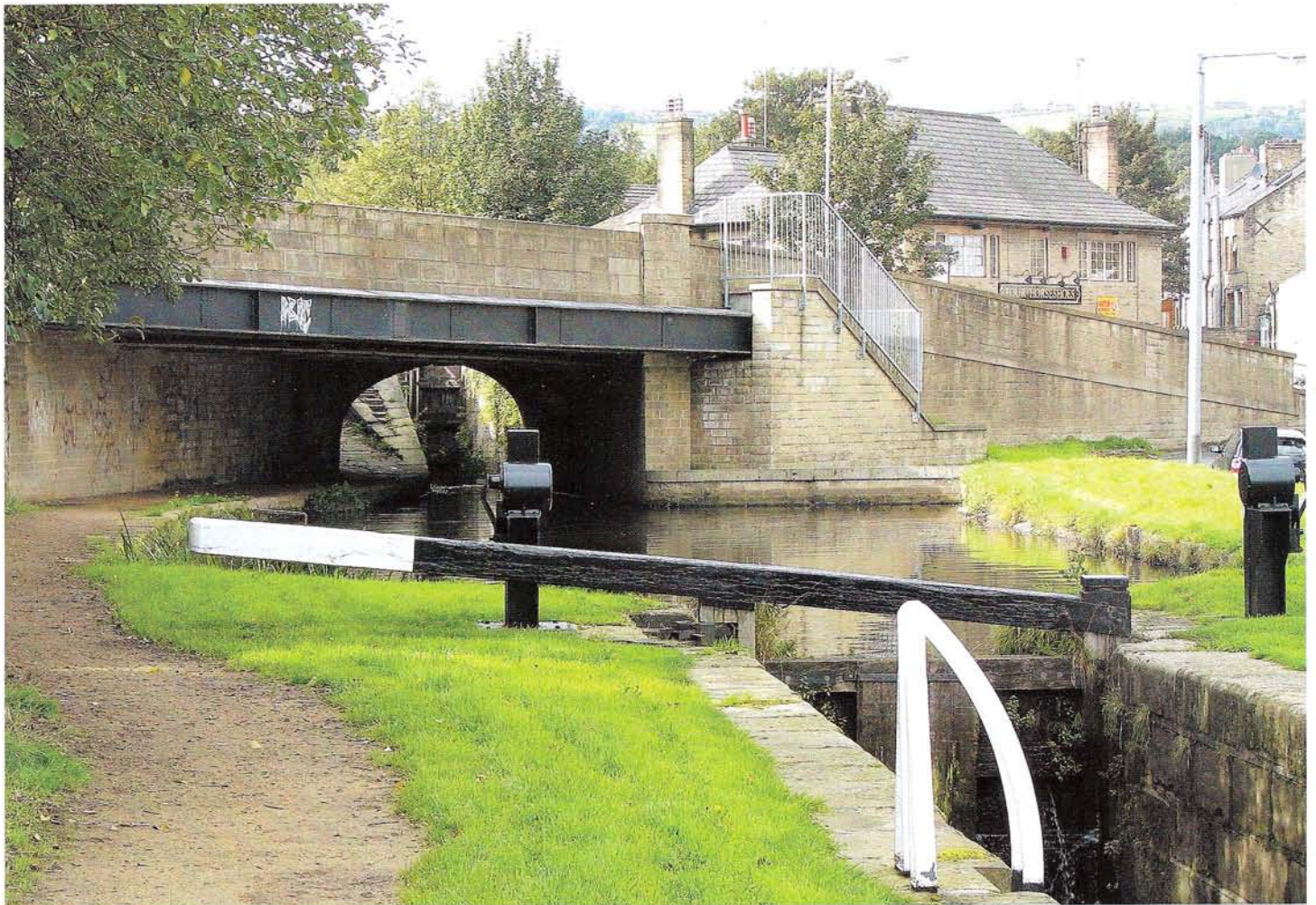
Opened in 1798 after 18 years of construction, the Huddersfield Narrow Canal linked Huddersfield, the Colne valley mills and Lancashire. Despite the effort involved in building the canal,

it wasn't long before faster transport in the form of the railways took over. It's still a cheering sight to see colourful pleasure boats chugging along, however, and to watch them slowly sinking or rising in the locks. Even if there are no boats around, there is plenty to look out for: waterlilies and vivid blue damselflies in summer, blackberries ripe for picking in autumn, and if you're lucky, a kingfisher darting over the water's surface. As you stroll along, you will also encounter Golcar Aqueduct, where the canal passes 40 feet above the river.

Carry on - passing under the amusingly named Whirley Bottom Bridge - until you reach Milnsbridge again, where an inviting public area has been created out of the once-derelict wharf. Along with stone paving, benches and a nod to the past by way of Michael Disley's sheep statue, you can see the remains of a crane base, once used to lift cargo into the waiting barges. It may not be much to look at, but it's a listed structure, as are the three bridges you passed under earlier.

Upon leaving the wharf area, turn left along Tanyard Lane (thankfully for modern sensibilities there are no smelly tanner's yards here anymore) and then right, following Whiteley Street back into Milnsbridge centre. Interestingly, many of the pubs in Milnsbridge have been here longer than their customers' houses: an 1853 map of the area shows the original Four Horseshoes and The Armitage public houses, as well as the Warren House Inn up at the junction with Manchester Road behind you. This latter inn is something of a bloody landmark, as only a few metres further along Manchester Road is the spot where, in 1812, Marsden mill-owner William Horsfall was shot by Luddites.

The story unfolds as you reach the centre of Milnsbridge. Look to your right along George Street at the traffic lights and you will see the corner of Milnsbridge House. Once the culprits in Horsfall's shooting had been rounded up, they were imprisoned here at the mercy of magistrate Sir Joseph Radcliffe, before being carted to York to face trial and eventual execution.



Canal towpath in Milnsbridge

The house later left the ownership of the Radcliffe family and went on to more pleasant uses, with the surrounding park, stretching the length of George Street, opened up to the public.

The walled park once boasted ornamental lakes and trees bearing peaches and nectarines! The house itself was built in 1748: these days, its Palladian interlocking temple front and Italian plasterwork may not be looking their best, but plans are afoot to renovate the building and turn it into flats, whilst MEG will soon be erecting a blue plaque to commemorate the house's turbulent past.

Returning to the crossroads, you will see Longwood Viaduct looming ahead. It's worth taking a closer look to really appreciate its scale, standing underneath one of its mighty arches as the trans-Pennine trains thunder overhead. Finally, return once more to the junction and turn up Scar Lane, taking a left

down River Street back into Somerfield car park. If you would like to savour the sights and sounds of Milnsbridge a little longer, a left turn by the signpost reveals steps down to the riverside, with a comfy stone seat built into drystone walling. It's not quite a fairytale ending, but Milnsbridge certainly has its fair share of stories to share with you.

Thanks to Polly McGrail and all at MEG for the Milnsbridge Circular Walk route. Look out for a leaflet which contains a map and more details about the walk.



Stone seat built into dry-stone walling at the riverside



Clock named after the Queen in Milnsbridge