

The Gt Northern Railway Low and High Level Lines to Grantham

by Graham Woodward

On 15 July 1850, the Ambergate, Nottingham, Boston and Eastern Junction Railway Company (the Ambergate) opened a line from Grantham to a junction with the Midland Railway line at Colwick; the line never reached Ambergate or Boston. At Colwick, trains then ran on the Midland Railway's track into Nottingham Midland Station on Station Street – the current station on Carrington Street did not open until 1904.

In 1852 the Gt Northern opened its northern section of the East Coast Mainline from Peterborough to Retford via Grantham and Newark. The Gt Northern had running rights over the Ambergate's line and fast express trains from London to Nottingham were advertised using Gt Northern trains. These were quicker than those on the Midland Railway route, which upset the Midland somewhat. The first Gt Northern express engine to arrive in Nottingham from London was 'captured' at Midland Station and locked in a shed where it stood for seven months until the dispute was resolved in court.

The Gt Northern ran the Ambergate line from 1855 and eventually it was decided to build a new station in Nottingham. In 1856 a new line from Colwick to London Road, Nottingham was built, terminating at a new station designed by the architect TC Hine. The station opened on 3 October 1857 and was called London Road Station. In 1861 the line was leased formally to the Gt Northern.



The new line ran parallel to the Midland line out of Nottingham and joined the line to Grantham at Netherfield Junction. Although it was later called the 'low level line', after leaving London Road station it was an elevated line over Meadow Lane and Trent Lane. At Colwick, the line linked with the Gt Northern's Derbyshire extension, later called the Back Line, which opened in 1875 to Derby Friargate via Gedling, Mapperley Tunnel, Daybrook and Basford. The Gt Northern also built a massive marshalling yard at Netherfield to handle coal trains from the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire coal fields. With these developments the Gt Northern was now able to compete with the Midland Railway, with fast express trains to London, access to the east coast holiday resorts and, more importantly, better access to the profitable coal trade from the region's coal mines. The Back Line route from Nottingham to Derby via Gelding was a long way around but this problem was addressed when the Suburban line opened, shortening the journey from Trent Lane to Daybrook by three miles.

The Suburban line opened in December 1889, worked by the Gt Northern. From Trent Lane Junction the line turned north towards Sneinton, Thorneywood, St Ann's, Sherwood and Daybrook where it linked up with the Back Line to Derby. The route was steep and difficult to work, and the introduction in 1901 of cheap electric trams to Sherwood and St Ann's took away much of its passenger traffic. The stations on the line closed in 1916 but the line continued to serve Mapperley Brick Works until closure in the 1960s.

In 1893 the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway Company (MSL) began building a London Extension from Annesley to London, passing through Nottingham. This later became known as the Gt Central, which opened to goods traffic in 1898. The MSL had worked with the Gt Northern since the early 1850s and they now shared services at Nottingham Victoria Station which opened to passenger traffic on 24 May 1900.

The Gt Northern built a new line from Trent Lane to Weekday Cross to allow trains from Grantham and the east coast to enter Victoria Station via the tunnel under Victoria Street and Thurland Street. This line became known as the High Level line and included a station at London Road (below), just north of the original Low Level station which became a parcels depot. All Gt Northern passenger traffic going east towards Grantham was moved to Victoria Station, although you could catch trains at London Road High Level station which opened in March 1899. The High Level and Low Level lines merged at Trent Lane Junction on the way to Netherfield.

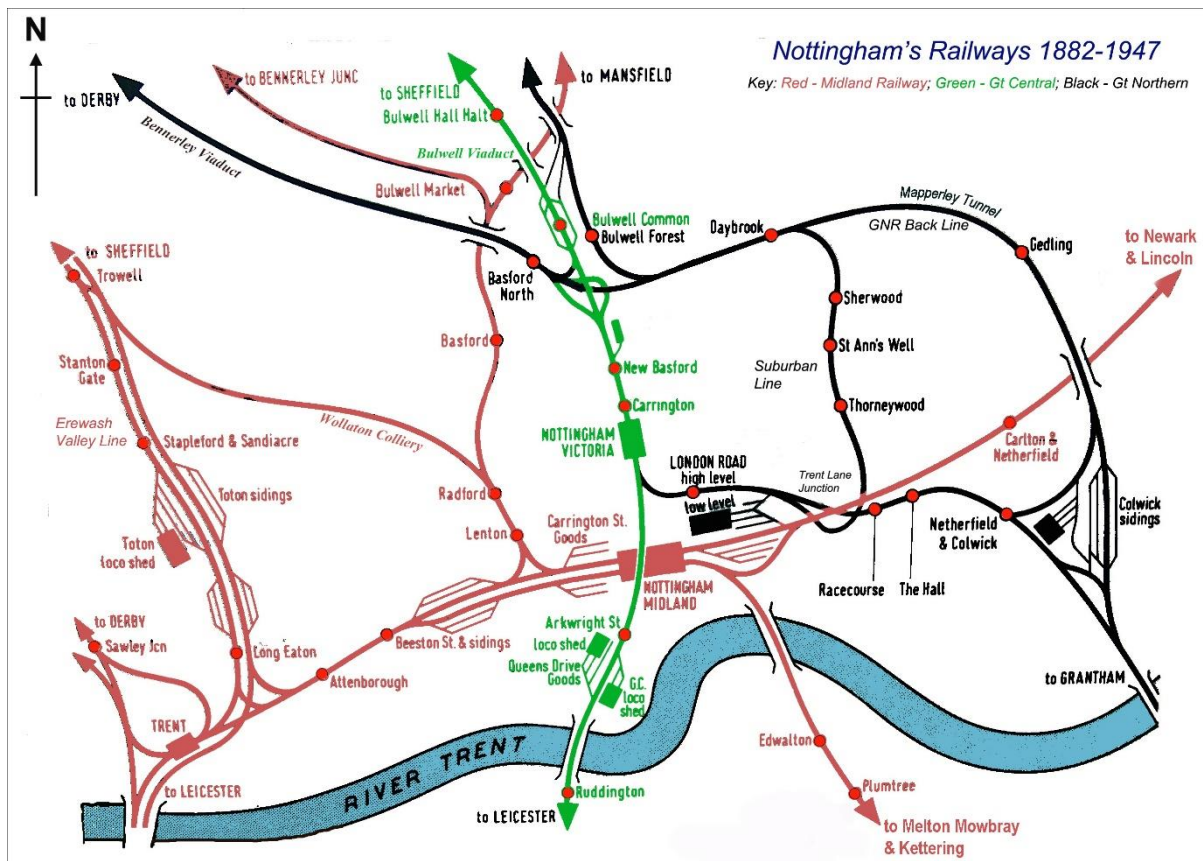


The Gt Northern also built links with the Gt Central at Basford providing faster access to Derby along the Back Line, shortening the journey to Derby by six miles, adding another nail in the coffin of the Suburban Railway.

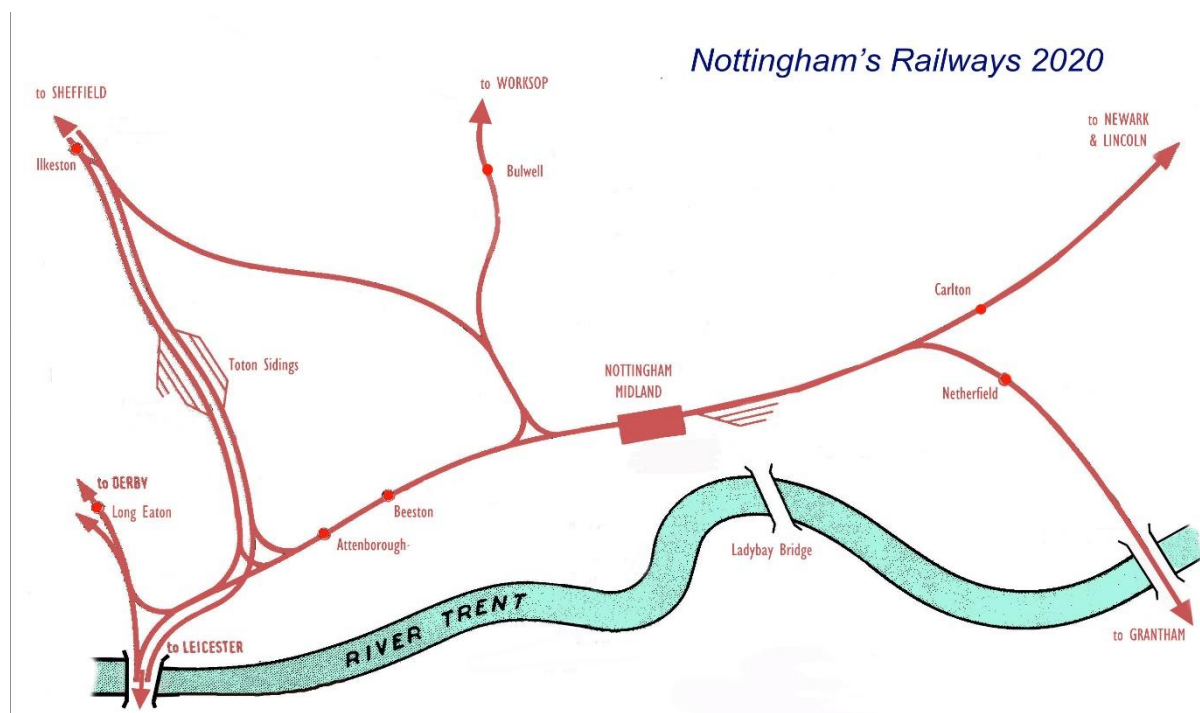
By 1963 most local services on the Gt Central had closed. In 1965 British Rail installed a link at Netherfield to the old Midland Railway's Lincoln line. Trains to and from Grantham then used the Midland line in and out of Nottingham Midland Station, as they do today. In 1966, the northern part of the Gt Central closed and by early 1968 Victoria station had been demolished. London Road High Level station closed in 1967 but the Low Level station remained in use as a parcels depot until 1989 and is now a health and leisure centre. The High Level station (above) was demolished in 2006.

Today (2020), there is very little left of the High Level and Low Level lines. Apart from TC Hine's magnificent London Road station, only a footpath along the old track bed from Meadow Lane towards Colwick and a few bridge-supports at Trent Lane remain. The line of the old track to Netherfield is now part of the extended A612 Daleside Road East alongside Nottingham Racecourse.

The map below shows the relative position of the various railway lines up until nationalisation in 1948. It shows clearly how the opening of the Gt Central (green) with its links to the Gt Northern line (black) at Basford shortened the journey to Derby (by six miles), avoiding the need to go all the way around via Gedling and Daybrook.



The map below shows the railways around Nottingham in 2020. Apart from the Grantham line, the lines used today are those built by the Midland Railway before 1880. Netherfield and Colwick station is now called Netherfield, and Carlton & Netherfield station is now called Carlton.



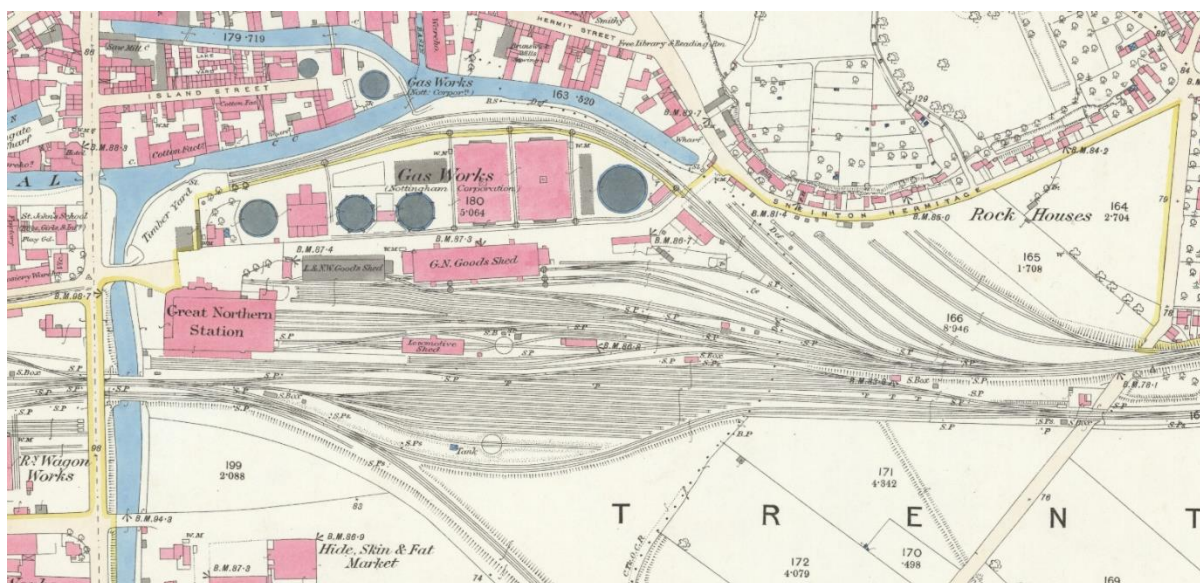
Gt Northern Low Level line



First, we will look at the Low Level line out of Nottingham's London Road Station that opened in 1857. TC Hine's London Road Station, seen here in 1880, has many typical Hine features, such as the criss-cross pattern in the brickwork and the building's symmetry. Elaine Harwood describes it in her book, *Nottingham: Pevsner Architectural Guides*, as having, "Venetian windows, French gables and a pavilion turret behind a deep porte cochere; long shallow wings either side with Hine's distinctive white header cornice behind". It is a Grade II listed building.

The picture below shows the station in 1980, still intact but somewhat neglected. Between 1998 and 2001 it was restored by Marsh Grochowski and converted by Coleman Architects into a health club. It is now the Virgin Active gym and also contains a number of smaller units, including a hairdresser and a manicure salon.





The 1884 OS Map extract above shows the scale of the site that was London Road Low Level station. The main pedestrian entrance was on the north side, accessed from London Road via a small road now called The Great Northern Close. The line running along the side of the canal's Poplar Arm, north of the gas works, later became part of the High Level line, built in 1898. The line turning south past the Hide, Skin & Fat Market was the Midland line to Melton Mowbray. The Gt Northern (GN) Goods Shed is still standing, albeit derelict. The shed was designed by TC Hine and is a Grade II listed building.



(Above) This picture shows the layout on the ground. The Gt Northern Main Line is that to the left of the telegraph poles, heading due east towards the southern end of Manvers Street and on to Meadow Lane. In 1900, when Gt Northern passenger services moved to Victoria Station, a few London & North Western Railway (L&NWR) passenger trains continued to use the Low Level station for trains to Northampton. This continued until World War 2 (1939-45) when these services were also moved to Victoria.

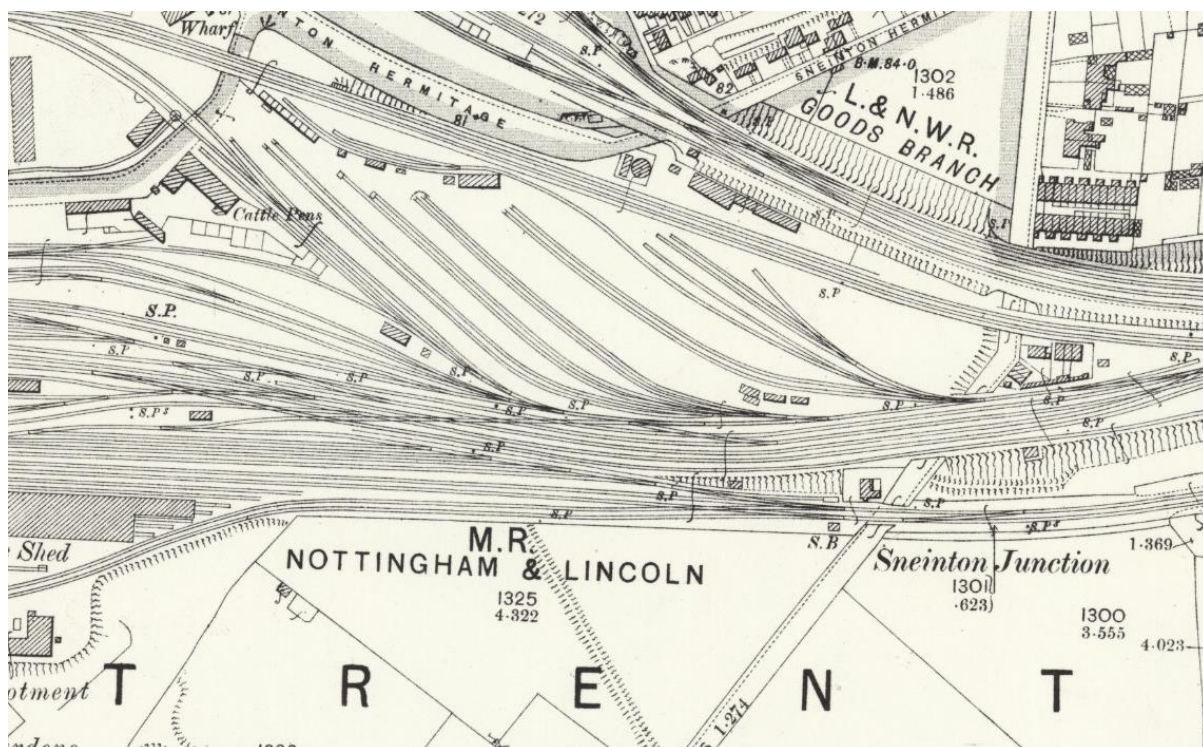
All of the lines to the right of the telegraph poles belonged to the Midland Railway, with the Melton Mowbray line curving off to the right. Most of the sidings to the left of the signal box are still in place, part of East Midlands Railways' Eastcroft Light Maintenance Depot.



The picture above, taken in 2010, shows how the landscape has changed. The Nottingham College and the Eastcroft incinerator complex are on the right. The sidings that served the cattle market are now part of East Midlands Railways' maintenance depot.



(Above) These two warehouses, seen here from Manvers Street, are the James Alexander Warehouse in the foreground and the two-storey Gt Northern Warehouse in the distance. The Gt Northern track bed was the other side of the buildings. There was no bridge at Manvers Street, as the southern part of the road from Sneinton Hermitage to Daleside Road was not built until after the line closed.



Meadow Lane, the next major obstacle on the route east, had four crossings all within a 100yds (87m) of each other. The location was known as Sneinton Junction. The Midland Railway line to Lincoln crossed the road on a level crossing – first come, first served. There was a gate box (SB) on the southwest side and a railway worker's house on the northwest side. This line is now used for trains to Newark, Lincoln and Grantham. The next crossing was a bridge carrying the Gt Northern Low Level line from London Road Low Level station to Grantham. Despite the name 'Low Level' the line was elevated all the way to Trent Lane. Next came a bridge carrying the Gt Northern High Level line from Weekday Cross, and last, but not least, was a bridge linking the Gt Northern lines to the L&NWR sidings at Sneinton Hermitage.

(Below) Today, this section of Meadow Lane has been closed to road traffic. This view south is from the site of the former Low Level bridge. The railway house that once stood on the right has been demolished.





(Above) The Low Level line bridge on Meadow Lane carried six sets of track over the road. This view is looking south towards Manvers Street and Daleside Road. The Midland Railway level crossing on the Lincoln line can be seen just beyond the bridge. Nottingham station is to the right.

(Below) The original, wide Low Level line bridge has been replaced by this narrow pedestrian bridge, part of a new footpath and cycle track to Colwick and Carlton. This view is looking north towards Ivatt Drive, Sneinton.





(Above) The route of the Low Level line east from Meadow Lane is now traced by this footpath and cycle track, running along the elevated embankment. (Below) Some parts of the old bridge still remain, such as this stone plinth on Meadow Lane.



After Meadow Lane the Low Level line merged with the High Level line at Trent Lane Junction, behind the houses now in Ivatt Drive. The next part looks at the route of the High Level line from Weekday Cross.

Gt Northern High Level line.



At Weekday Cross (above) the combined Gt Central and Gt Northern line emerged from the tunnel under Victoria Street. The Gt Northern built a new section of line going east to link up with an existing stretch of track between the gas works and the Poplar Arm of the Nottingham Canal on the east side of London Road.

The High Level line (below left) was carried on a large viaduct over Maltmill Lane, Popham Street, Canal Street, the Nottingham Canal and London Road where a new station was built, London Road High Level Station. As all trains going east now departed from Victoria, the old Low Level line station on London Road became a parcels and goods depot.





The viaduct carried the line over the junction of Middle Marsh, Narrow Marsh (above) and Maltmill Lane (left). It was still in place in 1979 when this photo was taken. Weekday Cross is to the right and the Gt Central line south can just be seen behind the bridge. The Viaduct was demolished in 2002 and replaced by the concrete viaduct shown below when the NET tram line was built.





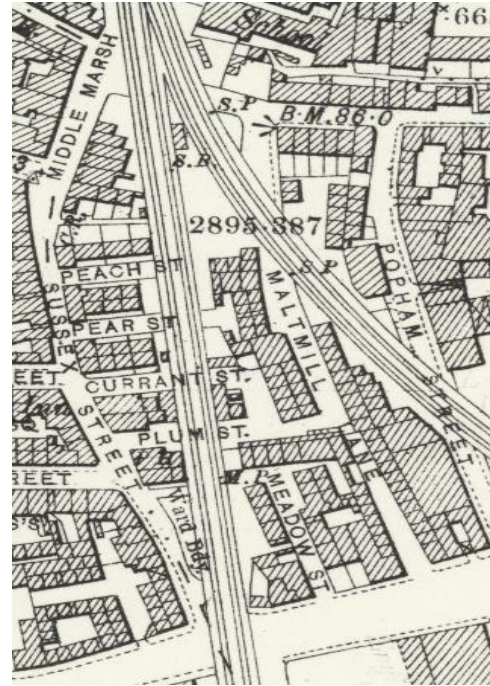
Narrow Marsh was renamed Red Lion Street in 1905 and then redeveloped in the 1920s and renamed Cliff Road. Records show that it had been known as Narrow Marsh since at least 1315. The signal box that stood between the Gt Central Main Line and the Gt Northern High Level line can be seen on the viaduct. The building on the right was the Woodman Inn, built in 1830 and closed in 1957 – it still stands today. Maltmill Lane is on the left where an Austin/Morris 1100 is parked.

(Below) The same view in 2011 with the railway viaduct replaced by the NET tram viaduct. The car park on the right was originally the site of old houses, demolished in the 1920s. Popham Street is on the left.





The High level line crossed Maltmill Lane on this steel girder bridge (left), part of the 552yds (504m) long viaduct between Weekday Cross and London Road. Maltmill Lane was at the edge of the old Narrow Marsh area, at one time one of the worst slums in Nottingham. Alluring road names like Peach Street, Pear Street and Plum Street did not reflect the true nature of the area.



(Above) This part of the old High Level line viaduct beside Maltmill Lane was demolished in about 2015 and the site remained vacant until the building of the new Nottingham College began in 2019. The former Unitary Chapel on High Pavement can be seen in the background along with the Nottingham Contemporary arts centre. The NET tram viaduct is on the far left next to Middle Hill.



Popham Street was another narrow road in the Narrow Marsh area. It was completely dominated by the oppressive scale of the railway viaduct.

When the railway was built in 1898, Popham Street was an industrial area, with only one domestic property. There was a printing and book binding works (J & J. Printers), an engineering works (H. Savage & Sons) and a wood and stone turners (Fitchett & Woolacott).



(Above right) Canal Street can be seen in the distance at the end of Popham Street. (Below) Marine House on Popham Street was formerly part of a sawmill.





(Above) Popham Street – after the bridge was demolished the parapets were retained.

(Below) This was the home of Cornish Engineering Limited, a printing and general engineering works. There had been a printing firm on Popham Street since at least 1915.





(Above) This huge steel lattice bridge carried the High Level line over Canal Street. Popham Street is where the white building is on the left of the bridge. The Gt Central line bridge is in the background. After Canal Street came the Nottingham Canal (below) crossed on this massive steel bridge of the same design as that at Canal Street.





(Above) All trace of the former High Level line bridge over the canal disappeared when the area along the south side of Canal Street was redeveloped with the building of the Nottingham One complex. (Below) From the canal crossing it was only about 180 yds (168m) to London Road. In this picture taken from High Pavement, the old Boots the Chemist factory at Island Street can be seen in the centre – the High Level line ran to the right (south) of that complex. The site is now that of the BBC studios and a hotel.

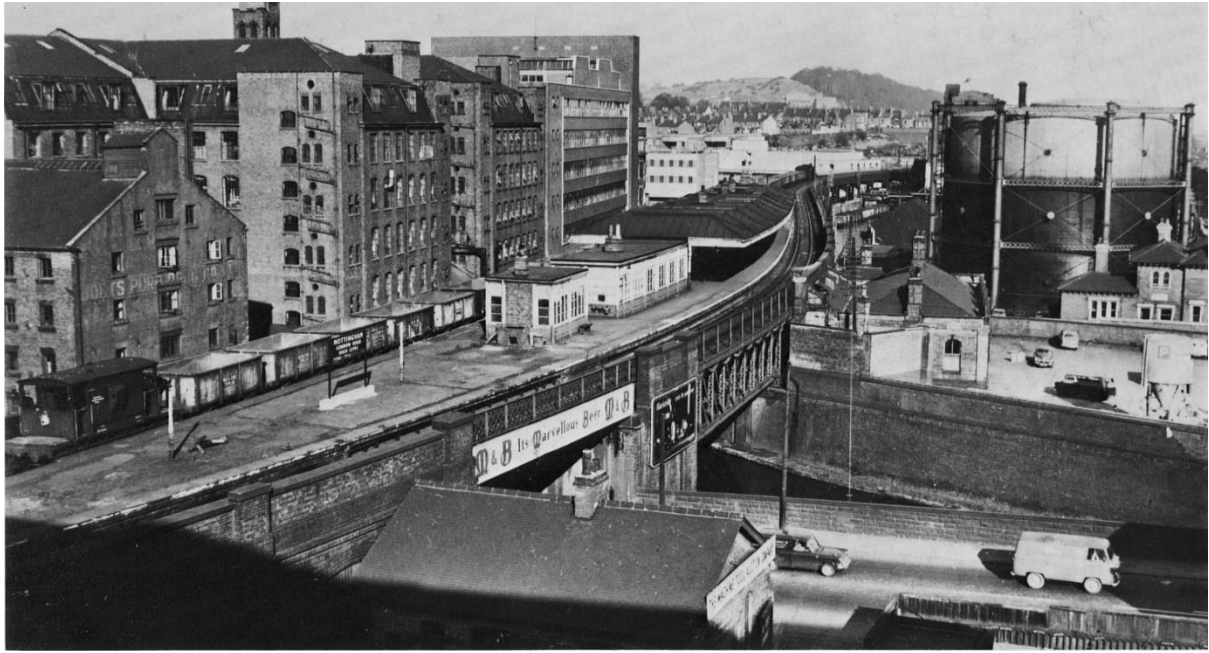




(Above) This view is looking north along London Road from near the entrance to Eastcroft. It is a rare image – there are very few that show the full length of the line across London Road. The picture shows the bottleneck that the bridge caused.

(Below) This 1934 post card shows the old High Level station on the right behind the tram. The tram (No.195) is a 1926 English Electric model with a Brush Traction P22 power unit. The trams ran from 1901 to 1936 when this one was sold to Aberdeen Council. Route F was from London Road to Radford and Lenton and was formerly known as Route 7 – the trams were given route letters when trolleybus services began in 1933.





(Above) London Road High Level station was an island-platform station similar to those built on the Gt Central, but there was no access direct from London Road. The station opened in March 1899 and was perched above the Nottingham Canal on a huge viaduct. It was advertised with the slogan, *"Alight here for the Trent Bridge cricket and football grounds"*. Access to the station was through the single storey brick booking office facing the concours where in the photo a Morris Minor car and a Bedford CA minibus are parked. London Road is in the foreground and Colwick Woods can be seen in the background. Judging by the vehicles on London Road, a Ford Thames Trader 400E van and a Ford Anglia 307E van, and the fact that the station closed in 1967, the photo must date from 1961-66. (Photo - John Mann collection).

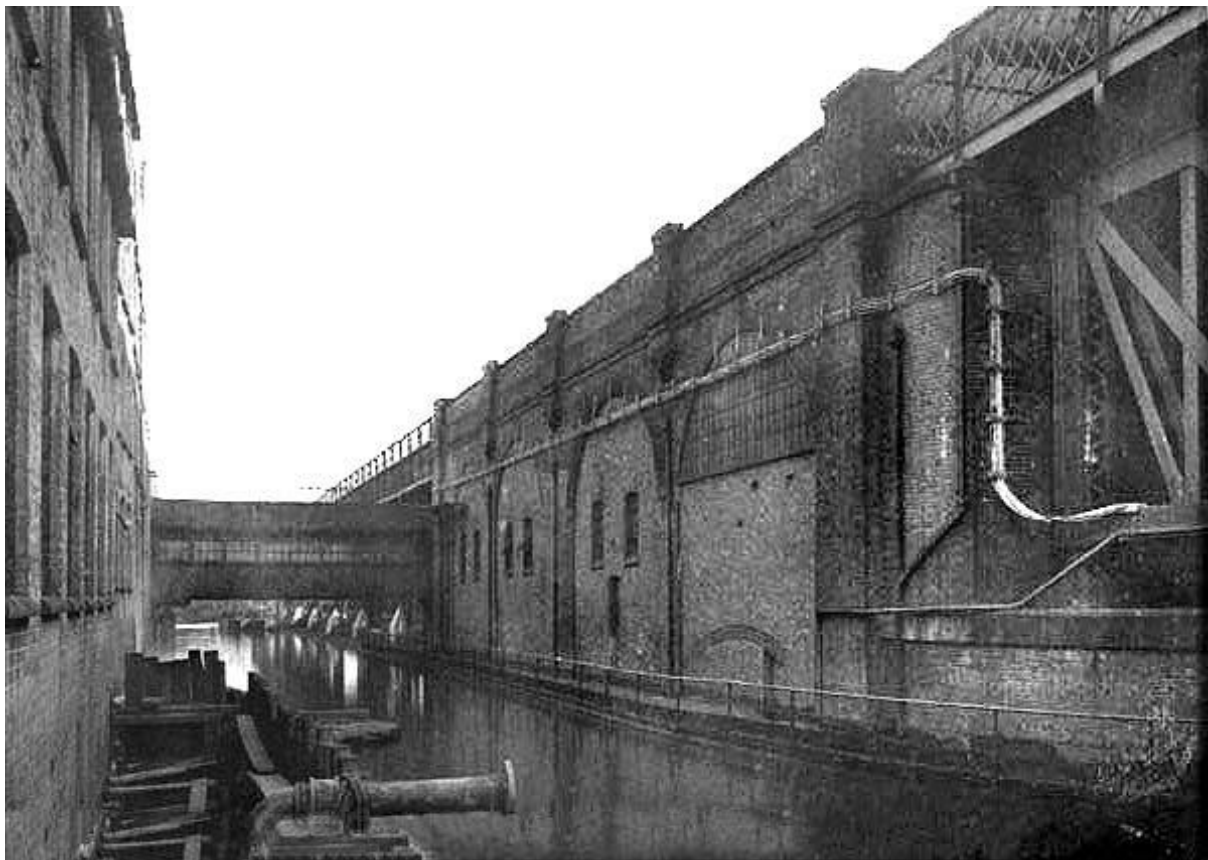
(Below) All the buildings on the platform were demolished in 1971, and only the viaduct over the canal remained. The track was lifted in 1975 and the bridge over London Road was demolished in 1978, the same year that I took this photo. The viaduct was demolished in 1996.





(Above) London Road High Level station, about 1930. The gas works in the distance was on the site now known as City Link, soon to be redeveloped as a housing complex.

(Below) This picture from 1916 is looking east along the line of the Poplar Arm of the Nottingham Canal. The Gt Northern High Level line is on the right, with the Boots' factory on the left. All this area has been demolished and the canal arm filled in. The site is now part of that occupied by the BBC studio and the NHS Walk-in Centre.





(Left) This picture was taken in 1980 from the footbridge at Meadow Lane over the Midland line to Lincoln. The view is looking west towards London Road and the canopies of the Gt Northern London Road Low Level station can be seen in the distance.

The stone bridge support on the right was part of the Gt Northern Low Level line coming from London Road. The old James Alexander grain warehouse on the Gt Northern line can be seen on the right behind the telegraph pole.

The grass patch behind the white railings was the site of a railways worker's house. My wife's mother was born here in 1920 as her father, Arthur Pratt, worked on the railway.

The original footbridge has been demolished, as the road has been closed to traffic and pedestrians can now use the old roadway.



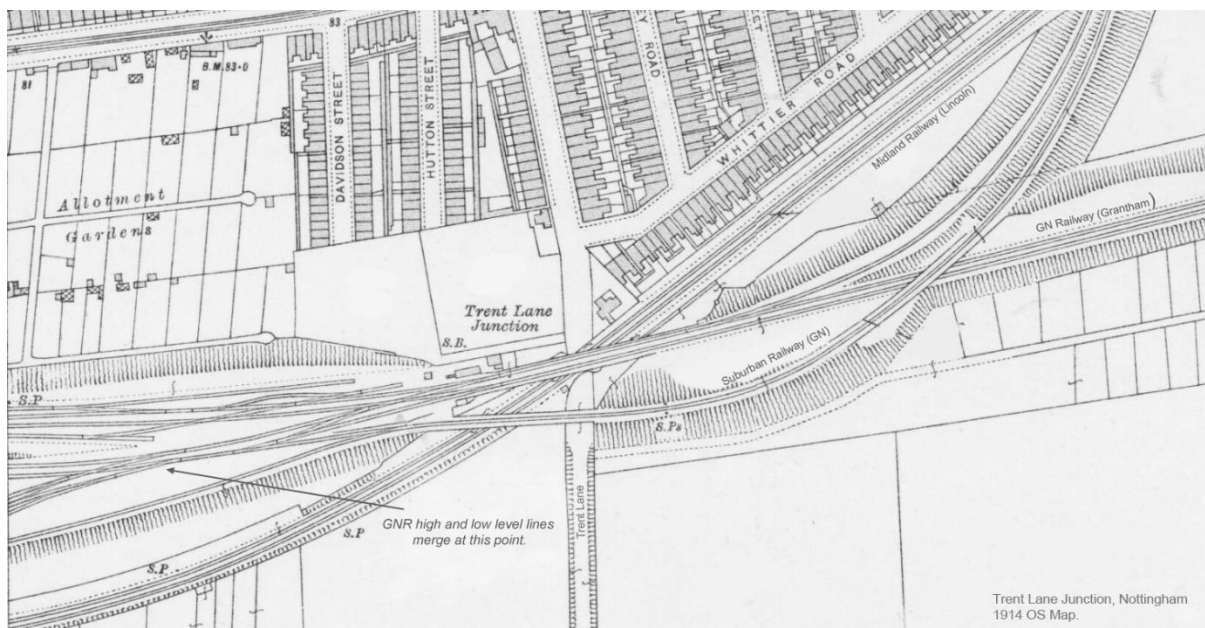
(Above) At Meadow Lane the High Level line crossed the road on this steel bridge. The Low Level line bridge can be seen in the background. Around the corner under the bridge was the Midland Railway level crossing on the Lincoln line. The sign on the left shows the bridge clearance to only be 12ft 6in (3.8m), which was very low – most bridges today are built to a minimum 16ft (4.8m) standard. Also, cigarette adverts such as the one on the left are now banned.

The merged lines



After Meadow Lane the High and Low Level lines merged just west of Trent Lane Junction before crossing Trent Lane on a bridge. This picture is looking east from Trent Junction and shows the combined High and Low Level main line over Trent Lane, towards Netherfield. The low bridge-parapets just beyond the signal box are where the main line crossed Trent Lane. The line coming-in from the left was the L&NWR line from Sneinton Hermitage. The lattice bridge on the right was at the southern end of the Nottingham Suburban Railway and carried that line over the Midland Railway's line to Lincoln that ran at ground level. The line also crossed Trent Lane on a brick-built bridge that is still in place today (2020). The Suburban line then turned north towards Sneinton and crossed the Gt Northern main line on the two bow-string bridges in the distance. (Photo - A Henshaw).

(Below) This 1914 OS Map extract shows a plan of the various lines.





(Above) This was the bridge that carried the Gt Northern line over Trent Lane and the Midland Railway's line to Lincoln. (Below) Beyond Trent Lane the bridge provided for an extra ground-level track bed demanded by the Midland Railway for possible future expansion, but no track was ever laid. The tall flats in the distance are on Colwick Road near Colwick Crossing.



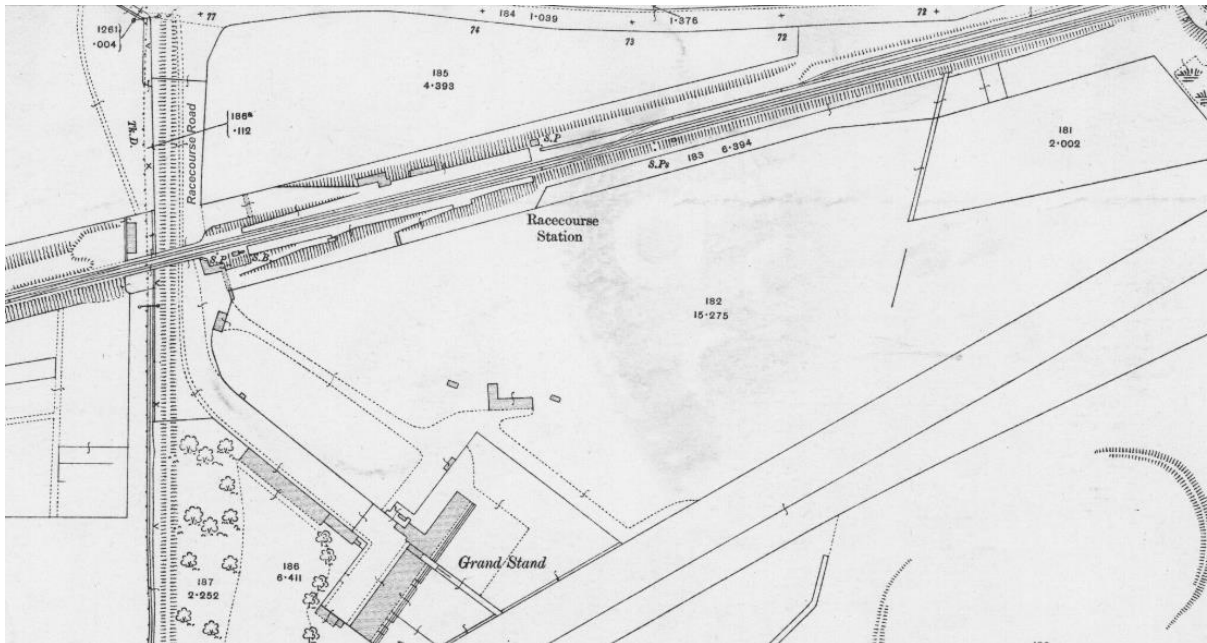


(Above and below) These brick and stone bridge supports are all that remain of the large bridge that carried the Gt Northern line over Trent Lane. As mentioned earlier, the expansion corridor where the railings are now (below) was never used as a track bed.

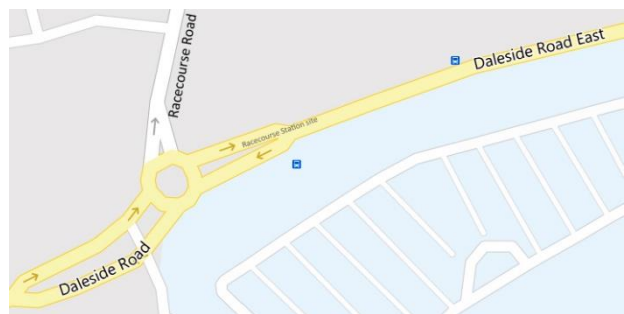




(Above) The line from Trent Lane east towards Colwick Racecourse is now a footpath and cycle way.



(Above) There was a station at Nottingham Racecourse, on the north side of the course. The modern Daleside Road East (A612) trunk road has been built along the line of the old track bed. The station was where the new road meets the roundabout, shown marked on the modern map opposite. It was still shown as an active station on a 1962 edition of the Geographia Street Map of Nottingham.

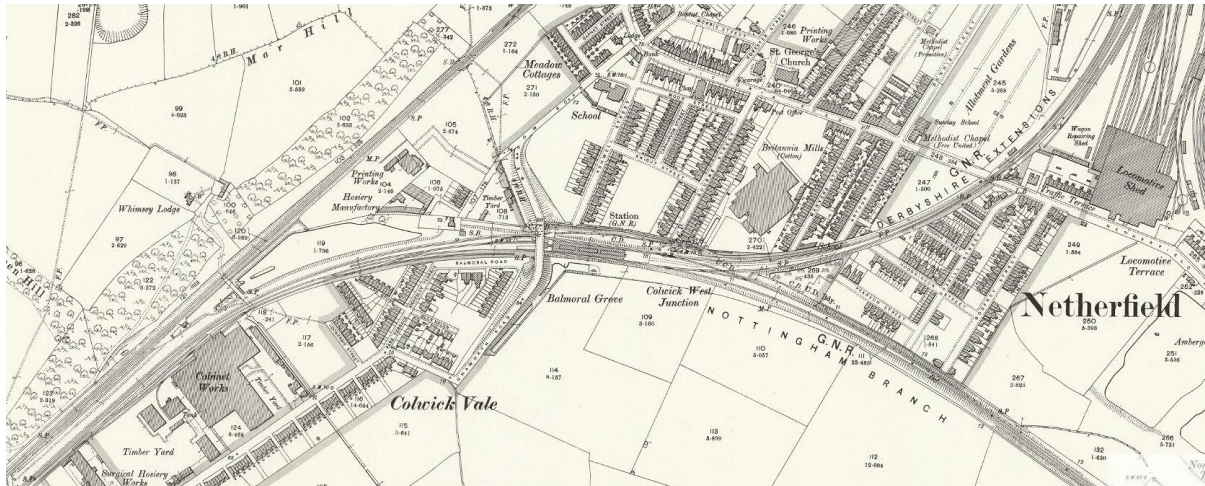




(Above) After the Racecourse Station the line continued due east towards Netherfield. This bridge carried Colwick Road over the line.

(Below) The line of the track bed is now that of Daleside Road East (A612). The bridge was where the embankment can be seen on the left.





(Above) Just over 1.8 miles (2.9km) east of Trent Lane the line turned east to what is now Netherfield Station. This was originally called Colwick Station but was later known as Netherfield and Colwick and then under British Rail control renamed Netherfield. The Midland Railway's line to Newark Castle and Lincoln is on the left and the Gt Northern Railway's Derbyshire Extension, often called the Back Line, curved north from Colwick West Junction on its way to Gedling and Daybrook. (Below) A picture postcard view of Colwick Station from 1908.



After Netherfield, the line goes east to Radcliffe on Trent, Bingham, Aslockton, Elton & Orston, Bottesford and Grantham. The architect TC Hine designed the station buildings at Radcliffe, Bingham, Elton & Orston and Bottesford and the wooden station shelter at Aslockton is Grade II listed.

In the 1850s the Gt Northern Railway Company saw the Grantham line to Nottingham as an important part of its inroads into the domination of the Midland Railway. The need to gain access from Derbyshire to the east coast was made easier by the use of the new line. Today, East Midlands Railway, the current franchise holder, provides similar services to those of the Gt Northern: trains from Nottingham to Grantham, Liverpool Lime Street to Norwich, and an hourly service to Skegness on the east coast. Nothing changes as they say.

Graham Woodward
December 2020

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See also www.gwoodward.co.uk for more guides to Nottingham and Nottingham pictures.