

Great Central Railway trackbed description

Woodford Halse to Rugby - part 1 of 6

This section of the trackbed description starts at Woodford Halse, north of the junction with the line that continues westwards towards the Chiltern Line. The description begins where the line is currently occupied by a builders' yard, just south of Station Road, and continues north towards Charwelton and the southern end of the Catesby Tunnel.

At Woodford Halse the line is occupied by a builders' yard (Main Line Timber) on the south side of Station Road at grid point SP 5402 5252, but the line leads northwards across Station Road over two bridges that are still in place. I believe the bridges mark the point where the station would have been (Figure 1). North of Station Road the line is carried on a high embankment that leads south to north through a well-used park branded as "Great Central Woodland", owned and managed by Woodford-cum-Membris Parish Council. The embankment is illustrated in Figure 2 and a view at the top of the embankment is given in Figure 3. Immediately north of Station Road, at the furthest south accessible point on the trackbed embankment, is a small memorial park. North of this the trackbed leads northwards on the embankment with a well-used footpath through mature trees for 500m until it reaches Byfield Road at SP 5408 5304. A bridge would have carried the railway across Byfield Road, but this has now been removed, as shown in Figure 4. My guess is that there would have been an embankment for some distance north of Byfield Road but there seems to be no trace of it now.



Figure 1 Looking south-west along Station Road in Woodford Halse at the bridges that would have carried the GCR (camera at SP 5406 5257).



Figure 2 Looking south along a footpath through Woodford Halse to the east of the trackbed. A high embankment on the right can be seen. This would have carried the railway (roughly SP 5413 5291).



Figure 3 Looking north along the trackbed on the embankment in Woodford Halse (SP 5403 5263).



Figure 4 Looking west along Byfield Road, Woodford Halse, where the GCR once crossed. The building across the road is roughly where the track would have passed through (SP 5414 5303).

North of Byfield Road there is a light industrial park covering the line of the trackbed. A road named Great Central Way leads northwards through the park, although the track would have been a few metres to the west of this road. The route of the line is not really accessible through this industrial park for around 400m. North of the park, starting at grid point SP 5419 5350 is a field which I believe was once a vast goods yard for the railway. There is no obvious trace of the line in this southernmost field, judging by Google Maps, and no obvious access for the public, although there is a well-worn footpath leading eastwards off the Jurassic Way between SP 5402 5404 and SP 5425 5399 which meets the line coming northwards, and in theory it should be possible to walk south of this second grid point (SP 5425 5399) in order to inspect this field further, although there doesn't seem much need at this stage.

From grid point SP 5425 5399 it is clear that the line followed close to the east side of a line of trees stretching north to grid point SP 5432 5436. There are various remnants of the railway here, including pieces of track and brickwork, as shown in Figure 5. The railway proceeded northwards towards what is now thick woodland starting at the north end of the open fields at SP 5432 5436. There is a gap in the fence, and from this point it is possible to walk north, roughly along the line of the trackbed. The vegetation gets sparser the further north you go. An example of the level of vegetation at the southern end of this section is given in Figure 6. The adjacent ground rises slightly, so the trackbed is in a shallow cutting for some of this section.



Figure 5 Looking south along the side of a wood roughly where the trackbed was. Scraps of former railway artefacts can be seen behind the wire fence (SP 5430 5428).



Figure 6 Looking south along the trackbed between Charwelton and Woodford Halse where the overgrowth is thicker than the section further north (roughly SP 5435 5466).

Further north as the vegetation thins, there are some low fences that suggest equestrian use (Figure 7). At SP 5429 5492 the Jurassic Way passes above on an overbridge (Figure 8). The cutting continues northwards with a well-used clear track where the railway would have been. The surrounding land falls as the trackbed approaches the River Cherwell, and the cutting becomes a small embankment. Near SP 5393 5565 the river must flow below in a culvert. A view of the trackbed along the embankment near here is shown in Figure 9.



Figure 7 Looking south along the trackbed between Charwelton and Woodford Halse (roughly SP 5435 5468).



Figure 8 Looking south at the overbridge where the Jurassic Way crosses (SP 5429 5492).



Figure 9 Looking south along the trackbed south of Charwelton (SP 5388 5574).

North of the river crossing, the trackbed is once again in a cutting as it approaches Church Street, which passes above on a bridge (SP 5384 5582). The trackbed is blocked at this bridge (Figure 10). From the top of the bridge, it is possible to look north at the continuation of the trackbed (Figure 11) and see that the cutting continues for another 300m to the A361 at SP 5368 5612. At this point, it is possible to stand on the pavement by the A361 looking south, and it appears that the cutting comes to an abrupt end a few metres south of the road. It isn't clear if the cutting has been filled in at the road, or if the cutting simply becomes so shallow that it reaches the road-level naturally (Figure 12).



Figure 10 Looking north along the trackbed to the overbridge on Church Street in Charwelton (SP 5384 5582).



Figure 11 Looking north from the bridge over the trackbed on Church Street in Charwelton (SP 5384 5582).



Figure 12 Looking south from the A361 across the road from the entrance to the new development at the Catesby Tunnel (SP 5368 5612).

North of the A361, the trackbed is occupied by an organisation that has converted the Catesby Tunnel (further north) for testing cars. The trackbed is not accessible but it is possible to walk nearby and observe the development as far as the southern portal of Catesby Tunnel. The front of the development on the A361 at SP 5368 5612 is shown in Figure 13. The trackbed continues northwards to the Preston Capes-Priors Marston Road at SP 5357 5632, passing under a bridge (Figure 14). North of this the trackbed proceeds for 700m in an ever-deepening cutting, the base now covered in tarmac towards a new building for the road-testing organisation at SP 5333 5699, just south of the southern portal of the Catesby Tunnel, as shown in Figure 15.



Figure 13 Looking north at the building at the front of the new development at Catesby Tunnel on the A361 near Charwelton (SP 5368 5612).



Figure 14 Looking south-east from the bridleway west of the railway cutting, showing the developed trackbed and the road bridge (camera at SP 5352 5640).



Figure 15 Looking east over the trackbed at the new building in front of the southern portal of Catesby Tunnel (camera at SP 5332 5690).