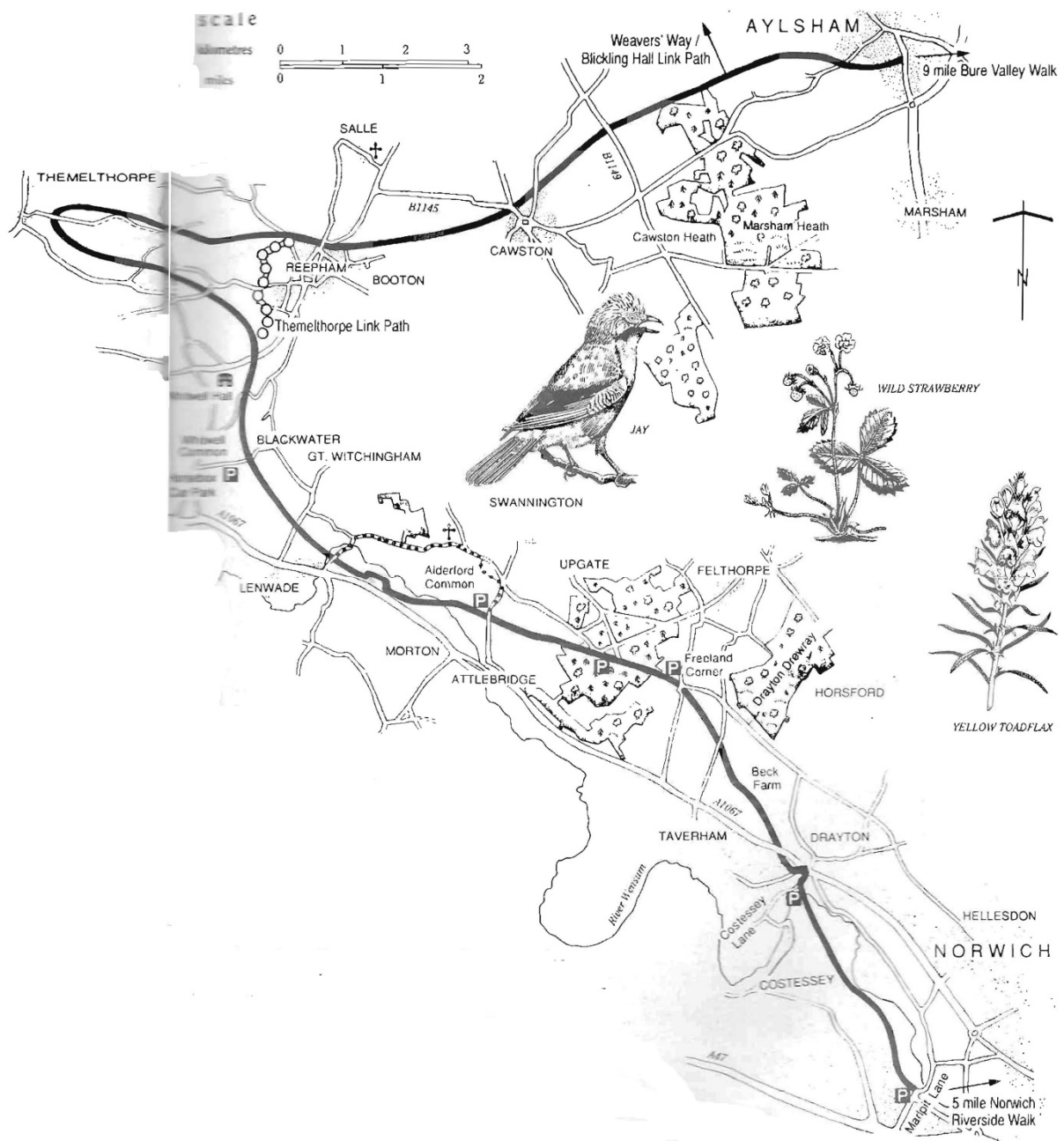


Marriott's Way

In 1979 the route of the former M&GN Railway from Norwich to Lenwade (a length of seven miles) was opened to walkers, cyclists and horse riders for them to use as a footpath and bridleway. The route was named after William Marriott who was the chief engineer and manager of the M&GN system for 41 years.

A further 14 miles has now been purchased and the route has been extended from Lenwade to Aylsham via Whitwell, Themelthorpe, Reepham and Cawston. The walk finishes in Aylsham opposite the station of the Bure Valley Light Railway.



The walk was officially opened on 1st May 1991 by the chairman of the county council's Countryside Committee, Ingrid Floering Blackman. The route is not a public

right of way, but members of the public are invited to use it as a footpath and bridleway at their own risk.

The purchase and development has been carried out by Norfolk County Council, Broadland District Council and Norwich City Council with further assistance from South Norfolk District Council, Costessey Parish Council and the Countryside Commission. Discussions were started with British Rail in 1987 to purchase the 14-mile section and these were concluded in December 1990 when contracts were exchanged and the implementation work commenced.

Part of the agreement was for the county council to also take over the bridges and put them (and keep them) in good order – all 35 of them! Urgent work costing £44,000 has had to be carried out on the bridges at Lenwade and Whitwell. Although a lot of money has had to be spent it is intended that no further structural repair will be required for a least another 20 years; it is ironic that the sleepers used to repair the bridges were imported from Holland as good sleepers at a reasonable price are no longer available in this area.

While walkers and cyclists are to be encouraged there have been efforts made to discourage the motorcyclists who use and churn up the track. A large number of gates, stiles and fences have been erected and these should make it difficult for the motorcyclist; the large gates will be padlocked but are there to allow maintenance vehicles to get in and out.

Horse riders have been presented with gates that can be opened without dismounting and three horse ramps have been built to allow horses and riders to get down easily from embankments, the best local example is alongside the bridge over Orchard Lane.

The route is well signed with small unobtrusive signs on all the gates and larger sign boards, which offer route detail and some of the basic rules to be followed. When the railway was in operation the wildlife was very restricted. The track vegetation was frequently cut, sprayed or burned off so that the trains were not obstructed by scrub and the sparks from the passing steam engines did not set fire to the track. It was only a very limited range of wild animals and plants that survived under such conditions. In the years since the closure limited work has been carried out and the vegetation has been allowed to encroach back in some places nearly across the track. A priority was to create a strip four metres wide along the whole length and this has meant that a great deal of vegetation has had to be cleared or cut back; this seems visually drastic but a season's growth will heal the wounds.



With exceptions of where the track starts and finishes in Norwich and Aylsham the only other place in its 21-mile length where houses come up to the track is in Reepham where the Richmond Rise estate and the houses along Cawston Road come up to the track; it is intended to plant trees to soften this view. Generally there are some excellent views from Marriott's Way compared to other similar walks, particularly the local views from the embankments beyond Whitwell Station looking towards Reepham, at Kerdiston looking towards Pettywell and on the line beyond Orchard Lane looking towards Cawston.

Since the closure, a range of wildlife has colonised the line. Trees and shrubs are the main colonists, including oak, field maple, thorns, apple and the rarer spindle with its distinctive coral-pink berries. The track bed and some sections of the banks have remained open, developing an interesting dry chalk grassland flora of a type that has become increasingly rare. Sections can include attractive flowering species such as wild strawberry, hare's-foot clover, great mullein and primrose.

Nature conservation work will be encouraged in a number of areas, particularly the cuttings which are good habitat for all manner of wildlife; a good example is Blackwater just southeast of Whitwell Station. Cuttings often support both a wide variety of plants and good ranges of insects, particularly nectar-feeding butterflies and moths.

In some places the track verges are wetter and species such as marsh marigold, meadowsweet, common or Norfolk reed and horsetail. Horsetails are non-flowering fern relatives, which are of particular interest as they come from a very ancient family that has survived almost unchanged for over 40 million years.

The most frequent animals that will be encountered are insects and birds; bird species include jay, magpie, goldfinch, wren and green woodpecker (which is noticeable when flying because of its loud, laughing song).

One aspect relating to wildlife that will not meet with everyone's approval is the control of rabbits; this work is not only essential but is also a statutory obligation under the 1953 Rabbit Act. While many walkers will have enjoyed watching the rabbits that live in the embankments near the meadows off Back Lane beyond

Broomhill, they will, I'm sure, appreciate that the large numbers that can be seen must be controlled. With the purchase of the line the necessity of this control has now passed to the county council.

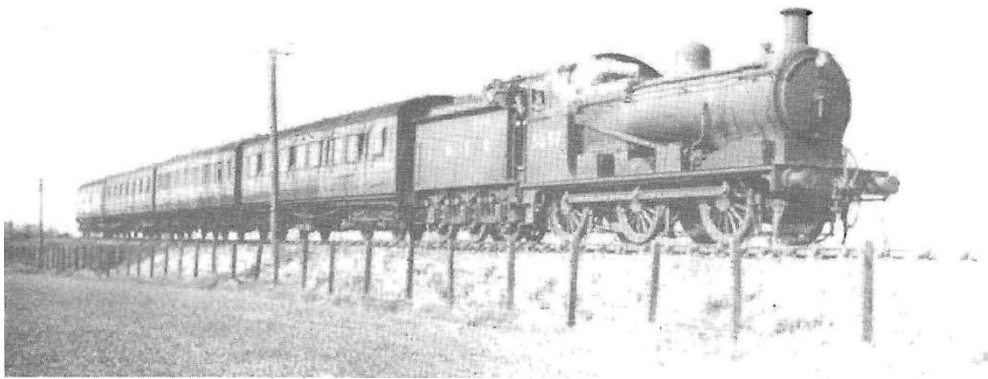


The walk is now officially open; it passes through some lovely Norfolk countryside and is there not just to be used by mainly to be enjoyed. The closure of the railways may have been regretted but now the old routes have been opened up they can be appreciated at a pace that is probably comparable with the speed of the steam engines that for 70 years plied their way backwards and forwards through this countryside.

One point will, however, never be fully accepted; the name Marriott's Way. The Themelthorpe–Norwich length is the route of the M&GN railway while the Themelthorpe–Aylsham length was originally run by the GER. The two companies ran in competition for many years, competition which was at times fierce and which fuelled solid loyalties among its employees. While the two companies were amalgamated with the nationalisation in 1948 and the two lines were physically joined in 1960, many people will never agree that an area of GER line should be known as Marriott's Way.



From an article published in the Reepham Society Magazine, 1991



J17 No. 5567. "Trains you could set your watch by" – changed into LNER livery the 3.52 pm to Norwich approaches Whitwell in May 1949.



E4 No. 2780. The 2.33 pm from Wroxham to Dereham, about to enter Reepham Station in April 1949.



J15 No. 5478. The 12 noon from Dereham at Reepham in August 1948.