

Low Moor Walks – Number 5



Victoria Park from a postcard sent in 1906

The Low Moor Explosion

Victoria Park – Spen Valley Greenway – Footpaths on landfill site – Dealburn Road – Spen Valley Greenway – Victoria Park

Starting point: Car Park off Cleckheaton Road in Victoria Park, Oakenshaw. BD12 7AT

Buses: 268

Parking: As above

Distance: 1 mile: allow 1 hour

Surface: Some tarmac but mostly hard core paths.

From the Car Park head towards the Bowling Greens. We are at point A on the map overleaf. To your right is the 2002 memorial to those killed in the explosion. If you wish to walk to the spot shown on the postcard at the head of this page, **follow the path, with the playground on your right, towards the War Memorial by the far gate of the park near Cross Road.** Point B on the map.

The photograph shows the park in 1906 with a different layout of paths and flower beds. Beyond the railway embankment is chimney of the Woodroyd or Towers Dyeworks of J and M S Sharpe Ltd at the left, with the furnaces of the Low Moor Iron Works at the right. The Low Moor Chemical Works, later the Munitions Company are in the dip across the railway line.

If it's summer when you do the walk, trees will block your view of the former railway embankment but you can get an idea of what the area looked like.

Now retrace your steps to the Car Park and leave it by a path at the far side. Victoria Park was laid out in 1897 and enlarged in 1900. following the Wibsey and Low Moor Enclosure Act. The derelict walls and brick building at the far end were part of the North Bierley Gas Works, opened in 1860 and sold to Bradford Council in 1900.

The path soon meets the Spen Valley Greenway. The Greenway follows the route of the old Lancashire and Yorkshire Railways track from Bradford to Cleckheaton and beyond. Pause to get your bearings on the map overleaf, where we have reached point C.

To the right you can see the new Low Moor Station which is due to open in 2017 and beyond it the bridge over the A638, Cleckheaton Road. The original station, which closed in 1965, was accessed from steps down from the other side of the bridge.

Turn left along the Greenway (ignore the entry on your right) eventually passing part of the site of the short lived Transperience Museum of the 1990s. When the green metal fence on your right ends, you will see mounted on the large stones, the memorial to those who died in the Explosion. This was erected by Low Moor Local History Group in 2016. at point D

If you study the embankments marked on the map you will realise that in 1916 the railway line had a steep drop on **both** sides. This area has changed beyond recognition since the large scale landfill of the 1980s. A signal box stood near this site and photographs 4, 5 and 6 overleaf were taken from near this point.

Turn right though the access point and go past the railings round a small pond and follow the path up the embankment. When you emerge from the trees at the top, do not follow the path, but turn left across the grass and walk up the hill beside the fence. Where the fence posts end turn right and go up the hillside to reach a flat grassy area. You will find a path just in front of the tree line. We turn right here This is point E.

This is the site of the Woodroyd or Towers Dyeworks shown on the postcard. It's very hard to imagine what this area would have looked like in 1916 – a busy industrial site full of workers and machinery and the smells associated with a dyeworks!

Looking back you have a wonderful panorama across the valley towards Oakenshaw, Bierley and Birkenshaw.

With trees to your left, walk to the end of the grassy area to meet a path coming from Wilson Road (F) on your left. Turn right here and follow the path up the slight rise before dropping down towards the industrial area. Walk past the belt of trees and stop where the path meanders to the left.

To your left in the distance is the New Road Side area of Wyke. Moving around to the right you can see New Works Road and the vast premises of BASF chemicals, then Raw Nook, Cleckheaton Road and the park where we started this walk.

It has been said this was an accident waiting to happen. Behind us a dyeworks, to the left the New Biggin Site of Low Moor Ironworks, to the right the gas works, running by all of them, the railway, and in the middle, a munitions factory manufacturing picric acid as an explosive.

Monday 21st August 1916 was a fine, warm day and the people of Low Moor were going about their business. The previous month the Battle of the Somme had resulted in many casualties from the area and families were mourning the loss of loved ones. Over 200 men and women were employed

at the Low Moor Munitions Company doing their bit for the war effort, manufacturing picric acid to fill shells.

As two men were moving some drums of acid, a spark seems to have ignited, causing a fire. The works fire brigade tried to get the blaze under control but it was soon apparent help was needed. At 2.33pm a call was made to Bradford Central Fire Station in Nelson Street and soon a motorised engine arrived from nearby Odsal Fire Station. The engine did not enter the works but the firemen did and assisted those already trying to put the flames out.

In the meantime, a general panic had ensued and work people fled for their lives alerting others as they ran. Two fire engines had arrived from Central and in all eighteen firemen were ready to tackle the blaze when an explosion knocked everyone off their feet. A second more powerful explosion followed which destroyed the "Hayhurst" fire engine and resulted in the deaths of six of the firemen and injured the remaining twelve.

When debris hit one of the gas holders it caused a huge fireball whose heat was felt almost a mile away and which was seen from all over the district. Explosion followed explosion for the rest of the afternoon and when eventually the blaze was under control it was realised there had been a huge loss of life.

In addition to the six firemen 34 other people lost their lives including the manager of the Munition Works, John Majerus, who had been leading the works firefighting team.

The site of the munitions works is now forty feet or so underneath the landfill.

Follow the path, keeping to the left near the bottom of the hill and going through the entry onto Dealburn Road. Turn right. The Household Waste site opposite is point G on the map and we are told cellars of the houses destroyed by the blast were encountered when the site was constructed.

Follow the road and at the roundabout turn right. Go straight forward at the end and re-join the Greenway. Turn left and then right to retrace your steps back to the start.

If you want to find out more about the explosion visit our website www.lmlhg.org.uk. Follow the "more about" link to the 1916 Explosion pages. There you will also find details about books telling you much more about the events and the people who were involved in this tragic disaster.

"The Low Moor Explosion.....a mystery explained" by Ron Backwell an augmented reprint in 2016 of the original 1987 book

"Yellow Poppies" by Barbara Reardon and Mary Twentyman – biographies of those who died in the explosion or received a national award as a result. Published 2016

You can download further copies of this leaflet from our website www.lmlhg.org.uk
There are four other walks in this series

You may also be interested in our South Bradford Local History Alliance website www.sblha.com which contains parish and other local records and links to related websites.

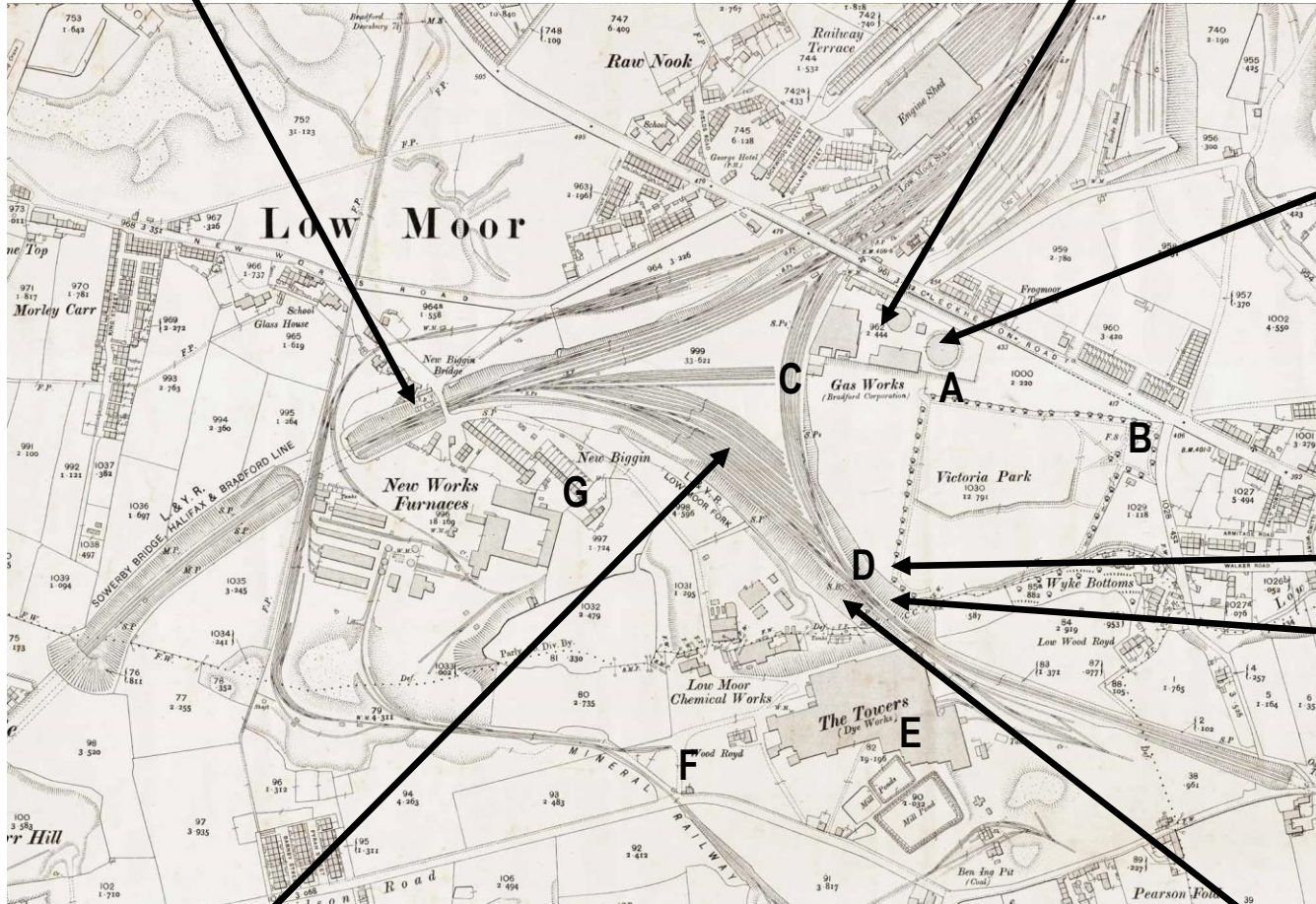
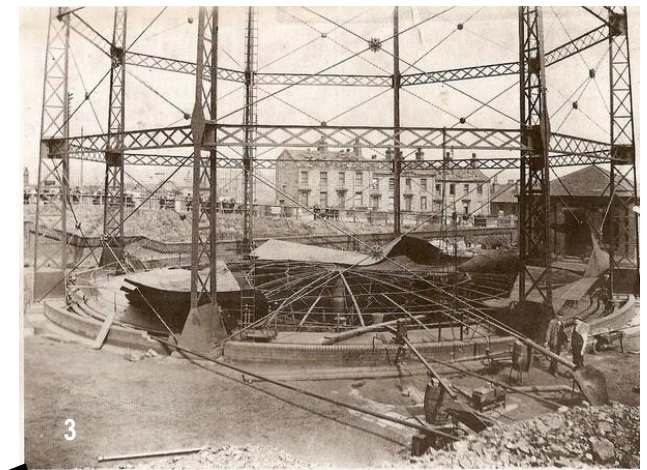
Low Moor Local History Group meets on the first Friday of each month (except August) at 2.30pm at Aldersgate Methodist Church. Common Road, BD12 0TW. Visitors and new members are welcome.

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Thanks to BASF - The Chemical Company – for printing this leaflet



(1) The damaged signal box stood by the bridge. The bridge is no longer there, but you can see the site within the trading estate. Two views of the devastated gas holders
 (2) Looking from Cleckheaton Road towards a brick building, part of which is still standing,
 (3) Looking in the opposite direction, across Cleckheaton Road towards Furnace Road



(7) Trains in the sidings were damaged by the blast.
 (6) The wreckage of the signal box is almost unrecognisable. Photos 4, 5 and 6 were taken from a site very near to where the memorial plaque now stands on the Greenway



(4) and (5) This is the aftermath of the explosion. You can see the boundary fence, which was patrolled 24 hours a day near the bottom right. The munitions works are in the foreground and the ironworks in the distance.