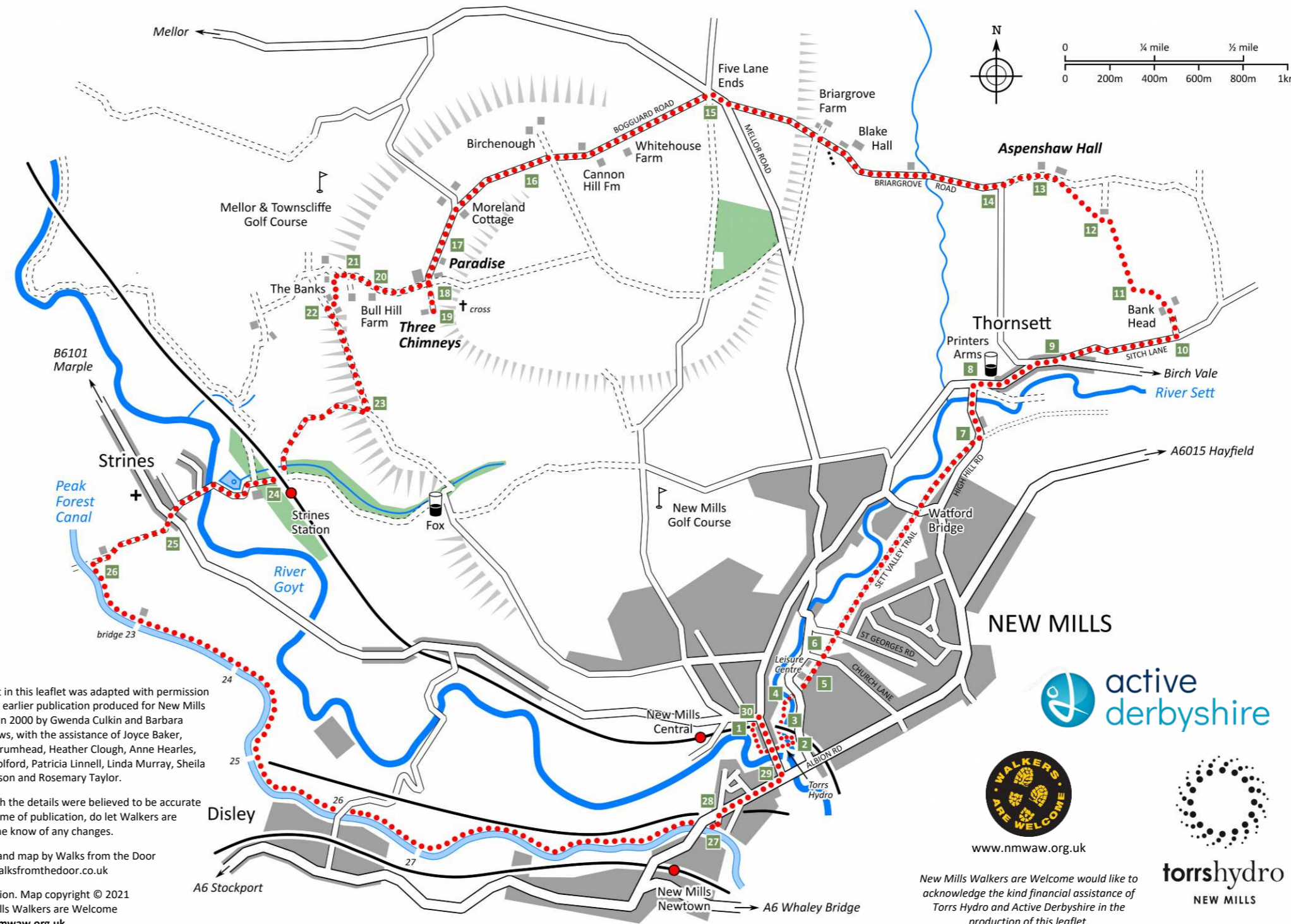


WALK 3 The Nesbit Connection

The EDITH NESBIT LITERARY TRAIL



NEW MILLS



The text in this leaflet was adapted with permission from an earlier publication produced for New Mills Library in 2000 by Gwenda Culkin and Barbara Matthews, with the assistance of Joyce Baker, Derek Brumhead, Heather Clough, Anne Hearles, Keith Holford, Patricia Linnell, Linda Murray, Sheila Richardson and Rosemary Taylor.

Although the details were believed to be accurate at the time of publication, do let Walkers are Welcome know of any changes.

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NEW MILLS

from a burning boat and alerted the bargee who was drinking in the Rose and Crown. There was a boatsmen's pub named the Rose and Crown at Bugsworth Basin, so perhaps the author used a little literary licence there.

Before moving to Cobden Edge, the Deakins lived above the canal at nearby Ridge End. Although there is no evidence that Edith Nesbit ever visited this side of the valley, she was certainly familiar with canal features such as locks and aqueducts, both of which are mentioned in *The Railway Children*.



The lake at the former calico printworks at Strines. The Chinese-style dovecote on the island, probably constructed in the late 19th century, is a designated Grade-II-listed building, as is nearby Strines Hall, a stone house dating from the 17th century.

The Edith Nesbit Society

The Edith Nesbit Society was founded in 1996 and aims to celebrate the life and work of the author and her friends, by means of talks, publications and visits to relevant places.

www.edithnesbit.co.uk

north of Chesterfield. Strines Station became an unstaffed halt on 10th September 1973, and a year later the buildings were demolished.

Calico printing at Strines started in 1792. The remaining works, dating back to the 1920s, were demolished in 2003–07 but the clock survives.

The small black and white church of St Paul's at Strines was opened in August 1880. On 11th November that same year the first baptism took place. The child was Godfrey Pariss Deakin, nephew of Edith Nesbit. The Deakins were living at Ridge End at this time.

Strines to New Mills

25 Cross the main road and walk up the track opposite towards the canal.

26 Just before the aqueduct take the stile on the left-hand side and walk onto the canal. Turn left and continue on the canal passing bridges 23 to 28.

27 Pass Brunswick Mills and turn left onto Victoria Street, opposite the marina.

28 Walk down Victoria Street and turn right onto Albion Road.

29 Keep walking until you come to the traffic lights. Turn left onto Union Road.

30 Cross Union Bridge high over the River Goyt and continue uphill back to the bus station.

The Peak Forest Canal was built for the purpose of transporting limestone from the Peak District quarries. Engineered by Benjamin Outram, the summit level from Marple to Bugsworth was opened in 1796.

A wharfinger's house once stood across the canal adjacent to the aqueduct and, at a wharf alongside, canal boats from the pits at Poynton once unloaded their cargoes. Horse-drawn carts then transported the coal down to the printworks. When the children in the book eventually discovered the canal, they did not experience the same friendliness from the bargees that they had from their friends on the railway. In particular there was a boy who threw coal at them from a boat while they were fishing. This situation changed after the children rescued a baby

9½ MILES – ALLOW 5 HOURS.

A lengthy circular walk from New Mills bus station, mostly on roads and well-defined paths and tracks, but with some significant ascents and descents.

It is believed that Edith Nesbit, author of *The Railway Children*, set her famous book around Strines Station and the railway line between Marple and New Mills. The writer’s half-sister, Sarah Deakin, and her husband John first resided at Ridge End, Marple, and later at Cobden Edge, Mellor. Electoral rolls show the Deakins to be living at Paradise during the 1880s. This was a property next to the cottage of Three Chimneys, the name of the house used in *The Railway Children*. It was here, overlooking the Goyt Valley at Strines, high above the smoking chimney of Strines Printworks and the railway along which the steam trains travelled, that Edith Nesbit came to visit her relatives. Her friendship with the Woodcock family of Aspenshaw Hall also allowed her to become familiar with the surrounding countryside which overlooked the industrial scenes of Thornsett and Birch Vale Printworks. The contrasting landscape of isolated hilly upland with industrial activity in the valleys appears to have inspired the author in her writings.

New Mills to Thornsett

1 Starting at New Mills bus station, locate the Torr Vale Mill viewpoint at the rear, and walk down the steps into the Torrs, then turn left under the Union Road Bridge.

2 Pass to the left of Torrs Hydro and take the upstream (left-hand) of the two footbridges over the River Sett. Turn left (upstream), then recross the river at the next bridge.

3 Pass under the railway arch. Ignoring the cobbled road leading up to the left, stay alongside the river then climb the steps to the old railway bridge by the tunnel mouth.

4 Turn right over the river, and pass under Hyde Bank Road on the old railway, now the Sett Valley Trail.

5 Walk behind the Leisure Centre and Medical Centre before crossing Church Lane.

6 Follow the path through the dip up to St. George’s Road, cross over the road, and continue on the trail, with the housing estate on your right and the river on your left.

7 Continue on the trail, passing over Watford Bridge Road, until the next gate at High Hill Road, where you come off the trail. Turn left along the road where you will see a sign for Thornsett, passing a row of houses and a cemetery on the right-hand side.

8 Ignoring the road to the Trading Estate, turn right up into the hamlet of Thornsett.

The sandstone gorge known as the Torrs was once the scene of the early cotton industry in New Mills, with several water-powered mills operating here. Across from the Millennium Walkway is Torr Vale Mill, the oldest of the riverside mills. The remains of Rock Mill are situated below the walkway, while the Torr Mill ruins can be seen through the arches. A group of mills was later built around the Peak Forest Canal at Newtown. These dark satanic mills were used by Nesbit as a setting for a series of short stories published in the *Daily Despatch* in 1884, entitled *The Social Cobweb*. They concern a man from London who obtained mill work in a north-country town called “Old Mills”, a place described as “not a large town, where great mills and factories with high chimneys sent forth clouds of smoke. The streets are paved with round stones and stone cottages have a bit of a garden.”

The opening of the Union Road viaduct in 1884 was one of the most important events in the history of New Mills, and was marked by a fortnight of celebrations. As it was built at the time that Edith Nesbit was writing about “Old Mills”, she must have been aware of its construction. Was it “the great bridge with tall arches running across the end of the valley” referred to in *The Railway Children*?

The Prophet’s Mantle, written jointly by Edith Nesbit and her husband Hubert Bland and published in 1889, is set partly at Thornsett. The central character travels from London to “the melancholy little station of Firth Vale”, a likely corruption of Birch Vale. The Sett Valley Trail runs along the disused railway line from New Mills to Hayfield. Birch Vale Station once served the inhabitants of Thornsett.

Thornsett to Aspenshaw

9 Passing the Printer’s Arms, a row of cottages, a converted church and another row of cottages, turn left into Sitch Lane and continue up the hill past an area of woodland concealing a small disused quarry on the right.

10 Take the next public footpath on the left, through a metal gate towards Bank Head Farm. Pass the farmhouse and go through the middle of the three gates facing, and walk along the path by the side of the wall on the left.

11 Go over the second stile you encounter in the corner of the field and walk towards the nearest house you can see – New House Farm.

12 Walk past the gate, turn left over the stile and pass the front of the house. Bearing left and keeping to the footpath, head towards Aspenshaw Cottages.

13 Go over the stile opposite the cottages and turn left passing Aspenshaw Hall.

Thornsett is mentioned in the Domesday Book and is one of the four hamlets making up the township of New Mills. At the time Edith Nesbit visited the area, the calico-printing industry was at its peak in the Sett valley, with several printworks and associated trades in operation. Garrison Dye and Bleach Works at Thornsett ceased production in 1968, but this former industry is reflected in the name of the pub The Printer’s Arms. *The Prophet’s Mantle* opens with local mill-owner Richard Ferrier drawing his last breath at Thornsett Edge. Sons Richard and Roland inherit the works but due to a disagreement, a “trouble at t’mill” situation develops, resulting eventually in the closure of the mill. A little spice is added to the story with the seduction of Alice Hatfield, “the brightest, as well as the fairest, in Thornsett village.” As the unemployed workers are dispersed far and wide, Thornsett is left in a state of decay, with a haunted, ghostly air about the village.

Walking across this high hilly landscape in the footsteps of the author and her friends from nearby Aspenshaw Hall, one can see where she got her inspiration from for several of her stories. *The Prophet’s Mantle* opens with the words “The light was fading among the Derbyshire hills.” The Ferriers’ house at Thornsett Edge, built of grey stone with a moorland background, is purely fictional, but it could

be modelled on several of the farmhouses around the hillside. In *The Head*, Morris Diehl finds himself “lost on these confounded Derbyshire hills in the grey of a winter’s dusk.” The stone walls across the fields are compared to the “blue-grey lines of a copy book.”

Aspinshaw Farm, a corruption of Aspenshaw, is associated with *From the Dead*, a short story in which Ida flees to darkest Derbyshire after confessing that she tricked her husband into marriage. Following a deathbed summons from Ida, husband Arthur arrives at Marple Station and takes a “long drive over bleak hills”, only to arrive at the farm too late. The fictional long low building of Aspinshaw resembles more the older buildings of New Houses and Feeding Hay farms than the real Aspenshaw Farm, seen in the fields across the lane.

Aspenshaw Hall was at one time three storeys high. During the period Edith Nesbit visited the house, the Woodcock family were in residence and they became fascinated with their unconventional visitor, with her short hair and uncorseted figure. The men in particular greatly admired her, and she in turn enjoyed their attention. In *The Prophet’s Mantle*, the hall is described as “a very pretty house of grey stone with a good deal of ivy about it, the grounds full of evergreens and shrubs.” It was the home of John Stanley and Miss Clare Stanley, a lady held in affection by both Roland and Richard Ferrier.

Aspenshaw to Three Chimneys

14 About 200 yards past Aspenshaw Hall there is a small green island at a road junction. At this junction walk straight on into Briargrove Road. This is mainly uphill. Walk past Blake Hall on the right-hand side until you come to the junction with the main New Mills to Mellor Road.

15 Turn right towards Mellor, walk for about 100 yards and then turn left into the macadamed road.

16 Pass Cannon Hill Farm on the left-hand side and then Moreland Cottage at a road junction.

17 Bear left up the hill passing Paradise on the left-hand side.

18 Just after Paradise a track cuts across the road at right angles. Cobden Cross is on the skyline to the left. Ahead of

you is the roofline of the Three Chimneys. Walk up the steep hill to Three Chimneys the house.

Cobden Edge is Wesley country: the famous preacher is said to have admired the view and likened it to paradise, hence the name of the house, Paradise. The wooden cross close by the house was erected by the Council of Churches in 1969. It was generally considered that Edith Nesbit’s relatives lived at Three Chimneys, because it is the name used in *The Railway Children* as the house that the children and their mother went to live in, on the moors above the railway. However, recent research has proved that John Deakin and his family lived at Paradise during the 1880s, but no evidence can be found of them ever occupying Three Chimneys. George Roper, an architect, is recorded as living there with his wife and several children during the times the Deakins were at Paradise. The children of both families, including Edith’s daughter Iris, must have enjoyed the freedom of living in such an isolated place on Cobden Edge. Perhaps, like the children in the book, they too “found the rocks and hills, and valleys and trees, the canal, and above all the railway so perfectly pleasing.” Perhaps they watched the smoke of the trains winding down the valley, and loved to go down to the station. Three Chimneys cottage was built over 200 years ago to accommodate the workers employed in the quarries on Cobden Edge, which were opened to supply stone for the miles of stone walls built to enclose the land. For a time during the last century, the cottage became a tea-room, serving the hikers that were transported by the railway to walk the Derbyshire hills. The white-painted cottage is a landmark for miles around.

Across the valley Mellor Church can be seen, situated on top of the hill. It was here in the churchyard that the broken-hearted Arthur buried his beloved Ida in *From the Dead*.

In one of the cottages of the small hamlet of The Banks (then known as The Bongs), the first Methodists of the area met. John Wesley came to preach here on three occasions between 1745 and 1748.

Down in the valley the railway lies hidden; sadly

there is no smoke from the steam trains to reveal its position today.

Three Chimneys to Strines

19 From Three Chimneys, retrace your steps to the junction opposite Paradise. Take the first road on the left.

20 Pass Bull Hill Farm on the left-hand side and the golf course on the right-hand side, where the road becomes a rough track. Keep straight on down the track running alongside the wall for a short way.

21 Turn left through an old gatepost, with a view including the site of the former Strines Printworks. Pass through a cluster of cottages (The Banks).

22 Turn left and continue straight ahead, along a narrow pathway bordered by fences.

23 The path ends at The Cottage. Take a sharp right and follow the path downhill to Strines Railway Station.

24 Walk under the bridge and follow the road until you get to the B-road between New Mills and Marple.

To quote from the famous book, “Let’s go down and look at the railway. There might be trains passing.”

The railway between Marple and New Mills was opened in 1865, the extension to Hayfield following in 1868. When opened it was known as the Marple, New Mills and Hayfield Railway. From its approach to Marple, the line passes through attractive rural scenery with two huge stone viaducts carrying the line over the River Goyt. Immediately before Strines Station the railway crosses the boundary between Cheshire and Derbyshire.

At the time that Edith Nesbit was visiting the area, the station was very different compared to today, with Victorian platform furniture including gas lamps. The buildings included a booking office and waiting room warmed by a coal fire. A footbridge linked the platforms and there was a garden. In fact, Strines was a typical country station as described in *The Railway Children*. The station in the book had a siding where trucks labelled “Staveley Colliery” stood and a coal store which Peter called his “coal mine”. Examination of a plan of Strines Station dated 1900 shows a siding and also a coal store on the platform. Staveley is a coal-mining district in Derbyshire,