## Thomas Brassey and his link to Heritage Railways No 9

## The Hooton to Parkgate Section of the Wirral Country Way

Thomas Brassey was awarded a contract by the Birkenhead Joint Railway in 1865 for the construction of a single-line branch from Hooton to a terminus at Parkgate, Wirral, Cheshire. The line, a total of 5 miles in length, included the construction of a sandstone cutting in the section between Mellock Lane and Lees Lane, Little Neston. There were two intermediate stations at Neston (later Neston South) and Hadlow Road, Willaston. Provision was also made for later doubling (never carried out) and extension beyond Parkgate (completed by others in 1886)

Passenger services gradually increased through the early years and freight traffic was boosted with the opening of the colliery at Neston in 1874. The inter war years probably saw the peak traffic for both passenger and freight. The colliery closed in 1927 significantly affecting goods traffic due to the loss of the coal trains. By 1950 passenger services on the branch line had begun to decline as bus services offered an alternative means of travel and car ownership expanded. Increasing financial losses became unsustainable and passenger traffic ceased in 1956. Freight traffic continued on for a further few years until that service too came to an end in 1962. Following closure little time was wasted in the demolition and by 1964 most structures had been removed.

Happily there was to be a life after closure for the railway. In 1968 the line was bought by Cheshire County Council and 12 miles of track bed between Hooton and West Kirkby secured. Following much consultation it was decided to turn the railway into a linear country park. Formerly opened in 1973 it became the Wirral Way and the first such country park in Britain.

Whilst Brassey's former railway would never see a train running over it again, due to the initiative of the Council, the track bed remains largely intact and the efforts of Brassey and his considerable work force can still be seen in the rock cutting referred to earlier. The former railway station at Hadlow Road was saved from demolition and is now beautifully restored as a museum and coffee shop. The work of Thomas Brassey completed over 150 years ago lives on.



*The surviving platform and station buildings at Hadlow Road, Willaston in 2022.*




*Hadlow Road station as viewed from the level crossing and looking towards Hooton in 2022.*