

Govan Riverside Walkway

Recent news that Govan Workspace has been awarded funding of £500,000 to refurbish the riverside walkway between [Water Row](#) and Govan Old Parish Church will see part of a historic right-of-way re-established in Govan.

At the start of the 19th century small ships were able to navigate the River Clyde to the harbours of Glasgow by tides and winds or by using poles on calm days; however, larger ships were towed by men walking along the riverbank, with no proper towing path these men often had to climb fences or cross marshland before getting to Glasgow.

Thomas Telford the celebrated engineer who was working on the deepening of the Clyde recommended a proper towpath be constructed and that horses should be used rather than men. As the north bank had a natural obstacle of the River Kelvin the south bank of the river was favoured. The towpath opened c1806 and was originally 20ft wide, extended for 5 miles between Glasgow and Renfrew and passed through the village of Govan.

Due to the advent of steamships its use as towpath had rapidly declined by 1825; however, the path remained a right-of-way providing a pleasant pastoral walk along the river bank. It has been noted that it was common for Glaswegians to spend some of their leisure time walking along the rural river footpath passing the quaint thatched cottages of Govan village and perhaps stopping at one of the villages many inns to partake in a glass of ale or wine before a pleasant walk back to Glasgow.

For many years the people of Govan and Glasgow were to have unhampered access to the river bank, when the first shipyards arrived in Govan in the late 1830s the right-of-way was still maintained with the yards building wooden walkways across their building berths, these wooden walkways were covered with canopies at places to provide protection to the public from those working on the bow of the ships above. The walkway was inconvenient for the shipyards as it had to be dismantled to allow ships to be launched, after the launch it had to be put back in place to restore the right-of-way, this also inconvenienced the public who could find the walkway removed weeks before and after a launch.

By 1900 the right-of-way now ran from [Highland Lane](#) to Linthouse Burn, shortened after encroachment to the west in Renfrew and to the east with the building of the Prince's Dock and Graving Docks.

In 1907 a letter was sent to Govan Town Council regarding Fairfield not providing a ferry service across their fitting out basin during a holiday period, the basin had been built at the Fairfield yard in the 1870s and a pontoon footbridge was built across the entrance of the basin to maintain the right-of-way; however, in 1905 when the basin was widened the footbridge was replaced by a ferry service. Assurances were given to Govan Town Council by Fairfield that the ferry service across the basin would resume, later reports of the right-of-way at the yard being closed for up to 6 weeks on occasions to allow ships to be launched from Fairfield were also recorded.



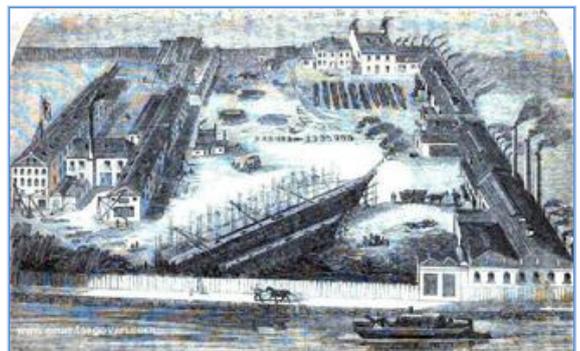
Pat Cassidy, managing Director of Govan Workspace who have just secured £500,000 funding to refurbish this historic riverside walkway in Govan.

Photo © Mark Mainz. [Evening Times](#)



Michael Honeyman's picturesque painting of the footpath in 1843 looking eastward to Glasgow from Govan's Clydebrae Commons. Within the wooded area to the right are the country villas of Clyde Villa and Bankton at Cessnock. This part of the footpath was removed with the building of the Prince's Dock and Graving Docks.

Photo © Glasgow City Council Museums



Just 8 years after the picturesque painting above, the scene was looking more industrial than rural when the Clyde Bank Shipbuilding Yard was built at Bankton in 1851; however, the footpath was still maintained by a wooden walkway and as this image shows was still being used as a towpath as late as 1860.

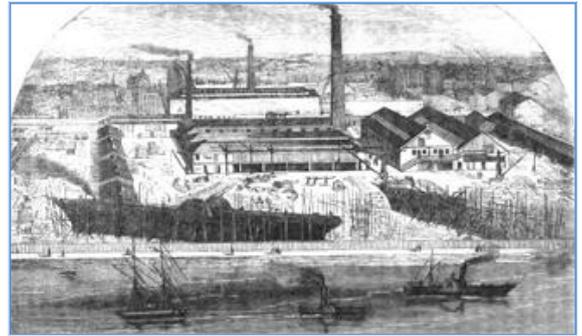
Image: George S. Measom (1861)

The walk along the footpath was now often broken by regular launches and now seemed far removed from the days of a pleasant rural stroll to and from Glasgow, the thatched cottages of Govan were replaced by tenements, the river was much busier and the ships much larger, perhaps still giving a view that was as equally enthralling as it had been in the peaceful old village days.

In 1912 Govan Town Council shortly before annexation to Glasgow began negotiations to sell the right-of-way to London & Glasgow Engineering & Iron Shipbuilding Co. Ltd at their yard. The reason given by Govan Town Council in the minute of agreement was that they were *"satisfied that the right-of-way can in the public interest be closed, and their usefulness would be outweighed by the consideration of the public advantages to accrue to the district by the increased employment of labour resulting from the improved facilities"*. The deal was completed by London & Glasgow's successors Harland & Wolff in May 1912 when the purchase price of £6000 was given to the Town Council and the right-of-way from Highland Lane to Water Row was closed. Now the only portion of the right-of-way remaining ran from Water Row to Linthouse Burn.

After [Govan's annexation](#), Glasgow Corporation sold the right-of-way to Fairfield in October 1913 for £5000, this seemed a real bargain to many as the Govan Burgh Surveyor had earlier valued the 857 yards of Fairfield waterfront at £19500. Glasgow Corporation aimed to abolish the remaining right-of-way along the Clyde with a clause in the *"Glasgow Corporation Order Bill 1914"*; this included the waterfronts at Fairfield, Alexander Stephen & Sons and also the sanctioning of the earlier sale to Harland & Wolff. The bill was met by stiff opposition and the formation of the *"Right-of-way Defence Committee"* who submitted a petition against the Order as *"Owners and Occupiers of Property in Glasgow"* in an attempt to preserve the right-of-way; among the opponents to the abolition of the right-of-way was Sir John Stirling Maxwell, Bart; however, attempts to block the clause in the order were futile as the abolition of the right-of-way was sanctioned by Parliament in 1914.

In 1912 you could walk along the riverside through Govan for 2.5 mile from Highland Lane in the east to Linthouse Burn in the west, two year later in 1914 all that remained was 400 yards running westward from Water Row at Govan Ferry to Meadowside Ferry; however, this remaining footpath was far from the idyllic riverside walk of the past, instead; on entering the footpath from Water Row we now find it halved in width from 20ft to 10ft with the imposing Harland & Wolff platers shed on the left and a 5ft fence along the riverbank to the right, it felt more like a lane than a riverside walk, it then carried on like this until [Dunvegan Street](#) where it opened out again to 20 ft, the footpath then carried on until it met [Wanlock Street](#) at the recreation ground built on Govandale Park (Once home to Linthouse F.C.) The new recreation and play park was built by Glasgow Corporation from the £5000 sale of the right-of-way to Fairfield; many Govanites will remember the park as *"the wee park at the bottom [MacKechnie Street](#)"*.



The footpath continued westward to Robert Napier's shipbuilding yard where again there was a wooden walkway that had to be dismantled to launch ships and rebuilt after. This portion of the right-of-way was sold by Govan Town Council to Harland & Wolff in 1912.

Image: George S. Measom (1861)



This 1887 painting by John MacNiven shows the wooden walkway looking westward from around Water Row towards the Old Silk Mill and Fairfield and was the only part of the right-of-way not abolished in 1914.

Photo © Glasgow City Council Museums [The Glasgow Story](#)



This photo has been taken from approximately the same location as MacNiven's painting above. It shows the footpath was still open in 1974. The foundations of the demolished Harland & Wolff's Platers shed can be seen along the left of the footpath.

Photo © Hugh Hood

After the closure of Harland & Wolff in the 1960s the path became overgrown and derelict, then the traveller community from another part of Govan moved onto the site and closed off the entrance to the path from Water Row; however, the path could still be accessed from the recreation park at MacKechnie Street, the park was demolished soon after and new housing with riverside access was built there in the 1990s.

With the closure of the shipyards and docks much of the riverside frontage has been reclaimed for public use, including footpaths at Pacific Quay on part of the former Prince's Dock, and on the site of Harland & Wolff shipyard the Riverside Housing Scheme with a public riverside walkway was built in the 1970s, this public walkway is now known as [Harland Way](#).

Now 100 years after the abolition of almost all of the riverside right-of-way it is great news that the part west of Water Row that was not abolished in 1914 will be refurbished to be once again enjoyed by Govanites and Glaswegians; however, a much needed bridge linking the Riverside Museum to the new Govan Riverside Walkway and [The Govan Stones](#) would no doubt bring the greatest benefit to Govan.



The entrance to the footpath from Water Row at the vehicle ferry was closed off in the late 1980s ending nearly 180 years of access to the footpath.

Photo: acumfaegovan.com (Sept 2012)



Other parts of the river bank have been reclaimed for public riverside walkways including Harland Way above.

Photo: acumfaegovan.com (July 2013)



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www.acumfaegovan.com/shipbuilding/right-of-way.php