

4-6 MILE WALKING GROUP – Around Auckland Park Report and photo by Ian Royston

Fortune favoured us with dry skies and even a brief appearance of early spring sunshine as five members set out on our "nested figure-of-eight" walk in and around Auckland Park. Conditions underfoot proved considerably kinder than the recce had led us to expect — a small mercy, gratefully received. Pleasingly, two of our number were new to the group, and one was attending her very first Teesdale u3a activity; we trust the day gave her every reason to return.

Departing from the palace gates, we began with the shorter loop, winding up to the deer shelter familiar to anyone who attended Bishop's *Aglow* event last winter. The path follows the River Gaunless in a gentle, unhurried fashion, and it wasn't long before the sounds of traffic and town fell away entirely.



Returning to our starting point, we crossed into town and descended steeply to pass beneath the Newton Cap Viaduct — a handsome structure that has reinvented itself from rail to road bridge — before descending onto The Batts, where interpretation boards recall a colourful history of fairs and archery. We followed the Binchester road briefly, crossed the Gaunless near its confluence with the Wear, then turned alongside the deer park wall. This stretch offered the walk's most testing terrain: muddy, undulating, and not entirely forgiving. All five of us, however, remained upright throughout — a small triumph.

We joined a short section of *The Way of Life*, one of the Northern Saints Trails linking Durham Cathedral to Gainford, with ambitions stretching onward to Santiago de Compostela for the truly committed. Our own ambitions extended only as far as the trackbed of the former Ferryhill–Spennymoor–Bishop Auckland Railway, completed by the North Eastern Railway in 1845, closed to passengers in 1952, and finally falling silent for goods in 1966. Here we paused for a well-earned snack.

The stillness was remarkable. With the town barely a mile distant, the traffic had reduced to a faint, almost imagined hum; nothing but open fields stretched to the horizon in every direction.

Walking the old railway, we paused to appreciate the robust Victorian stonework of the accommodation bridges — built simply to allow farmers continued access to land bisected

by the railway, yet constructed with a solidity that has seen them outlast the line itself by sixty years. We followed the old route back towards Bishop, turned alongside the golf course, and concluded a satisfying five-and-a-bit miles in the shadow of the new gardens at Auckland Palace.