

Glorious Gorse Hall Audio Trail (Text Version)

Stalybridge Town of Culture

Written and produced by 2 Boards & A Passion Theatre Company

1. Gates: Introduction

Welcome to Glorious Gorse Hall, a guided audio walk which will lead you around the grounds of the beautiful, historic Gorse Hall estate. It has been scientifically proven that spending time in nature has a positive impact on your well-being, helping to lower stress hormones, reduce feelings of anxiety and depression, and even helping to improve your memory. So relax, enjoy spending time outdoors and take the route at your own pace. This is time for you to slow down, enjoy the scenery and nature, and hopefully discover some interesting facts about Gorse Hall's history. If you would prefer, you can break the walk into sections, using the map and the different numbered audio tracks to pick up where you left off another day. If you would like to learn more about Gorse Hall's history, you will find several information boards along your walk, created by the Friends of Gorse Hall, which are full of fascinating facts about the site and its history. We would like to thank the Friends of Gorse Hall and the Tameside Local History Forum for their research which has helped to create this audio trail.

As you stand at the gates at the main entrance to Gorse Hall we can see the original cobbles on the floor. This is the start of a mile long driveway to the new hall at the top of the hill. We begin our walk by walking through the gates and up the driveway. As we leave Stalybridge town behind us, be aware of the sounds you can hear around you; the busy traffic on the main road, and depending on when you visit, maybe children shrieking and laughing in the playground of the nearby primary school. Part way up the hill you will see the first information board, as well as a blue plaque commemorating famous author Beatrix Potter's links to Gorse Hall. Where the road splits into two forks, take the path to the right and continue up the hill. Pass the information boards about the mills on your left, and when you reach the carving of a rabbit, play track 2.

2. Rabbit sculpture

The road up to the top of Gorse Hall is long and winding, and steep in parts, so we will take a moment to stop here and catch our breath. Your breathing may be deeper and faster as your body works hard to climb the hill. Become aware of the speed of your breathing, and how your breath begins to slow as you pause here. Once this track has finished, take a moment to listen to the new sounds around you. Be aware of how the sounds of the town are beginning to fade into the distance as the path rises higher above the town. Listen for sounds in the trees and undergrowth around you; the flapping of a bird's wings above you, or the snap of a twig below you. As you continue along this audio tour, take time to notice the birds around you who make Gorse Hall their home. You may see familiar garden birds such as blackbirds, magpies, pigeons or sparrows or you may even be lucky enough to spot a bird of prey such as a kestrel or sparrowhawk out hunting. As you continue up the hill, remember to slow down and enjoy the journey, looking and listening for things you may never usually have time to notice.

Just after this rabbit sculpture the path forks again. Follow the path up the hill to the right, towards the marker post with the single yellow band until you reach the stables on your right, clearly marked with an information board.

3. Stables

After a long steep climb to the stables and courtyard, take a moment to look at the noticeboard where you will find a beautiful artist's impression of how this area used to look. Find a low wall to sit and rest on, and take a few minutes to imagine how this area would have looked in its day. Take a deep breath in and try to imagine the smell of the horses and the hay. In Victorian times when Gorse Hall was built, wealthy families such as the Leech and Storrs families who lived at Gorse Hall would have travelled by horse, or by horse-drawn coach. The stable block would have been a busy place, housing not only the families' own horses, but also providing shelter and care for the horses belonging to visitors to Gorse Hall. The coachman and his family, and also the stable hands also lived in this block.

As you look around now, it may be hard to imagine how things once were. Parts of the outer walls where the buildings used to be are still in place, and looking inside the stables, you can still see the stalls where the horses were kept by the Leech and Storrs families. The stable block buildings were demolished over sixty years ago, and nature very quickly took over. The Friends of Gorse Hall have worked hard to uncover the remains of the various buildings around the estate, and to reclaim history being buried in the undergrowth. But even now, as you look down at the cobbles, you will see the plants effortlessly pushing their way back up between the old stones. In Summer, as you look down at the cobbles you may notice a butterfly moving from flower to flower. The longer you sit and focus your attention, more and more butterflies seem to appear in beautiful reds, browns, oranges and creams. Once this track has finished, remove your headphones for a few minutes and listen for the gentle buzz of the bees as they move around busily collecting pollen. As you listen to the sounds around you now, you will notice that the noise from the town below has all but vanished, except for the rumbling of the occasional train, or the sounds of aeroplanes overhead to break the peace. The sounds you hear will change depending on what time of year you visit, but most of the year you will be able to relax to the sound of the breeze rustling through the surrounding trees.

When you are ready to move on, walk out of the stables, and up the hill to the right. Follow this path until you reach the bowling green which is visible on your left. This will be our next stop.

4. Bowling green

Take a moment to sit on one of the stone posts on the bowling green, or on the bench overlooking the magnificent view of the area now known as Tameside. Bowling was a hugely popular pastime during the Victorian era, and a family with their own private bowling green would surely have been the talk of the town. Close your eyes and imagine the Leech family and their guests enjoying a game of bowls on a warm, Summer's day in their long dresses, bonnets and morning suits.

When you are ready to leave, cross the bowling green from the opposite side where you came in, passing the picture of the fox. Follow the path along, keeping the wall on your left. Stop when you reach the information board about the orchard.

5. Orchard / kitchen garden

Behind the wall to your left was the orchard and kitchen garden which would have supplied fresh produce to the family and staff at Gorse Hall. Imagine the smells in the air at harvest time as the workers collected the fresh apples and maybe other produce such as root and salad vegetables. Although the kitchen garden is long gone and the orchard is hidden from view, Autumn is still a

fantastic time to visit Gorse Hall to collect blackberries, with bramble bushes aplenty across the estate.

Continue along the path in the same direction that you were heading until two paths cross. Turn right at the red marker post, so that you are heading up the hill in the opposite direction to the black and silver gate posts. Follow this path until you reach the pond. Depending on the time of year the pond may or may not have water, so look out for the bulrushes and the little jetty.

6. Pond

Far above the noisy and thriving Victorian town, at the height of the industrial revolution when factories and mills were springing up in Stalybridge and the surrounding area, it is easy to see why the pond at the top of the estate might be seen as a tranquil oasis away from all the hustle and bustle below. If you would like to rest, why not take five minutes to sit on the bench next to the pond and watch the world go by or watch the planes fly overhead? If there is water in the pond at the time of your visit you might be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of some of the wildlife that lives here, including pond skaters, mayflies, dragonflies and maybe even an occasional newt.

When you are ready to leave, cross over the jetty and follow the path towards the break in the hedge. The Millenium Viewpoint, is visible up ahead. To reach the viewpoint, turn right and then look for one of the paths on your left which take you through the trodden down grass up the hill towards the young oak tree. Pass the tree and make one final short climb up towards the viewpoint and the picture frame.

7. Viewpoint

Congratulations. You have reached the very highest point of our trail. We hope that you will agree that the view from up here definitely makes the climb worthwhile. In 2022 Manchester artist Cherry Chung was commissioned to create the spectacular Viewpoint picture frame that you see before you. The sculpture was created from steel and woven willow, and frames some of Tameside's beautiful scenery, including Hartshead Pike. Why not take a moment to take some photos to remember your day? Just behind the frame is a stone bench; an ideal place to sit and rest for a few minutes. Take a few minutes to watch the clouds roll across the large expanse of sky and listen to the wind in the trees.

When you are ready to move on, follow the path which heads down the hill past the stone bench. You will see the red brick walls and tall white chimney of Tameside hospital directly in front of you. You will pass several posts with blue markers on, on your way down. Ahead of you the path will fork once more. Take the path to the left, still following the blue markers. Follow this path down towards the left, either down, or past, the shallow steps. Pass the Summerhouse on your left, and where the paths cross, head straight over the junction. You will pass a post with red, blue and yellow markers on your right, and a Tame Valley Loop marker on your left. This path will take you to the New Gorse Hall where we will stop again.

8. New Hall.

This is the site of the New Hall which was built in 1835. The hall was dismantled in 1910 at the request of the owner's widow. The stone was taken away and used for other building projects, including the building which now houses Natwest bank in Stalybridge. If you look at the photograph

on the information board you can see how the building used to look. It is easy to imagine the sounds of the horses and carriages pulling up to the top of the cobbled driveway as the family's guests arrived for an evening of food, drink and entertainment. Why not sit in one of the old bay windows, and imagine living the life of luxury at the hall, looking out across your land, or looking down at Stalybridge town from the top bedroom windows. Although people no longer live at Gorse Hall, the site is home to a wide variety of British wildlife, including small mammals such as squirrels, badgers, rodents and foxes. Although many of the animal residents may be small and stay well hidden from view, why not look around for signs of life such as burrows, paw prints or droppings as you go.

When you are ready to move on, walk towards the memorial stone for George Harry Storrs. From here, turn to your right and follow the path down to the left of the oak tree. Follow this path downwards until you feel flagstones under foot. Turn left along the flagged path until you come to the window of the Old Hall where we will stop and look inside.

9. Old Hall

The Old Hall is over 400 years old yet, from the remains it is perhaps easier to picture what life might have been like for those who lived here in the past. From what we can see of the Old Hall today it is easy to imagine how snug and cosy it would have felt with a large crackling fire filling the old inglenook fireplace on a cold winter's night.

Moving on now, climb down into the Old Hall and leave via the doorway straight ahead of you, to the left of the fireplace. This path takes you down a few steps and through the gate posts. If you would prefer fewer steps you can retrace your steps along the flagged path. Both options bring you back to the same path; turn left onto this path back down the hill. Soon after this point, three paths come together. At this point, stop and listen to the final part of our trail.

10. Conclusion

Our audio tour of Gorse Hall is almost at an end. Before you begin to head back down to the entrance gates where we began, keep remembering to look around you. Listen to the sounds of birds calling, the gentle buzz of bees and insects around you, and the sound of the breeze through the leaves. Hear the gentle sound of the gravel crunching beneath your feet. As you descend the hill towards Stalybridge town you will start to become aware of the sounds of the town, its traffic and its people. Today you have made time for yourself, outdoors in nature, made some new memories and maybe even discovered plants and animals that you have never noticed before. As you have taken time to slow down we hope you have relaxed, and as you leave this tranquil place, know that you can relive these memories at any time.

Follow the path down the hill to bring you back to the entrance gates, and to the end of our trail. Thank you for joining us today. We hope you enjoyed your time at Glorious Gorse Hall.