

# Dunham and Bowdon



Moss Farm, Bowdon  
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View of Dunham 1792, by Dayes and Pollard by kind permission of Joan Leach



**When Manchester was linked to Altrincham by the Manchester, South Junction and Altrincham Railway in 1849 the Cheshire countryside became more easily accessible to the Gaskells. The station, then on Railway Street, was nearer to Bowdon than the present station.**

Whenever Elizabeth's children were ailing or in need of country air away from smoky Manchester, they would be taken to stay at Moss Farm in Bowdon. Perhaps their first visit was in May 1851 when Elizabeth described it to her eldest daughter Marianne:

*'It is a small old-fashioned farm ... at the foot of the hill, more's the pity; & they have a double bedded room and a sitting room. I long to go over and see them [the Walker Family].'*

On another occasion, Elizabeth's daughter Florence had been ill, probably with whooping cough and Elizabeth remarked that she was pleased Florence had eaten farmhouse bread and an egg. Her husband William spent a day with them and was met by the children at the train station. They walked into Dunham Park and it is was remarked that Florence was not too tired but had been frightened by the deer,

a sign William thought, of her weak state of health.

The children were at Bowdon again in September when they were packed off, after the rain cleared, with:

*'... a dinner in a basket & tea and sugar, to drink tea at Mrs Walker's ... I got away after a lunch dinner, rushed to Bowden (sic) ... drank tea with the children, came home at six, dressed, went to Miss Jewsbury's ...'*

Moss Farm has seen many changes. In Gaskell's day the cottage was thatched like old Moss Cottage dated 1666 on a carved lintel: a survivor that gives one an idea of the former rural charms of the area. There was a patch of green between the houses and the water came from a well, overhung with banks of primroses and king cups. As walkers meandered through the orchard with its many fruit trees, they would come to a wicket gate

and a field path to Bollin Meadows and Ashley Mill. The building up of the area came only after the young Lord Stamford inherited the estate and sold building land.

It seems Elizabeth loved the farm's wood-burning grate with its high, narrow mantel piece and it is here she talked to the Walker family about her visit to Haworth and Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*.

*'Oh Miss Betsy, if you could see that dreadful place and know the life there, you would be sorry for poor, poor Charlotte.'*

Perhaps it was at Moss Farm that she wrote *Ruth*, as she rested on the sofa. The Walker family who had owned it from the early 18th century were still telling stories of the Gaskells and the old farm in the 1940's. They described Elizabeth Gaskell as:

*'More like an angel than anything else: an angel in the house.'*

Dunham Park was a venue for Whit Monday trips by the canal. Elizabeth described these in a short story: *Libbie Marsh's Three Eras*. This was her first published story (1847), but the second 'era' may have been intended originally for *Mary Barton*: this depicts the mill workers on their rare day off and their wonder at being in the green, peaceful countryside:

*'For years ... Dunham Park [has] been the favourite resort of the Manchester workpeople: for more years than I can tell probably ever since. The Duke by his canals, opened out the system of cheap travelling. It is [in the] scenery too which presents such a complete contrast to the whirl and turmoil of Manchester; so thoroughly woodland, with its ancestral trees ...'*

the green, grassy walks, ferns, wild flowers, rabbits, wood pigeons and the hum of insects on the breeze were all entrancing to the city dwellers who could see their smoky Manchester away in the horizon.