

John Blenkinsop

John Blenkinsop was born at Low Felling, and baptised at the local parish church at Heworth on 22 June 1783. His father, grandfather and uncle were all stonemasons, but when his father died in 1802, John was mentioned in the will as being 'apprentice to Mr John Straker of Felling Hall Heworth, colliery viewer.' His apprenticeship probably would have lasted until at least 1804, so he might well have seen the Trevithick locomotive constructed that year at John Winfield's foundry in Gateshead, only a mile or two from Felling.

In autumn 1808, John Blenkinsop arrived at Middleton, to become the owner's agent in charge of the manorial estate and its long established colliery. The absentee owner was Charles John Brandling, a fellow Tynesider who obviously had confidence in the young Blenkinsop, having agreed to pay him £400 a year agency fee. John arrived at Middleton in time to begin work on 1 October. He set up home in the estate's older residence, Middleton Hall, and began to assess the colliery's problems.



Photo shows the decorative fence at Rothwell Library with a representation of the Blenkinsop/Murray loco. AM Johnson

Blenkinsop realised the problem with the few locomotives already built had been that of constructing a machine strong enough to pull a commercially viable load, without being too heavy for brittle cast-iron rails. The solution was to employ the rack and pinion principle. Thus the locomotive would wind itself along the track by this method, with no adhesion problems when hauling a train. On 10 April 1811, 'aided by the advice and suggestions of Mr. John Straker' Blenkinsop's invention was secured by Patent No.3431, which covered the rack rail and wheel, but not the steam engine design.



Matthew Murray was the obvious man to approach regarding a steam engine. He was over twenty years older than Blenkinsop. Like him, he had come to Leeds, from Tyneside, as a young man and, after working as a mechanic in a large linen mill, he left to set up a foundry in partnership with a former workmate. Known as [Fenton, Murray & Wood](#), the firm mainly made textile machinery, and stationary steam engines of a quality which rivalled that of Boulton & Watt's. The basic design of the locomotive, though often attributed to Blenkinsop, was undoubtedly Matthew Murray's. To him, as well as to Blenkinsop, is due the credit for producing these pioneer machines which for nearly a

quarter of a century successfully carried out the job for which they were designed.

John Blenkinsop predeceased the last of his beloved Patent Steam Carriages. No portrait of him seems to exist, and neither his Will nor his newspaper obituary mention a wife or children. He died, aged only forty seven, on 22 January 1831, and lies buried alone north of the base of the tower of Rothwell Parish Church.

We would like to thank Sheila Bye for contributing information about John Blenkinsop.

Detail of the wording as recorded on John Blenkinsop's grave in Rothwell, photos by AM Johnson.

Sacred

*To the memory of Mr John Blenkinsop. Upwards
steward to the Middleton Estate who departed this
Life January 22nd 1831 aged 47 years.*

Sincerely regretted by all who knew him

The Centenary observed 25 Jan 1931

*John Blenkinsop invented the rack railway in 1811
and on a line he built between Leeds and
Middleton. 4 Matthew Murray locomotives ran
from 1812 to 1833.*

*The system was adopted at Newcastle-on-Tyne in
1815 and Wigan in 1814. These railways were the
first on which steam locomotion was a commercial
success.*

Note: Middleton was in the parish of Rothwell at
the time of his death.

