


A group of cyclists is riding away from the camera on a wide, light-colored dirt path that stretches into the distance. The path is flanked by dense trees and foliage, many of which have turned yellow and orange, indicating autumn. Sunlight filters through the leaves, creating a dappled light effect on the path. The cyclists are wearing various cycling gear, including helmets and jerseys in red, pink, black, and blue. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

WILD, WILD WOMEN!

Riding the Georgian Trail

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY SANDRA J. HOWE

The Georgian Trail between Meaford and Collingwood makes the most of an old rail line, as a multi-use recreational trail.



The Georgian Trail follows the old rail line between Collingwood and Meaford, a 34-km route nestling between the Niagara Escarpment and the southern Georgian Bay shoreline. It is a multi-use, recreational trail providing access to spectacular views and welcoming communities. An autumn bike ride is just the ticket to explore the highlights of the Georgian Trail.



▲ The annual Scarecrow Invasion takes over Meaford, home of “wild, wild women!”

For railway buffs, the Georgian Trail offers many glimpses into the bygone days of train travel. The Collingwood Museum, modelled on the 1873 rail station, chronicles local history. Collingwood began as tiny Hens and Chickens Harbour, named for the bay’s islands, developed into an important shipping, agricultural, and industrial port, and is now a bustling commercial and recreational city. The railways played an important role in this transformation.

Railway Heritage

The first steam train arrived in Collingwood in 1855 on the

Ontario, Simcoe, and Huron Railway (OSHR) line. The OSHR was sometimes called the Oats, Straw, and Hay Railway because it transported agricultural commodities. This early connection between port and rail enabled trans-shipment of goods and people throughout eastern North America, giving Collingwood a huge boost to development.

The OSHR became the Northern Railway of Canada, and enabled construction from Collingwood through Thornbury to Meaford. The first locomotive rolled into Meaford at Station Hill in 1872. In 1902, the line was extended to Meaford harbour and a new station was built by

the Grand Trunk Railway. The Canadian National Railway (CNR) took over in 1923 with passenger service lasting until 1962. As the trains rolled into town, the whistle sang out, and the conductor’s voice carried: “Meaford, end of the line, the home of the Georgian Bay trout, and wild, wild women!”

With improved highways and private vehicles, Ontario’s railways declined. The CNR line from Collingwood to Meaford saw its last freight train in 1972. Stations were demolished. In the 1980s, the tracks were removed but the rail bed was protected. This became the Georgian Trail which opened in 1989.

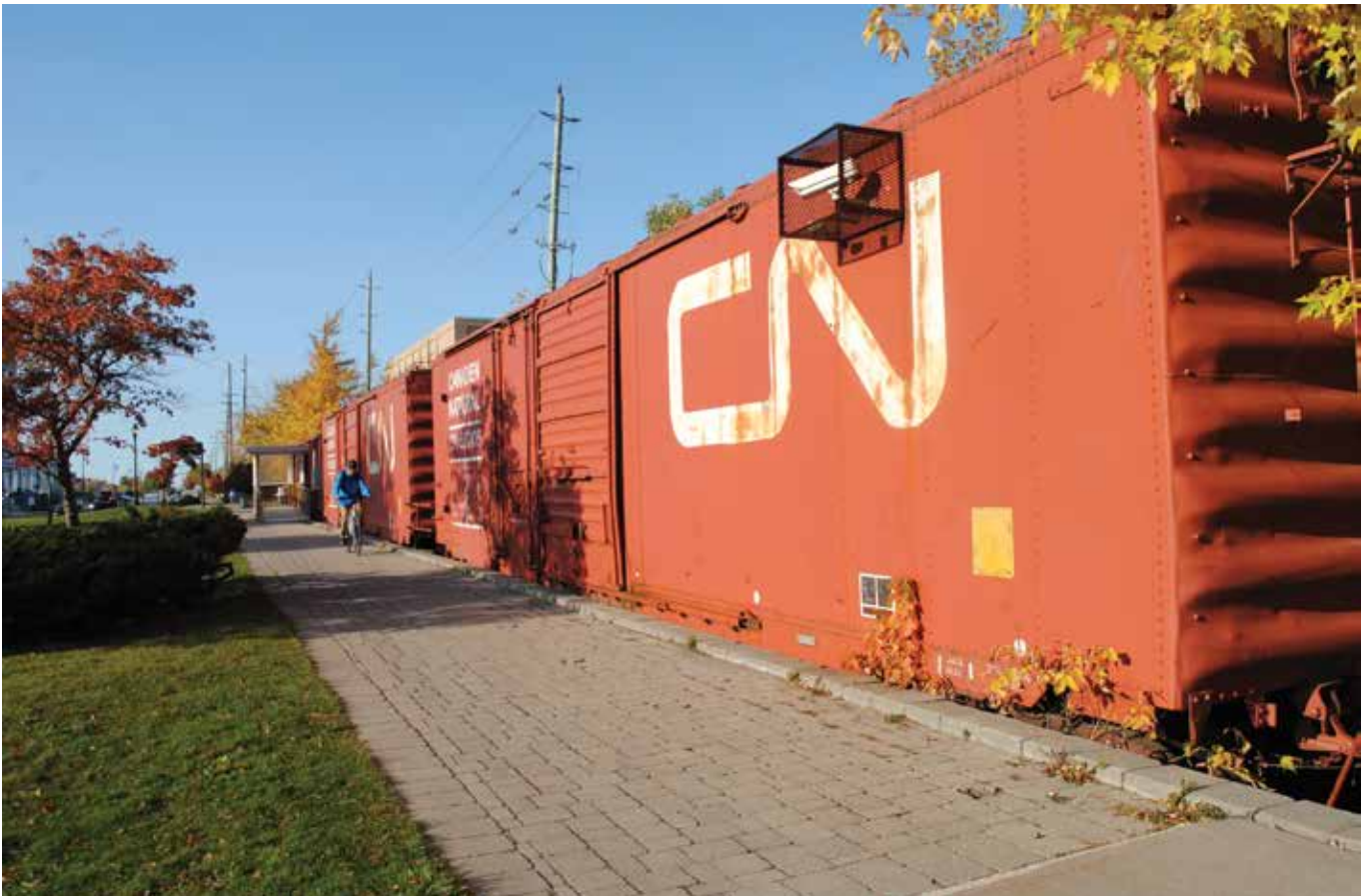
Exploring the trail, you will note old CNR boxcars used for storage at the Collingwood Museum, railway trestles crossing creeks and the high trestle over the Beaver River at Thornbury, the historic coal shed in Thornbury, and the remaining freight shed at the Meaford harbour. These remnants of the past call to mind our railway heritage.

The original Craigeleith Train Station, now the Craigeleith Heritage Depot, is a beautiful example of railway architecture. It is located on the trail near the Georgian Bay shore. Fully restored in 2023, the Depot currently houses tourism services, the public library,



▲ Fall colours line the trail in autumn.

▼ At Collingwood Museum, old CNR boxcars beside the trail are used for storage.





◀ Craigleith Heritage Depot houses tourism information, a public library and a museum.



▲ Trilobite fossil in Craigleith shale.



◀ Delphi Point Park in Town of The Blue Mountains offers fascinating fossil viewing.

and an excellent museum. A walking tour of the grounds offers fascinating interpretive signage about Indigenous peoples, the station and railways, and the development of the Blue Mountains ski industry.

Begin at Craigleith

Craigleith is a great place to begin your Georgian Trail exploration with options to ride or walk in either direction. Northwinds Beach, just across Highway 26, has picnic grounds, a sand beach,

seasonal washrooms, and lots of parking. Collingwood is nine km east of Craigleith. The trail is flat and straight through colourful woods and wetlands with some views to the Niagara Escarpment. The wide surface makes for easy

going. Do be considerate of other trail users, and abide by trail rules. Watch for the Silver Creek bridge with interpretive signage, and the possibility of seeing fish coming up the creek to spawn. Trail traffic increases as



you approach Collingwood. It has Silver Designation as a Bicycle-Friendly Community with over 60 km of trails to explore. The Georgian Trail winds its way along the Pretty River through the city to Harbourview Park. You can continue along the trails to reach the Collingwood Museum, tour the beautiful park, or visit historic downtown. The Train Trail passes the Collingwood Museum, extending out Millennium Park for spectacular views of Nottawasaga Bay, or inland for 12 km to Stayner. Visit collingwood.ca/trails.

Heading west from Craileith, you can fuel up at the little shopping plaza that backs onto the trail. For geology enthusiasts, this shoreline area holds amazing fossil viewing. "Bituminous shale," or the Collingwood Member of the Lindsay Formation of the

Escarpment, crops up within Craileith Provincial Park and at Delphi Point. The dark grey, organically-rich limestone is full of trilobites and other fossils, and forms rocky shore ledges. It can give off an oily smell, and oil was extracted from it briefly here in the mid-1800s.

Onward toward Thornbury, you can access Delphi Point Park which has a lovely rock ledge beach, and picnic facilities, by crossing Highway 26 at the Georgian Peaks stop lights, and riding east through the subdivision. The fall colour views of the ski slopes are also wonderful here. Craileith to Thornbury is 12 km, and Craileith to Meaford is 25 km total. You will need to plan your ride time and speed accordingly to avoid getting caught out in early fall darkness. Council Beach and Peasemars Nature Preserve, both before Thornbury, offer water access and a restful break.



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► Georgian Peaks Ski Club gives Escarpment views of bright autumn colours.



► Bushels of local apples are available at Grandma Lambe's in Meaford.



Thornbury Fishway

The Georgian Trail crosses Highway 26 before entering Thornbury. Information signage and all services are available in this friendly community. Thornbury is famous among visitors and anglers for its dam and fishway. In autumn, Chinook

Salmon leave Georgian Bay to migrate up the Beaver River. You can look out from the trail's high trestle bridge, or walk down by the river to see the fishway, salmon, and busy fishers up close. Visit <https://www.thebluemountains.ca/recreation-culture/>

harbour-fishing/thornbury-fishway-fishing.

From Thornbury to Meaford, the Georgian Trail passes inland into the apple orchards of Meaford. Stop by Grandma Lambe's for tasty apples and goodies. Rolling into Meaford is a long, gentle incline to the

historic harbour. You can enjoy the sights and sounds of this lovely town, including all the fun of the Scarecrow Invasion. Meaford also has an informative heritage tour accessed by QR codes. See <https://tidbits.site/>. Meaford's vibrant history, including its rail story, comes alive



▲ Thornbury is known for its dam and fishway for Chinook Salmon returning to Beaver River to spawn.

with videos and images.

The Georgian Trail provides both residents and visitors to southern Georgian Bay excellent recreational opportunities to explore the region's cultural and natural history. Whether rails, shales, or fish tales excite you, there is plenty to keep

you busy along this scenic route. For a downloadable map, visit: <https://royalharbourresort.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/georgiantrailmap.pdf>. **NEV**

Sandra J. Howe's last piece for this magazine was "Kemble Maple Tour," Spring 2025.



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