



13 THE SETTLE & CARLISLE RAILWAY

A Prolific Potato: It may interest some of your readers, writes a correspondent, to know that early in spring Mr Joseph Parker (of Stainforth) found a potato on the Settle and Carlisle Railway, which he planted in his father's garden, and the produce of which has been 12 lbs of sound tubers. They appear to be Scotch Regents. Craven Herald & Pioneer, 14 October 1876

'It was dark and cold and they had nearly reached their home in the village of Stainforth when they saw a line of ghostly lights stretching into the distance, parallel to the road. By the light of the lanterns they could make out ghostly figures and could hear the noise of machinery and the clatter of tools, and men calling to each other as they worked.'

This is not a description of the building of the Settle and Carlisle Railway, but of an experience at the end of the 20th century, when work was being carried out to upgrade the track, when the line was nearly one hundred and thirty years old! But the scene gave an idea of what the people of Stainforth saw all those years before when the greatest upset to life in the village occurred and the landscape was changed forever. No longer was Stainforth just an isolated Dales village; it was also a place on a long train route between London and Scotland. Now, total strangers would be visible in the trains as they passed and the remote way of life enjoyed by Stainforth villagers would be intruded upon. And, although the route ran right through the village, no trains were ever going to stop there to pick up passengers or freight.

Local impact

As is usual, the railway ran as much as possible in a straight line, and since Stainforth was at the start of the famous 'long drag', it went gradually up hill. It was built parallel to the River Ribble, but above it. The effect on the landscape of the village was dramatic. Whole fields were divided, deep cuttings were made, and bridge after bridge was built so that no existing road or track was cut off. There were stone bridges in the middle of farm tracks and an aqueduct to carry a stream over a cutting; there was even a short tunnel. The River Ribble was crossed twice by particularly grand bridges.

Where the line actually reached the middle of the village it is, by chance, on a fairly level piece of ground and in full view. Villagers could stand and watch the work, and later could marvel at the great trains exuding clouds of smoke and steam as they climbed noisily on their way from London to

Glasgow or sped quite silently down in the opposite direction. It is difficult now to imagine how much noise and smoke there would have been, in the middle of the village, day and night, during the years the railway operated at full volume. For the last few years there have been more goods trains, many of them operating at night, but these, although noisy, tend to have a fairly monotonous sound rather than the puffs and snorts of a fully loaded steam-train climbing a steep slope.

An extraordinary venture

The Settle and Carlisle Railway was one of the last major routes to be constructed, and was considered one of the most extraordinary ventures in railway building: the crossing of inhospitable uplands, long tunnels, enormous viaducts and a very steep climb. The directors of Midland Railway had only resorted to building the line as a means of maintaining their competition for passengers with rival railway owners. Indeed, at the last moment the developers tried to have the Act of Parliament that allowed its construction withdrawn because the company had by then arranged a satisfactory alternative means of getting its carriages up to Scotland. But Midland Railway had to go ahead, and so began an extraordinary feat of engineering.

Begun in 1869, the whole of the line was built simultaneously: contracts were let for the five sections and the line at Stainforth was part of Contract No.1, which went from Settle Junction to Dent Head. To build such a structure, a large number of labourers was needed—the famous ‘navvies’ who built first the canals and later the railways. The navvies provided the basic manpower and their work was rough and demanding and often dangerous. They had their own hierarchy depending on their skill and consequent rate of pay (an average of about four shillings per day). Above them in the pecking order were the more skilled workers such as masons, tunnellers, bricklayers, platelayers, and carpenters. Over these gangs of assorted skills reigned the engineers and managers. The Settle and Carlisle was the last big railway building project in Britain and by this time the navvies and other railway workers were probably the second and third generations of a family thus employed. They had their own customs and traditions and they were used to moving from place to place to find work.

Living in huts

At the time of the building of the line, Settle was full of railway workers, as were most of the settlements along the route to the north. To cope with these numbers, the contracting companies housed the navvies within easy reach of their daily work. They lived in huts and were supplied with much of their needs by a contractor’s shop—in this case, Messrs Burgoyne and Cocks in Settle, who supplied bread and meat and other essentials. Presumably, they sent their goods up the line by locomotive as soon as this was feasible; they had branches elsewhere, including Stainforth. It is not known where in the



*The Cumbrian Mountain Express passing through Stainforth, March 1998
- photo courtesy Christine Harte*

village their shop was, but a company 'token', exchangeable for goods, has been found above the line near the former school on the Stainforth to Horton road.

When the building of the line began, Stainforth had about 200 residents. Most of them were farmers—there were shops, including a grocer and a butcher, there was a school and a Post Office, a Church, a pub, a joiner, a wheelwright, and a tailor. In other words, most needs were catered for and most of the food would come directly from the land. There was relatively little need to leave the village and most people probably never did except, perhaps, for a trip to a nearby village in the Dale.

It is difficult to imagine the disturbance the arrival of the navvies caused. Wooden huts were built for them—a total of 17, some of which housed up to as many as 12. For the local historian it is fortunate that the navvies were in residence when the 1871 census was taken. At the end of the tally for the village are listed Huts Nos. 49 to 64 but, frustratingly, there is no indication of where they were. There was an additional one, listed separately, which was on Swarth Moor. There are some hints of where the others were—for example a token was found near the old school. It was dug up in one of the allotments, along with numerous pieces of china and pottery and the stems and occasional bowls of clay pipes. The allotments are on the edge of the railway embankment so it seems very probable that this was the site of one or more of the huts. The parish records list someone as living in the 'Tunnel Huts' that must have been near Taitlands, where the only tunnel in the parish was built.

The navvies in charge of the huts were usually heads of families, in their 20s or 30s, and had a wife and children, who presumably went to the local school. Any older children went to work on the railway line. Then there were the lodgers, who, if the census records are accurate, were single men, mostly in their 20s. In all, at the time of the 1871 census, Stainforth had an additional two hundred people living either in the Huts or as lodgers in the village itself. This must have had an enormous effect on the local population and yet there is very little evidence of what happened. The parish records show that the children of navvies were frequently christened in the local church, but it is difficult to know whether there were any marriages between the local population and these itinerant visitors with strange ways and, according to repute, a fondness for alcohol.

Family accommodation

According to W R Mitchell, the huts usually had three large sections, one for the principal family to sleep in, the second for the lodgers and the third for cooking and eating. Hut No. 53 seems typical. It housed 12 people: Thomas Mullinger and his wife Caroline and four daughters were the main family; Emma Bicker, sister of Caroline; one boarder; and four lodgers, all of them unmarried. Presumably, Caroline and Emma did the cooking between them.

The four young daughters had all been born in different places, including Kent and Hampshire, whilst the youngest had been born locally. The boarder also came from Hampshire, while the four lodgers had all been born in Gloucestershire and probably worked together as a group. Thomas Mullinger and his wife had both been born in East Anglia. So, the only trace here of the tradition that navvies were Scots and Irish is their surname—Thomas Mullinger was probably a descendant of earlier navvies who had migrated from Ireland to seek work.

Hut No. 51 also housed 12 people. The Borne family were the principal occupants and had five children, the eldest of whom was 12 years old and had been born in Wales, the next, aged eight, was born in Hampshire, the next in Kent, the fourth, aged two, also in Kent, whilst the youngest was three months old and born locally. This family had moved every few years because Thomas Borne, head of the family, worked as a railway labourer. His wife, who catered for the needs of their young family and for any lodgers, accompanied him. In their hut in Stainforth, they had six lodgers, all unmarried men in their 20s, except for one, aged 40—rather old to be a navvy.

The 1871 census is the only definitive record of what went on in Stainforth during the building of the Settle and Carlisle railway. And the census was the record of only a single night—the population of navvies probably changed frequently to match the requirements for labour on particular sections of the track. It is estimated that up to 7,000 people were employed along the length of the line at any one time. In addition, the work was hard and the temptation to move elsewhere must have been strong. The next census was in 1881 and by that time the population had reverted to its original level of about 200 residents. The railway line was well established by then and only three people were working as railway labourers. But it is not possible to discover the full details from the census—as made evident by the descendants of a Mr Kitchener who lodged in Stainforth whilst working as a navvy and stayed on and married a local girl, and whose descendants still live here. The census does not mention that he worked on the railway, only that he was a ‘labourer’.

Co-existence

It is difficult to discover just how the navvies and the local people co-existed. Since the navvies were used to moving on after a few years or even a few months, it is likely that they had evolved their own way of dealing with a transitory way of life—one that did not depend very much on contact with local populations, but rather one that provided their own entertainments and culture. One telling item in the *Craven Herald* notes that Stainforth’s annual sports day had been reinstated after the navvies had left—perhaps signifying that the village just ‘battened down the hatches’ to cope with the influx of strangers, and waited for them to move on. After all, the navvies were not in the area for very long, the project being completed in six years.

The line opened to goods trains in 1875 and to passenger trains in 1876.

So, after a few years the great influx of navvies was over and life returned to relative normality, except that the village was now split in half by the railway line and subject to noise and smoke at all times. Many villagers were employed on the railway, some as labourers on the line and also in Stainforth Sidings at the Craven Lime Works, where the lime was sent out on railway wagons. Until very recently people from Stainforth worked 'at Craven'.

Strategic line

There was the occasional incident on the line. One of the most frightening must have been when a goods train was derailed just south of the village and the runaway wagons careered down the slope towards Stainforth Sidings and its signal box—which the wagons demolished but, miraculously, the signalman was uninjured. The cutting to the north of the Craven Lime Works was, and is, difficult for engine-drivers, as it is narrow and shady and damp because of the springs that gush out in wet weather. In freezing weather the lines became very slippery, causing the wheels to spin. This can still cause problems for the steam specials that run today. For example, at the end of December 2000, in the gathering dusk of a crisp snowy day, a special train with its smart steam engine, the *Green Arrow*, ground to a halt at the entrance to the Taitlands tunnel, belching clouds of smoke and steam. There it stuck, unable to get going again on the icy rails. A group of men was despatched to scatter grit on the line and, after a long wait and several aborted attempts, it slowly pulled away again to make its way cautiously north out of the village—a reminder of times past.

The line prospered for about 70 years. In its heyday, passengers could travel from further south up to Scotland in the luxury of the American-designed Pullman cars. During the World Wars it was strategically very important, providing as it does a route from the South of England to the port of Glasgow: it carried large numbers of troops, as well as munitions and supplies. Like the man who found a potato on the line and planted it, the line was a source of supply for the people of Stainforth as well. Coal was often 'gleaned' from the line and the story goes that there was a more organised method of obtaining a large lump of coal during the War: a basket of eggs would be lowered from one of the bridges so that the driver of an 'up' train, travelling slowly, could take it and in return throw out a suitable amount of coal. Some more formal arrangements existed, for example the newspapers would be thrown from a train at 'Craven', for onward distribution round the village. There were allotments beside the line on railway company land: just south of the tunnel someone kept chickens on the embankment.

Future of the line

The story of the Settle and Carlisle is well known and at the time of writing

its future seems relatively secure. Recently, large sums have been spent to upgrade it and more noticeably to clear the saplings and other undergrowth and the weeds from alongside it. It must now look similar to its original state—pristine lines and neat embankments and bridges. When a ‘steamer’ is scheduled, strategic points for photography are crowded with enthusiasts and cars follow its progress on the adjacent road.

For the people of Stainforth things are much the same—the trains still do not stop here and to board the train they have to go to Settle or Horton. When the line was being built the Parish Council had written to the Midland Railway asking for a station to be built but this was turned down. Now there is more traffic on the line, though to date it is mainly freight. The daily passenger service to Glasgow has been reinstated—starting from Leeds, not quite like the famous Thames Clyde Express, but a step in the right direction. There is also an increasing number of visitors to Ribblesdale, so perhaps there is a case for more local stops. Will the line become integral to the National Park? Will Stainforth become a ‘park and ride’ station?

Sources

- Census Records, Skipton Public Library.
Craven Herald, Skipton Public Library.
Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line—various editions of magazine.
Hay, David. 1996. *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History*. Oxford University Press.
Lambert, Anthony. 1997. *Settle to Carlisle: a Beautiful Journey North*. Parragon.
Mitchell, W R. 1993. *The Men Who Made the Settle-Carlisle*. Castleberg.
Mitchell, W R. 1996. *The Lost Shanties of Ribblesdale*. Castleberg.
Pearson, Michael. 1991. *Pearson's Railway Rides: Leeds, Settle, Carlisle*. J M Pearson & Son.
Siviter, Roger. 1984. *The Settle to Carlisle, a Tribute*. Bloomsbury Books.
Wiggin, Helene. 1997. *Trouble on the Wind*. Hodder & Stoughton.