

Tales from DalesRail

An Original DalesRailer – Jessica Lofthouse (part 2)

By Craig Ward

DalesRail may not be operating in 2020 but that doesn't stop us sharing our many interesting experiences about our journeys. We hope you will share your interesting stories, favourite walks, fascinating anecdotes, and pictures about DalesRail. Please send them to richard.watts.crl@gmail.com or Simon Clarke at simon.clarke.crl@gmail.com.

In the first article under the above title I used extracts from Jessica Lofthouses' numerous books in which she recalled her journeys using the Ribbles Valley and Settle-Carlisle lines to reach the starting points for many of her walks in the Dales.

Below, is an article she wrote for the Blackburn Times in September 1946 in which she describes, in her own inimitable style, the section of the route between Hellifield and Garsdale. In the introduction she mentions catching a train from Hawes to Hellifield which, until 1959, it was possible to do. This section of the Wensleydale Railway from Garsdale to Hawes was built by the Midland railway and opened in 1878. At Hawes it made a connection with the North Eastern Railway's line to Northallerton. This section closed to passengers in 1954 but remained open for freight. The section between Redmire and Northallerton is a heritage line.

So, sit back and enjoy Jessica Lofthouses' journey and reminiscences as she described them in 1946.

The Hellifield-Garsdale-Hawes Railway Line.

By Jessica Lofthouse 6th September 1946

If you chance to travel on the 1625 train from Hawes to Hellifield it is possible as travelling companions you will have railway workmen – breakdown men, gangers, for whom the train stops between stations to pick them up. The other day half a dozen stepped into my compartment. Very soon lively arguments had developed – the subject, the best stretches for scenery on this most scenically spectacular of all lines to Scotland.



Hawes Station today - Richard Watts

In the past few days of tramping in the high Pennines I had heard many such discussions among walkers and youth hostellers. To hear the opinions of men "on the job" was most entertaining. The wild, windy heights beloved by moorland trampers, the lonely tracks above Ribblesdale, Dentdale and Garsdale raised no enthusiasm among the railwaymen – too bleak for them, too desolate with too many memories of cloudbursts, Yorkshire mists and snowdrifts, though they had to concede to my first choice among "dales of perfect peace" that Dentdale and Garsdale seen from the railway line "need some beating."

Do you know the Hellifield-Hawes Junction (Garsdale) line? It is a route of tremendous contrasts. From Hellifield to Long Preston and Settle, nothing spectacular, only the limestone scars some distance away; from Settle to Horton playing hide and seek with the Ribble, here a rollicking, foaming, brown and gold young river racing under rocky banks and between a welter of boulders with green sloping pastures and trees on either hand, groups of aged farms glimpsed as the train rushes by, Moughton, the great limestone hill, on the left hand and Pen-y-Ghent growing larger, on the other. This is the side to concentrate upon as the train goes north – the eastward view, a very lovely scene on a sunny day, all pastures and meadows boxed in by white walls, dotted with sheep, with young stock, with a laithe to almost every field and intimate peeps into the tiny hamlet of Selside. It is a wide and spacious region up here with the three mountains of Craven looking on, manes tossing in the winds and clouds more often than not wreathing round their heads.

The green fields tilled and cared for down the centuries give way to the barren wastes around Ribblesdale, where tiny tributaries of Gayle Beck, emerging from cave, pot hole, bog pool, trickle among reeds and bents, scarce knowing in which direction to flow. The wind rages almost always hereabouts, up Chapel le Dale, up Widdale, up Ribblesdale, down Littledale, for the station stands over 1000 feet above the sea at the meeting place of many winds. The Batty Moss viaduct is ahead, we cross it slowly, remembering the men who lost their lives in its making in the great years of railway engineering achievements. Down there where the land is rough and hussocky, and traces of old tracks are visible, hundreds of navvies were housed till 1875, with huts, canteens, beer shops, offices, stables, even a hospital, to serve their needs – Batty Wife Green.

There is a track alongside the railway as it pushes up Littledale, climbing as the railway climbs, and when, with a piercing whistle the train plunges into Blea Moor tunnel, the track continues above ground and over the moor following the way made by the tunnel builders seventy years ago. Walkers making for the Deeside Youth Hostel in Dentdale use it, making from one pile of excavated rubble to the next, heaped up by each air shaft. Smoke is continually coming from these vents, Blea Moor having the strange appearance of a smoking mountain.

It is a very short cut from Ribblesdale to Deeside but not so long ago a few lads finding time was getting short and anxious to be in time for supper at the Youth Hostel decided on a shorter. "It is only a mile and a half through the tunnel" said they "and we have torches." They set off hopefully, into the darkness. They had not reckoned on the roughness of the going – the tunnel makers did not leave the clearance as a promenade; they did not know that in a tunnel busy with constant passing trains the smoke never clears and torches are useless in an atmosphere thick as a pea soup fog. They climbed up and up, reeling, lurching and feeling for the safety alcoves as great 12 coach express trains roared by. It was not a pleasant experience and they are not likely to repeat it. They seemed to have been a whole day groping along in that enveloping darkness, but at last they emerged into the golden light of evening – each as black as a sweep.

To them Dentdale must have appeared a demi-paradise. We are in the tunnel one minute and the next out in the daylight – 1298 feet above sea level on a line terraced on the steep hillside. The Dee (born very near the Ribble's Gale Beck source) excavates its bed in Dent marble – actually a grey encrinital limestone – and the fine viaducts we cross are built of the same everlasting stone. Down below in Arten Gill, are the ruined marble works.

But it is not for the marble works, nor for the Deeside Shooting Lodge of the Cavendish Bentincks (now the Youth Hostel), nor for the strange spectacle of the double row of snow screens on the upper side of the railway, nor for the impressive view of the northern sweep of Wharfedale that travellers rouse themselves. It is to seize hold of an exquisite minute, to remember it forever. Was it not this memory picture made so many Yorkshiremen and

Yorkshire lovers turn their thoughts Dentwards when war had carried them into desert and jungle? There below is perfect peace – a dale like a green cradle, floored with countless tiny fields, yellow, green and gold, seamed with green hedgerows, walls; grey lines reaching up to high fell and mountain too. You gaze down upon it and try to capture and hold the vision safe for ever, before being whisked away into more wild, dark, unarable places. Black Mire, Dodderham Moss, Broad Mea, under Great Knoutberry Hill the train passes, into another tunnel and, out into a sister dale of Dee's – the long green dale of Garsdale which runs down to Sedbergh.

“Aye,” said a railway ganger, “Dentdale and Garsdale are bonny enough but line’s dree. Now give me Eden – give me Langwathby way.” And in a voice lowered and awed he described the beauty of a summer dawn breaking over the woodlands of Eden and gilding the red rocks of Langwathby. He was a rough diamond of a man, I doubt if he had ever looked at a poem since schooldays, but he had felt poetry in the beauty seen “from the line.”



Garsdale (once Hawes Junction) – Craig Ward