

Some of the "older end" at Settle recall tales about a railway that this year becomes a centenarian.



## Gang Life on the Long Drag

**I**T was in the spring of the year—a time when the Midland Railway Company took on extra men for re-laying track—that Harry Cox first worked on the Settle-Carlisle line. In 1904, platelayers were being paid 19 shillings a week. Between 30 and 40 extra men were needed for a comparatively short season, after which most of them were sacked.

It was known as the Extra Gang. Its members began work at 7 a.m., but as the train from Skipton did not arrive until 8 a.m., they were given an hour of odd jobs about Settle station by ganger Jim Ion.

The same arrangement applied at the end of the week. Even though the men had lodged away from Monday until Saturday, the fact that they arrived at Settle at 11 a.m. meant they had an hour to fill in, work ending at 12 o'clock. The Skipton men, who were still travelling during that hour, were spared the onerous extra duties.

When a man was needed to help the masons, Mr. Cox decided to move. Between 1905 and 1910 he worked on some of the great viaducts and also in the tunnels at Blea Moor and Rise Hill.

Masons were considered to be more skilful than platelayers and received £1 a week. "We had to lodge out in summer, and were paid an extra 1s. a night for lodgings. We took a week's 'grub' with us in tin boxes." Mr. Cox remembers lodging with a platelayer at Dent and with a farmer at Colt Park.

When he opened his "bait box" on a

Monday evening he could see several days' food, including that for breakfast on the following Saturday! "Monday's dinner and tea we carried in baskets. I would leave home with a reasonable load—the basket and a tin box. Mother made me four tatie pies. They were in brown dishes. These were for dinners. I'd warm them up on the stove in the lineside cabin."

**W**HEN working away from home, Mr. Cox could buy fresh food: eggs at 24 for a shilling, butter at 7½d. a pound. "I'd go and help to churn the butter on a Friday night at a farm near Dent Head viaduct." When he returned home on Saturday, his tin and basket were full of farm produce, including Wensleydale cheese and rabbits at 7d. each.

He remembers staying with an old ganger at Hawes Junction (later known as Garsdale). The lodgings cost 2s. 6d. a week and the ganger's wife bit the half-crown handed to her to assure herself it was real. "Our lodgings were in one of the railway cottages. It had three bedrooms, and there were six of us—two to a room.

"I often wondered where the ganger and his wife slept. One night we went down to Hawes for a night and missed the last train home. We had to walk the six miles back, following the track. When we got into the house we saw the old lady coming out of her dormitory—a cupboard under the stairs. The ganger also slept there!"

During work at Ribbleshead, the masons faced strong winds from the west. These



winds came sweeping up Chapel-le-Dale, and the viaduct seemed to suck them through. Work on the masonry had to stop. Small items were either removed from the scaffolding or firmly secured.

"I remember a goods train passing on a blustery day. A door on a van must not have been properly secured, for it blew open. Lots of boxes containing kippers came flying out. Some of those boxes were taken to the station. We also managed to keep some and we lived off kippers for a few weeks!"

**S**CAFFOLDING now comes in small lengths that are bolted together. "We had to use a crab (hand-operated winch) to draw up lengths of scaffolding 100 feet long. One day I was digging at the base of a pier to partly bury one of these great pieces. I went down through loose stuff, mainly 'black marble' and found an English lever watch, the contents rusted through. It was probably dropped by a navvy when the line was being built."

Bricks used for re-lining the arches at Ribbleshead were Staffordshire (blue) bricks. When the work was done, all the scaffolding was loaded on to the ballast train (a task taking two or three days) and taken through Blea Moor tunnel for work on Dent Head viaduct.

Mr. Cox helped to re-brick the whole 10 arches at Dent Head, a task taking two or three summers. "In amonghands, mainly in winter, we worked in Blea Moor tunnel."

Blea Moor was a place to remember with dread. The company allowed a worker a white blanket coat (which didn't stay white for long), also thigh-length leggings.

"Naphtha lamps were used. If a man felt a little devilish he would accidentally knock one over, causing a spectacular blaze. If he felt even more devilish, he would throw something out of the darkness and knock over one or two lamps. Then the tunnel seemed to be on fire!"

Some men spurned the lamps. They were accustomed to walking through the tunnel in darkness, using the four-foot. They would tap a rail with a stick to maintain the right course.

"When we were working here, we had to watch out when an express was passing. It was 10 to one that a member of the catering staff would hurl out unwanted food. We heard the food swish against the tunnel wall. It was against regulations, of course.

"One day we went into the tunnel with our naphtha lamps and saw something

glistening ahead; it turned out to be an enormous catfish. We carried it back to the cabin and it was hung up there for a day or two. We didn't sample it, though. Why had the cook thrown it away in the first place?"

**N**OW and again, the driver of a locomotive would report water pouring from a ventilation shaft, which meant that some of the "garlands," part of the drainage system, were blocked. "We had to clear them. We'd go to the top of the shaft, on wild Blea Moor, erect some scaffolding, and set up a jack-roll (hand-winch). It might take a couple of days to do this.

"For a descent of the shaft, three men held a handle of the jack-roll and three men took hold of the other handle. The remaining man (often me!) had to go down the hole to investigate and clean out the drainage system. I'd sit on a seat—it was just a piece of wood, fastened at the four corners to the one-inch wire rope attached to the jack-roll. A naphtha lamp was hung from the seat. A man stationed in the tunnel talked to those on the moor-top by telephone.

"When I first looked down a shaft, I saw what appeared to be two little pencils far below. They were the rails! I was lowered to the first garland, which I cleared out; then the second garland, and so on." He controlled his descent with a shunting pole.

When the man below reported a train was coming, all Mr. Cox could do was to close his mouth and eyes to keep out the smoke. Sometimes the smoke hung about the tunnel ends or ventilation shafts for hours.

**R**ISE Hill tunnel, on the Dent length, was not as grim as Blea Moor. "The ganger in my time was George Fawcett, who was also a Wesleyan lay preacher. He'd be preaching in the chapel on Sunday when he'd spot one of his men, say Jim Atkinson. Breaking off from reading the Bible, or preaching, he'd say: 'Tunnel in the morning, Jim; think on'."

A ganger's length was between two and three miles but, at Blea Moor, Old Tom Mason's length took in the tunnel and perhaps 50 yards on either side; consequently, when he could he'd spend some time working in the tunnel and then have the opportunity of doing a fresh air job.

Inside Blea Moor was a crevice between two rocks. "If we used a knife, we could extract some coal from that crack. I suppose at one time there was coal visible, but each year a small amount was taken and the crevice was deepened. It was quite a novelty





to take some of this coal home, telling your friends it was from the Blea Moor 'coal pit'."

The cabin built by men engaged in viaduct or tunnel work was entirely home-made from such material as railway sleepers. The men made their own seats, and the foreman would knock up a rough cupboard in which he could keep his papers. Up at Dent were substantial stone cabins, erected in case men were marooned here during a snowy spell.

The fireplace of a lineside cabin extended into the room and was adorned by a metal plate on which food could be warmed. "At one time, the foreman would allow a man to go to the cabin an hour before meal (bait-time) to prepare food for the men. For example this man would ask me what I was having. I might say half a collop of bacon and a couple of eggs. When bait time came around, the food would be ready and warm."

**M**R. Cox helped to instal the Garsdale water troughs in 1907. A reservoir was made on the fell by a workforce numbering 50/60 men. Material like cement was taken to it on a light railway extending from the main line. George Fawcett was the man in charge, with Bill Smith as the

**Above: A derailed wagon at Church Viaduct, Settle, in 1894. Harry Cox, then a schoolboy (third from the right on our photograph) recalls that the wagon held a load of fireman's shovels that were spread about the road.**

ganger. It took nearly 12 months to construct the dam.

Meanwhile the stream was diverted over the top via a chute. On opening day, the dam leaked like a sieve because the cement had not properly set. It had been used sparingly to save the company a large expense. The dam was rebuilt!

Water from the reservoir flowed to a lineside engine house from which it was pumped into the cast iron troughs. When locomotives first used the troughs, the scoops simply pushed out the water. Anyone standing nearby got a soaking. A device was added to the scoop to "cut" into the water.

Mr. Cox's railway career ended when the powers-that-be decided that members of the gang would lodge away from home in winter as well as summer. "It seemed a bit hard. Most of the gang agreed; they were

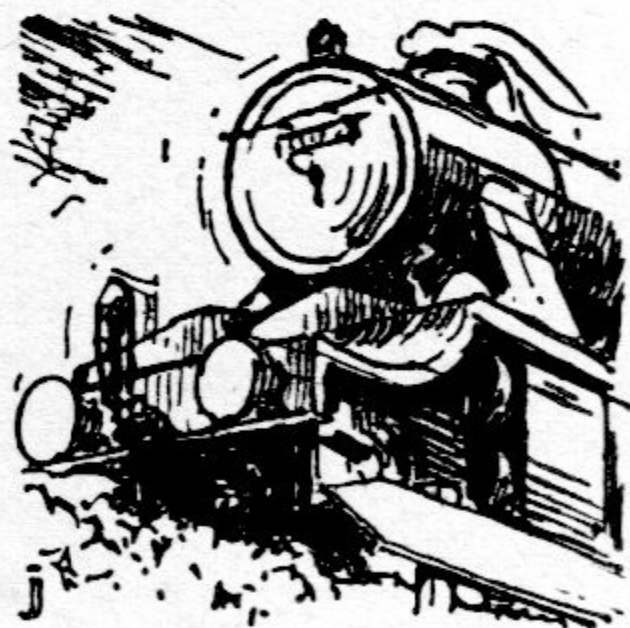


married and jobs were not easy to come by then. I stuck out—and left.”

His last task as an employee of the company was to hand in his Rule Book and whistle.

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## Three Generations of Prestons



**T**HOMAS Preston worked for the company for over 57 years, beginning before the Settle-Carlisle was opened. When he retired he was called to Derby, to be given £5 and a free dinner voucher. Thomas had 13 children. The eldest, George, is now a patient at Harden Bridge Hospital, near Austwick.

George relates that his father lived in the railway cottages at Settle—and he kept two pigs in a hut on the railway bank behind the house. One night, sparks from a locomotive ignited the hut. The pigs were roasted.

George himself worked on the railway. His first job brought him 18 shillings a week. He was a joiner's mate maintaining the cattle pens at Settle station, and then became a painter's mate. He recalls a morning near Stainforth when men loaded a bogey with old sleepers. "We then took the bogey on to the main line, heading for Settle, but we saw the signal change. Into view came a train privately used by Lord Ribblesdale; it struck the bogey and scattered the sleepers. We were court-martialled about that!"

Norman Preston, the youngest member of the family, who lives at Settle, says that his grandfather, Ambrose, was of Scottish ancestry; he worked on the construction of the *Little North-Western* line through Giggleswick. Grandfather went abroad, as a taskmaster on some tropical estate

(either Africa or the West Indies, the precise area is not known).

Thomas Preston, the son, started work aged seven in a nail factory in Upper Settle, and he had no formal education. He began work on the Settle-Carlisle line, then in the course of construction, when he was eight. As a "nipper" he did all forms of trivial and menial work.

When he had been working for a fortnight, Thomas entered a cabin near Cleatop and found a man had hanged himself. He could also recall the collapse of a crane jib in Langcliffe cutting which led to the death of a Welsh man named Owen, whose grave is prominent in Settle churchyard.

**O**NE of Thomas's jobs was taking messages from one part of the works to another. He went up to Blea Moor with a message on a day when there had been an explosion below ground. The candle-boy (he who took candles down the shafts) had sustained a broken leg, so Thomas was given the job for a short time. He confessed that descending the shaft was one of the most frightening experiences of his boyhood. As he was about to go down for the first time, he heard the grouse shouting: "go back, go back," and wished he could take their advice!

Thomas told his children about the shanty towns at Ribbleshead and the roughness of life there. Young lads were told never to wander away from the course of the line or they might be beaten up by navvies at the shanty town. Navvies hoped to incapacitate a boy so that one of their children could secure the job.

Thomas Preston was later in charge of the Extra Gang (latterly called the Slip and Drainage Gang) in the area from Skipton to Appleby, his son recalls. He often was away from home during the week, from Monday to Saturday, and mother had a colossal baking day before he departed for a five and a-half day stint.

An old railwayman once said to Norman Preston: "I'll tell thee summat about thy father. I only knew him to be late once. We were supposed to be going north, at 6.30 in the morning. When we got to the station, plans had been altered. We were now going Skipton way at 8.20.

"Father said he'd nip over to his allotment for a while. He forgot the passing time. The first thing he heard amiss was the passing of the train he should have been on. He was a conscientious man. It upset him terribly."

W. R. Mitchell