

I WALK THE LINE

The Settle-Carlisle Railway, March 2004

Friday: Newcastle – Settle

Trundling along the backs of the terraces and the industrial estates of Tyneside, it hit me that you get a much more realistic, if gritty, view of the world from a train. We turn our backs on the railways and project our best side out onto the road. I could see dirty dishes in kitchen sinks and carcasses of insurance write-offs in scrap yards, rather than the ornaments on the mantelpieces and the gleaming new models in the car showroom windows. Grey marshalling yards, pigeon lofts, and shady looking businesses run out of grubby little shacks are the true face of the urban fringe.

My journey started mid-morning on a Friday and the carriage was only a fifth full. Across from me sat two old dears, immaculate in tweedy suits and almost folded over with age, talking to each other with sibilant esses about Mrs Carruthers and Mrs McGiven. They probably never used each other's first names. They surprised me by getting out at the sprawling neon-lit hell of the Metrocentre with all the noisy kids who should have been at school.

We left the conurbation behind and followed the Tyne upstream as it morphs from a major waterway to a wide shallow rippling trout river, with the glittering reflections of the sun silhouetting the fly fishermen flicking their rods from the safety of their waders. A wiry wide-eyed man with a goatee and tattoos was sat down the carriage and the scene got him talking in soft Mancunian tones to his unseen and unheard companion about fish. No particular type of fish, just "Fish!", except once "Monster Fish! There's Monster Fish there!"

We passed Stephenson's cottage, birthplace of the godfather of the railway, and then the cartoonish chipboard factory smokestack and blue clock of Hexham, where we lost one half of the Tyne to the wildlands of Redesdale and Tynedale. I swapped sides of the train several times to maintain the view of the South Tyne until we left it at Haltwhistle where it takes a sharp left up into the Pennines. We climbed up over the misty hills

of the watershed, looking down on whitewashed farmhouses huddled in the valleys, but it was only when we passed over the broad Eden at Wetherall that we saw water again.

I had already decided to break my journey at Carlisle for a look around, but once I went between the imposing twin pink rotundas of the Citadel, the town opened out into yet another identikit British high street: Boots, M&S and the rest. I headed for the more interesting sounding “The Lanes”, but instead of the twisting streets of eclectic shops the name invoked, I found myself in a fluorescent air-conditioned mall. Only the cathedral provided a note of interest with its shocking pink granite and interesting nooks and crannies. Don’t get me wrong, I have nothing against the city, but for some reason I always expect so much more.

I found a trendy winebar and bumbled about knocking chairs and tables with my rucksack until I got settled near a window. I felt alien amongst the beautiful people of Carlisle in my Gortex jacket and walking boots, but the food was excellent and I enjoyed my pint of exotic German lager. I was on holiday.

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The Settle-Carlisle railway has led something of a charmed life. Legend has it that it was proposed purely as a political ploy by the Midland Railway Company to bully its rival, London and North West Railways, into opening up access to Scotland along the West Coast Main Line. The ploy worked initially, but backfired when the Government of the day played their bluff, and refused to let the Midland abandon its plans. After 6 years of construction, 22 viaducts, 14 tunnels and £3.5m, it finally opened to passengers in August 1876. However it was downgraded continuously after the War, losing a large number of stations and services, and the axe almost fell in the early 1980’s. The threat of closure provoked an outcry and a surge of interest and the passenger numbers quintupled in the five years between 1983 and 1988. In 1989 the railway was declared safe.

I had decided to take a service with two locomotives rather than one of the ubiquitous Sprinters that ply the remaining backwaters of Britain’s great Beeching’d and privatised railways. Somehow this seemed more romantic to me, and presumably to others, as the carriage filled up completely, mainly with groups of Goretex’d day-trippers, train-spotters and photographers, the latter lot trying out each other’s lenses with the subtle one-upmanship of the hobbyist.

We climbed up through the dramatic Eden Gorge, with the river hidden in the wooded valleys below, then passed the British Gypsum factory that helps keep the line open. Gypsum from the flue gas desulphurisation plant at Drax Power Station is shipped up here to make plasterboard. At Appleby I got a chance to see an example of the standard station built by Midland, in a style known, possibly with tongue gently in cheek, as “Derby Gothic”. They’re certainly very pretty with dark stone walls contrasting nicely with white fretted woodwork and burgundy ironwork and signs.

Kirkby Stephen station is almost two miles out of the town it serves, evidence maybe of the lack of real enthusiasm that Midland had in building this route. Beyond this stop we climbed into the fells, but the hilltops were shrouded in low mist, so the most dramatic views were downwards into the river valleys. The higher stations were identical in style to Appleby, but smaller. The tunnels linking the valleys got longer and longer until the scenery suddenly opened up into dramatic wild moors, then, all too quickly, we were back down into a cutting where we couldn’t see much until we pulled into Settle.



The Golden Lion is a 17th century coaching inn on the main street. I went into the lavish lounge bar where the barman handed me a registration form and said he’d get the manager. He pulled a couple of pints, took them down to the public bar end and demanded of one of the lads sat at the bar.

“Whar issy?”

“Int toileh.”

“Issy ’avina crap, issy? I goht lad ‘ere averoom. Tellum ‘urryup.”

When the manager emerged from his ablutions, he took me upstairs to a well appointed room with an uneven floor and a huge heavy wooden door with at least an inch gap underneath. After making myself a cup of tea - in-room tea making facilities being one of the great unheralded joys of travelling in the UK - I went back outside to have a wander around.

Settle appeared to be an affluent place with shops in the main square selling stainless steel Dualit toasters and Smeg ovens. I climbed up through the winding backstreets where the sheer number of old stables suggested an affluent past as well. I left the town on a rocky lane up the side of the valley. A red-faced man with flat cap and lurcher climbed into a field next to me without a greeting. I stopped at a suitable vantage point and look

down at the town. The older parts consist of two asymmetric lumps on either side of the railway which cut through the middle on a series of viaducts. The gaps have now been filled by light industrial units and a supermarket, but presumably used to be cattle pens or sidings.

When I got back down into town, I took a look at the station, but the visitor's centre was closed. The waiting room had a series of posters on the railways sponsored by the freight company EWS. The sheer amount of stuff they shift, 100 million tonnes every year, is staggering – the hidden cost of the lifestyle we lead in this country.

After my posh lunch, I didn't fancy a sit down dinner at the Lion, so I went out to the chippy in the Shambles arcade on the town square. It was obviously predominately a take-away and, having fought my way through the tightly packed tables to a seat I fancied, it took a while for one of the girls behind the counter to come and take my order.

A petite, pretty woman in her thirties and her eight year old son came in and took the table next to me. He fidgeted and squirmed until she gently admonished him.

“You've got to be good to your Daddy.” I heard her say.

“Give him advice.” he nodded sagely.

“You can't give him advice, silly, you're just a kid.” she ruffled his hair, giggling affectionately.

“I give him advice.” He was serious “I told him to give you another chance.”

She laughed again, now nervously. “What did he say?”

“He said he'd given you a hundred chances.”

They both went quiet until their food turned up and then they talked about other things.

I finished up, went back to the Lion and tried out the public bar. In contrast to the opulence of the lounge bar and restaurant, it was decorated plainly and tattily with peeling wallpaper and prints of dogs playing pool. I had a couple of pints at one of the few tables scattered around the edge of the room, wrote up some notes and read my novel, behaviour which prickled the curiosity of the beefy lads at the bar.

Saturday: Up the Ribble Valley

I hate trying to find my way on a footpath out of a strange town. Not even my fancy waterproof Explorer maps had enough detail to distinguish exactly which lane to take, but eventually I left the playing fields and carparks behind and found myself hiking along the Ribble, passing through knarly woods and along the backs of ramshackle but operating factories. I got a surge of that great sense of freedom and purpose you get at the start of a solo walk when your legs are still strong, your pack doesn't feel that heavy, and you can eat up the miles.

At Stainforth Force a multicultural group of school kids was being marshalled for a photo at a safe distance from the plunge pool. Their cheap windcheaters and ethnic diversity suggested they were not from round these parts. A sign hanging from a tree said "No wet suits, No skin diving, No scuba diving." These prohibitions puzzled me until I remembered that this is an area of great limestone formations riddled with caves and potholes. When I looked back up, the kids were arrayed across the beautiful stone arch of the bridge over the waterfall for another group photo. I waited for them to get back into their minibus, then crossed the bridge myself, across the railway in its deep cutting and through the pretty village of Stainforth.

I climbed up out of the village through fields and over stiles, passing a trio of schoolboys labouring under their rucksacks. When I got up to the moorland, I came eyeball to eyeball with a proud ram, his scrotum bursting with masculinity. He stepped out of my path, but stopped and watched me pass from a gateway. I strode on along the drystone wall of his field for ten minutes before I realised that the ram had distracted me from my route and I should have turned down the hill past him. My path now lead up Pen-y-Ghent, one of the "Three Peaks". Oh well, I thought to myself, I'll give it a go.

Some National Trust volunteers were rebuilding the path where it started to steepen. I stopped and chatted for a bit. They were trying to get the paths repaired before the hoards descended (or ascended as the case may be) for the summer season. The occasional walker came past and gave them the odd look that the public tends to give volunteers at work, a strange mix of condescension and guilt.

The final ascent was a difficult scramble with a full pack. At the top I took my place in the row of exhausted bodies sat along the wall and sank down out of the wind. The guy sitting next to me produced a pint glass and

poured himself a beer from a can. I congratulated him on his planning and resigned myself to a flapjack and water. I checked my map and noticed for the first time that the Right-of-Way off the top took a switchback which would add three miles to my trek.

The descent was steep and fast and fun. I stopped for lunch by a large sinkhole called 'Hull Pot' full of ferns and the odd tree. I could hear, but not see water running along the bottom. I resisted the temptation to scurry across the 200 yards of field that separated my from the return leg of the switchback and I was happy to stop at the Post Office in the hamlet of Norton in Ribblesdale and stock up with some snacks and isotonic drinks.

The climb out of Norton and the endless stiles over the drystone walls started to take their toll on my legs. I stopped at one to let a couple cross and, just at their heels, a big doughy American woman with a man's voice who wanted to stop and talk. I tried to be friendly but I found her a bit too tedious to handle at that point, so made my excuses and kept on going. The next section of the walk was across a series of limestone terraces up to the fantastically titled 'Dismal Hill'. Below and ahead of me, The Ribblehead Viaduct finally swung into view, a dramatic curve of arches linking two embankments reaching out to each other across a desolate plain.

The path started to drop down and I stumbled along it, legs starting to wobble as I got that '2 miles left to go and nothing in the tank' feeling. Then I came across the most enchanting bridge, little more than an arch of bricks over a beautiful stream rushing and gurgling 15 feet below at the bottom of a narrow chasm whose sides almost touched. I stopped, sat down and watched the scene, sipping at one of my isotonic drinks. I had to drag myself away, rejuvenated by the sheer charm of the spot, up a bank onto the road and climb the hill to the Ribblehead Inn just as dusk was falling. I must have looked rough after my 18 miles as a middle-aged couple in the carpark took one look and rushed back to check their car was locked.

All the rooms were booked so I was staying in a bunk house on my own. The nine bunks were arranged in a 3x3 matrix against one wall and I chose the bottom middle as that's where Willie Rushton sat in Celebrity Squares. I showered under lukewarm water, got changed in the steamy cold that you only get in campsites, and went into the Inn for my supper. The food was good basic grub, the real ale was excellent and the service friendly.

A middle aged man came in wearing clean hiking gear and picked up the payphone beside me.

“Hello dear, it’s me” he said after he had inserted his coin.

“Yes, it was a good day, but, I tell you, the toilets in the carpark were awful.”

“Why can’t people keep toilets clean? I don’t know I really don’t...”

This went on and on, so I took my beer into the main bar, sat by the fire, and tried to keep my eyes open long enough to write some notes and read a few pages. I read some more back in the bunkhouse with a hot chocolate before making the cold dash for the light switch and back to my sleeping bag. Despite my tiredness I kept waking up during the night, breaking up a series of strange dreams.

Sunday: The Other Two Peaks

I had planned to spend Sunday walking to Garsdale Head as part of my original plan to follow the railway along its length from Settle to Kirby Stephen. However I could only get accommodation at the Ribbleshead Inn, so this would have necessitated walking for several miles along roads and shuttling back and forth along the railway. As I get older, I’m getting more flexible in my planning, and having enjoyed climbing Pen-y-Ghent, I decided to attempt the other two peaks. This is definitely the diet version: hard core walkers and fell-runners do the 26 mile circuit of all three peaks in one day.

Leaving the Inn, I walked out across the moor at the foot of the viaduct. Up close it is very plain, a standard Midland railways design according to my railway buff’s guides. It is only from a distance, where you can see it in its bleak and beautiful context that it impresses, monolithic, dark and brooding all alone in its featureless plain. I stopped and listened for Tapping George, a navvy who fell into one of the hollow piers before it was filled with rubble. According to a poster I read in the Inn at breakfast, legend has it that he survived the fall and was entombed by the rubble, tapping at the wall with his hammer to this day to get let out.

The path took me up the side of the viaduct, past a signal box and a tatty house, and over a neat aqueduct which crossed the line as it sank towards the entrance of Blea Moor Tunnel. I took a detour here, heading up past the tunnel entrance and along the path I had originally intended to take.

Up on Blea Moor, great pimples of earth marked the shafts which were sunk to dig the tunnel from six points simultaneously with the start and finish. Three of these shafts were left open for ventilation. As a token gesture to my original plan to cross the Moor, I went as far as the first of them which had a brick tower topped with vicious rusted defences to deter the curious, the idiotic and the suicidal.

Back on the main path up Whernside, a large group of fell runners overtook me. Most said Good Morning and thanked me for standing aside and letting them by, but I took against the first few who charged past with the flinty eyes of the single-minded obsessive. I imagined that if I had had a fit on the path, they would have vaulted my twitching body, tutting at having to break their stride. I felt sorry for the stragglers who, despite all their hi-tech gear and shoes were barely pulling away from me.

The top of Whernside is one long ridge with the footpath running along a narrow strip between a cliff edge and a drystone wall. As I climbed into the cloud and fog that I had been hoping would clear, the edge shifted and swirled and I got a touch of vertigo until the path widened. I found a few banana skins dropped on the path. Bloody fell runners, I tutted to myself, they think this mountain is just for them. I dropped them over the other side of the wall to undergo their slow decomposition out of sight.

The summit would be barely perceptible if it wasn't for the triangulation point and a windbreak built into the wall. I got there at the same time as another walker, a tall good looking lad in his mid twenties. We nodded at each other as we both pulled out some supplies.

“Would you like some cake?” he asked me. “My mother always bakes me too much when I go walking.”

I accepted some and it was excellent, dark moist chocolate sponge. He was waiting for some kids doing the Duke of Edinburgh Award. He asked me if I'm doing the Three Peaks and I meekly explained my two-day wimp-out.

“You're missing the Boat Race.” I indicated his Worcester College Oxford Rowing Club jacket.

“Yeah, I've got someone to tape it for me and I'll hear it on the radio on the way back down.”

I left him there in the fog and passed his rag-tag bunch of public school boys toiling up a steep climb. My path then cut left down a difficult slope,

dropping back down beneath the fog where the viaduct appeared dramatically once again. Two female fell runners passed me, half walking, half skipping down over the rocks. I tried to hurry up and match them, but they easily outpaced me and disappeared off into the distance. Along the path the walls are crossed with double stiles, testament to the popularity of these routes during the summer.

The valley I descended into has a spectacular morphology with high shoulders of completely horizontal limestone pavement from which the river has gouged its route like the first scoop of ice cream from a fresh tub. The pavement is dramatic with trees growing out of the cracks, their roots wrapping themselves around the rock faces like tentacles.

I dropped into a mossy lane past a spiky metal sculpture by Charles I'Anson, whoever he is. A sign explained that the artwork had once been chucked into a nearby sinkhole by vandals, but that some cavers had risked life and limb to retrieve it. The lane lead past some comfortable looking houses and on to the hamlet of Chapel-le-Dale with its tiny and very cute 17th Century church, famous for holding the graves of many of the navvies who died building the railway. From here it was just 2 miles as the crow flies from where I had started, but I had another mountain to climb.

I made my way back up onto the limestone pavement; this side even more spectacular and desolate than the other. I passed up through a derelict farm between two of the rocky terraces, having to push my way through a flock of sheep waiting at a gate for the farmer who had turned up behind me in a Land Rover. Eventually I came to the bottom of a near cliff and had to wait for a middle aged couple to make their way down a tortuous path on its face.

“I was just sayin’ t’Doris tha’ if tha’ were roof of t’ouse, you wouldn’t be on’t!” declared the husband as he puffed down and waited for his wife. “Why the flaming ’ell do we do it out ’ere?”

I scrambled and hauled myself up the path, back up into the cloud and fog and onto the flat top of Ingleborough, the third of the Three Peaks. I followed shadowy silhouettes across the flinty rock plateau until I found the ‘peak’ marked by another stone wind shelter. Here some fellow walkers (or fell runners) had kindly left some more banana skins and a plastic cake wrapper lying on the ground. This made me really mad and I stomped back off the way I thought I had come until I nearly stepped over a cliff. My

anger switched violently into shock as I wobbled at the edge and I had to breath deeply until I calmed down.

I took more care at clambering down off the top and found the wide peaty path which led back below the fog. The figures I had seen on top had gone a different way and I was almost on my own again. The path led down through another massive limestone pavement, where I took a sharp left off the route to Pen-y-Ghent and walked along some pleasant fields until I hit the road by a terrace of Midland railway cottages. Again it was tough getting up the easy climb to the Inn, my feet complaining about the hardness of the tarmac.

After showering I ate by the roaring open fire in the Inn. It was almost empty compared to the night before. I asked the barmaid why, but she just said that's the way it was on a Saturday.

Monday: Garsdale and Eden Valley

Ribblehead Station is just above the Inn so I got there in plenty of time, but the visitor's centre wasn't open. The train came on time and we crossed the viaduct and thundered through Blea Moor Tunnel where I was disappointed not to see flashes of light from the air shafts. On the far side the scenery was much more spectacular than on the way to Settle as the sun broke through the early mist and lit up the valley in golden swathes.

The station at Garsdale Head is an odd one and it took me a bit of to-ing and fro-ing before I found the way out. I crossed the road and climbed through a boggy field to cut the corner into the valley. At the top of the hill my mobile phone made its first network connection of the day and went into a text receiving frenzy. It was my birthday and congratulations came in from Belfast, Newcastle and Melbourne. I was on my own this year and had decided that an outdoor adventure would be more fun than trying to persuade people to go out on a Monday night.

I crossed the railway again on the far side of the hill and went through a farmyard that must have belonged to Old Macdonald given the sheer variety of poultry and livestock milling about. Three psycho-collies hurled themselves at the gates on either side of the path, slabber flying from their snarling mouths. I followed vague tracks through a muddy shit strewn field and came to an ugly concrete and metal bridge across the River Ure. I had a choice here, either to climb up to the old drove road on the other side of the valley or to follow the river up to the watershed. I decided on the former

and immediately lost the right of way and had to tramp up through the heather, trying to negotiate the path of least resistance. At the top I came to a ruined farmstead and looked back. The path I had been trying to find lead back down below me like a bloody motorway. But I had made the right choice – the other route would have taken me on a winding tramp through bogs, marshy fields and small holdings; whereas from the drove road I had a fantastic view across the fells and the railway in the valley below.

The track was deeply rutted with motorbike tracks which made walking difficult, but I found it impossible to be angry with the couple of perpetrators I met as they let me by with deliberate courtesy. I crossed a wide red brick bridge over the nicely named Hell Gill Beck at the bottom of a dramatic gorge - six foot wide, but thirty feet deep, the water gurgling and rushing way, way below. I was looking down on the highest point of the whole railway on the watershed between the Ure and the Eden valley. A bit further on, a tall metal sculpture framed the outline of the river Eden. I stopped for lunch and admired the view down the valley. The place names here were as brilliant as the view was beautiful: the crag of the Mallerstang sat on the horizon as I descended down to 'The Thrang' with its graceful stone bridge over the Eden.

I wandered through fields, past a ruined tower and round a broad sweep of the river where I was neighed at by a horse high on the hillside above me. I passed Pendragon castle on the far bank, but it was overrun with hairy people in heavy metal T-shirts so I didn't bother stopping. I went through a meadow with a really arsey sign stipulating the exact route of the right of way, but if the owners had really wanted me to go that way they wouldn't have put three goats in the field, so I ignored it.

As I passed Wharton Hall – a half ruined castle rebuilt into an old stone farmhouse and a modern farm, two bright green parrots took off from the battlements, circled twice over my head and flew off crying into the distance. This must have hit some deep superstitious nerve as I suddenly started worrying about catching the train at Kirkby Stephen station, now a mile uphill. If I didn't catch the 16:29 I'd have to wait over two hours for the next one. The worry grew and grew until I lost my nerve and ran up the slope, puffing and panting, slipping and sliding. I hit the platform, slumped into a seat and glugged my last Lucozade Sport. The train came in bang on time 10 minutes later. My pack felt surprisingly light as I put it on the overhead rack, but when the conductor came around I was so exhausted I

could barely speak and ended up half gesticulating and half grunting at the poor man until I got a ticket back to Newcastle.

Return trips never hold my attention as well as the corresponding outbound journey and it was dark, so at Carlisle I loaded up on more liquids, chocolate, a newspaper and a music magazine which lasted me until I got home, worn out, weary, but ecstatic.