

The Navvies buried in Settle churchyard

On a lovely sunny summer evening at Settle Parish Church a group of 30 visitors are taking part in one of the popular graveyard tours — this one is about ‘Saints and Sinners’. But suddenly it stops. As usual, the graveyard tour is interrupted by a steam engine, on this occasion Tornado, hauling passenger carriages over the viaduct back from Carlisle towards the end of their trip of a lifetime. The enthusiastic passengers wave down, as they always do and those in the graveyard reciprocate and take photos. We are so lucky that this is life in 21st century Settle.



Since its opening in 1876, the Settle to Carlisle railway has been the dominant feature of Settle town, providing transport, trade and leisure for thousands of people every year.

The country's most scenic railway was one of the last to be built because of the technical challenges it presented. There would be 14 tunnels and 22 viaducts to be built over hostile terrain in (typically) appalling weather conditions. A review of the railway in 1876 describes the Settle to Carlisle Railway *'has given more trouble to the contractors . . . than any recently made in this country. From what I saw of it I would almost be inclined to go as far as to say that however the Midland engineers induced themselves to attempt its construction is a puzzle. It is emphatically a line of embankments, viaducts, cuttings and tunnels'* [1].

As for the engineering, well, I could not avoid learning that the new line is some 72 miles in length, and has given more trouble to the contractors who undertook to construction than any recently made in this country. From what I saw of it I would almost be inclined to go as far as to say that however the Midland engineers induced themselves to attempt its construction is a puzzle. It is emphatically a line of embankments, viaducts, cuttings, and tunnels. From Settle to Carlisle these succeed each other with such rapidity that if not in a cutting or a tunnel it would almost be safe to say the line is running over a viaduct or embankment.

It was an engineering triumph and, despite the daunting task, was completed to 'express standard' so that trains could run at 90mph throughout, still suitable for use today. It was built by the Midland Railway

as a trunk route to access the lucrative Scottish trade, to overcome difficulties with a rival company's hold over the Ingleton Branch Line. This history is well documented and so will not be repeated here.

Around 6000 navvies worked on the construction of the line, many of them travelling to Yorkshire from other parts of the UK. For working class men it was a relatively well paid but dangerous job as, across the country, there were an estimated three navvies deaths per mile of railway laid. This figure was far higher in areas of terrain such as that of the Settle to Carlisle railway. The church graveyards along the route contain hundreds of these casualties, the majority of them buried without gravestones.

So how many navvies were buried in Settle church graveyard?

Holy Ascension Church in Settle and St Leonard's Church in Chapel-le-Dale were the two graveyards to have a plaque erected and dedicated to the memory to the navvies who died during the building of the railway between Settle and Dent 1869–1876. Therefore there are likely to be burials of navvies in Settle churchyard. But how many? Where and how did they die?



It's taken nearly 150 years to find out.

Since 2018, the **Settle Graveyard Project** has been researching the lives of those buried, in the graveyard of Settle Parish Church, with and without gravestones. The graveyard is nestled below the embankment of the railway and so the project was particularly interested in its links with the railway. The 'Old' section of the graveyard was purchased to fit in alongside the railway in 1885. The research identified a number of men who seemed likely to have been navvies working on the construction of the Settle to Carlisle line. The Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line generously paid to purchase death certificates for these men to find out more. This account is the result of the subsequent research. In the end a total of 23 certificates were purchased.



Main findings:

- There were 19 railway workers, carpenters and stonemasons who died whilst working on the railways and were buried in the graveyard.
- A further three young men died who were apprentices in the associated occupations of the blacksmith and tinsmith. They were likely to have worked for the railway for at least some of their time, although we have no proof.
- Of these deaths, nine were caused by tragic accidents and 13 by disease.
- Over a third of these deaths occurred in 1872.
- The average age of death was 30.8 years. The youngest was 16, the oldest 64.
- Of all these burials there are just four grave plots which have gravestones. One gravestone commemorates two navvies.
- There were a further 30 burials who were the infants, children, mothers and wives of navvies.

(It transpired that one young man was a labourer in the limeworks. He was less likely to be associated on the railway and so has been discounted from further analysis. Out of interest, his story is summarised with that of his namesake Robert Ralph.)

As well as these navvies, the Settle graveyard contains burials of numerous men who worked on the Settle to Carlisle railway and the Little North Western railways since they were built. For the sake of manageability this account covers the navvies who died during the building of the Settle to Carlisle Railway and a few others who were discovered during research of the 'Ancient' graveyard and are linked in some way to the railways. Perhaps 'part 2' will cover more recent employees. This account is presented as:

1. Settle, a Railway Town

2. Research findings and observations

3. The Navvies

- Summary spreadsheet of information provided by death certificates and research
- Life stories, in chronological order

Accidental deaths 1872

*Henry Caswell
William Peacock
Thomas Burton
John Jones*



*Abraham Cooling
William Potterton*

Accidental deaths 1873–74

*John Griffith Owen
Thomas Smith
James Lashbrook*

Death caused by disease 1869–72

*Harry Gifford
Richard Cartmell
James Burkinsher
James Todd
Joseph Smith
Joseph Uttley*

Death caused by disease 1873–75

*Robert Henry Jackson
Robert Ralph
James Harry Smith
Samuel Henry
Thomas Cooper
Thomas Ferris
John Barrett*



4. Other railway folk

- The coroner, the registrar and the railway surgeons
- Other railway winners and losers

Author's note

To my parents' disappointment I am no expert in railway matters although I have the genes! My father, Dr Fred Youell, was the founder of the Middleton Railway Preservation Society, the preserved industrial railway in Leeds. He bought the last engine built at Stratford works, N7 69621, from BR, now at the East Anglian Railway Museum. My mother, Susan Youell, was a passionate enthusiast from childhood, well before the publication of the first Ian Allan books. Her log books recorded 1077 steam engines between 1937 and 1944, including all 35 of the A4 class engines. She also beat my father in driving her first steam loco at the age of 17. I hope this work in some ways redeems this situation, but I do apologise for any mistakes due to my ignorance and would welcome corrections and additional information from people who know much more.

Throughout the account I have used the general term 'navvy' to mean any labourer or other tradesman employed in the excavation and construction of the railway. I apologise if this causes offence.

I would like to thank the Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line for providing the funds to obtain the death certificates for this research. It is easy to forget the sacrifices these people made in the building of the railway and their contribution to life in Settle. I look forward to working with the Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line to find out more about the navvies, raise awareness, celebrate their achievements and commemorate their lives. After 150 years without even knowing who they were, we owe it to them.

Sarah Lister, July 2020



This account has been compiled as part of the Settle Graveyard Project which has recorded gravestone inscriptions, updated church records and researched the lives of those buried. Life stories can be found on dalescommunityarchives.org.uk, 'settle graveyard project'. The 'Old Settle' family tree on ancestry.co.uk includes the families buried in the graveyard. The project is ongoing and welcomes queries and information on settleresearch@gmail.com. Latest news and events are on the Facebook page 'Settle Graveyard Project'.

Newspaper cuttings with the kind permission of the British Newspaper Archives: 1 – Bradford Daily Telegraph