

## George Gibbs, an extraordinary railway tunneller

George Gibbs, 1833 - 1895 was born in Gloucestershire, the eldest and only surviving child of another **George Gibbs**, and his first wife **Mary Ann Trigg**. The family had moved to Gloucester from Kent to find work as a private gardener. George had four brothers who died in infancy. Mary Ann died at the birth of their fifth son. Once moved to Cornwall, George (Snr)'s second wife had 7 more children.



George (Jnr) had a tough childhood, experiencing the deaths of numerous younger siblings and a very basic standard of living. He left home as soon as he was old enough to work. At the time of the 1851 census 18 year old George worked as a house servant for a miller in Lanlivery, north of St Austell. Here, he caught the eye of local lass **Jane Burn**, the daughter of a copper miner, and, by the time he married her in 1856, George had become a tin miner. George was able to write his name on the wedding certificate, so must have had some form of basic education.

As in the best Poldark dramas, we know that copper mining in Cornwall was extremely precarious in the 19th century, so George, together with other miners had to move around Cornwall for new mining opportunities. We know he worked in Camborne and Falmouth. Cornish mines were reaching the end of their economic viability by the mid 19th century so George and Jane had some difficult choices to make ends meet with their growing family – they were to have 10 children.

Some Cornish miners were attracted by the opportunities in the New World and emigrated to the States or Australia. Others changed occupation or used their transferrable mining skills in other parts of England, and that's what George did. George would have attended a local hiring market (a 19th century Job centre) held every quarter, or replied to an advert in the local paper. This one was in the *Yorkshire Post* in 1873 [1]. The Midland Railway were advertising for tunnellers at Blea Moor Tunnel at Ribbleshead, indicating that lodging was available site. The wages paid to railway labourers were very attractive compared to other labouring work, mainly because it was difficult to recruit men to do such hard labour in remote, hostile terrain. Skilled labourers, such as tunnellers were paid even more to reflect the increased dangers of the job – working with dynamite in a candle-lit environment was unpredictable at the best of times. So, George earned six shillings per day. At that time there were 28 different railway companies advertising for railway tunnellers.

**TUNNEL MINERS** wanted at Blea Moor Tunnel, Settle and Carlisle Railway, No. 1 Contract. Wages, 6s. per day. Good lodgings immediately adjoining. Station, Ingleton via Leeds. Parties of ten men will be passed down.—Apply Alfred Terry, Midland Railway Offices, Settle

The 'railway mania' occurred between 1845 and 1850, accounting for around half of the railway lines. As time went by, railways began to be built through more challenging terrain, requiring more tunnels and viaducts to be built to get through the landscape. The Settle to Carlisle Railway was one of the last major railways to be built for this reason. The review of the railway in the *Bradford Daily Telegraph* in 1876 [2] describes the Settle to Carlisle Railway as '*emphatically a line of embankments, viaducts, cuttings and tunnels*'.

**As for the engineering, well, I could not avoid learning that the new line is some 73 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 so 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.**

By the time of the 1871 census George and his

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family were living in one of 20 railway huts on the hillside above Garsdale. He was described as a 'railway miner' and was helping to build the Black Moss Tunnel, also known as the Rise Hill tunnel, along with 120 other miners. This was one of the more challenging tunnels to be built[2].

depth of over 50 feet. One of the largest works on the line is Rise Hill Tunnel, a short distance north from a cutting from which 150,000 cubic yards of earth and stone have been excavated. This tunnel, which has been cut through a pretty high hill, is 1217 yards in length, and when it is mentioned that this underground passage, 26 feet wide and 20 feet in height had to be formed through solid rock 140 feet below the surface of the earth, it is difficult to realise the enormous labour which such a vast undertaking entailed. Another engineering work

Despite the generalised perception of navvies being loud drinkers and fighters, George and Jane were bringing up four children. As in most huts, the wife of the family provided lodging and food to unmarried navvies to supplement their income. The family would have been at one end of the hut, boarders at the other with the central area used for eating and cooking.

Railway Hut	1	George Gibbs	Head	Mar.	30	Railway Miner	Gloucestershire: Gloucester
		Jane Do	Wife	Mar.	28		Cornwall: Toweldash
		James H. Do	Son		12		Do Do
		Lavinia Do	Daughter		5		Derbyshire: Fernwell
		George Do	Son		3		Do Do
		Mary Do	Daughter		1		Yorkshire: Harrogate
		Francis Frattlefarty	Boarder	Mar.	27	Railway Labourer	Staffordshire: Lichfield
		James Smith	Do	Mar.	25	Do Miner	Lancashire: Liverpool
Railway Hut contd		Richard Birley	Boarder	Mar.	27	Railway Miner	Devonshire: Devonport
		Thomas Watkins	Do	Mar.	26	Do Do	Staffordshire: Collyford
		Robert Rouse	Do	Mar.	25	Do Do	Suffolk: Thelveton
		James Thomas	Do	Mar.	24	Do Do	Devonshire: Plymouth

The birth places of the labourers on this census return show that many navvies came from Lancashire, Yorkshire and Derbyshire but some from further afield, including George. On this part of the railway, there were less Irish navvies than usual. Several men were recorded as 'NK' birthplace - 'not known'. There was an exceptionally high turnover of workers in Garsdale, many taking one look at the terrain and going away. It was reported that 36,000 railway workers came and went through Garsdale and so the railway provided numerous perks – cheap accommodation and free refreshments to entice workers to stay. George and Jane must have been made of strong stuff! A noticeable number of railway workers gave false names and/or were untraceable before and afterwards, probably a deliberate strategy! Some gave incredible names! One of George's lodgers called himself **Francis Frattlefarty** from Lichfield – one wonders about his personal hygiene? Unsurprisingly, he can't be traced any further.

A navy village was not the dream location for child rearing. Typically navvies and tunnellers were paid daily or weekly, sometimes in tokens which had to be spent at the village stores or, notoriously, the local inns. George and Jane's boarder James Smith was fined 5 shillings for being drunk at Black Moss [3].

**SEDBERGH PETTY SESSIONS.**  
**THURSDAY.**  
 Jas. Smith and Hy. Hill, miners engaged at Black Moss Tunnel, were charged with being drunk on the 22nd ult. at Black Moss, and were fined 5s. and costs each.

Another drunken episode involved the attack on **Ellen Bowers** by a drunken **Levi Abbott** in 1874. Levi, another miner and his wife **Susan Abbott**, both from Somerset had recently arrived after working on a tunnel at Lazonby, north of Penrith with their 7 children. Levi's victim was Ellen, wife of miner **Alfred Bowers** who lived in Railway Hut nearby. Alfred was another railway miner from Wiltshire. Ellen was an 'old and decrepit witch of an Irish woman'. In fact Ellen was 53 years old, and

Railway Company, at a tunnel called Blackmoss tunnel. Near the tunnel the prosecutrix, an old and decrepit woman, lived in a hut, and provided accommodation for the navvies and their wives. On the day in question the old woman was sitting in her hut when the prisoner and his wife came in, and after sitting a few minutes the prisoner suddenly rose, and, seizing a formidable looking pocket, struck the old woman on the head twice, inflicting some very severe injuries. When the policeman apprehended him he said he was sorry he had not killed the old woman, as she had bewitched his pigs and himself. The Judge (Baron Amphlett) in summing up said it was hardly possible to believe that in the middle of the nineteenth century any one could be so ignorant as to believe in witchcraft. The jury found prisoner guilty. Sentence, five years' penal servitude.

provided for seven boarders in their hut. Levi had been *'drinking for a week or a fortnight.. and was very sorry for the violence he had so foolishly used.* [4]. Navvies huh?

prisoner guilty only on the lesser count. There was no motive whatever for the assault, and prisoner, who had been drinking for a week or a fortnight, was either "dazed" from the effects of that or a little jealousy. In any case he had no ill-feeling against the woman, and was very sorry for the violence he had so foolishly used.—His LORDSHIP said the assault

It wasn't just the railway labourers causing trouble. In 1873, one of the subcontractors of the Benton and Woodiwiss company was charged with menace and obtaining money under false pretences for encouraging 30 navvies to demand money from a railway agent that he had previously secured. He was labelled *'a pest to society'* by the judge and imprisoned for 12 months with hard labour. We know that George Gibbs worked on several of the contracts run by Benton and Woodiwiss, following them around the country.

**SEDBERGH.**  
**THE LATE CASE OF MISDEMEANOUR.**—The case of George Williams, a sub-contractor on the Settle and Carlisle Line under Messrs. Benton and Woodiwiss, was brought on at the Wakefield spring sessions on Thurs-

In September 1873 accident took place on the site where George, Jane and his family lived [5] probably due to a complete lack of basic health and safety measures. Three women were killed when trucks derailed from the service tramway. A drunk man who had laid down to sleep was also killed by the trucks, *'his head being nearly cut off.'*

**FATAL ACCIDENT ON THE SETTLE AND CARLISLE RAILWAY.**

An accident, attended by the loss of three lives, occurred on Monday evening on the works in connection with the construction of the Settle and Carlisle Railway. Near the Black Moss Tunnel, about seven miles from Sedbergh, a tramway has been laid for the conveyance of material up an incline. It is worked by a standing engine and a wire rope. On the evening of the above-named day eleven men and women seated themselves on three trucks for the purpose of travelling to the bottom of the incline. Shortly after starting the pin connecting the rope with the trucks broke, and the trucks ran on at a rapidly increasing rate of speed. Nine persons managed to alight, but two women, named Pemberton and Fordham, were unable to do so, and on the trucks jumping off the rails they were both thrown out and instantly killed. A third woman named Lakin, was also hurt, but not seriously. Just before the accident occurred a man named Alexander Blanney, being under the influence of drink, lay down upon the incline and refused to rise, although a little girl who was passing endeavoured to remove him to a place of safety. He was killed by the runaway trucks, his head being nearly cut off.

Despite all of this going on, George and Jane continued to bring up their growing family. From the birth places of their children given on censuses we can track where George worked and most of these locations coincided with the building of railway tunnels, many under contract to Benton and Woodiwiss.

Fortunately George and Jane were able to remember the birth places of their children – many navvies couldn't. There may well have been other jobs in between.

- 1858 - 1861 Cornwall: Lanlivery, Camborne, Falmouth
- 1862 - 1865 Dove Holes tunnel, Derbyshire, 2984 yards
- 1868 - 70 Marsden second Standedge tunnel, 5337 yards
- 1871 - 75 Black Moss tunnel, 1213 yards
- 1875 - 78 Queensbury tunnel, Halifax, 2501 yards
- 1878 - 1879 Yeadon, possibly working on improving Springs Belmont Wood Tunnel, Guiseley 77 yards



(At the time of the 1881 census, George worked as an iron miner in Barnby, near Whitby, North Yorkshire)

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1890 - 94 Marsden double track railway tunnel, 5340 yards

George died in November 1895 aged 62, just 6 months after his son **George Gibbs**, also a tunneller, aged just 25. They both died of tuberculosis. George (Snr) had been working as a miner/tunneller for at least 40 years. Widow Jane died of cardiac failure in 1916, still in Marsden. Despite the relatively high wages paid to tunnellers the family couldn't stretch to a gravestone, but George, Jane and George are buried in Marsden graveyard, a long way from their birthplaces. Just as George had done, their children left home as soon as they were old enough to work, employed in labouring, navy or weaving families.

George was an unusually resilient railway worker spending so many years on the railway, way beyond the average for such a physical job. Most navies only worked on the railways for a few years and then found other less strenuous occupations, if they survived. George and his (often pregnant) wife spent all that time travelling from one end of the country to the other with growing numbers of children, living in terrible conditions just to put food on the table for their families. Only two children died in infancy. **George Michael Gibbs** was born in Cornwall and died in Derbyshire a year later, and **Charlotte Gibbs** was born and died in Yeadon, also aged just one – nationally one in five children died before the age of five in the Victorian Era, but this figure was far higher in the insanitary conditions of the navy huts.

Despite the turmoil around him, George and his family kept themselves out of trouble. There weren't many like him! We mustn't forget the contribution that George and others like him made to our lives today, many of whom sacrificed their lives, or lives of family members along the way. There are 75 navies and 142 family members buried in Chapel-le-Dale with others in Dent, Garsdale and other graveyards along the route. May they rest in peace, and may we remember them as we enjoy the fantastic Settle to Carlisle Railway, still going strong over 150 years later.



*This account has been compiled by Sarah Lister as part of the Settle Graveyard Project which has recorded gravestone inscriptions, updated church records and researched the lives of those buried. It has been written in good faith with no offence intended. If I have inadvertently included errors or breached any copyright I apologise and would welcome corrections.*

*The life stories of people with italicised names have been researched as part of the graveyard project and can be found on [dalescommunityarchives.org.uk/settle graveyard project](http://dalescommunityarchives.org.uk/settle-graveyard-project). The 'Old Settle' family tree on [Ancestry.co.uk](http://Ancestry.co.uk) includes the families buried in the graveyard. The project is ongoing and welcomes queries and information on [settleresearch@gmail.com](mailto: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 – Yorkshire Post, 2 – Bradford Daily Telegraph, 3 – Westmorland Gazette, 4 – York Herald, 5 – Shields Daily Gazette, 6 – Lancaster Gazette*

*Census returns via [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk), originally from The National Archives.*