

## Ribblehead Tales . . . Informants

During the building of the Settle to Carlisle Railway 75 navvies and a further 142 members of their families died and were buried at St Leonard's Church. When they died someone, known as the informant, had to report the death to the registrar. In usual times this was often a family member, but, as many navvies at Ribblehead were single men, this could be another navvy who worked in the same gang or someone in the same navvy hut or anyone else who happened to be there. After an accident or death under suspicious circumstances, the County Coroner would report the death following an inquest. Some hardy folk lived at or near the navvy site for the duration of the railway construction and, as a result, were the informant for several navvies. It's a grim thing to do and risky when infectious diseases were involved, but someone had to do it. Unsurprisingly, there were several mistakes in the information given to the registrar and the vicar.

### Poor old John Firmstone

**John Firmstone** was the informant for three men. **William Clark**, a single labourer from Doncaster, living at Sebastopol died of Enteric Fever (Typhoid). **Evans Davis**, a railway labourer from Denbighshire died of smallpox. Both men were 27 years of age, died on 2 June 1871 and were buried on 4 June 1871. This was one of just two occasions that two navvies died on the same day. John was also the informant at the death of **Henry Loyd** who had been living at Jericho and died of typhoid on 29 February 1872.

So, who was John Firmstone? Born in 1836, John was a labourer's son from Hinstock, Shropshire, between Shrewsbury and Stoke. His father died when he was nine and John started life as a farm servant in his teenage years. The railways provided a great opportunity for John and by the time of the 1861 census he was working as a railway labourer at Kirkby Stephen.

In 1865, in Swansea, John married **Mary Alice Oxendale**, known as **Alice**, the daughter of a railway contractor, **James Oxendale** and his wife **Rose Ann Lovett**. In April 1850 the Oxendale family lived at Thornton-in-Lonsdale and James was working on the railway branch at Ingleton. Their only son, five year old **James Oxendale** was drowned when he was blown off a temporary bridge into the river by very boisterous winds. His body was found two miles down stream the following morning [1]. At the time of the 1861 census the Oxendales lived at Sedbergh. Before John and Alice married, she had been working as a servant in Hetton so it's not clear why they married in Swansea — a secret getaway? Whatever the reason, they quickly had a daughter **Rosanne Firmstone**, in Somerset and three sons, **James, John** and **William** while living at Chorley. Unfortunately, Rosanne died aged two.

INGLETON.—MELANCHOLY ACCIDENT.—We have this week to record a most lamentable accident, which occurred at Ingleton, on Saturday last, under the following circumstances. It appears that James Oxendale, only son of James Oxendale, plate-layer, Ingleton, aged five years, was about to cross over some timber, laid across the river at Ingleton by the railway company, and when about the middle of it, by some unfortunate event, he fell into the water and was drowned. No one was near at the time, or probably his life might have been saved. It was not till the following morning that his body was found, about two miles from the place where he fell in. The body was conveyed home, and an inquest was held on Tuesday last, when a verdict of "Accidentally drowned" was returned.

At the time of the 1871 census John and Alice lived at '109 Jericho' navvy hut with two of their sons, James and John, and five boarders. John and all their boarders were excavators (tunnellers). Middle son William was living with his grandparents, James and Rose Ann Oxendale in one of the 'Lea Yeat' navvy huts in Cowgill, Dent, along with an aunt, **Jane Oxendale**, and some 12 lodgers — yes 12! The average number of lodgers in the Ribblehead navvy huts was just six. James'

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popularity could have been something to do with Rose Ann's cooking and housekeeping or could have been linked to an event in July 1870. Excise officers and Superintendent Exton went 'undercover' into navy huts with the result that James was fined 20 shillings for selling beer without a licence. **Mr Pugh** was a chief witness [5]. James protested that Mr Pugh had a grudge against him — he had previously been a lodger in James' hut but had been turned out by his wife. However, Supt Exton wanted a heavy penalty of £5 'on account of the quantity of excusable liquor which is illegally sold by the hut keepers on the new line.' But the Bench decided that 20 shillings was a sufficient fine and that wouldn't have dented James' purse too much.

Superintendent Exton then called as his witness to prove the sale a "navvy," named Pugh, who appeared in the box with a recently inflicted black eye, who in answer to questions put to him stated that he saw the defendant's wife in presence of defendant supply "Curley" with a pint of ale, and also take pay for a quart with which he had been previously supplied.

We know that the Oxendales had moved over to live at the Sebastopol huts at Ribblehead by 1872 as daughter Jane married **William Archer**, another railway labourer at St Leonard's church on 8 July that year. One of their witnesses was **Thomas Robinson**, an excavator from near Kirkby Lonsdale who died of disease in July 1873.

By 1873 the Oxendales and the Archers moved to Spotland in Rochdale and ran lodging houses to supplement their income. In October 1873 **Thomas Holt**, the 'Inspector of Nuisances' for the Rural Sanitary Authority surveyed housing in the area with a focus on sanitary arrangements. He reported that James Oxendale and William Archer were running 'uncertificated lodging houses'. Both had six lodgers crammed in one room with no means of ventilation [2]. Perhaps they hadn't adjusted from life in their navy huts?! James Oxendale died in Rochdale in 1879, aged 67.

ashpit. I have also inspected 2 uncertificated lodging houses at Brickshaw. In the one kept by James Oxendale there are 6 lodgers in one room, and no means of ventilation. In the one kept by William Archer there are 6 lodgers in one room. Since your last meeting

Meanwhile, what happened to John Firmstone and his wife Alice? At the time of the 1881 census John, a general labourer and his three sons were also in Rochdale living with his mother-in-law Rose Ann Oxendale, next door to William and Jane Archer. John described himself as a widower. The families continued to live together for the rest of their lives. John died in 1913, aged 77 spending his last years with son John and family.

So, what happened to wife Alice (Oxendale) Firmstone? Had she died? We know the Ribblehead community had many distractions and relationships were put under strain. On 25 April 1874 in Chester-le-Street, County Durham, Mary Alice gave birth to **Charles William Hibbs**, fathered by 'husband' **William John Hibbs**, a colliery labourer who will inevitably have worked at Ribblehead for a while to meet Alice. Then daughter **Frances Rosanna Hibbs** was born in Kirkby Stephen, with William John working as a railway tunneller, and daughter **Lily Hibbs** followed in Blackburn. Unfortunately, both daughters died of tuberculosis within a week of each other in March 1879 in Blackburn workhouse.

The only fifth April 1874 Chester le Street	Charles William Boy	William John Hibbs	Mary Alice Hibbs formerly Oxendale	Colliery Labourer	The mark of Mary Alice Hibbs Mother Chester le Street
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Alice's runaway husband, William John Hibbs didn't really turn out as she may have hoped. Youngest daughter Lily was born on 21 March 1878 in Blackburn. In July 1881 **John James Hibbs Hill** was born, the son of '**William John Hibbs Hill**' and his new 'wife' **Elizabeth Peel**. They went on to have three other children including another '**Charles William Hibbs Hill**'.  
Naughty William John.



What about Alice? She had been deserted by her runaway husband, who had run away with someone else, and her real husband and children were living with her own mother in Rochdale. After a spell in Blackburn workhouse Alice lived the rest of her life in Preston with son Charles William Hibbs, describing herself as 'married'. She worked as a charwoman. When she died in 1918, aged 77, still in Preston, her death was registered under the name of Firmstone. Her son, Charles William Hibbs, a dairyman, married and had eight children but died in 1914, aged 40, predeceasing his mum. Alice certainly paid the price for a bit of fun at the navy huts.

### Richard Foster, the rough and tumble of navy life

Richard was the informant for the deaths of four navvies. 13 year old **Henry Hodges** and his father **John Hodges** aged 38, both died of typhoid on 9 January 1873 and 23 November 1873 respectively. **Thomas Clark**, a railway labourer at Jericho died of heart problems in September 1873. **George Capstick**, a bookkeeper, died of tuberculosis in March 1872, aged 38 and we will meet him in another story.

Richard Foster was the second of six sons born in Ingleton to **William Foster**, a farmer and his wife **Mary Stainforth**. The birth of youngest son **Robert Foster** in 1846 probably caused his mother's death, aged 45, and his father died in the same year too. All the brothers stayed in the North and had families. Richard, a shoemaker and miner, and eldest brother **William Foster**, a railway labourer/miner stayed in Ingleton. Both the Little North Western Railway from Leeds to Lancaster and the Settle and Carlisle Railway provided opportunities for them.

Richard married **Mary Ann Blezard** in 1851 and she had a son and four daughters. Richard worked as a coal miner at this time. On a Wednesday evening in 1860 Richard was at home preparing some dynamite for the following day when a spark fell from the candle and caused the powder to explode. *'The clothes of the child in its mother's lap were ignited, and in extinguishing the flames the arms of the mother were severely burnt'*[3]. The child was probably one year old **Betty** (who died aged 20). This may have been the reason for the end of Richard's career in coal mining. He had originally been apprenticed to a shoemaker and returned to making shoes from then on.

ACCIDENT.—As **Richard Foster**, coalminer, **Ingleton** was preparing on Wednesday evening, a quantity of cartridge for use in the coal mine, a spark fell from the candle and the whole pound of powder immediately exploded, and inflicted several injuries on **Foster's** face and neck. The clothes of the child in its mother's lap were ignited, and in extinguishing the flames the arms of the mother were severely burnt.

In April 1865 Richard's wife, Mary Ann, had to give evidence in court in a case in which **Ann Wearing**, an elderly lady, was charged with stealing a pair of drawers belonging to **Agnes Dobson** after she had hung them outside to dry. The next day Agnes saw her drawers on Ann's washing line. There was quite a debate about whether old women wore such drawers

Mrs. **Foster** examined by Mr. Exton—I am the wife of **Richard Foster**, of **Ingleton**, shoemaker, I know the house some time ago. I cut those drawers out about 8 months ago. They asked me to cut 2 pair out (2 pair produced) I am sure that I cut these drawers out for **Agnes Dobson**.

Here followed quite a comic scene in which Mr. Pearson, Mr. Exton, and Mrs. Foster joined, each intently examining these articles of female modesty, Mr. Pearson with the view of throwing a doubt upon their identity, at the same time handling them very delicately and, as he held them up to view in court, to the edification of the Ingletonian youths, who had mustered in goodly numbers to hear the trial he seemed to be quite taken up with them.

— whyever not? Mary Ann Foster had made the offending drawers for **Agnes Dobson** eight months previously. Mary Ann and the solicitors then had a debate about the identity of *'these articles of female modesty, handling them very delicately as he held them up in court, to the edification of Ingletonian youths who had mustered in goodly numbers to hear the trial.'* The case was dismissed and the drawers returned to Agnes Dobson. It was probably a senior moment!



1865 was not a good year for the family. Daughter **Nancy** died in February 1865, aged 7 and then wife Mary Ann died later in the year. In April 1867

Richard married **Margaret Dobson**, a labourer's daughter from Dent who had come to Ingleton to find work in domestic service. Richard and Margaret had another four children.

The building of the Settle to Carlisle Railway could not have happened at a better time or place for this Ingleton shoemaker. The main route to the Ribbleshead site for machinery and supplies was up the road (rutted track) from Ingleton. Richard will have been up and down that road on numerous occasions with his horse and cart providing boots and anything else he could think of for the navvies to buy and bringing back orders and other requests. Perhaps he stayed in a navy hut for some of the time? One of the jobs he managed to acquire was that of postman, or *'rural letter carrier'*. Unfortunately, whilst carrying out those duties, in March 1872, Richard was attacked by a navy who demanded he gave up all his money. *'After a severe struggle in which both fell to the ground, Foster at last managed to get away and went as fast as he could to Batty Wife Hole, the navy pursuing him for above a mile.'*[3] Richard reported it to the police, perhaps **PC Archie Cameron**, and the navy was apprehended. It's surprising that a fit navy couldn't catch a postman, but perhaps he was drunk? Another report names the navy as *'Thomas Sutton, a repulsive looking individual.'*[4] He was sentenced to two months imprisonment plus 28 shillings costs. Would the sentence have been any less if he hadn't been such a repulsive looking individual?

**ATTEMPTED ROBBERY OF A RURAL LETTER CARRIER**  
—On Saturday last, as **Richard Foster**, letter carrier between **Ingleton** and **Batty Wife Hole** had proceeded on his journey about two miles, he met a navy who seized him and threatened to kill him if he did not give up all his money. After a severe struggle in which both fell to the ground, **Foster** at last managed to get away, and went as fast as he could to **Batty Wife Hole**, the navy pursuing him for above a mile. When he got to **Batty Wife Hole**, he gave information to the policeman and they both returned and apprehended the man. They took him to the **Ingleton Police Station**, and he was brought before Messrs. **Denney and J. T. Rice**, who sentenced him to two months imprisonment; and at the expiration of that time to pay 28s. cost, or in default to be imprisoned one month.

**ATTACKING A POSTMAN.**—A man named **Thos. Sutton**, a navy, a very repulsive looking individual,

In February 1873 Richard found himself being the subject of a newspaper article with the title *'Postal Annoyance'*. The number of navvies at Ribbleshead considerably increased the pressure on postmen such as Richard and *'the inhabitants of this locality have been annoyed for three months, and though missive after missive of a fault finding character have been sent to the authorities the evil has not yet been adequately remedied.'*[6]. Post from Ribbleshead often missed the trains from Clapham and deliveries were often *'not delivered to villages until after the dark.'* In the end Mr Ashwell, the main contractor at Batty Green offered to pay Richard 1 shilling a day for the extra expenses and labour required to get the job done. *'Mr Foster now leaves his house at 7am to take the train the Clapham Station to meet the Barrow train to the south. Then he carries the Ingleton and Batty Green deliveries four*

miles to Ingleton where he arrives at 10am. After delivering there he goes on to Batty Green. Can the government sustain such an extravagant liberal pay to all its public servants?' Lucky Richard!

After the railway was built Richard returned to life as a shoemaker in Ingleton. Wife Margaret died in 1878, aged 37 after the birth of a son, **John Thomas Foster**. Spinster daughter **Sarah Ann Foster** became housekeeper and looked after Richard until he died in 1899, aged 70.

## Naughty Jonas Beck

On 21 May 1872 **Jonas Beck** was the informant for **Thomas Mullins** who died of measles aged 40. **Jonas Beck**, from Skipton lived next to James Mathers at the Welcome Home Inn at Inkerman, Batty Wife Hole. Jonas began life as a boatman on the canals, following in the footsteps of his parents. Jonas married **Mary Hirst**, also from Skipton and they had at least nine children. In 1851 Jonas, aged 27 and **Thomas Hudson**, aged 19, were unloading goods from their boat to a warehouse in Blackburn and 'secreted' two blankets, the property of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, and 39lbs of wheat [2]. They were discovered

**STEALING BLANKETS AND GRAIN.**—On Saturday 12th, Jonas Beck and Thomas Hudson were brought before W. Eccles, Esq., having been remanded on the previous Thursday, charged with stealing two blankets, the property of Mr. James Pilkington, furniture broker, Blackburn, and 39lbs. of wheat, which had been consigned to Mr. John Tattersall, of Blackburn. The prisoners were employed as boatmen on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, and contrived, on the 26th ult., while discharging the cargo at the warehouse, in Blackburn, to secrete the property. The blankets were found in the boat. The

with the goods in their boat. Jonas was imprisoned for four months and Thomas Hudson for two months. This seemed to bring an end to Jonas' life on the boat and his criminal behaviour. He set up as a draper in Burton-in-Lonsdale putting him in an ideal place to exploit the opportunities the shanty town would bring. While Jonas lived up at Ribbleshead Mary kept the family and business going in Burton-in-Lonsdale.

Jonas was still at Ribbleshead in October 1875 — he appeared at a witness debating whether licenses should be given to the inns as navy numbers had decreased so much — see *Innkeepers*. Jonas said he had been on site for five years and thought it was desirable there should be three licensed houses at Batty Green.

After the railway was constructed the Beck family moved to London where Jonas made a living as a coal merchant. Jonas must have been proud of his time at Batty Green as it was mentioned on his probate documentation when he died in 1888 aged 60.

### **BECK Jonas.**

Personal Estate £192.

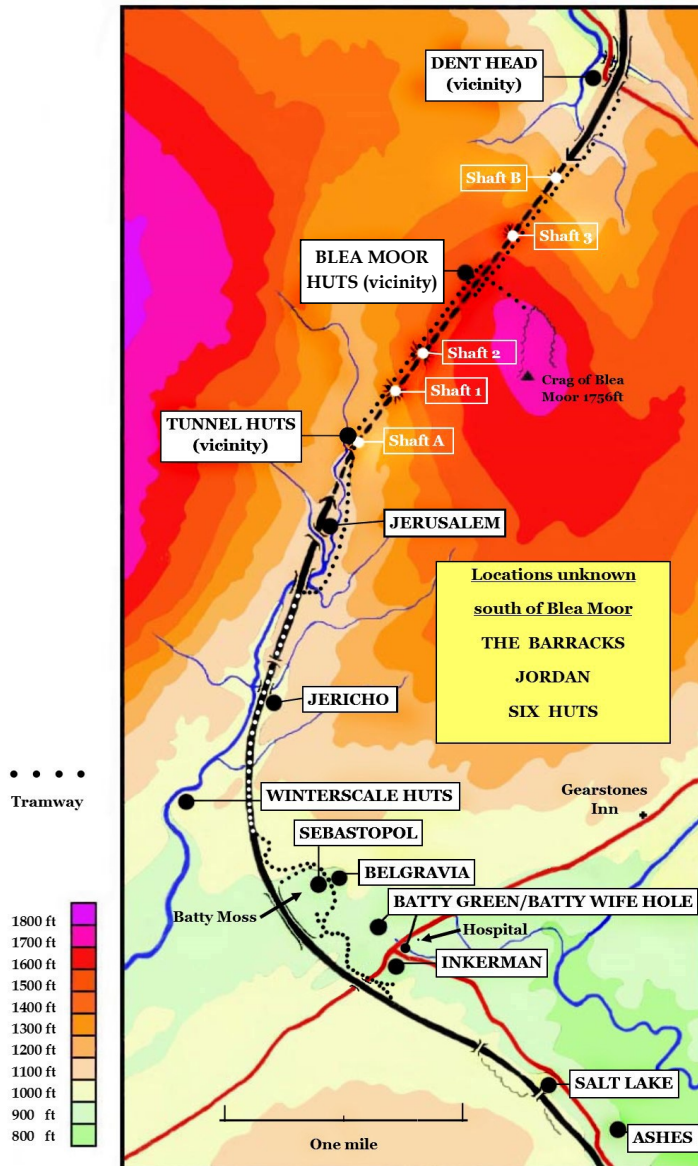
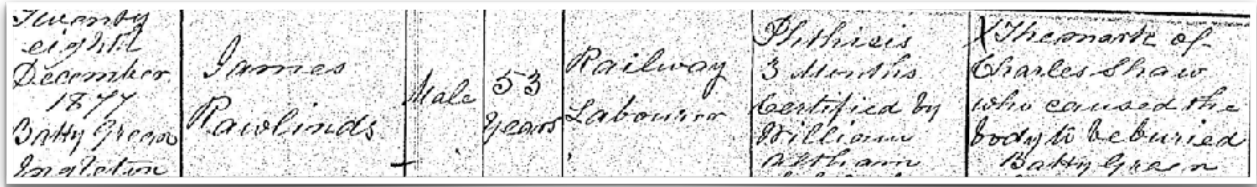
2 April. The Will of Jonas Beck formerly of Batty Wife Hole near Ingleton in the County of York Draper and Grocer but late of Nightingale-terrace Harlesden in the County of Middlesex Coal Agent who died 27 February 1884 at Nightingale-terrace was proved at the **Principal Registry** by Mary Beck of Nightingale - terrace Widow the Relict the sole Executrix.

## Charles Shaw

One other informant deserves a mention for going beyond the call of duty. **Charles Shaw** was the informant for the death of **James Rawlinds**, alias **John Gutteridge**, the last navy to die at Ribbleshead. James died of tuberculosis on 28 December 1877, aged 53 after suffering from phthisis (tuberculosis) for 3 months. The death certificate tells us that Charles Shaw of Batty Green, who was illiterate, 'caused the body to be buried'. This term means that he was the man planning the

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funeral with the church — there was probably no-one present at the death and so Charles was the closest person available to inform the registrar of the death. Poor James. Charles Shaw was a life long railway carpenter who lived with his wife **Ann Kirkham** at Batty Green from 1874-1878 and had three children whilst there. Before that they were based in a navy hut at Helwith Bridge where they had another three children to add to the two born previously in Staffordshire. Charles was originally from London and Ann from Frodsham, Cheshire. They never bothered getting married and moved to Warwickshire after the railway was built.



Supposed locations of navy settlements between Ribbleshead and Dent Head.

Revised to 2022. © Nigel Mussett

## Settle Graveyard Project

*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 — Kendal Mercury, 2 — Rochdale Times, 3 — Lancaster Gazette, 4 — Carlisle Express, 5 — Westmorland Gazette, 6 — Lancaster Guardian*

*Navy Settlements diagram with thanks to Nigel Mussett, archivist for FoSCL. Thanks to Teresa Gordon for the sketch*

*Other sources: The Railway Years in Chapel-Le-Dale 1870 - 1877 and The Chapel of the Fells both by Gerald Tyler, The New Railway To Scotland by David Occomore, Shanty Life on the Settle-Carlisle railway and How they built the Settle-Carlisle Railway both by W R Mitchell, The Railway Navvies of Settle: the end of the line by Sarah Lister.*

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