

## John Griffith Owen, railway navvy and singer

*Sacred to the memory of John G Owen of Holyhead who died at Settle Feby 18th 1873 aged 19 years. Ai mewn bedd man loan back -O l'e. loan sy'n llwch bellach. Ond daw'n ol etto'n iach At ail vesi'n hi tlysach*

*(Young John is now in his grave, John that is all ashes now, But he'll come back a second time, A thousand times better)*



John's gravestone helpfully tells us John was from Holyhead which is in Anglesey, north Wales. It would be hard to find a name more common than John Owen on the island of Anglesey and so it's impossible to be sure of this man's roots. However, he is one of the best known of Settle's graveyard residents. John G Owen's gravestone tells us that he was 19 in 1873, so born in 1853/4, and was from Holyhead on Anglesey. There were nine John Owens registered on Anglesey in 1853/4. Four have mother's maiden name of Jones, two of Owen and also a Roberts, an Evans and a Williams and, as registration was not compulsory in those days, there may be more. It really was a common name. At the time of the 1871 census, a John Owen from Holyhead, born in 1854, was lodging with his father **John Owen** and brother **Henry Owen** in 'No.9 railway hut' at Crosby Garrett near Kirkby Stephen, all working as quarrymen and miners on the railways. This could be the same John.

John had settled in Settle by November 1872 to the extent that he was contributing to the community. John '*very efficiently sung a Welsh song*' for the '*Temperance Life-Boat Crew.*' This was not actually anything to do with the Royal National Life-boat Institution saving lives at sea, but was part of the Temperance movement playing on the word '*lifeboat*' to save lives through persuading people away from alcohol [1,CH]. Despite being so far from the coast the Settle branch of the RNLi was extremely active around this time (*see below*) so it's easy to see where they got the idea from. Quite clever really! We can assume John Owen was a clean living, temperate young man.

### SETTLE.

**TEMPERANCE LIFE BOAT CREW**—The members and friends of the above society gave the first of their entertainments this season on Saturday evening last, Captain Phillipson in the chair. The Hall was well filled with a very enthusiastic audience. The programme, which comprised songs, readings, recitations, and dialogues, was gone through in a very creditable manner. The reading in the Lancashire dialect by Master R Lambert, entitled "Owd Shunt" kept the audience convulsed with laughter, and was deservedly applauded. The dialogues with the assistance of a few friends were very creditably rendered. Mr. John Owen very efficiently sung a Welsh song.

and it died from inanition. Another organization sprang up, known as "The Lifeboat Crew," its aim being to present temperance truths to the public by means of plays or dialogues. At the outset large audiences were attracted, but the difficulty experienced in providing fresh programmes within a reasonable time rendered the efforts too spasmodic to be effective, and eventually the "crew" was disbanded.

On 18th February 1873, John, aged 19, was working on the railway at Langcliffe in '*No.3 cutting*'. He was working near a crane when one of the crane supports fell on him, killing him instantly [2]. The crane would have been of primitive design with no safety features. The report of the inquest describes that he was "*Accidentally killed by a crane falling and striking him*". Unusually, the jury actually



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recognised the need for better health and safety measures. They recommended, *'That for the future all the cranes used on the line should undergo an inspection daily by some competent person in the employ of the Midland Railway Company.'* Now that's a good idea.

**SETTLE—FATAL ACCIDENT.**—John Owen, aged nineteen years, whilst working underneath a crane in No. 3 cutting, near Langcliffe, on the new Settle and Carlisle Railway, was killed on Tuesday last by one of the legs or supports of the crane falling upon him, causing his instant death. An inquest was held the same evening, when a verdict of "Accidentally killed" was returned by the jury, who recommended that for the future all the cranes used on the line should undergo an inspection daily by some competent person in the employ of the Midland Railway Company.



John's fine gravestone in Settle graveyard was thought to be arranged by fellow navvies. *'Owen's sorrowing mates attended the funeral at Settle Parish Church.'* John was working and died at Langcliffe, but his body would have been brought to Settle for the coroner's inquest which is probably why he was buried at Settle rather than at Langcliffe.

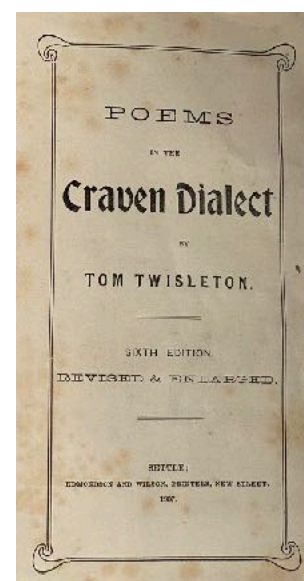
**Tom Twisleton**, our local dialect poet, was captivated by John's tragic story and wrote a poem of some 15 verses [A]. This was Tom Twisleton's only 'non dialect' poem. John was obviously a well respected and popular young man. Being in the Victorian era, the second half of the poem suggests ways to view his death as a matter of fact and inevitability. Of course, his passing should be rejoiced.

No farewells spoken  
As he went forth at dawning of day  
For little they thought, ere the morning had fled,  
That the summons would call him away.

His face was bright as morning spring  
His heart free from sorrow and shame  
And blythe as a lark, he would carol and sing  
Hymns, in praise of his maker's name.

As oft 'twas his custom, whilst plying his toil  
To enliven his task with a song  
Or, with friends interchanging the joke or the smile,  
To make labour pass lightly along.

He hath greeted his mates at the cutting of rock  
And to work they have gone with a will.  
Whilst he, humming a tune, kept time to the stroke  
Of the rattling hammer and drill



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The crane groaned and creaked and loud roared the shot  
And the whistling engine went by them  
These were every day things and they heeded them not  
Nor dreamed they that danger was nigh them

But hark! a strange sound for a moment is heard  
The crane that overhangs them is broken  
And the heavy jib falls ere a hand can be stirred  
Or a sentence of warning be spoken

In a breath, in an instant, it falls down the rock  
And the workmen are scattered below  
But all, except one, have escaped from the shock  
He, alone, have received the fell blow.

They raise him up gently and utter his name  
Tis in vain — he hath breathed his last breath  
The spirit hath fled unto Him, whence it came  
And the body is silent in death.

Ah! now heavy sobs convulse the strong breast  
And tears trickle down the hard face  
As they take the remains of the fairest and best  
And bear them away from the place

Oh man in thy power! Oh youth in thy pride!  
trust not in thy strength or thy skill.  
When the messenger calls thee to lay them aside  
Be prepared to submit to his will.

But how often it happens, that we of short sight,  
Are apt to lament or complain  
When death takes the hopeful, the young and the bright  
While the wretch lingers on in his pain.

But thou, whose we are and whose the world is,  
Thou, who wash'd out our sins with Thy blood  
In Thy goodness and wisdom does nothing amiss  
But arranges all things for our good.

Look thou down, in Thy mercy and pitying power  
on the parents who mourn for their son  
Give them strength to look up in affliction's dark hour  
And say, 'Let the Lord's will be done'.





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Thou his sun has gone down, ere it reach'd the noonday  
Though sudden and fearful the blow  
Yet pause and reflect — he hath but gone the way  
We all, sooner or later, must go.

Then dry up the tear, and let sorrowing cease  
When the body is laid neath the sod;  
For, rejoicing above at its early release  
The spirit is present with God.



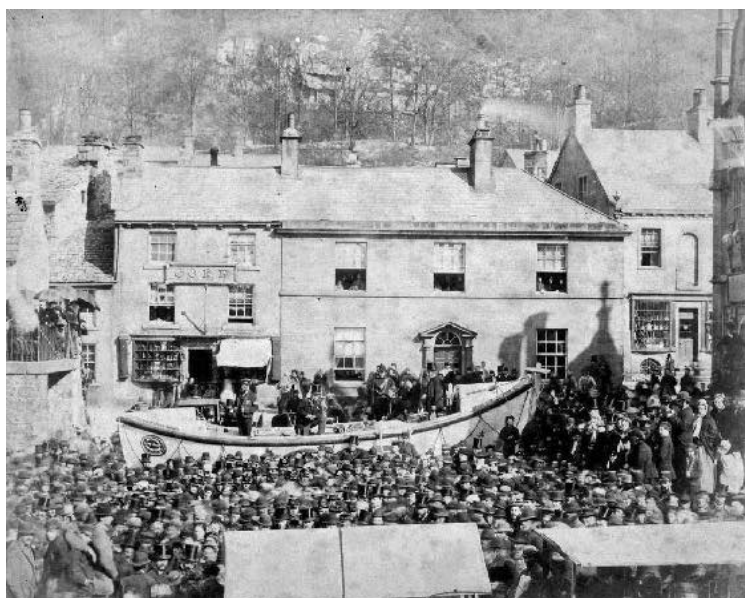
## The Settle Lifeboats

Incredibly, despite being some 35 miles from the nearest coast, between 1868 and 1912 the Settle Branch of the RNLI raised enough money to buy six lifeboats which were thought to have saved 148 lives in all. John Owen may have known that one boat was stationed in Anglesey and two were posted there in the years after he died.

The Settle branch of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution was established in 1862 and was still 'one of the society's best branches' in 1875, ably led by **Christopher Brown** of Stainforth with the support of **Walter Morrison** of Malham Tarn Hall [ph1]. In the intervening years the branch raised nearly £3,500 which enabled the purchase of several lifeboats with names including the *Christopher Brown* and the *Ellen and Margaret*, the mother and sister of Christopher.

SETTLE BRANCH.—ESTABLISHED, 1862.  
President, Walter Morrison, Esq. ; Hon. Secretary, Christopher Brown, Esq.,  
IN looking over the Subscription Lists in the Life-boat Journal of May last, we find that Settle still holds its place as one of the Society's best branches. The contributions from January, 1862, to December 31st, 1874, amount to £2993 13s. 6d., and in 1875, to December 23rd, including the "Ellen and Margaret, of Settle" Life-boat demonstration fund, £377 17s. 0d.

On 14th April 1868 the first of two boats named *Christopher Brown* was brought to Settle by train and then drawn by a team of heavy horses and a huge cart to be paraded through Settle. Cheap trains were provided from Lancaster, Morecambe and Bentham to encourage people to attend. It was presented to the Institution with appropriate pomp and ceremony. A fundraising concert was



Mr. Brown was astride his favourite white horse, his face radiating the deep happiness he felt on what was to him a day of triumph. The police superintendent was on horseback and Mr. Walter Morrison rode in his coach.

**STRAW HATS**  
It was a day of rejoicing and of celebration, and the warm spring sun shone beneficently down upon a throng of top hats, straw hats with enormous feathers, billycocks, bustles and leg-of-mutton sleeves.

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held in the Music Hall (Victoria Hall). The boat was 'christened' with a bottle of sherry by **Miss Elizabeth Stansfeld**. 'The boat is named after the indefatigable treasurer to the Settle branch of the Institution.' [1, ph1] 'Mr Brown was astride his favourite white horse, his face radiating the deep happiness he felt on what was to him a day of triumph.' [CH] 'Mr Morrison rode in his coach' and three bands escorted them. 'It was a day of rejoicing and celebration, and the warm sun shone down upon a throng of top hats, straw hats with enormous feathers, billycocks, bustles and leg of mutton sleeves.' This life-boat was based at Penmon, Anglesey and operated on the coast of North Wales.

Seven years later, on 26th May 1875 the scene was repeated with the second life-boat, *Ellen and Margaret*. The boat was 32ft long and 7ft 6in wide and fitted with the most modern self-righting appliances. On another sunny day the banks were closed and the crowd wore blue ribbons around their hats, upon which was written 'Ellen and Margaret'. On this occasion children were given medals, two inches in diameter to mark the occasion [ph2]. They sang songs including:

*Get ready my lads, for such wailings we hear,  
Arise from your shipwreck, in terror and fear,  
Hearts of oak are our ships, hearts of oak are our men,  
The helpless we will rescue again and again.*



**Mrs Ingleby** of Lawkland Hall, a relation of Christopher Brown's broke the bottle of sherry over the stern of the boat. Amongst other celebrations, **Rev William Pierson** 'read a portion of the 107th Psalm in a most impressive manner'. Appropriately this includes the verses 'Some went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters. They saw the works of the Lord, his wonderful deeds in the deep. For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunkards; they were at their wits' end. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven.' **Hector Christie** of the Langcliffe Mills and **Walter Morrison** gave speeches and the band played God Save The Queen [ph1]. There were three hearty cheers in honour of Mr Brown and the RNLI. This boat was stationed at Hornsea, north of Hull. The organising committee included **Ellwood Brockbank**, **John Cowburn**, **William Towler** and **William Gifford** from Long Preston.

Who was Christopher Brown? He was a bachelor who had a comfortable life in Stainforth living off the proceeds of the land inherited from his parents. His mother was **Ellen Ingleby** of the family who owned Lawkland Hall and associated land, which speaks for itself. His father was **James Batty Brown**, a successful 'silk mercer and woollen draper' in the bustling metropolis of Liverpool.

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James died in 1828 when he was just 39 and is buried in a surprisingly unmarked grave in Giggleswick with a 30 year old son, also **James Batty Brown**.

Christopher owned 758 acres of land including the Cowside and Sherwood House estates, including '*excellent fishing in the Ribble and Catterick Force.*' He left an '*ample fortune*' of £14,000 in 1886 — worth millions at today's value. He is likely to have been buried at Stainforth with his mum Ellen and sister Margaret.



*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 — Lancaster Gazette, 2 — Derbyshire Times*

*A — Poems in the Craven Dialect by Tom Twisleton*

*ph1 — photo with thanks to John Reid, ph2 — credited to the Back in Settle Facebook page submitted by Mick Harrison*

*CH - with the kind permission of the Craven Herald and Pioneer, kindly provided by Mike Howarth*

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*The full story of Settle's navvies involved in the building of the Settle and Carlisle Railway are in the project book, 'The Railway Navvies of Settle: the end of the line', published by the Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust, available from the project, Settle and Carlisle Railway outlets at Settle and Ribbleshead and bookshops in Settle.*