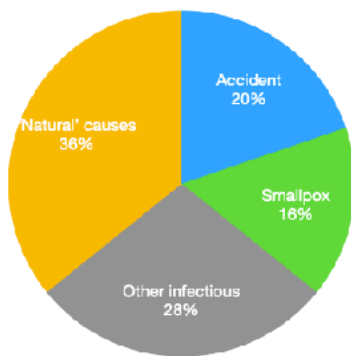


## Ribblehead Tales . . . Navvies dying of Smallpox



Nearly half of the navvies who died at Ribblehead were victims of infectious diseases, with over a third of those being victims of the smallpox outbreak of 1871. A fifth of the navvies died in appalling accidents which could have been prevented with the most basic health and safety measures. Over a third of the navvies died of 'natural' causes. The Midland Railway contributed £25 for matching plaques at St Leonard's Church in Chapel-le-Dale and Holy Ascension Church in Settle which read:



***To the memory of those who through accidents lost their lives in constructing the railway works between Settle and Dent Head. This tablet was erected at the joint expense of their fellow workmen and the Midland Railway Company 1869 to 1876***

As so many of the non-accidental deaths were a product of the appalling conditions at Ribblehead, it's a shame the plaque didn't acknowledge them too. The extreme physical challenge of navvy work and the harsh living environment will inevitably have exploited any bodily weakness resulting in men and their families dying at a ridiculously young age. *'Hardy and apparently healthy navvies were stricken down; the toughest constitutions gave way'*[2]

The millennium plaque, situated above the eastern end of the graveyard rectified this:

**here. The hospital was rendered necessary owing to the inclemency of the climate. Hardy and apparently healthy navvies were stricken down; the toughest constitutions gave way. The viaduct in the Ingleton**

***In the Millennium Year 2000 The Church Community of Chapel Le Dale erected this plaque To the memory of the many men, women and children resident in the Parish who died through accident or disease during the construction of the Settle to Carlisle railway and who were buried in this graveyard***

There was no sick pay, of course and so men had to go to work, spreading their disease, if they were ill. Medical treatment was expensive. To help, navvies could make contributions to the Settle and Carlisle Railway sick fund, established towards the end of 1870. It had 140 members by the end of 1873 which is only a tiny proportion of the navvies. A shortfall of funds was met by organising an entertainment in Settle Music Hall, raising over £10.

**Mr Edwin Septimus Green** was the surgeon officially appointed to the Settle to Carlisle Railway and, after he was dragged for over a mile by his horse to his death in August 1871, yes really, he was replaced by his brother **Mr Francis Green**. They had an onerous task. The first wave of infectious disease was due to smallpox, caused by the Variola virus.

### Smallpox

Smallpox was named to distinguish it from 'Great Pox', the common name for syphilis. Smallpox was a terrible disease because, without vaccination, the mortality rate was over 30%. It was transmitted through inhalation of the airborne virus (within a distance of 2 metres) and through direct contact with bodily fluids. The disease had been around for centuries but vaccinations were introduced in 1796 to those who could afford it, thanks to **Edward Jenner**. It was eventually eradicated, globally, in 1977.

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Out of the 46 deaths caused by infectious disease 12 navvies and up to 17 other family members died in the smallpox outbreak which struck mainly in Sebastopol and Jericho huts. In April 1871 **William Griffiths**, a railway labourer from Jericho huts became the first to die of smallpox and other victims soon followed, including the wife and all four daughters of **James Fassam** within the space of two weeks — see *Children*. It didn't take long to realise that an isolation hospital was urgently required and, very quickly two huts were built, connected by a 20 foot covered walkway to accommodate a total of ten patients. A 'respectable married couple' were recruited to staff it [3] and **Mr and Mrs Halifax** were the

successful couple to 'operate' it from June 1871. It was full within a fortnight of its opening and so Edwin Septimus Green acquired a further hospital hut and an additional male nurse funded by the Settle Union. 35 cases were admitted in the first month and the care of nurses and basic hygienic procedures enabled many patients to recover and limit the spread of the disease. A further building was constructed to house another ten patients and another nurse. In the end, six of the navy smallpox deaths took place in the hospital plus some of the other family members. To stop the spread of infection patients' clothes were 'baked' in a large oven and disinfected. Huts were whitewashed and dead bodies were removed to a 'dead house'. In the summer weather this was essential. A year later, in June 1872 a navy, **Thomas Burton**, was killed when he was crushed between wagons at Helwith Bridge. The jury at the Coroner's inquest said, 'The body of Thomas Burton, 26 hours after death being in an advanced state of decomposition, gave off offensive fumes. It cannot but be detrimental to the health of the patients and the staff confined in the Hospital. The hot weather is likely to be a prolific source of disease and so the jury therefore urgently recommend the erection of a dead house detached from the hospital [1]. Thomas was buried in Settle graveyard.

**SETTLE UNION.**—Wanted immediately by the Guardians of the above Union, a respectable Married Couple without Incumbrance, to take the management of and act as NURSES in a Small-Pox and Fever Hospital, situate at Batty Green, near Ingleton, Yorkshire. Salary £2 per week and rations.—Applications, stating age and previous occupations, accompanied by testimonials of recent date as to character and fitness, must be sent to John Lister, Union Clerk, Settle.—Settle, February 29th, 1872.

of the establishment, and during the hot weather is likely to be a prolific source of disease in the locality; and the jury therefore urgently recommend the erection of a dead house detached from the Hospital as a means of remedying the present unsatisfactory state of things.

With the benefit of hindsight, the papers were critical of the unhygienic conditions, 'No doubt if more attention was paid to the sanitary conditions of the huts and the habits of the people, that it would have a good effect towards the rooting out of a disease that has so many victims lying in the quiet burial ground at Chapel-le-Dale.' [4]. They probably had a point! Mr Edwin Septimus Green replied in no uncertain terms, describing the measures taken to date and the difficulty in persuading navvies and their families to have a vaccination, just as now.

THE SMALL-POX.—Though there are many cases in the hospital, still none of them have proved fatal during the last week. No doubt if more attention was paid to the sanitary condition of the huts and the habits of the people, that it would have a good effect towards the rooting out of a disease which has so many victims lying in the quiet burial ground at Chapel-le-Dale.

not. Had they taken the matter seriously up small-pox might have been eradicated long ago. The law arms them with extensive powers were they disposed to put it in force.

1st. They should have established an infirmary on the spot and appointed a respectable medical gentleman to it.  
2nd. They should have removed every patient to it at once.  
3rd. They should have had everyone vaccinated who had not been so previously.  
4th. Every new comer should be carefully inspected and examined, and vaccinated if necessary.  
5th. Every hut where the disease has been should be disinfected, and more cleanliness enforced.  
6th. Independently of an infirmary a convalescent house should be established, whither recovered patients could be sent till safe enough to join their fellow men again.

In July 1871 the papers gave 'A Caution to Persons in the Small-pox', 'a terrible scourge to the human family is often spread by

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*thoughtless individuals who are affected by disease.* A Ribblehead navvy came back from Barrow by train with smallpox. The disease was just at its height so he would have been infectious. The superintendent of Police, **Mr Exton**, *'feeling that the health of the village was imperiled by such an injudicious act'*, sent him to the smallpox hospital, burnt his clothes and bedding and disinfected his hut[1]. **Nathaniel Dell**, aged 26, died a few days later at the hospital.

A CAUTION TO PERSONS IN THE SMALL-POX.—The small-pox, which is a terrible scourge to the human family is often spread to healthful countries by thoughtless individuals who are affected with the disease. A case in point occurred at Ingleton this week. A young man, a native of Ingleton, who, according to report had been working at Barrow, came to his home by rail on Monday the 24th inst., when he was suffering from small-pox. At the time he arrived.

The rate of deaths slowed at the end of June and **William Davies'** death on 7 August 1871 seemed to mark the end of the outbreak. Three other navvies and some other family members died in February/March 1872. The Millennium memorial overlooks the lower east end of the churchyard re-enforcing the popular myth that *'all the navvies are buried down there in a mass grave.'* This is obviously untrue. Because of the risk of infection from dead bodies, especially those with infectious diseases, navvies tended to be buried as soon as possible, even on the same day that they died. They would never have re-opened the grave of a recently deceased body to bury others in a mass grave. However, the majority of smallpox victims were in the lower part of the graveyard as it was not extended until 7 August 1871.



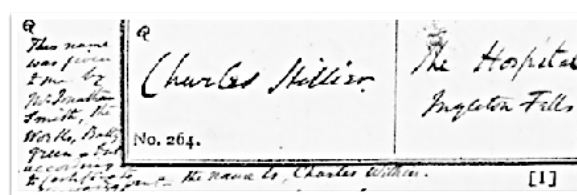
The navvies who died of smallpox:

On 25 April 1871, **William Griffiths**, a 22 year old railway labourer from Somerset became the first smallpox fatality. He had suffered for nine days. He had been lodging at 116 Jericho with **George Wilkins** and his wife, Sarah. George Wilkins was present at his death.

**William Court**, a horse-keeper lived at 50 Batty Wife Hole with his wife Mary. He died on 21 June 1871, aged 35. His parents ran the Mulberry Tree Inn in Stratford upon Avon. After William's death his mother, **Betsy Court**, spent ten years in a Warwickshire 'Lunacy Asylum' which is where she died. William's neighbour at Ribblehead was blacksmith's striker **William Thomas** who died of tuberculosis in 1873.

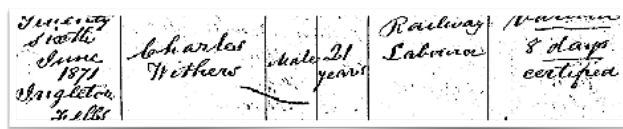
On 2 June 1871 **Evans Davies**, from Denbighshire died, aged 27, after suffering for eight days. He was a railway labourer living at 68 Sebastopol with his wife. **John Firmstone** was present at his death — see *Informants*. Evans died on the same day as navy **William Clark**, who died of typhoid and John was present at his death too.

On 26 June 1871 **Charles Withers**, a railway labourer aged 21, died at the new hospital after suffering for eight days. Charles was buried under the name **Charles Hiller**. Rev Ebenezer Smith wrote a note *'This name was given to me by Jonathan*



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Smith, The Works, Batty Green but according to certificate afterwards sent, the name is Charles Wilkin'. However the death certificate clearly states his surname as 'Withers'. No wonder navvies are so hard to trace.



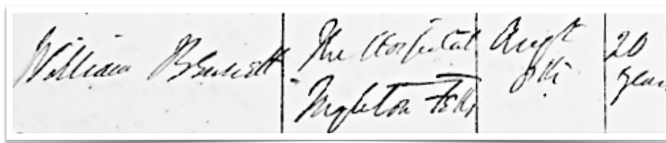
On 27 June 1871 **Henry Slater**, a railway labourer, aged 37, died in the hospital having suffered for nine days. Henry was from Berkshire and had been working as an excavator in Halifax at the time of the 1871 census.

On 29 June 1871 railway labourer **John Baxter** died at the hospital, aged 29, after suffering for five days.

On 13 July 1871, railway labourer **George Hughs** died at the hospital after ten days' illness, aged 32. **George Wright**, who ran a navy hut at 23 Batty Wife Hole, was present at his death so was perhaps his landlord? Their neighbour was **William Wyre** who died of rheumatic fever and meningitis in 1874.

On 30 July 1871 railway labourer **Nathaniel Dell** died in the hospital, aged 26. Nathaniel was from Reading, the son of a brickmaker and had been working in Slough before coming to Ribblehead. Nathaniel could have been the '*thoughtless individual*' who arrived in Ribblehead with the disease, potentially infecting many others.

7 August 1871 saw the death of 20 year old railway labourer **William Davies** at the hospital. He also had an alias, being buried under the name **William Bennett** (the vicar wrote with a distinctive 'e'). Tommy shop keeper **Robert Holland** was present at his death.



After six months without any cases, on 7 February 1872 **George Hill**, a 23 year old labourer at the Jericho huts died of 'confluent smallpox' from which he had suffered for 13 days. Confluent smallpox is when the blisters merge to become a sheet. It is the usual form of smallpox so may have only just been adopted as the correct way to notify the cause of death by the doctors. All the remaining cases were referred to as confluent smallpox. **John Knowles**, possibly the son of navy **William Knowles** was there at his death. William Knowles died in 1877 of congestion of the lungs.

On 25 Feb 1872 **William Whellake**, a labourer at Jericho huts died, age 32, also of confluent smallpox. He'd been suffering for seven days. Tommy shop keeper **Robert Holland** was also present at his death.

On 10 Mar 1872 **James Barratt**, a stonemason at Sebastopol died after 12 days with confluent smallpox, aged 36. Newspaper reports tell us that in April 1872 **Miriam Williams**, aged 31 also died of smallpox at the hospital.



*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.*

## Settle Graveyard Project

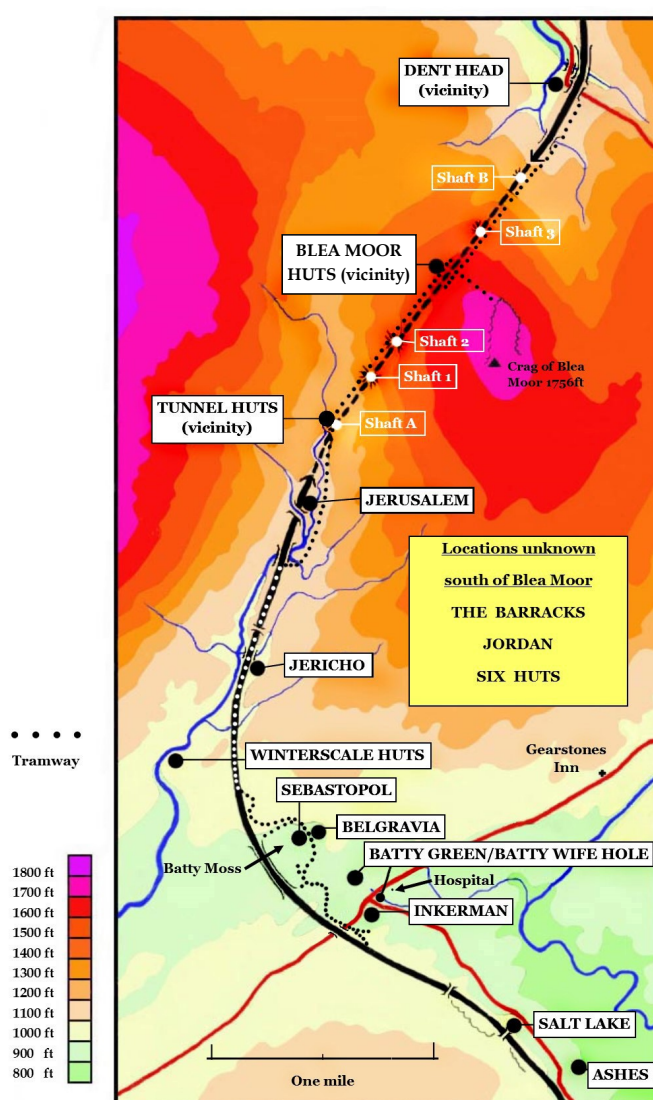
The life stories of people with italicised names have been researched as part of the graveyard project and can be found on [dalescommunityarchives.org.uk/settle graveyard project](http://dalescommunityarchives.org.uk/settle-graveyard-project). The 'Old Settle' family tree on [Ancestry.co.uk](http://Ancestry.co.uk) 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'.

Navy Settlements diagram with thanks to Nigel Mussett, archivist for FoSCL. Pie chart with thanks to Ken Lister

Newspaper cuttings with the kind permission of the British Newspaper Archives: 1 — Lancaster Gazette, 2 — Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 3 — Yorkshire Post, 4 — Lancaster Guardian

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.

Birth, Marriage and Death certificates provided by the General Records Office, covered by Crown Copyright. Census returns and baptism, marriage and burial records via [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk), originally from The National Archives.



Supposed locations of navy settlements between Ribbleshead and Dent Head.

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