



# Grand days of steam



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 Dalesman

**S**pring is tardy on the Pennines. It rushes up the dales and then has to fight, yard by yard, to overwhelm the hills.

Springtime has reached the flanks of Blea Moor, beyond the head of Ribblesdale. A clump of rhubarb near the celebrated signal box is alive and well.

I viewed it from the Blea Moor track, peering through a fence composed of rusty bedsteads and rotten sleepers (of the railway track type!). The plant will soon be warding off the Pennine rainfall with a leaf which looks like an umbrella.

My companions on the visit to Blea Moor were Nancy Edmondson and emissaries from Radio 4, a station which is ever ready to sniff out unusual stories, in this case happenings in the so-called shanty towns of the railway construction period.

Media folk wearing thin anoraks and suede shoes have joined the Whernside-bound walkers on the track across Batty Green, near the high arches of Ribbleshead viaduct.

Little remains on the ground but the grassed-over tramway, the twin peaks where the brickworks chimneys stood, a lime kiln and the trench which is thought to be an inspection pit used when maintaining the contractor's locomotives.

With the line open for traffic, and a hundred or so steam trains a day clattering along it, Blea Moor, through which a tunnel was driven, resembled a slumbering volcano as smoke rose from the ventilation shafts.

Nancy was reared on Blea Moor, so to speak. Her father, John Dawson, a lengthman between Ribbleshead viaduct and the midway point in Blea Moor Tunnel, had a house provided. It backed on to the moor, where grouse called at daybreak and peat was cut to augment coal as fuel.

The house, into which the Dawsons moved towards the end of 1939, was one of a trio built for what the Victorians called "railways servants." Nancy, when attending school, had to walk one-and-a-quarter miles from her home to catch the school bus at Ribbleshead.

When Radio 4 showed interest in the Ribbleshead railway shanties, our trip to Blea Moor was for Nancy a nostalgic journey, tinged with a little sadness. Her old home and the one beside it were long since



**REARED ON BLEA MOOR:**  
 Nancy Edmondson at Ribbleshead

demolished. The allotment in which her father took such pride is now a weed-strewn plot. All that survives of the former neat rows of vegetables is a rhubarb patch. And, as I recall from tasting the stuff years ago, this hardy rhubarb is so tart that to use it in the kitchen would demand an equivalent weight in sugar.

The remaining house is a mere shell. Once it resounded to the chatter of railwaymen using it as a barracks. Earlier, it was a tidy home to Nancy's sister Margaret and her signalman husband.

We strode along the track to join the old line of the tramway used in the 1870s and eventually joined the rocky way to the summit of Blea Moor. It was the way used by railwaymen charged with maintaining the ventilation shafts.

Nancy remembers Ribbleshead as the playground of gales, especially those so strong that she and her sisters would take shelter behind a pier of the viaduct waiting for a lull or, if pressed for time, slip stones into their raincoat pockets to stop their clothes from flapping.

This is "tewit country." In spring, a cock lapwing tumbles in the air with the ecstasy of the mating season. When you expect the bird to dash itself against the ground, it climbs again, twists and turns and utters reedy calls.

Such a performance would surely draw a gasp of admiration from a member of the Red Arrows aerobatic team.

We paused now and again so that Radio 4 listeners might be treated to Pennine sounds, notably the wind, and to tales of the day-before-yesterday. Nancy recalled that her indomitable mother was for years a schoolteacher who commuted from Blea Moor by bike.

There were shopping trips to Settle, travelling by train from Ribbleshead station and returning sometimes in grand style, on the footplate of a locomotive if the driver had recognised them. The Dawsons were dropped off virtually at the door of their home.

For the return to Blea Moor, we walked into a chill breeze. Nancy spoke of wild days, with rain descending on the rocky track to Blea Moor like the proverbial stair-rods.

The signal box came into view and near it the shell of the one remaining railway house. Peering over a decrepit fence, we noted that Blea Moor rhubarb (*Rhubarbarum alpinis*) is not yet extinct.

Said Nancy: "The rhubarb patch is the last of father's garden. We grew all the vegetables we needed."

Father defied the elements to grow potatoes, onions, peas, beans, turnips and beetroot, which mother converted into toothsome food, including the pies cooked on plates which John Dawson took to work and consumed at snack time.

The Dawsons of Blea Moor were almost self-sufficient. And the rhubarb tasted sweeter in the old days.