

# Nancy Dawson's early life

First of all, I must thank the Ladies Friendship Group for giving me this opportunity to share my early life on the S&C railway which I hope you will all enjoy.

I was born at Scow House in Cowgill and at that time my father was already working on the railway, and Mum was teaching at Cowgill School, one of the many schools she taught at when she was a primary school teacher. Mum was very prim and proper and Dad was just the opposite, having come from a farming family in Chapel-le-Dale. Quite the odd couple!

When I was about 18 months old, my father was transferred to gang no. 30 at Ribblehead and we were given a railway cottage to live in: No 1, Blea Moor Cottages. For those of you who do not know where Blea Moor is, it is a spot on the Settle to Carlisle line about a mile and a half north of Ribblehead station and a quarter of a mile before the tunnel entrance. There is very little there now except for one house and the signal box, but in my time, there were also two typical semi-detached railway cottages and a large water tower. Then the line was very busy with many freight trains, and regular passenger trains to Leeds and Carlisle and of course during the war there were regular troop trains. The gang he joined covered the line from the middle of the tunnel to the middle of the viaduct and was responsible for keeping the track in a safe condition and carrying out minor repairs as needed to signals, points and rails. So he started out in the soot and smoke of the tunnel and worked his way down to the gales of the viaduct — it was nearly always windy both on top and below whatever the weather.

My mother was then teaching at Chapel-le Dale and I was one of her pupils for the first few years of my life — not something I enjoyed very much, as if I couldn't do something I was in trouble at school and then again at home, and when Inspectors came to visit, I was always selected to answer questions. To get to school we walked to Ribblehead, to the Station Inn, where we caught the school bus. Later on, when I had progressed to the Secondary school, Dave the driver used to watch for me as I ran down the path towards Ribblehead, pipping the horn all the way. No wonder my legs are a bit dodgy now!

It was about a mile and a half along the path that followed the railway embankment — a lovely walk in summer, but dreadful in winter. When it was wild and wet we kept a change of clothing at the Inn and left our wellies and coats to dry ready for the walk back at night. In those days we didn't wear trousers so the tops of our wellies rubbed our legs red raw. Quite often, even though it was forbidden, we would walk along the track instead of using the path as it was much quicker. One night when dad had been down to Ribblehead to collect his wages, and he seemed to Mum to have been a long time, she went out along the path to see where he was. He of course came home along the track, went in and locked the door. When she came back to find the door locked and he eventually let her in he said 'whats tha doin' out there woman!' Words were said and, needless to say, he didn't visit the pub for quite a while after that!

Our cottage consisted of a kitchen-cum-living room, a front room and a pantry downstairs and 3 bedrooms upstairs. The front of the house actually looked out on to the fell, and at the back was a walled yard containing the washhouse with a stone sink and an earth toilet at one end. That was a construction never to be forgotten — a huge hole in the ground, covered by a wooden seat, and there was usually a howling gale blowing up from goodness knows where. On a bad day it was impossible to drop paper down that hole! My

sisters and I used to visit the toilet at night in pairs, with a lighted candle covered with an enamel jug to keep the flame alight. Torches were kept for emergencies as the nearest shop for batteries was at Ingleton or Settle.

The washhouse was equipped with a huge boiler where water was heated for the weekly wash day. The fire was lit early on Monday mornings and the clothes were washed in a dolly-tub with a wooden dolly-stick or dolly-legs, and Dad's shirts were scrubbed and boiled to get rid of the tunnel soot. It took almost all day to do the week's washing and an awful lot of muscle power! Then the next day was spent ironing — heating the flat iron on the fire and ironing on the kitchen table. Flat irons as I remember were always either too hot or too cold and invariably covered in soot from the fire.

The house was heated by the coal fire in the kitchen — a huge range that had to be black leaded regularly. It had a side boiler which produced all the hot water that was needed, and an oven for baking. All our cooking was done on this range and every drop of water was carried to the house by bucket from the tap in the washhouse. The water came from the river up near the aqueduct - I am still unsure of the mechanics of this but we never ran out of water. It was never a good idea to inspect a glass of water too closely for fear of what you might find! Many times we had to go up to remove a dead sheep from the stream, when the tea started to taste a bit strong. But, on the whole, it was clear, sparkling and good to drink and I don't think it ever did us any harm.

We washed and cleaned our teeth at the stone sink in the washhouse each morning and it is difficult to imagine now how cold that water was at 6 o'clock on a wintry morning. Bath night meant heating water in the boiler and in pans on the fire, and then filling the tin bath on the rug in front of the fire. It was cosy but not very private, but in those days, we didn't have many visitors! Then it was up to bed with our candles which we balanced on the pillow to see to read. It was a miracle we didn't burn the house down!

The main light we had was a Tilley lamp which was pumped up and gave a very bright white light and there were several smaller paraffin lamps which we took from room to room, but paraffin was used sparingly, as it had to be carried from Ribbleshead each week, along with the accumulator for the wireless. Needless to say, we didn't use the wireless much except for the news, Dick Barton, Special Agent and ITMA, and to follow the Test Match scores, as change-over train crews always wanted to know what the state of play was! Our main entertainment was Jigsaws, playing the piano and violin and reading and we always had a clippie rug on the go.

As far as food was concerned, we were fairly self-sufficient. My father had a big garden where he grew all our potatoes, onions and other vegetables and we had gooseberry, raspberry and black currant bushes. The fruit from these was bottled each autumn and used throughout the year for pies and puddings. The rhubarb patch I believe is still going strong, but beware, it is the sourest I have ever come across!

We kept pigs which we slaughtered ourselves although it was strictly against regulations during the war. Everyone kept quiet about it, except the pig of course! As the front porch opened onto the moor and was rarely used, the pork was cured in there, and the hams and rolls of bacon were hung from the ceiling in the front room next to the piano.

We had a good supply of eggs from the hens we kept, black leg horns and Rhode Island reds, and relations coming for holidays looked forward to our ham and egg teas with home baked bread. I always longed for fish, chips and sliced bread! A whole day was spent each

week baking, and my father took a small fruit pie to work every day. The basic groceries were delivered monthly by train, so we always had a stock of flour, sugar and tea etc. Just after the war I remember there was usually a sweet or an orange hidden in the box, and this was a great incentive to help unpack the groceries. Weather permitting, Mum would walk to Ribbleshead on Tuesdays to catch the train to shop at Settle as it was market day, but she always had to carry the shopping all the way up to the house.

Other items like milk and butter we got from the farm at Winter Scales so there was a daily half mile round trip to collect these and meet the postman for the letters and the newspaper - the Daily Herald I remember - a strong labour paper.

One day in April 1944 when I was about 6 Mum met me from the school bus and told me that a Wellington bomber had crashed into Whernside. It was a training plane for Navigators which had got lost in bad weather. All but one of the crew had been killed and the remaining rear gunner had crawled over the peak and down into the valley. I had nightmares for weeks after this, and was always scared when I heard a plane. Dad did take me up to the scene and we got parachute silk for under wear, and Perspex, that the signalman made into rings and bracelets for me. The site is only just visible now at the side of the path for the three peaks walk, across the front of the mountain.

One of my early memories was of 1947 when I was about 9 years old and we had a really bad winter. I was off school for 13 weeks and we were isolated for many days at a time when the line was blocked by snow. My father was out most of the time trying to keep the points clear of ice and he would return at night covered in icicles, and his greatcoat stood up by itself when he took it off. It was a lovely winter to look at as it snowed all day, froze all night and the drifts were spectacular. But it was very difficult keeping the water supply thawed out and digging a path from the back door each morning, only for it to be filled in again in a few hours. The farmers had a dreadful time digging out sheep from the drifts each day. The railway line was blocked in the steep cutting below Blea Moor and attempts to clear it with the snowplough were eventually abandoned. One day a message came through on the telephone in the signal box from the "powers that be," that everyone was to stay inside behind closed doors and windows, as a new snow blower was coming to clear the cutting, and snow would fly for miles. Mum and I duly went upstairs to watch this spectacle in safety. Dad said: 'There's nowt'll shift that but a lot o' men wi' shovels.' And with that, he sat on a rail in the sidings and lit his pipe. Nothing happened for a long time and then a further telephone message informed us that the blower was now buried in the cutting! Eventually the drifts were cleared and the blower freed — by a lot of men wi' shovels. These men I remember were Italian prisoners of war. It was early in June that year when the last of the snow disappeared from the hills. When the big thaw did come, bales of hay were dropped from an aeroplane above Winterscales to the sheep that had survived the drifts, and this brought further tragedy for the farmers. The food dropped on the wrong side of the river which was in full spate and many of the sheep were drowned trying to get across for the hay.

After passing my 11+ examination, I left Chapel-le-dale school and went on to Settle Girls High School. It was decided that I should lodge in Settle and this I did reluctantly for a few years, coming home by train on Friday night and returning on Saturday night — just time to wash and iron the uniform. After a few years there was a school bus through to Settle so I moved back home and travelled daily again. By this time I was very interested in botany and natural history and the walk to and from Ribbleshead took me longer and longer as I explored the embankments for plants and flowers. There were rare orchids, violets, and a

wealth of mosses and lichens, and, of course, in summer all the wild strawberries to pick for tea. It took a long time to fill a jam jar but they were delicious and well worth the effort.

During the Easter holiday of 1952 the weather was beautiful and I was sunbathing on the pigsty roof in the corner of the big garden. There was an awful noise of hissing steam and grinding metal and as I sat up I saw one of the engines of the Thames Clyde express train was lying on its side and the first few coaches were scattered about behind on the edge of the track. I flew down the hill across the little stream to see what I could do. Luckily no one was killed but there were some nasty injuries from broken glass. One boy about my own age had been thrown out of the window and had sustained deep lacerations to both legs and he was taken into our front room where we bandaged his legs with torn up sheets. He stayed there for quite a while as it took a long time for the emergency vehicles to arrive at Winterscales. By this time all the uninjured passengers had been extricated from the wreckage and were lying on the embankment, sunbathing. The ambulance men were horrified when they saw how many bodies there were lying about!

We made cups of tea and took homemade biscuits to the rest of the passengers until they could continue with their journey. It was a very busy day at Blea Moor and I remember taking off over the fell to avoid the newspaper reporters who were pestering me for the gory details. They reported next day that I had been playing with my dolls at the time of the accident! As I was nearly 14 this wasn't what I wanted all my friends to read. However I received letters of commendation from the railway authority, and the Girl Guide association and was later presented with a watch by British Rail at a ceremony at Settle school. It had cost £10 which was quite a lot of money at that time and it still works well today.

The year after the train crash my eldest sister Edith came to stay with us prior to her wedding at Chapel le Dale church and she and her fiancé had booked to stay at the Station Inn the night before. This meant that we had to transport her dress and our bridesmaids' dresses to Ribbleshead and after a word to the signal man, a passenger train stopped in front of our house and we all clambered aboard. Not the conventional way to arrive to your wedding!

In 1956 my sister Margaret and family were living in No 3, the house that is still standing, and she suddenly went into labour with her third child. Once again British Rail came to our rescue. The signal man stopped the express train going towards Skipton and with a lot of help from passengers we hauled her on to the train, much to everyone's amusement. She was safely delivered of a son. How she got back I can't remember!

It must have been around this time when the railway cottages were modernised. Water was brought into the living room from the wash house so we had a sink and a cold-water tap. We still had to heat all the water in the boiler but at least we didn't have to carry buckets anymore. The old earth toilet was finally filled in and the wooden seat replaced by a chemical toilet. My father contemplated this for a while, working out what was involved, and then declared 'them as uses it empties it' and promptly disappeared up the fell to a convenient pot-hole.

You may think that the social life at Blea Moor would leave a lot to be desired but it was surprising how our time always seemed to be filled. The signal box was a change-over point for the engine crews and we would spend hours playing cards and dominoes. Saturdays, as I got older, were set aside for a trip to Ingleton to the pictures first house and then on to a dance at the Ingleborough hotel, if there was a chance of a lift back to Ribbleshead. Dances were also held at Chapel-le-Dale in the school room and these were

always very popular. For a while we had church services held in the station waiting room when my mother played the harmonium, and we even progressed to a few dances there to music from a record player.

Eventually my father retired from the railway and of course we had to vacate the house and this was a sad time for us all. We had been there from 1939 until 1956 and it was the only home I could remember. We moved to Winshaw on the Hawes Road and here it was positively civilised. The bus to Hawes passed the road end every Tuesday, there was a telephone, electricity and even a bathroom. When we had settled in father decided he would try having a bath, never having been known to do so before. Mum ran the water for him and he took off into the bathroom. A little while later he emerged and announced: 'If that were bathing I don't think I'll bother anymore'. And I don't think he ever did, to my knowledge!

The move to Winshaw coincided with my leaving school and starting work in a hospital on Tyneside where my eldest sister was then living. I think this made the move from Blea moor a little easier to bear. I have been back many times over the years and even though there is little to see now, it remains a special place for all our family.