

2.1 The Settle to Carlisle railway

The Settle to Carlisle railway was an amazing feat of Victorian engineering. Built in only seven years, its 72 miles (116 km) demanded the construction of 14 tunnels and more than 20 viaducts across some of the most inhospitable terrain in England. This immense effort was almost entirely made by manual labour – one of the last lines to be built thus.



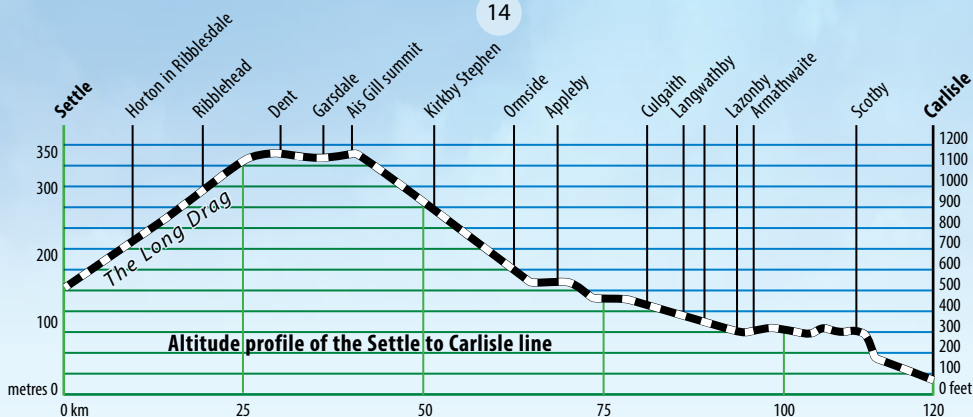
Leander hauling the Fellsman up the Long Drag

First opened to freight traffic in August 1875, passenger use began nine months later. At a time when each railway company built and maintained its own lines, rival firms depended on each other to move freight and passengers over long distances. To continue north to the English–Scottish border, the Midland Railway had to transfer goods and passengers to its competitor, the London & North Western Railway – a problematic relationship. In 1865, the Midland Railway applied to Parliament to build its own line north of Ingleton, and a Bill was subsequently passed. Relations between the two railway companies improved later, but the Midland Railway was nonetheless inclined to link Settle to Carlisle directly.

Work on this immense task began in 1869. The Rivers Ribble and Eden provided a natural line through the hills, but the terrain and climate created huge obstacles. The highest point on the line is at Aisgill in Mallerstang, 356 m/1170 ft above sea level. To reach it from Settle, engines have to haul trains up a one in 100 gradient – known to railwaymen as 'The Long Drag'. The highest station, and the highest mainline station in all England, is Dent at 350 m/1150 ft. The longest tunnel, through Blea Moor, stretches for almost 2½ km. The most remarkable structure is Ribblehead Viaduct whose 24 arches tower more than 30 m above the ground, and span a distance of 400 m.

Ribblehead Viaduct: the central six arches





And much of this had to be constructed on bleak moorland where rain and wind were the norm, and snow piled up in huge drifts during the biting cold winters. The damp, peaty ground created problems for engineers and workers alike. The 208 m-long Dandry Mire Viaduct was not part of the original plan, but was created after three years of trying to fill the area with ballast and of watching each attempt sink into deep, soft peat. The engineers finally decided that a viaduct was the only solution: see page 33.

At the height of its construction, some 6000 men were involved. They came from all over the British Isles, often bringing their families with them. Together they lived in overcrowded hut settlements on the moors, where drainage and sanitation were poor. At one time, 2000 people lived in the area between the turnpike road at Ribblehead and the inhospitable summit of Blea Moor. As one walks across these windswept hills today, it's hard to picture what conditions could have been like back then. Even on the wildest of winter days, one can barely imagine the hardships that the workforce and their families must have endured in their rat-infested 'shanty towns'.

Many men were injured or killed in accidents during the construction of the railway, but many more, and their wives and children, died during outbreaks of smallpox and other diseases which spread quickly in the makeshift, unhygienic settlements. During the smallpox outbreak of 1871, the Midland Railway paid £20 to have the local burial ground extended. The headstones in the churchyard at Chapel-le-Dale testify to the high mortality rates among 'navvy' families. (The term 'navvy' originated in the 18th century, to refer to the men who built Britain's canals or 'navigations'; after the railways began to supersede the canals, the name stuck.)



Armathwaite Station

Both freight and passenger numbers were high in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the early 1900s, steam trains brought tourists from the polluted mill and mining towns of Yorkshire and Lancashire. Horse-drawn carriages met them at Langwathby Station and took them to see the sights and breathe the fresh air of the eastern Lake District.

Originally there were 19 stations along the line. Walkers of today pass through tiny villages such as Long Marton and Little Salkeld that were once directly served by the railway. Station closures began in the 1960s, and in 1963 the infamous Beeching Report recommended the line be closed, but the plans were shelved.

In the 1970s, British Rail (BR) – the company responsible for operating the country's railways since nationalisation in 1948 – began running the line down. In 1983, it officially proposed closing the line, using the poor condition of the Ribbleshead Viaduct as one of its main excuses. The impressive structure, battered by the elements and subject to prolonged heavy usage, was indeed in need of major repairs, but it wasn't an impossible task, nor as expensive as BR alleged. A protest group, the *Friends of the Settle Carlisle Line*, formed in 1981 when closure was first threatened. Their petition to combat closure was signed by more than 22,000 humans and one famous collie called Ruswarp: see photo below. This high-profile campaign was finally successful in 1989. Repairs to the Ribbleshead Viaduct were completed in early 1992, safeguarding the future of the railway.

Today, the line continues to be used for both passenger and freight traffic. Indeed, when torrential rain and landslides closed both West Coast and East Coast main lines in June 2011, the Settle-Carlisle was the *only* link to remain open between Scotland and the south – a triumph for the route design and build quality achieved by the Midland Railway engineers and navvies 140 years earlier.

The media coverage of closure plans during the 1980s did much to raise the route's profile. In addition to serving local people and walkers, the line carries many visitors and railway enthusiasts who now enjoy the views from England's most scenic train journey. Since 2009, Statesman Rail has operated 'Fellsman' steam services on summer Wednesdays and, on occasion, off-season: see www.statesmanrail.com.

The *Friends of the Settle Carlisle Line* continue to champion the route, working tirelessly to improve facilities and services. Since 1989, eight stations have been reopened and the number of services has risen: see page 62 for more.



Statue of Ruswarp, Garsdale Station