

GEORGE GIBBS, THE LIFE OF A RAILWAY TUNNELLER

George Gibbs, 1833 - 1895 was born in Gloucestershire, and was the eldest and only surviving child of another George Gibbs and his first wife **Mary Ann Trigg** who had moved to Gloucester from Kent to find work as a private gardener. George had four brothers who died in infancy. Mary Ann died at the birth of their 5th son. Now in Cornwall, George (Snr)'s second wife had 7 more children.



George (Jnr) had a tough childhood, experiencing the deaths of numerous younger siblings and a very basic standard of living. For financial reasons, he would have left home as soon as he was old enough to work, and in the 1851 census 18 year old George worked as a house servant for a miller in Lanlivery, north of St Austell. Here, he caught the eye of local lass **Jane Burn**, the daughter of a copper miner, and by the time he married her in 1856, George had become a tin miner. George was able to write his name on the wedding certificate, so was literate and must have had some form of basic education.

As in the best Poldark dramas, we know that copper mining in Cornwall was extremely precarious in the 1800s, so George, together with other miners had to move around Cornwall for new mining opportunities. We know he worked in Camborne and Falmouth in Cornwall. But Cornish mines were reaching the end of their economic viability so George and Jane had some difficult choices to make ends meet with their growing family - they was to have at least 10 children.

Many Cornish miners were attracted by the opportunities in the New World, and emigrated to the States or Australia. Some changed occupation. A smaller proportion used their transferrable mining skills in other parts of England. George would have attended a local hiring market (a 19th century Job centre) held every quarter, or found an advert in the local paper. This one was in the Yorkshire Post in 1873. The Midland Railway were advertising for tunnellers at Blea Moor Tunnel at Ribbleshead, indicating that lodging was available at the area. At that time there were 28 different railway companies requiring railway tunnellers.

TUNNEL MINERS wanted at Blea Moor Tunnel, Settle and Carlisle Railway, No. 1 Contract. Wages, 6s. per day. Good lodgings immediately adjoining. Station, Ingleton via Leeds. Parties of ten men will be passed down.—Apply Alfred Terry, Midland Railway Offices, Settle

The 'railway mania' occurred between 1845 and 1850, accounting for around half of the railway lines. As time went by, railways began to be built through more difficult terrain, requiring more tunnels to be built to get through the landscape, and requiring specialist "tunnellers". The Settle to Carlisle railway was one of the last major railways to be built for this reason.

The 1876 review of the railway in the Bradford Daily Telegraph describes the Settle to Carlisle Railway as "emphatically a line of embankments, viaducts, cuttings and tunnels".

By the time of the 1871 census George and his family were living in number 15 railway navy hut in a navy village (shanty town) of some 20 huts on the hillside above Garsdale. He was described as a "railway miner" and was helping

As for the engineering, well, I could not avoid learning that the new line is some 73 miles in length, and has given more trouble to the contractors who undertook to construction than any recently made in this country. From what I saw of it I would almost be inclined to go so far as to say that however the Midland engineers induced themselves to attempt it construction is a puzzle. It is emphatically a line of embankments, viaducts, cuttings, and tunnels. From Settle to Carlisle these succeed each other with such rapidity that if not in a cutting or a tunnel it would almost be safe to say the line is running over a viaduct or embankment.

to build the Black Moss Tunnel, also known as the Rise Hill tunnel, along with 120 other miners. This was one of the most challenging tunnels to be built.

Despite the generalised perception of navvies being loud drinkers and fighters, George and Jane were trying to bring up their first 4 children. As in most huts, the host family provided lodging and food to unmarried navvies to supplement their income. The family would have been at one end of the hut, boarders at the other, and the central area for eating and cooking.

...of the work, the pits had to be sunk to a depth of over 50 feet. One of the largest works on the line is Rise Hill Tunnel, a short distance north from a cutting from which 150,000 cubic yards of earth and stone have been excavated. This tunnel, which has been cut through a pretty high hill, is 1217 yards in length, and when it is mentioned that this underground passage, 26 feet wide and 20 feet in height had to be formed through solid rock 140 feet below the surface of the earth, it is difficult to realise the enormous labour which such a vast undertaking entailed. Another engineering work

15	Railway Hut	John Dexter	Boarder	Winn.	20	Railway Carpenter	N.K. : N.K.
		George Gibbs	Head	Winn.	30	Railway Miner	Houcester: Gloucester
		Jane Do	Wife	Winn.	28		Cornwall: Towdresh
		James H. Do	Son		12		Do. Do
		Lavinia Do	Daughter		5		Derbysh: Vermuill
		George Do	Son		3		Do : Do.
		Mary Do	Daughter		1		Yorksh: Stannage
		Francis Frattlefarty	Boarder	Winn.	27	Railway Labourer	Staffordsh: Lichfield
		James Smith	Do	Winn.	25	Do: Miner	Lancash: Liverpool
		Thomas Watkins	Do	Winn.	26	Do : Do	Hampsh: Clifford
		Robert Rouse	Do	Winn.	25	Do : Do	Suffolk: Melnethon
		James Thomas	Do	Winn.	24	Do : Do	Devonsh: Plymouth

The birth places of the labourers on this census return show that many navvies came from Lancashire, Yorkshire and Derbyshire but also some from further afield, like George. On this part of the railway, there were less Irish navvies than usual. Several men were recorded as “NK” birthplace - “not known”, and a noticeably high number gave false names and / or were untraceable before and afterwards. Some gave incredible names - one of George’s lodgers called himself **Francis Frattlefarty** from Lichfield - one wonders about his personal hygiene? Unsurprisingly, he can’t be traced any further.

A navy village was not the dream location for child rearing. Typically navvies and tunnellers were paid daily or weekly, sometimes in tokens which had to be spent at the village stores, and notoriously on ale. George and Jane’s boarder **James Smith** was fined 5 shillings for being drunk at Black Moss.

SEDBERGH PETTY SESSIONS.
THURSDAY.
 Jas. Smith and Hy. Hill, miners engaged at Black Moss Tunnel, were charged with being drunk on the 22nd ult. at Black Moss, and were fined 5s. and costs each.
 Thomas Allen, Farfield, was also fined 5s. and costs for a similar offence.

Perhaps alcohol got the better of James as he may have died in 1875, although there is a disparity with his age.

ker, aged 46 years.
 Settle.—On the 22nd inst., Mr. James Smith, railway labourer, aged 40 years.

Another drunken episode involved the attack on Ellen Bowers by a drunken Levi Abbott in 1874. Levi, another miner and his wife Susan, both from Somerset had recently arrived after working on a tunnel at Lazonby, north of Penrith with their 7 children. Levi’s victim was Ellen, wife of miner Alfred Bowers who lived in Railway Hut number 5. Alfred was another railway miner from Wiltshire and the ‘old and decrepit’ witch of an Irish woman Ellen was 53 years old, and provided

carry out a scheme. This concluded the business.
THE RESULT OF A BELIEF IN WITCHCRAFT.—At the Leeds Assizes, Leine Abbott, 37, excavator, was charged with wounding Ellen Bowers, at Garsdale, on the 18th July. It appears that the prisoner was working on the Settle and Carlisle Extension of the Midland Railway Company, at a tunnel called Blackmoss tunnel. Near the tunnel the prosecutrix, an old and decrepit woman, lived in a hut, and provided accommodation for the navvies and their wives. On the day in question the old woman was sitting in her hut when the prisoner and his wife came in, and after sitting a few minutes the prisoner suddenly rose, and, seizing a formidable looking pocker, struck the old woman on the head twice, inflicting some very severe injuries. When the policeman apprehended him he said he was sorry he had not killed the old woman, as she had bewitched his pigs and himself. The Judge (Baron Amphlett) in summing up said it was hardly possible to believe that in the middle of the nineteenth century any one could be so ignorant as to believe in witchcraft. The jury found prisoner guilty. Sentence, five years’ penal servitude.

for 7 boarders. He had been “drinking for a week or a fortnight”. Navvies huh?

prisoner guilty only on the lesser count. There was no motive whatever for the assault, and prisoner, who had been drinking for a week or a fortnight, was either “dazed” from the effects of that or a little jealousy. In any case he had no ill-feeling against the woman, and was very sorry for the violence he had so foolishly used.—His LORDSHIP said the assault

FATAL ACCIDENT ON THE SETTLE AND CARLISLE RAILWAY.

An accident, attended by the loss of three lives, occurred on Monday evening on the works in connection with the construction of the Settle and Carlisle Railway. Near the Black Moss Tunnel, about seven miles from Sedbergh, a tramway has been laid for the conveyance of material up an incline. It is worked by a standing engine and a wire rope. On the evening of the above-named day eleven men and women seated themselves on three trucks for the purpose of travelling to the bottom of the incline. Shortly after starting the pin connecting the rope with the trucks broke, and the trucks ran on at a rapidly increasing rate of speed. Nine persons managed to alight, but two women, named Pemberton and Fordham, were unable to do so, and on the trucks jumping off the rails they were both thrown out and instantly killed. A third woman named Lakin, was also hurt, but not seriously. Just before the accident occurred a man named Alexander Blanney, being under the influence of drink, lay down upon the incline and refused to rise, although a little girl who was passing endeavoured to remove him to a place of safety. He was killed by the runaway trucks, his head being nearly cut off.

In September 1873 another accident took place on the site where George, Jane and his family lived. It received plenty of publicity, and again highlighted the effect of alcohol.

However, this wasn't always the case. In Settle the attendance at “adult sabbath” classes increased considerably during the building of the Settle to Carlisle line. Preachers and charity workers visited the villages.

The temporary navy huts were very basic and had poor sanitation - death by disease and “in fighting” also contributed to the deaths. George and Jane had 2 children who had died in infancy.

It wasn't just the navvies causing trouble. In 1873, one of the subcontractors of the Benton and Woodiwiss company was charged with menace and obtaining money under false pretences for encouraging 30 navvies to demand money from a railway agent that he had previously secured. He was labelled “a pest to society” by the judge and imprisoned for 12 months with hard labour.

So navvies had a bit of a bad reputation. Here are two others causing trouble in Settle. Again, these two cannot be traced outside this incident, so probably used fictitious names.

Despite all of this going on, George and Jane continued to bring up their growing family. Amazingly, only two of their 10 children died in infancy - nationally one in five children died before the age of 5 in the Victorian Era, and the figure would probably have been far higher in navy huts.

OVERSEERS, to be given out at CHRISTMAS.

SEDBERGH.

THE LATE CASE OF MISDEMEANOUR.—The case of George Williams, a sub-contractor on the Settle and Carlisle Line under Messrs. Benton and Woodiwiss, was brought on at the Wakefield spring sessions on Thursday, the 10th inst., and from its importance as affecting contractor and sub-contractor's men it was watched with a good deal of interest by those most immediately concerned as well as by parties less intimately connected with railway works, involving as it did several very knotty points. The indictment was upon two counts—first, for *menaces*; second, for soliciting to the commission of an offence not afterwards committed. The evidence which was the same as that produced at the

PRISONERS.

VIOLENT ASSAULT ON THE POLICE.—On Monday last, before J. Birkbeck, Esq., and Rev. J. Swale, two navvys, named respectively George Thompson and James Booth, employed on the Settle and Carlisle Railway, were brought up in custody, charged with having committed a violent assault upon P.C. Taylor, on Thursday, the 27th ult. From the evidence it appeared that the prisoners had savagely attacked the police-constable on the turnpike road near to Ingfield, Settle, and had thrown stones at him, one of which hit the police-constable on the head, and for a time rendered him insensible. Several of the stones were produced in Court, and were of formidable dimensions. The cries of Taylor for help were heard by two men, who were working in the neighbourhood, and with their assistance both prisoners, who were drunk, were, after some difficulty, safely locked up. Both prisoners pleaded guilty, and Thompson was committed to prison for three months, and Booth, who it appeared had been most violent in his conduct, was sent for six months. They were also charged with being drunk and riotous, for which offence they were each fined £1 and costs, or in default one month's imprisonment.

ROYAL NATIONAL LIFE BOAT INSTITUTION.—It will

In the first 17 years of operation of Settle's Holy Ascension graveyard, 42% of burials were for children aged 5 and under.

From the birth places of his children given on censuses we can trace the places where George worked, and many of these coincided with the building of railway tunnels. (Fortunately George and Jane were able to remember the birth places - many navvies in this navy village weren't). There may well have been other jobs in between.

1858 - 1861 Cornwall: Lanlivery, Camborne, Falmouth

1862 - 1865 Dove Holes tunnel, Derbyshire, 2984 yards

1868 - 70 Marsden second Standedge tunnel, 5337 yards

1871 - 75 Black Moss tunnel, 1213 yards

1875 - 78 Queensbury tunnel, Halifax, 2501 yards

1878 - 1879 Yeadon, possibly working on improving Springs Belmont Wood Tunnel, Guiseley 77 yards



(At the time of the 1881 census, George worked as an iron miner in Barnby, near Whitby, North Yorkshire)

1890 - 94 Marsden double track railway tunnel, 5340 yards

Several of these tunnels were under contract to Benton and Woodiwiss, so it's likely that George and family moved around the country with them.

George died in November 1895 aged 62, just 6 months after his son George, also a tunneller aged just 25. They both died of tuberculosis. George had been working as a miner / tunneller for at least 40 years. Wife Jane died of cardiac failure in 1916, still in Marsden. Typically, there was no way this family could afford a gravestone, but they are all buried in Marsden graveyard, a long way from their birthplaces. Just as George had done, his children left home as soon as they were old enough to work and became or married into labouring, navy or weaving families.

George was an unusually resilient railway worker. He spent over 40 years working on the railway, way beyond the average for such a physical job - most navvies soon found others less strenuous occupations, if they were not killed. George and his (often pregnant) wife spent all that time travelling from one end of the country to the other with growing numbers of children, living in terrible conditions just to put food on the table for their families. Only two children died in infancy - George Michael Gibbs was born in Cornwall and died in Derbyshire a year later, and Charlotte Gibbs was born and died in Yeadon, also aged 1.

Despite the turmoil around him, George and his family kept themselves out of trouble. We are also grateful that he felt able to give his correct name, age and birth location on each census. There weren't many like him, and we mustn't forget the contribution that George and others like him made to our lives today. There are far more navvies buried in Chapel-le-dale, Dent and Garsdale and other graveyards along the route. May they rest in peace, and may we remember them as we enjoy the fantastic Settle to Carlisle Railway, still going strong nearly 150 years later.

Sarah Lister March 2019