

Tales from DalesRail

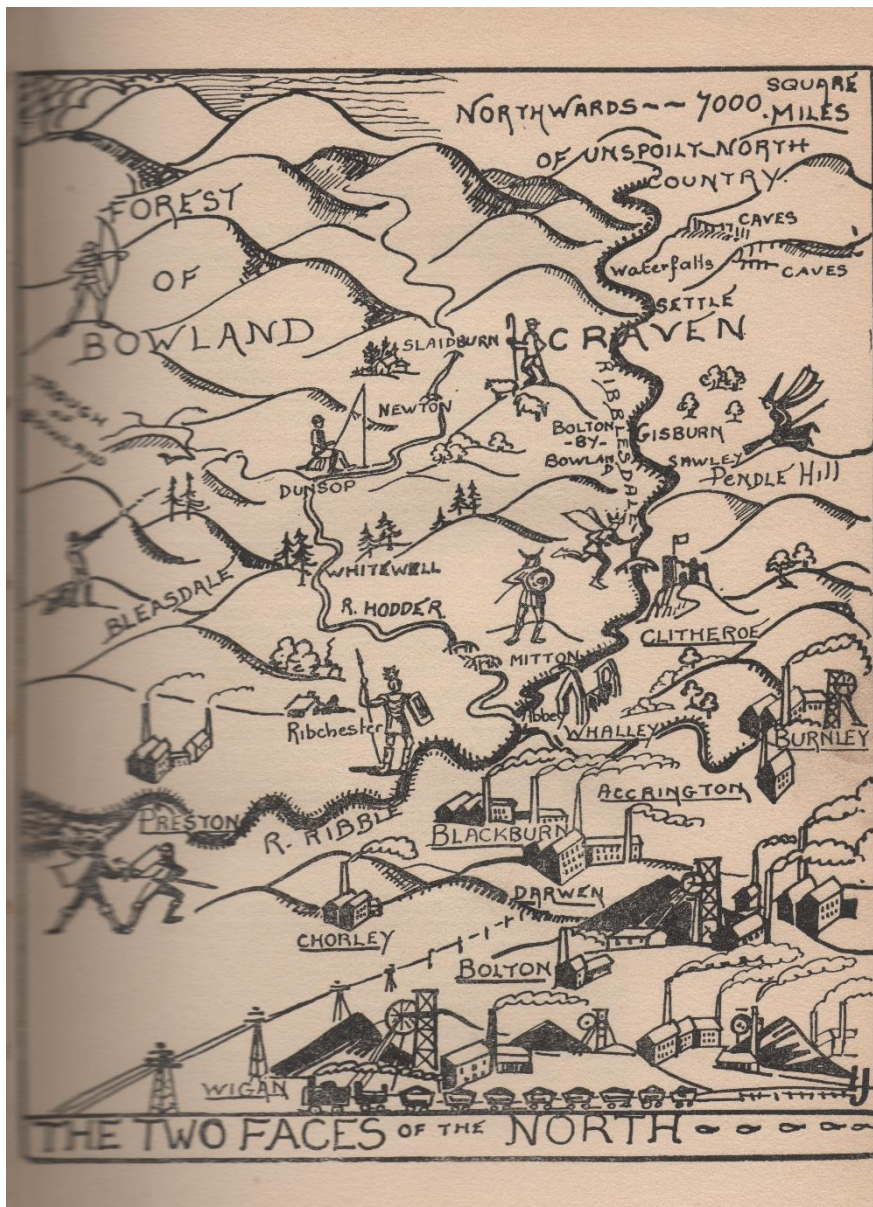
An Original DalesRailer – Jessica Lofthouse (part I) Craig Ward

DalesRail may not be operating in 2020 but that doesn't stop us sharing our many interesting experiences about our journeys. We hope you will share your interesting stories, favourite walks, fascinating anecdotes, and pictures about DalesRail. Please send them to richard.watts.crl@gmail.com or Simon Clarke at simon.clarke.crl@gmail.com.

To those of us who are regular DalesRailers, travelling up through Ribblesdale and along the Settle-Carlisle Line, the passing landscapes and stations have become familiar and almost taken for granted. In the forty-five years in which DalesRail has been running quite a few changes have taken place along the route – some quite marked, others more subtle. In the Ribble Valley the most noticeable have been the re-opening of local stations and, more recently, the large amount of housebuilding which continues apace. Along the Settle-Carlisle Line it's the huge expenditure on civil engineering works to make the route more resilient to extreme weather conditions, the renovation of station buildings and, more recently, the panting of thousands of trees in the upper Eden Valley to reduce the threat of flooding to towns lower down such as Appleby and Carlisle which stand out. When these trees mature the upland landscapes will look very different.

As someone interested in history, I often wonder what travelling on this route was like in the past and if walkers made regular use of it to reach the Dales. Over the years I have found only a few contemporary accounts written by travellers. Walkers usually concentrate on their actual walking experiences rather than their journeys.

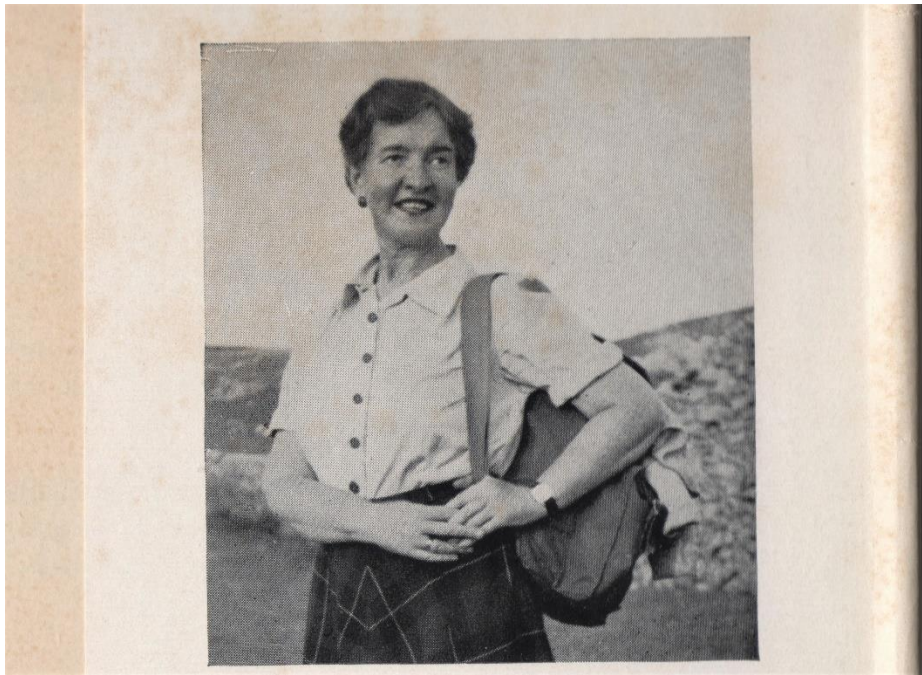
Amongst these travellers' and walkers' accounts one person in particular stands out – Jessica Lofthouse. Jessica Lofthouse was born in Clitheroe in 1906, taught in Liverpool and Blackburn and, in later years, lived in Langho hence the legend: 'Jessica Lofthouse Country' on the station's name boards at Langho. Jessica grew up in the Ribble Valley and became a keen walker, traveller and countryside lover. As she grew older she explored further, helped in the 1930's by the growing network of youth hostels, began to pen articles for local newspapers and eventually wrote and self-published her own book: 'The Rediscovery of the North' in 1938. In this book she extolled the beauty of our North Country stating that there were 'Seven thousand square miles to explore'. More commercially produced books followed and were (and still are) widely read. For many, including me, they described the north and enthused them to go out and explore it. I remember using one of her books, 'Three Rivers' to write an end of year 5th Form long essay describing a journey down the River Ribble from source to sea and this encouraged me to want to get out and explore the north's countryside on foot. Even now, in winter, when the weather is dank and dreary I will take one of her books from my bookshelves and enjoy her account of a walk somewhere in the Dales which is written in that quirky but wonderfully descriptive and enthusiastic style.



An original sketch map from the Rediscovery of the North

Of course, in order to explore the Dales' countryside in the 1930's and 40's, Jessica often used the rail network, especially the Ribble Valley and Settle-Carlisle Lines, to reach her starting points. For example, in 'Off to the Dales' (1950) she writes, 'On the April day when the world and his wife were Aintree bound I travelled in, I believe, almost solitary state with a whole train to myself, to Hellifield. (Perhaps not a good omen as the train service between Blackburn and Hellifield was withdrawn in 1962) Earlier, in November 1941, in an article for the Blackburn Times, she describes the wartime scene at Hellifield Station: 'Not many people have a good word to say for Hellifield. It seems to most just a benighted railway junction, and long waits for slow trains on draughty platforms, with north east winds meeting one at every turn, and only the companionship of other taciturn travellers who, with collars turned up and hands in pockets, stamp up and down to keep warm. I found myself there a little while ago and with near an hour to wait for a Settle train. The waiting room was overflowing with mothers, and infants under six, all sucking oranges – homeward bound evacuees by their talk.

I decided to take a look at the village. There was a good smell of cattle, traced to the trucks in the sidings which were jammed with animals, unhappy creatures, jostling and thrusting impatient horns over their prison sides.'



Jessica Lofthouse in her younger days

A few years later in *Three Rivers* published in 1946 she describes in detail some of her experiences of travelling up the line from Hellifield as follows: 'It was a railwayman, an engine driver, who told us that the Pennine country north of Ribblesdale was Siberia. He recalled, "Two pals of mine for a bit of a joke asked at Euston for two tickets to Siberia. The booking clerk made them out for Garsdale. 'You'll be wanting returns,' he said. Every employee on the L.M.S. knows what it is like up here in winter. Fierce – folk in towns have no idea."

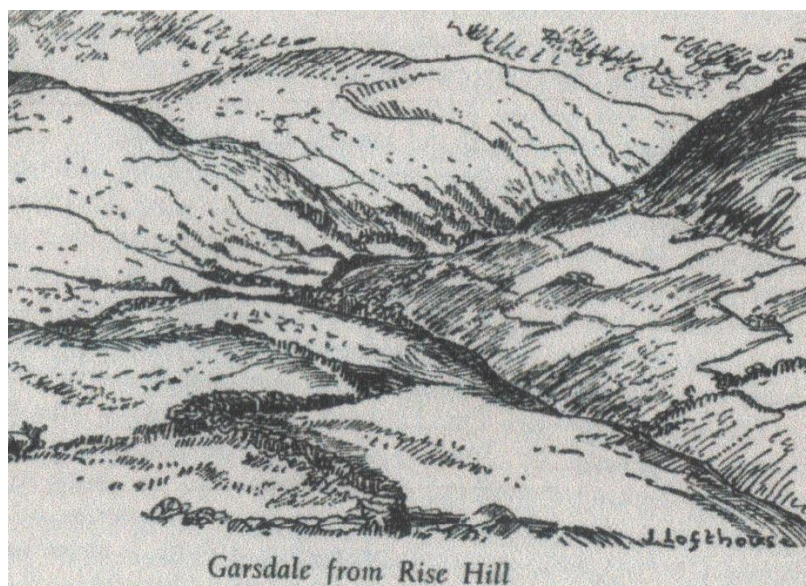
It was a bitter cold autumn day and we were sharing the station master's fire in the remote station in Ribblesdale. Our train south was late. Each time we left the fire to probe the darkness up-line the bitter wind drove us quickly indoors again. "How'd you like to be a signalman on this line?"

The driver told us of one lone watcher beyond Ribblesdale who keeps records of the wind's velocity and sends bulletins to the junctions up and down the line so that trains starting out from Carlisle and Hellifield prepare accordingly, tethering tarpaulins, making all trucks safe against gales. One train some years ago was derailed by the wind; at Garsdale an engine was spun around on a turntable all though one night."

We could imagine all he said to be unvarnished truth. Why, one October we found it impossible to open our carriage door when the train drew into Ribblesdale Station. It was July when a thunderstorm accompanied by torrential rain kept a train waiting five minutes before any of the passengers, or train staff, could make a move. Never have we battled against stronger winds than the equinoctial gales rushing up the 'flue' of Chapel-le-dale from Gearstones to Batty Green in March, or at the 'back end'.

I have never resented the presence of a railway less than the line between Settle and Garsdale. A railway line is not often an asset to the landscape; trains need not be a welcome sound to a wanderer enamoured of the silence of the moors. But I have an affection for this section of the L.M.S. line, probably because it has for many years been the means of rapid escape to the upper dales. It would be true to say that the escape was liable to a long hold-up at Hellifield, but that is expected, it being in the nature of things that an hour's wait here is provided to set the walker longing for violent action. Also, the trains which are scheduled to stop at Settle, Horton, Ribbleshead and Dent are very few, though Scotland and Leeds bound trains dash along with abandon through the day, express trains passing the 'stoppers' on the double track, and scores of long goods trains filling up the lulls. A little planning is needed and then the hillwalker comes to regard the four stations as gateways to an easily attainable earthly paradise. Walkers regard the line with affection; railway employees with some respect and very little affection.'

Jessica continued to use the railway regularly until the closure of the Ribbles Valley Line in 1962 severed the rail link to the Dales. After that her books, unsurprisingly, were focussed on discovering the Dales by car. It is clear from the following extract written in 'Countrygoers' North', published in 1965, that she missed her rail trips. She writes of Garsdale: 'The grey road unwinds and we are below Garsdale Station, the Hawes Junction which in the days when trains ran on our railways we so often used as a starting place for high Pennine walking holidays. The old Boniface (Ed: The nickname for the local Hawes to Hellifield stopping train) used to bring us in from Hawes at the end of our journeys. The waiting room among its many roles has been a Sunday school and lending library. The row of gaunt houses, up the lane and past the post office (Ed; closed in the 1990's and where Graham Nuttall used to stay on his frequent walking trips to Garsdale) are built as strongly as fortifications, like all railway property on this old midland line. Rosy-faced children play hide and seek below the wildly flapping washing pegged on clothes lines, hair blown about like calf's mane. When a train whistle or diesel horn blows, they race up to the line to wave to the drivers.'



Jessica Lofthouse continued writing, lecturing and broadcasting until her death in 1988. Her archive of books, articles, manuscripts and sketches are held at Blackburn Central Library where she spent many hours of research. They represent a lifetime of experiences of someone

who loved the North Country and encouraged others to do likewise. Whether she ever used DalesRail after it started in 1975 is not known. However, I am sure that she would have been delighted that the service was established and continues to give people the opportunity to travel by train in order to go 'Off to the Dales' and walk in their glorious landscapes or enjoy them from a carriage window - and without a long wait for a slow train on a draughty platform at Hellifield !



Jessica in her later years