

A change of platform

DENT STATION: Steve McClarence takes a trip along one of the world's great railways and finds that a place which sheltered its navvie builders has been given a new life.

THE ramblers on the train back to Leeds – particularly the woman who's been eating Ryvitas all the way from Appleby – look alarmed as we get off at Dent, England's highest mainline station. "It's four miles to Dent village," one says. "And you know this is the last train, don't you?" I smile. "No worries,"

I say, with super-cool insouciance. "We're staying on the station." Mrs Ryvita nibbles on nervously.

And we are staying here, in the Snow Hut down the end of the platform: warm and cosy, a joy for train-spotters and anyone else really: a bolthole in a Yorkshire Dales landscape as wide and wild as they come.

It's 1,150ft up, and with the night gale

howling outside, you can believe it. All around are rugged bits of landscape that sound like Blues singers: Monkeybeck Grains, Rough Gill Brows, Winterscales Pasture, Countersett Bardale.

You can get here by train from anywhere in Yorkshire, anywhere in Britain. It's on the Settle-Carlisle line, one of the handful of English rail routes that feel like a great journey through an inspiring, wuthering,

glowering landscape, an adventure, a "look this side... no, look that side" kind of line.

As the train had pulled out of Skipton on our way up from Leeds at the start of our Dent weekend, however, most of the passengers were reading, dozing, staring at their laptops or babbling into their mobile phones.

"All these things I'm telling you," a youth



WINTER WONDERLAND: A snow-covered Dent Station – the highest mainline station in England. The main station building has been a holiday let for four years; another, the Snow Hut, has recently opened.

four rows back shouted down his phone. “Keep them to yourself. Don’t tell anyone about Becky.”

I wanted to shake them and say: “Look, we’re on the Settle-Carlisle. It’s 72 miles of magic. It’s been voted the world’s second-best train trip. Turn off your laptops; look at the lapwings. And you...” this is to the youth with the mobile... “I’m going to tell everyone about Becky.”

The second-best-train-trip accolade comes from an American news network. It ranks the Settle-Carlisle runner-up to South Africa’s Blue Train, and above the Trans-Siberian and the Orient Express.

No-one in Yorkshire will argue with that, even if people in Moscow, Venice and Istanbul might (and you could put in a case for two or three fabulously scenic lines in Scotland).

But why argue, as the line breezes across mist-swirling moorland where tree branches straggle horizontally, and you cross the Ribbleshead viaduct so blithely that you almost forget what an extraordinary structure it must have seemed when it was built across such open country.

The Snow Hut, one of three, is a reminder of those early Settle-Carlisle days. The huts

“ It’s been voted the world’s second-best train trip... above the Trans-Siberian. ”

were built in 1885 for teams of navvies sent to clear snow drifts. Fifteen of them spent whole winters here, but the huts were gradually abandoned. Now they’ve been rescued by Robin Hughes, a chartered surveyor who opened Dent station’s main building as a holiday let four years ago: hugely comfortable with doors still labelled “Station Master” and “1st & 2nd Class Ladies Waiting Room”, an original ticket hatch and toilets with the old twirl-round “Vacant/Engaged” signs.

That building, sleeping six, has now been joined by the Snow Hut, which suits singles or couples. Its guests have included St Michael of Portillo, patron saint of BBC railway programmes, and it has slate floors, underfloor heating, a microwave cooker and a wood-burning stove that

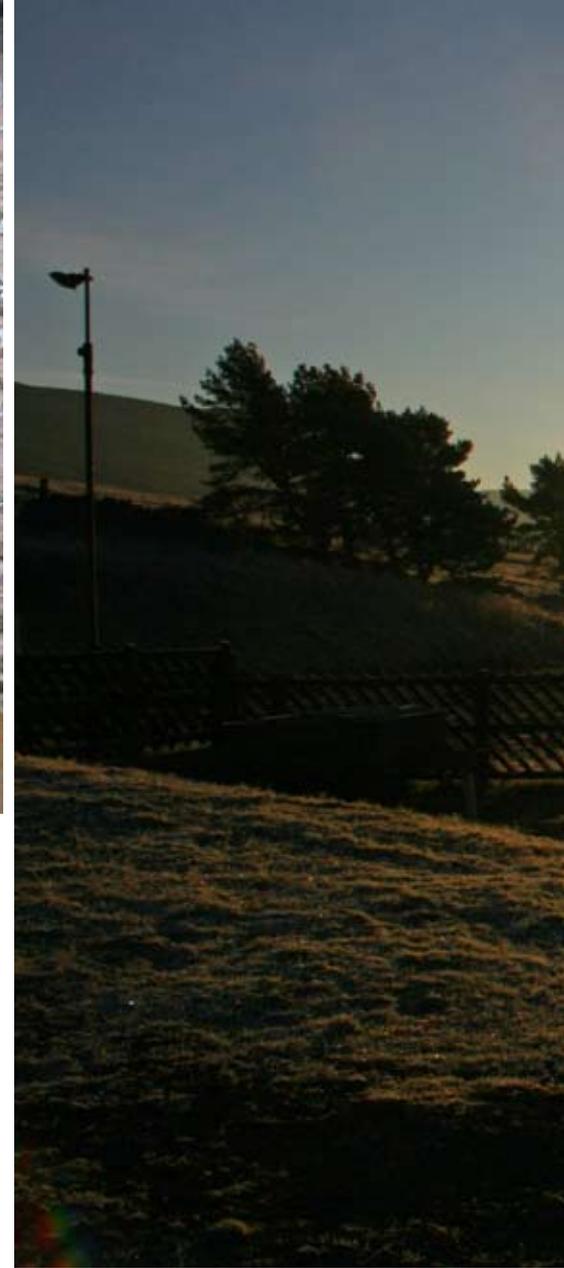
proves a steep lighting curve for my wife Clare and me.

Despite the luxury, the hut’s greatest asset is its sense of utter remoteness, with long views over the top left-hand corner of the Dales. Dentedale, dotted with cottages, twists and turns below and finally disappears round a corner.

For much of our stay the hilltops are muffled in cloud but the sun shines bright on the valley bottom. The night has a profound silence, broken only by the sheep, the pheasants and the beck tumbling down the hill. The sky is generally spangled with stars.

What’s it like to live here? I ask Jenny Holmes, whom we meet while waiting for the train to Carlisle, an hour and a quarter away, where she’s going to buy some milk and yoghurt.





HOLIDAY BY THE TRACKS: Dent Station Snow Hut holiday accommodation; Robin Hughes with Michael Portillo who stayed in the Snow Hut while making the BBC TV programme *Great British Railway Journeys*, above; and main picture, and far right Dent Station in the spring and summer months.

➔ She and her husband Roy have lived for 30 years in the old station master's house at the other end of the platform.

"It's like camping, only a bit dryer and a bit warmer," she says. "When you get bad winds the roof does a dance. But it's lovely. You have to see places like this in good weather. To get up on a morning and see the sun treacling round the corner when it's white-over and there's no sound whatsoever and the sun glints on the track... it's just another world."

We have an agreeable day in Carlisle,

as Scottish as it's English, and get back to Dent in time to catch one of the infrequent buses down the enchanting dale to equally enchanting Dent village itself with its

“It's like camping, only a bit dryer and a bit warmer... it's just another world.”

cobbled, crooked alleys. I ask a fellow passenger why the station is so isolated, so far from the nearest community. "Because it's where the line is," he says, as though talking to an idiot.

The bus carries on to Sedbergh, the "Book Town" hunched under the Howgill Fells: also enchanting. That's enough enchantment, says Clare.

What else? We rail-ream between stations, using walking guides produced by the Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line, and back at the Snow Hut, we sit and watch trains materialising over distant viaducts.

A night for poor eyes

Optegra Yorkshire Eye Hospital invites you to come along to one of two exclusive information evenings where you can find out more about leading a life with less dependence on glasses and contact lenses.

One event focuses on Optegra Yorkshire Eye Hospital's own Clarivu™ Total Vision Correction treatment whilst the other is dedicated to the most advanced laser eye surgery available.

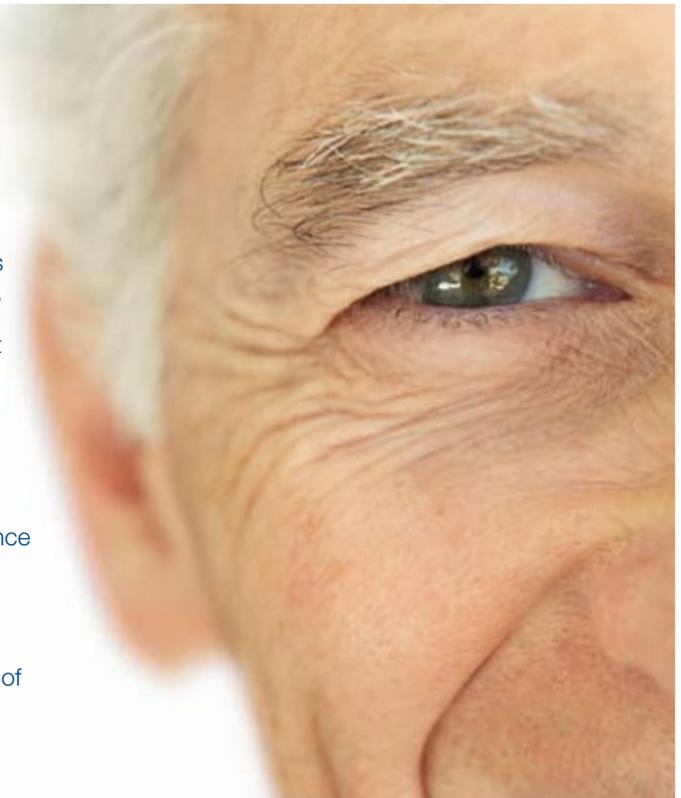
Both evenings which are completely free to attend, are led by expert Optegra surgeons and feature previous patients who are on hand for a genuine insight into each treatment.

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Clarivu™ Evening, 6pm Monday 5th March at Optegra Yorkshire Eye Hospital, 937 Harrogate Rd, Apperley Bridge, BD10 ORD

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To reserve a place at either evening call 0845 456 2021, email icare@optegra.com or visit www.optegra.com

The above guidelines on suitability for attendance can be discussed further if necessary so please feel free to ask

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I try to read, but jump up to check the timetable by the door every time there's a faint low rumble.

"Coal train coming," cries Clare excitedly. We have become Railway Children.

■ A week's self-catering at the Snow Hut (07824 665266; www.dentstation.co.uk) costs from £400. A week in the main building costs from £800. Northern Rail (0845 000 0125; www.northernrail.org) operates trains between Leeds and Carlisle via Settle. Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line: www.foscl.org.uk



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