

The line of beauty ; The station house at Dent, Britain's highest railway station and, far left, the nearby Ribbleshead viaduct

ANDREW MARTIN Daily Mail

Robin Hughes is a quantity surveyor. 'One of the principles of my profession,' he says, 'is that you never take the same route twice between any two points.' The winter before last, he was crossing the Yorkshire Dales by some of the wilder and more inadvisable routes when he found himself skirting past England's highest railway station, at Dent.

Mr Hughes saw that there was a 'For Sale' sign propped outside the station house (the station is unmanned, and the house has been in private hands for the past 20 years). He bought and refurbished the house, and has just started letting it out as a holiday cottage.

He aims to attract families, but he also has a fantasy that railway executives might convene there 'for brainstorming sessions'. In my own fantasy, railway bosses would meet at Dent and, over a good dinner and a few bottles of wine, they'd resolve to make all stations like this one and its companions on the Settle-Carlisle line. There would be waiting rooms with coal-burning stoves, signs inviting passengers (not 'customers', please note) to have a chat with the signal man about running times.

There would be flowers in baskets, no graffiti, no CCTV cameras.

These are stations to be proud of, Dent perhaps in particular. A sign on the southbound platform gives its claim to fame, announcing the altitude: 350m(1,150 ft) above sea level. In my two days of staying there, I couldn't resist walking proprietorially up and down the platform, jangling the keys to the house, looking as though I was checking on things, and nodding meaningfully at departing train drivers (much to their bafflement and alarm). If I'd had the nerve, I'd have put on the station master's cap that hangs on the hook behind the door.

The house is subtly separated from the northbound platform by a picket fence. The glass fronting the platform is frosted, while the windows on the other side look over the glorious expanse of Dentdale. For some of my time in the station, a helicopter buzzed over the dale, and it seemed to me that I was looking down on it. The door to the main living room is marked 'Booking and Waiting Hall while that to the kitchen is 'Ladies' Waiting Room'. Although the house is fitted out with every convenience, it does have the slightly institutional feel of a station: something to do with the high ceilings and the daunting fireplace in the living room.

You seem to be communing with the spirits of those who've passed time in this room over the past 130 years.

In the late 1860s, the Midland - one of the pushy, Johnny-come-lately Victorian operators - built St Pancras station to try to upstage King's Cross, but it lacked a route to Scotland.

It was required to do a deal with the London and North Western Railway, whereby the company would carry Midland passengers across the border into Scotland, from the little station at Ingleton in the Dales.

The LNWR did not go out of its way to indulge Midland ticket-holders. In fact, their carriages were often hooked up behind rumbling, 20 mph coal trains. So, between 1869 and 1876, they built their own line. It went across some of the most inhospitable terrain in England, but they just got on with it. Or at least, the navvies did: 300 of them died in the course of the work. When they came to a mountain they blasted through it; when they came to a valley they built a viaduct. The idea was to

create a more-or-less straight line, and the Settle-Carlisle is, as one author has noted, 'the only mountain railway that is also an express route'.

The pretty, Gothic stations were given the names of local villages, but the priority was to get passengers from St Pancras into Scotland as quickly as possible, and the names sometimes meant little. Even from the great height of Dent station, you can't actually see the village of Dent. It is nearly five miles away (and as tranquil and pretty, with its twisted, cobbled high street, as a Pyrenean mountain village).

Today, nobody crosses the heights of the Settle-Carlisle in a luxurious sleeping car, or while eating a four-course dinner.

But it remains a superbly romantic experience.

As the trains climb towards the summit of the line at Ais Gill - about six miles north of **Dent station** - your ears pop just as they do on an aeroplane. The vertiginous perspective and the rattling of the refreshment trolley add to the feeling that this is a plane rather than a train. At times you look down on clouds.

The weather fluctuates alarmingly. One station can be all Thomas the Tank Engine pretty and bathed in bright sunshine; at the next, the lamps might be lit and the fog swirling in.

The mightiest viaduct is at Ribbleshead, between Ribbleshead and Dent stations. There are stories of locomotives in full steam being brought to a standstill by the wind as they attempt to cross it. Certainly, foot-wide lumps of coal have been blown off firemen's shovels here, and I am told that men walking the track sometimes still do find it judicious to proceed on hands and knees.

There is something ghostly about the Settle-Carlisle. On the bank above Dent station are blackened railway sleepers driven vertically into the ground 100 years ago to keep snow off the line. I had seen photographs of these while researching my novel, *Murder At Deviation Junction*, which includes an account of a journey north across the Settle-Carlisle in the winter of 1909. But close up, they are something else. They loom like an advancing army, and seem lightly but significantly closer to the station as night falls.

Two terrible crashes occurred only a little way north. On the rainy Christmas Eve of 1910, the overwrought signal man at the station that was then called Hawes Junction (and is now Garsdale) allowed a fast train to catch two small locomotives at Moorcock Tunnel. He realised his mistake when he heard a distant train whistle followed by a sinister rumbling noise, whereupon he turned to a colleague and said, 'Go and tell the station master that I am afraid I have wrecked the Scotch Express.' Twelve people died. On another stormy night, in 1913, 14 were killed when two southbound express trains collided at Ais Gill.

And then, in 1970, along came BR with its plans for rationalisation. Clearly something as maverick and beautiful as the Settle-Carlisle could not be allowed to survive, and most of the stations on the line were closed. In 1981, it was announced that the entire route would be shut down. But a group called the Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line (who today help maintain the stations) fought hard to save it, and Michael Portillo, Secretary of State for Transport, announced the reprieve in April 1989.

Today, there are passenger trains almost hourly in both directions, and freight carries coal and gypsum over the line. There are plans for a new Nottingham-Glasgow service via the Settle-Carlisle, and it's not impossible that London-Glasgow trains will again use it regularly. (Currently, the pain of engineering works on the West Coast Main Line is occasionally mitigated for passengers on Virgin Trains by a diversion over Settle-Carlisle.) It is easy to holiday at **Dent station** without a car.

You would arrive and depart by train, and shuttle up and down the line as required - perhaps for a day in Settle, an elegant foursquare market town where the church bells seem always to be ringing, and perfect strangers say hello to you as you walk past. Or you could journey three stops south to Horton-in-Ribblesdale, the pretty village which is the starting point for the circular, 24-mile Three Peaks walk, which could be done between the first and last trains of a Saturday (if you got a move on).

A decent pub - The Sportsman's Inn, in the idyllic hamlet of Cowgill - lies about a mile downhill from the station, and I approached it on a sunlit Saturday evening to the perfect accompaniment of a harrumphing tuba played by a man who repairs brass band instruments.

Alternatively, you could do what I spent the largest part of my time doing: sit in the garden of the station house, take in the view and watch the trains go by, and generally feel like a railway king of the Dales. * Murder At Deviation Junction by Andrew Martin is published by Faber & Faber, [pounds sterling]10.99.

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