Dent in the 1950s

by Rodney Hampson © 2010

I was Station Master at Dent from March 1952 to September 1955, and I thought it would be of interest to set down my recollections of that time. I am relying chiefly on my fallible memories of events fifty-five years ago, so I apologise now for any errors.

I was in charge of the station itself, and two signal boxes: Dent Station Box and Dent Head Box. Dent is on the Settle-Carlisle line, built by the Midland Railway in the 1870s to provide its own route to Carlisle and Scotland. With the west and east coast routes already occupied by competitors, the Midland took the rugged backbone of England as its only alternative. Its surveyors managed to limit the gradients to 1 in a 100, but this involved deep cuttings, massive viaducts and long tunnels. The line at Dent ran along a shelf on the eastern side of upper Dentdale, between mile-and-a-half Blea Moor Tunnel to the south and three-quarter-mile Rise Hill Tunnel to the north, with major viaducts at Dent Head and Artengill to bridge side valleys.

Dent Station has the reputation of being the highest main-line station in England, at 1145 feet above sea level. The reputation is qualified: by 'main line' - Princetown, terminus of a branch line in Devon was considerably higher at almost 1373 feet; and by 'England' because the main line station at Dalwhinnie on the Perth-Inverness line was higher at 1188 feet.

Dent Station and Dent

The station building continues, now as a holiday let, but earlier used for Barden Grammar School, Burnley 'outward bound centre' after closure in 1970. It is the standard Settle-Carlisle small station type, with over 700 small window panes, 'blue-bloomed' by smoke, although regularly cleaned by the porter - who'd counted them - some no more than two inches square. There was the entrance porch with well-worn Yale lock, office to the right, ladies waiting room and toilet to the left, booking hall straight ahead with a magnificent view down to Dent. The ladies room had a Dent Marble fireplace, rarely graced with a fire.

There was a ticket window in the booking hall and inside the office, a small ticket rack, ticket stock drawers, dating press and cash drawer.. Also the two-faced clock by Potts,

Leeds, wound weekly, and a huge wall cupboard right of the fireplace, for office instructions, documents, stationery etc. There was a two-drawer table and an 'M R' inscribed 'captain's chair' for the Station Master, and a stool for the porter.

We had a new all-night burning stove in front of the open fireplace, and an elderly safe, bolted to the floor beams. This came about when the auditor was checking his list, and asked if I was still taking the cash home at night. I was in lodgings at Garsdale, hence the installation of a safe.

As one could imagine, receipts were small, but what cash there was went by sealed leather cash-bag to Mr. Lee at Settle. He took cash from Garsdale, Dent, Ribblehead, Horton and of course Settle to Martins Bank at Settle each day. He also drew wage and salary cash for these stations, returned in the same sealed leather bags. An extra chore for him was purchasing the correct National Insurance stamps for each station. Government rules required National Insurance cards to be held at the pay point, and to be stamped regularly.

The up waiting room was as it is today, stone-built and slated, flagged floor and continuous seats round the sides. It had its regular summer visitors, house martins which built their mud nests under the eaves - and left us to deal with their sanitary arrangements at ground level.

The Station House at Dent was known for its slate-hung walls and double-glazing, a rarity then. Both had become dilapidated and were removed. The house itself required modernisation: Calor Gas lighting and cooking, a hot water system and bathroom, and the wall slates replaced by rough-casting. This work was only completed by April 1955, shortly before I left. Meanwhile, I lived at the School House at Cowgill, near the foot of Station hill.

When I went to Dent, Tommy Fothergill was the porter. Tommy, son of a Dent builder, had served in gliders at Arnhem. He lived up Flintergill in Dent, and woke the neighbours with his elderly motor-bike. Whilst I was there, he leased a small farm in Cowgill, one of the 'top' farms which were all falling out of use, like Blackmire, above the station. Tommy told me of finding the walls 'papered' with newspaper when he began to decorate.

Tommy and I worked turns, alternate weeks, to cover the passenger trains, with half-days off on alternate Saturdays. He was thoroughly competent and conscientious. He could do anything needed, except the monthly accounts: caring for platform and signal lamps, whitening the platform edges, cleaning, selling tickets and operating the weighbridge. When

his farming was established, Tommy left the station, perhaps becoming a platelayer, and was succeeded by a native of Cowgill, Jack Akrigg.

Jack's family lived at Hobsons, the farm on the slopes of Whernside, opposite the station, a farm which received no sun for several winter months because of its location. Jack married whilst I was there, and had ambitions to move up in the railway world, learning what he could of operating and commercial practices at Dent.

My diary for 1954 has survived, and I could tell the times and days I visited the signal boxes through that year, and what I had to check. A lineside fire in January, surprisingly, and a lamb killed in July, are noted. The lines were 'fenced' with dry stone walls, maintained by the platelayers, the walls supplemented by posts leaning outward to the fields, topped with strands of wire to deter adventurous sheep. When I commented to a farmer that it was always the most valuable sheep which were killed on the line, he responded, poker-faced, that they were the most venturesome!

The pick-up's principal traffic for Dent was loaded coal wagons from Yorkshire collieries for M.E. Haygarth & Son, Dentdale's coal merchant. Unlike most urban coalmen, Matthew and his son Jack were gentle, kindly men. When told that there was nothing on the pick-up for him, Matthew's response was usually 'That's good, we wasn't wanting any'. When a wagon arrived, it had to be emptied within three days, or 'demurrage' (rental) at three shillings a day was charged. Domestic coal was then 8s.2d. (41p.) a hundredweight.

Other full loads inward were very rare, but every year a few covered vans were needed to send away filled 'wool sheets'. There were two wool merchants, one at Bradford and one at Long Preston, who seemed to buy all the wool from Dent's black-faced sheep. They sent the empty sheets to the farmers, who filled them with the clip and stitched them up. Haygarths collected the wool sheets and we loaded them into the waiting vans. Before that, we had a complicated charade of weighing Haygarth's lorry, first fully loaded and then again after each farmer's sheets had been unloaded. That gave an rough estimate of each farmer's clip, which was very important to check against the merchant's much more precise weighing at the warehouse.

There used to be some live sheep traffic from the lamb sale at the Cow Dub, the Sportsman's Inn at Cowgill, held the first Friday in September. I dutifully ordered several cattle trucks and went to the sale, but the cattle lorry owners had taken all the business by 1952.

In the fifties, there wasn't the intense competition for parcels traffic that prevails today: the Post Office carried parcels up to fifteen pounds, and the railways and British Road Services carried the larger items. Dent received its share: parcels for the Dent shops, mail order catalogue items for housewives, goods for the blacksmith and joiner, all came by rail, and almost all were delivered by Haygarths, the coalmen. I think we paid sixpence or a shilling an item, and Haygarths signed for everything. . A very convenient arrangement, except that they took the parcels 'when they were going that way' and so Dent Head and Deepdale deliveries waited for days, or even weeks sometimes. Many of the farms are located on the hillsides, well off the public roads, and it was usual to have a small shelter at the roadside, where goods were happily left unattended. In that honest area, I don't recall any problem with theft.

Once or twice a year we had a small avalanche of cartons of cattle medicines for even the most remote farms. Coopers of Berkhamsted sent some, but the principal supplier that I remember was Day, Son and Hewitt of Crewe. Obviously, their representatives did a thorough round of all the farms, and this was the result. Some packages waited quite a long time!

Our biggest problem in handling was Rayburn cookers, then very popular with farmers' wives in place of the old black-leaded kitchen ranges. Willan Hodgson, the Dent blacksmith, had supplied the old ranges, to be seen with his name on the chimney breast, and reaped further profit by replacing them with Rayburns. The farmers themselves were treating themselves to 'lile grey Fergies', Ferguson tractors, to ride round upon. The quad-bike for 'looking the sheep' was unheard of then.

The problem with the Rayburns was that they came in crates weighing four hundredweight each. At one time, Dent had a crane, and the cruciform stone foundation was still visible in the yard, but there was no crane in 1952. It was all hands to manoeuvre the crate from the tariff van, onto a four-wheeled truck. All hands again to hoist it onto Haygarths' lorry.

Either the Dent joiner or blacksmith imported scythe poles from Sussex, by rail. These were not the common 'S' shaped ones, but long straight poles with a shallow 'C' curve at the blade end, used in Dent for serious mowing on steep meadows. The joiner was also the undertaker for the dale, and we received packs of pre-sawn coffin boards for them to make up to measure, stain and polish.

Shops: there was a small general shop, Ginny's, at Dee Cottage, Cowgill, where Mr. Middleton also sold paraffin and ran a branch of a savings bank. In Dent itself, Dinsdale's was a large scale grocers and general hardware shop, and Batty's was a smaller grocers opposite the Post Office. The Sub-Post Office, perhaps Mr. Sharples, sold the usual stationery etc., and next door was a ladies outfitters, associated with the PO. There were two shoe-menders, John Haygarth who also ran a taxi, and Mr. Fawcett at the east entry to the churchyard, who possibly also sold new shoes.

There was one butcher, Rowly Burton, the joiner and the blacksmith, Haygarths' garage on the Hill, Mr. Sanderson the corn merchant, and an antiques shop owned by Donald Crossley. He had a sideline in restoring rush-bottomed chairs, and also specialised in Mason's Ironstone China, the founder of which firm was a native of Dent. Most of these businesses received goods by rail occasionally, and 'returned empties'.

Crates and boxes were charged for by suppliers, and it was worthwhile to pay small charges to return them for credit. This gave the Station Master the obligation to collect the small charges once a month - a pleasant bike-ride in summer. I recall Willan Hodgson, the elderly blacksmith, sitting at his bureau-bookcase, and when I apologised for the larger than usual bill, commenting 'Ah, well, lad - more empties, more trade!'

Dent had a few notable visitors in the 1950s: Roger Fulford, the author, lived at Barbon Manor, and brought his visitors to see the trains. Marie Hartley and Joan Ingleby, writers on the dales, came to the station whilst writing the Dent chapter of *The Yorkshire Dales*.

There were some practical local arrangements, not found in any printed instructions. Newspaper parcels from W.H. Smith's platform bookstall at Hellifield came out on the 0810 train. Freddy Spratt, efficient manager (and sole member of staff), sent out daily bundles, some to locations like Helwith Bridge, Selside and Blea Moor, hurled from the train by the guard. On closure of the Hellifield bookstall, Freddy ran Skipton Station refreshment room for years.

Dent's share of the newspaper delivery was the daily parcel for Cowgill Institute. This contained papers and magazines for many of the Cowgill residents. The regular drill was for the 'Institute papers' to be taken down the hill by whoever was going, usually the coal merchant, sometimes a taxi driver. The package was put in the spacious window sill, inside

the Institute, opened up by the first caller, and the individually addressed papers finally delivered by whoever was passing the address - it all worked.

Upper Dentdale was served by Dr. Higgins from Hawes. He came into the dale every Thursday, and if you needed him, you left word with one of his regular calls. He took his prescriptions back to Roma O'Connor, the chemist at Hawes, and she sent them in an open carton on the train, 'Bonnyface', the same afternoon. The platelayers going off duty would call in the booking office, take any prescription for delivery on their way home, and the remainder went in the open box to Cowgill Institute. Left in the windowsill there, like the newspapers, the prescriptions were taken to their recipients by anyone visiting the Institute - it all worked well. When I lived at the Station House, our butchers' meat was also sent from the butcher at Hawes by Bonnyface.

Station Masters attended Superintendent's meetings: the Royal Hotel at Carnforth to meet the District Commercial Superintendent from Barrow; and the Unicorn at Skipton for the District Operating Superintendent from Leeds. The Skipton meeting on 2 December 1954 was abandoned when the DOS was told that there were landslides on the Morecambe line and at Garsdale. 1954 was a very wet year: Ribblehead recorded over 100 inches of rain for the year, including a phenomenal 5¼ inches on 2 December!

When I went to Dent, I lodged with Miss Lily Thwaite at No. 4, Garsdale Station Cottages. Miss Thwaite routinely accommodated Relief Station Masters. Traditionally, the cottages only had running water in the wash-houses.The proposal to pipe water into the cottages and provide flush toilets for an extra half-crown (12½ pence) on the weekly rent was viewed apprehensively. The Station Master's house, No 5, already had indoor water and perhaps even a bathroom.

Miss Thwaite's brother Harold, with his notable wing collars, was technically a porter at Garsdale, but capable of performing all office duties. Like Ribblehead, Garsdale boasted a harmonium for church services in the down waiting room. It also had a small lending library housed in a glass-fronted cupboard, provided by a lady in the early 1900s for the staff. In 1952 the Northallerton branch was still operative, and I recall the repetitive blow-off of the compressed air brake on the North Eastern engines, standing in the bay platform. That service ended about 1954, leaving only Bonnyface, the once-daily Garsdale-Hawes and back train every afternoon.

Douggie Cobb was Station Master at Garsdale, an extrovert character, who brought his motorcycle combination when he arrived from Leicestershire. Doug played his accordion

for the dances held weekly in the Tankhouse, the social room beneath the water tank. Doug and family emigrated to Nyasaland Railways, where they lived in great style - rather like Garsdale's total of twenty-two railway cottages, there was a native compound at his station.

His successor was Cyril Breeze, who came from the Marple area. He was a good friend, and moved up in the railway world, finally Assistant Station Manager at Crewe, working shifts round the clock. Cyril died in 1998, commemorated by a seat at Garsdale Station.

My colleague at Ribblehead was initially Joe Shepherd, his photo often published, hat strapped on, stop-watch in hand, releasing a weather balloon. Besides the routine station work, the SM at Ribblehead was paid a little extra to phone hourly weather reports to the Air Ministry. The weather balloons were more often given to railway children than used to calculate cloud height. Local knowledge of the heights of neighbouring Ingleborough and Whernside was enough for cloud height estimation.

Before the 1939-45 war, staff who took the Class 5 posts of Station Master at Ribblehead and Dent, the lowest grade, were promised promotion to more civilized places after two years. Ambitious signalmen took these places, an opportunity to enter the salaried grades and learn office work without being overwhelmed. After the war, advertising of vacancies was introduced, and some men were 'trapped' far beyond two years, because salaried clerks had seniority for Class 4 posts.

Joe Shepherd was promoted to a station near Southport and was succeeded by 'Dick' Elliott, a relief signalman. 'Dick' is in quotes because his real name was Martin Arthur Elliott. Somehow, he'd become known as Dick Jost whilst a boy at Dent. He'd been an RAF navigator in the 1939-45 war. Prior to moving into the extremely damp Station House at Ribblehead, Dick and his Norwegian wife Solveig lived at the foot of Dent Station hill, and he was very helpful to me with his local railway experience. Jim Taylor at Horton-in-Ribblesdale and Mr. Sarginson at Kirkby Stephen West I rarely met.

Trains

A hundred trains a day - an impressive figure for the Settle-Carlisle in the 1950s. Break it down to up trains and down trains over twenty-four hours, and it becomes one train every half-hour, each way. All the times shown are from memory, and may not be accurate.

Top of the list must be the eight Scots expresses, the up and down day and night trains between London St. Pancras and Glasgow St. Enoch and Edinburgh Waverley. Two more daytime expresses, up and down Leeds City and Glasgow, 1030 from Leeds and returning at 1600 from Glasgow, completed the top ten Class A trains, 'Is line clear?' being signalled by four consecutive bells on the block instrument. The only other really fast train was the evening Express Dairies milk tankers from Appleby to London, and the return empty working.

Whilst I was at Dent, there was a bold and successful venture: the Starlight Specials, on summer Friday nights from London to Scotland, returning on Sunday nights. At a very attractive cheap fare, these trains attracted many passengers, precursors of 'Easyjet' by many years.

Of course, none of these trains stopped at Dent - except the Glasgow-Leeds evening train, twice a year: on Whit Mondays, to set down passengers from Appleby Sports, and on the following Saturday, to pick up patrons of Dent Fair. The major attraction at both events was foot-racing - running - with heavy betting and rumoured 'nobbling' of runners!

My diary for 1954 reminds me that Dent did have very occasional excursions: 8 May, a Conservative Party excursion to Edinburgh; and 3 July, a trip to Leeds for a military tattoo. On Sunday, 12 September, we received a Ramblers' Association excursion from Leeds.

In another year, a National Farmers Union excursion south produced a request from railway catering for several gallons of milk. To Manchester minds, this would be simple: in reality, the health requirements for tuberculin-tested or pasteurised milk precluded local farmers from supplying it. Fortunately, Matthew Pratt at Garsdale was a registered milk retailer, and was able to 'fill the bill'. When we lived at the Station House, Matthew religiously sent our domestic milk by rail each day. During the 1955 railway strike, when we only had a single down train stopping at Dent, we evolved a system of him sending our milk from Garsdale, up to Settle, then down to Dent. It worked!

Rarest of all were Royal Trains - 4-4-4 on the bell. There were three whilst I was at Dent, but all were 'Deepdenes', ordinary night expresses with an additional sleeping car for a royal personage, rather than the complete Royal Train. They still required extraordinary precautions, including the on-call Station Masters en route being in active attendance in the early hours of the morning.

I recall trials of Southern Region 'Merchant Navy' class engines, running daily with a load of coaches for several weeks. During the East Coast floods of early 1953, North Eastern Region trains between Edinburgh and where? - Doncaster? were diverted over the Settle-Carlisle line. One diversion scored the platform edge at the south end of the up platform at Dent - were there still streamlined engines in 1953? I only saw the resulting damage, not the cause!

Nine passenger trains did call at Dent, which may have been its most 'intensive' service before closure in 1970. My recollection of statistics is that over a year, Dent averaged one passenger per train, on or off. Three thousand a year sounds more impressive. The first train each morning was the 0735 from Garsdale to where - Hellifield, Skipton? This train developed from a daily engineer's train, taking out platelayers from the Garsdale 'slip and drainage gang' to wherever they were needed.

Prior to this extra 0743 up train, the first southbound train, calling at Dent around 1000, had been the 0835 from Carlisle, all stations to Hellifield or Skipton, a late start for anyone's day out. Before that was the first down train at 0900, starting from Hellifield at 0810.

Later trains were from Carlisle to Hellifield, calling at Dent at 1215 and 1840, and from Hellifield to Carlisle, Dent at 1240 and 1800. These through trains of three side-corridor coaches were often hauled by the large modern Clan Class engines, in green livery, with smoke deflectors. It's my recollection that these Class 7P engines, designed by British Railways, were not considered very successful, which perhaps explains their use on local passenger trains. Some of these trains were worked by Carlisle guards, where I think there was a 'Midland' link, a set of very smart, elderly guards. I particularly remember Guard Dowthwaite, immaculately turned out with flower in button-hole, beautiful handwriting when he signed for 'registereds', and a splendid twirl of his green flag as he swung aboard.

And then there was 'Bonnyface'. I go with the general suggestion that it received its name from platelayers who were glad to see its bonny face as it returned from Hawes to Skipton at 1625, signalling the approach of the time for finishing work. It left Bradford Forster Square about 1300, three non-corridor coaches pulled by a Class 2 tank engine, called at all stations, including Dent at 1500, and went down the branch from Garsdale to Hawes. It returned at 1625, all stations to Skipton, calling at Dent at 1647.

The three-coach set was unusual. The end coaches had guards vans, and third (second by then?) class compartments, but the centre coach provided for long distance passengers' requirements by having first class compartments and toilets in the middle, accessible to both first and third class compartments adjoining. Two elderly ladies from Bradford who had a holiday cottage at Dent, regularly used this train. They brought a cat in a basket, and were punctilious about paying the proper fee.

Unlike the Carlisle-Hellifield trains, hauled by mighty Class 7P Clan engines, a modest Class 2MT tank engine brought the same number of coaches up the Long Drag to Hawes. Bonnyface was a lifeline for railway staff and their families. Staff wives had a free once-a-week market pass to Settle, but that journey took a whole morning or afternoon from Ribblehead, Dent or Garsdale. The same pass also covered Hawes, and Bonnyface gave an hour in Hawes in mid-afternoon, enough for focussed shopping. In fact, Dent wives rarely used their 'Market Free Passes' because of the toil up the Station Hill. Ribble buses ran from Lea Gate to Sedbergh twice a week, out on Wednesday and Saturday mornings, back in the afternoons, the Saturday bus allowing enough time to go on to Kendal and back.

The nine trains did bring passengers, the 'one-a-train' average including unruly parties of school-children for Dent Youth Hostel, and the 'crowds' for Appleby Sports and Dent, about 25 on and 25 off for each event, a fortnight's passengers!. The less agile passengers used the portable steps kept on the low platforms, not raised until 1998. They came and went from Dent station via the horrendous Station Hill, on foot, bicycle, private car or taxi. Dent village had three taxis, John Haygarth (also shoe mender), Ernie Parrington and Bob Burrows.

So much for passenger trains, ten expresses, nine local trains, leaves eighty freight trains through Dent each day, from Class C fully fitted, running at near express speeds, to the lowly 'pick-ups' which served lineside stations. One 'named' train, named by signalmen, was the 'Jubilee', from Burton-on-Trent, taking the beer to Scotland every day, said to be so-named because it first ran in one of Queen Victoria's Jubilee years, 1887 or 1897. My favourite recollection is of a freight train hauled by a Class 5F 'crab' approaching Dent on the down line, its smoke box flanked by its hunched cylinders as it thrust itself forward, a great impression of power. A new working south in my time was train-loads of hoppers holding ginger-coloured iron ore, referred to by the signalmen as 'monkey-muck'!

'Limey' was the down freight which served the lime works along the lineside from Settle to Ribblehead.. There were two 'pick-ups', Carlisle and Hawes. The Carlisle pick-up could serve Dent, but rarely had any traffic to put off, and the Hawes pick-up was Dent's normal freight service. It ran daily from Hellifield to Hawes, timed to go down the Hawes branch before Bonnyface, and return after Bonnyface. The pick-up engine was turned at Garsdale on the down trip.

Dent Station Signal Box

Dent Station Box stood on the down side of the line, south of the station. It had about twenty levers. It controlled eight signals: down distant, home and starter, up outer distant, inner distant, home and starter, and one dwarf shunting signal, out of the down siding. Dent box had points for an up siding, two outlets from a down siding, and a trailing crossover between the up and down lines with a slip into the cattle dock.

The two outlets from the down siding allowed goods wagons to be detached from a down freight and run round to be propelled into the dock. Detachment to the dock from an up train was simply through the crossover and slip.

Apart from wagons intended for Dent, there were occasional 'hot boxes' to put off: wagons with overheated axle boxes noticed by a preceding signal box, and detached for attention by the carriage and wagon fitter from Skipton. This was at a time when many of the old 'Private Owner' wooden coal wagons with grease-box axles were still in use. If the damage to a loaded wagon was beyond repair, I'd have to find a platelayer willing to tranship the ten tons of coal over the end of the damaged wagon into another wagon. I think the going rate was eight hours at overtime rate. Emptied, the C&W fitter would patch up the axle box for the wagon to go to Skipton for new wheels.

I recall one special problem: trains of loaded hoppers went south, loaded with iron ore. One was stopped with a hot axlebox, and the difficulty in trans-shipping the load was in the height of the hopper end and the sloping sides. More overtime solved the problem, but it took some days to release the hopper. That would certainly have 'oil-boxes' if not Timken bearings, but it still ran hot.

Dent Station Box was manned from 0600 Monday to 0600 Sunday, switched out during Sundays. There were three regular signalmen, working early, late and night shifts in

turn. In the days of 48-hour weeks, they covered all except holidays, but the 44-hour week had been introduced after the 1939 war. This involved ‘rest day’ working: each man working alternate five-day (40 hours) and six-day (48 hour) weeks, with a ‘rest day’ in the five day week.

In theory, this could have given long weekends, but the rest day shifts had to be covered by rest day relief signalmen, who covered eleven rest days every fortnight, and so there was a complicated rota - I don’t think that rest days were taken on nights, another complication. The rest day relief signalmen were in addition to general relief signalmen, who covered vacancies, sickness and leave. All were under the supervision of the District Traffic Inspector at Skipton.

When I went to Dent, the three regular signalmen at the Station box were Bill Bannister, Jack Sedgwick and Freddie Wright. Bill had served as a regular soldier in Germany after the 1914 war, and returned to civilian life as a porter at Leeds. I don’t think he volunteered to move to Dent; the Midland Railway had a practice of moving staff to wherever there were vacancies, with the option of giving up what was regarded as a ‘good job’. I recall goods guard Phipps, who had a most pronounced ‘Glorstershire’ accent, who’d been unceremoniously transferred from his native Defford to Skipton pre-war. Bill came to Dent, bringing with him knowledge of crystal-set radio, previously unknown in Cowgill. He married Nellie, daughter of Bill Bayne, and they lived in part of Stonehouse, at the foot of Artengill. Their son, Brian, became a lighthouse keeper, then retired to Stonehouse and made walking sticks. Their daughter became Youth Hostel Warden at Hawes.

Bill came to work up Artengill and the footpath to Jacob’s Cabin, and his mate could rely on seeing Bill hove into sight at ten to the hour before their change of shift. He was a very good signalman, clear about all the rules and regulations, though a little gruff, not suffering fools gladly. His stock reply to Control’s anxious inquiry about the weather was ‘Blowing and drifting, blowing and drifting’, delivered with a pronounced sniff! There was a tradition of cleanliness in the box, and Bill, senior man, had his methods of rebuking oversights.

Second in seniority - Bill’s slippers were nearest to the Nelson stove - was Jack Sedgwick. As one would expect with the surname of Sedgwick, Jack was a native of Cowgill for many generations. His father (Len?) farmed Spice Gill and Jack himself had a smaller

farm nearby, perhaps Sikeland. Jack too, was a good, thoroughly experienced signalman, a great source of information.

Third was Freddie Wright, who lived at Gate, halfway between Dent village and Sedbergh. Freddie was a quiet man, very reliable. Captain Pugh, head of Atco Motor Mowers, lived at the big house at Gate, and for a time provided Freddie with a mo-ped to test out an engine which Pughs intended to make for motorised bicycles. It was certainly tested on Dent Station hill.

There was no mains electricity supply to Dent or many other signal boxes, but low voltage electricity was used in many features of railway signalling. Originally from wet batteries, later from dry batteries, the supply was maintained by the signal and telegraph linesmen from Settle. The battery supply was of course not sufficient for permanently lit signal lights. One of the porter's duties was 'lamping': weekly visits to both signal boxes to clean, trim and fill the paraffin lamps of the signals, and paraffin oil was supplied in 45-gallon drums. Lamping had to be well done: drivers would quickly report any failure to keep clean bright lights.

The signalman could see that his nearby stop signals were lit at night, either from the actual red/green spectacles, or the small 'back-lights' of those signals not facing him. The backlight was obscured by a mechanical shutter linked to the signal arm, when the signal was off, showing the signalman that the signal had operated correctly. The arms and lights of distant signals were not in view, and their indications were repeated within the signal box. The mechanical arms opened and closed electrical contacts, and the heat from their lamps operated a pyrometer which closed a circuit, both devices repeated via a small electric current to indicators within the signal box.

The signal boxes on the Settle-Carlisle line were fitted with 'rotary block' instruments. As railway signalling developed, tic-tac telegraph instruments and bells were used for communication between boxes. The underlying principle was 'only one train on one line in one section at one time'. The rotary block system was a sophisticated system to ensure this. Without going into detail, a 'treadle' was fitted under the rail at the end of each section. Until a train had passed over and compressed the treadle, the signal controlling the entrance to the section was locked at danger.

The treadle was a covered cast-iron saucer filled with mercury, which sensed the depression of the rail above, and made electric contact to release the block instrument and

signal. Occasionally, it failed, and the unofficial remedy was to get a platelayer to hit the rail with his sledge hammer. It had been known for the platelayer to hit the cast-iron treadle by mistake, achieving release but requiring the signal fitter to replace the treadle. Track circuits were an advance on the rotary treadle. A low voltage electrical current in one rail would be short-circuited to the adjoining rail by a passing train, showing that a train was occupying the section of track and also controlling signal aspects.

Besides the block instruments, signalboxes and stations were linked by internal telephones. There were two circuits at Dent: between Skipton (later Leeds) Control and Carlisle Control, serving the boxes 'over the top', say Horton to Appleby; and a local one from Hellifield telegraph office to stations and boxes between Ribblehead and Ais Gill. Both circuits were 'omnibus', everyone could listen in and join in - often beneficially for train working - as well as socially.

The box steps and entrance were on the south side, and at the foot of the steps were the lamp cabin, the coal bunker and the toilet shed. To the rear of the box was a long stone building, housing a platelayers' cabin, tool store and the 'canteen'. This last was provided for use during snow clearance by additional staff - the canteen attendant was to travel on the first snow-plough engine.

The only oddity in signals was the additional inner distant on the up line. It was provided after the 1947 snow, in a snow-prone cutting, on a pronounced curve. If the line ahead became clear after a driver had been checked by the original distant signal, it gave him a chance to 'open up' again rather than be bogged down by drifting snow. One 'signalling' feature which may still remain, though all the signals have gone, is the white square on the south side of the Station bridge, to enable drivers to distinguish the red down starter signal against the bridge masonry.

Dent Head Signal Box

Dent Head Box was a small 'standard' wooden signalbox, with about ten levers. It stood on the west side of the line, just under two miles south of Dent, and half a mile north of Blea Moor Tunnel north entrance. Like Selside and Mallerstang boxes, Dent Head was provided to reduce the length of block sections and thus allow the passage of more trains. 'Intermediate

Block' signals later served the same purpose, and a modern version is under consideration to again increase the capacity of the Settle Carlisle line.

Besides up and down distant, home and starter signals, Dent Head had a simple setting-back cross-over between up and down lines. In theory, though rarely in practice, a slow train could be reversed from one line to the other to allow a faster train to proceed. Of course, this procedure blocked the other line. Another occasional use was during line blockages through engineering work or accident, for single line working by pilotman. I think flat-bottomed rail was just coming in: previously, the track was made up of sixty-foot bull-head rails, replaced every twenty years on the Settle-Carlisle, but every seven years in tunnels, because of corrosion.

In my time, there were only two signalmen at Dent Head: Jim Harper and Donnie Sedgwick, and they worked alternate weeks of day and night shifts, 0900-1620 and 2200-0520, Mondays to Saturdays. These were considered to be the busiest periods; outside these times, the box was 'switched out' and the section became nearly five miles, from Blea Moor to Dent Station. Timetables took account of this reduction in line capacity. Incidentally, Blea Moor Box had no switch: if Blea Moor was closed, say on Christmas Day, the entire line was closed from Settle Junction northwards.

Jim Harper was a very steady, serious, well-read man, fond of nature. He lived at Scow, below the box, on the roadside, with his school-teacher wife and daughter. Donnie was younger and more extrovert, member of a well-known Dentdale family. He lived in a bungalow at the foot of Station Hill, with his wife Joan and her younger brother. Joan's father, Bill Stanley, had built the bungalow, and had also worked in Dent Head Box, sadly dying there on duty, before my time. Dent Head Box also later saw the death on duty of Jim Harper.

One of my duties was to visit Dent Head at least once a week, and once a month out of working hours. The idea was that I should not be expected. There were two ways of getting from Dent Station to Dent Head: by walking along the line, or by walking down Station Hill, up the valley by road, and then up a footpath from Bridge End cottage. Achievement of management's wish for surprise visits was really impossible. One had to leave word where one was going, in case of emergency, and the signalmen's 'bush telegraph' would make sure word was passed on.

Bridge End cottage was the home of the widow of Jack Ward, a former tunnel length ganger, who had been killed in Blea Moor tunnel, leaving her with a large family to rear. She had re-married, to Harry McCrone, himself a tunnel lengthman. Whilst I was at Dent, her son Jack Ward, who had become tunnel length ganger, was also killed on the line, at the north end of Blea Moor Tunnel.

The Lineside

'My' area was really limited by the two tunnels, though I had some interest in Garsdale Junction Station to the north and Blea Moor Box to the south, because of my 'weekday on call' responsibility, strictly from Aisgill (inclusive) to Blea Moor (exclusive). Stationmasters took alternate weeks of being on call twenty-four hours a day with their neighbours, and were paid a little extra, more if Sundays were included. In a town, the SM on call could leave word that he was at the cinema or pub, where a porter could find him; but in places like Dent this wasn't possible, and one was pretty well tied down. On call was from Thursday to Thursday, and so half-days off had to be in the week off call, usually Saturday at Dent.

The Garsdale water troughs were to the north of Rise Hill Tunnel, cared for by Garsdale platelayers. No concern of mine, except that occasionally the fireman on a south-bound train would forget to raise his scoop after taking water, and gouge out a sleeper or so from the foot crossing at Dent Station, resignedly replaced by the platelayers.

Rise Hill Tunnel was three-quarters of a mile long, slightly hockey-stick shaped, with the curve at the north end - you couldn't see through it. A gang of four platelayers - lengthmen - covered the line through Rise Hill Tunnel, in charge of the ganger, Joe Cragg. In turn, he was supervised by the District Permanent Way Inspector, 'Joss' Walton, located at Kirkby Stephen. Joss was a big, burly man, shrewd and taciturn.

The 'Coal Road' crossed the line by a bridge just north of Dent Station, winding up from the valley to cross the watershed to Garsdale. There was one derelict farmhouse above the station, Blackmire, and a wartime observation post on the roadside, complete with GPO telephone line. My wartime predecessor, Mr. Sanderson, had served there in the Observer Corps. Some OPs were reactivated for the Cold War, but this one was dormant in my time.

The summit of Great Knoutberry Hill (2200 feet), above the station, provided the most remarkable views in clear weather, noted on my 2½ inch map flap in the summer of

1955. To the north, Wild Boar Fell, the Eden valley, the Solway Firth and the Galloway hills. Easterly, to Swaledale, down Wensleydale and as far as the Cleveland hills. South-east, Cam Fell, Wharfedale, Great Whernside and Pen-y-Ghent; then south down Ribblesdale to Pendle Hill, Ingleborough and Bowland Knotts. To the west, Morecambe Bay, Whernside, Dentdale of course, the Langdales and other Lakeland peaks, and finally Baugh Fell above Sedbergh.

Some residents of Cowgill had 'rights of turbary', the right to cut peat on Knoutberry Hill, above the station. In my time, Ben Munro, a retired policeman who lived at Weaving Terrace, Cowgill, exercised his right: cutting his peat blocks, and rearing them up to dry, before taking them home for the winter. Ben had an old Alvis car, garaged in his workshop near Cowgill School, and could be persuaded to do taxi work occasionally.

Bill Bayne, who farmed East Cowgill, also cut his peat. He rode up over the bridge every day on his 'cob' pony, to 'look his sheep' on the hillside. Beside his wide ranging fell side, Bill rented a small piece of land from the railway, left over when the line was built, and religiously called at the station to pay his half-yearly rent. Sheep in Dentdale were 'heafed', that is, they were native to the fell, bought and sold with the land. I assume that 'foreign' rams were introduced to improve the quality of the native flock.

Whilst at Dent, I learnt that the unmade road from Deepdale into Kingsdale had been surfaced, so I wrote to the County Surveyor in far-off Wakefield, suggesting that Dent Station hill should be similarly treated. To my surprise, I received a fairly prompt reply saying it would be done, initially to the station, and later over to Garsdale Station. Dent Station even received a tanker of bitumen emulsion for use on the road. On the steepest part, the roller had to be winched up and down, but the job got done. The Station Hill climbs 400 feet in the 3,000 feet from Lea Yeat to the Station, an average of 1 in 7.5 throughout, and considerably steeper on the lower slopes.

Entering the station from the north, the line crossed the Monkey Beck, which wound down from Knoutberry Hill past Blackmire farm to the River Dee at Lea Yeat. Monkey Beck provided the water supply for the station and the station house. Water was led off the beck into a brick cistern above the line, and it was important to see that the cistern overflow was always running. If not, the inlet was blocked and had to be cleared. The station toilets were fed from this beck and the solitary tap was in the gents. Lower down, the same beck provided the water supply for Cowgill village by a similar cistern arrangement.

Along the eastern side of the line were the snow fences, two or three rows of sleepers on end, meant to drift snow before it reached the line. They were pretty dilapidated in my time, and I didn't experience enough snow to show if they were useful. They are marked on the 1910 ordnance map, so were already there by then.

The *Sectional Appendix to the Working Time Tables* contained the oft-quoted instruction on 'Snow Drifts between Carlisle and Hellifield': 'Station Masters and signalmen between Hellifield and Carlisle must, during the Winter months very carefully watch the weather conditions, and in the event of snow threatening, keep the District Control Offices at Carlisle and Skipton continuously advised about it . . . Control Offices must be kept open . . . snow ploughs must be in readiness for quick dispatch . . . drivers, when they observe snow drifting, must . . . report it at the next signal box.'

Dent signal box controlled two line-side sidings. The up siding for thirty wagons was little used: by current standards it was too short for anything other than the local 'pick-ups', and in any case it was quicker to send a freight train forward to Blea Moor loop than to laboriously 'set back' into the siding. The down siding, overlooking the valley, was for forty-three wagons in 1937, but I think was lengthened to take fifty or so, early in the 1939 war. The conversion of Blea Moor sidings to loops later in the war made Dent down siding less in demand, but two down freights could be disposed of by running the first to the set-back siding at Dent whilst the second ran into the down loop at Blea Moor.

A disused quarry on the up side was probably a relic of building the railway - it made a pleasant picnic spot. There was a substantial platelayer's hut at the north end of Artengill viaduct, known as Jacob's Cabin, with a footpath down to the valley. Artengill Viaduct was the major feature between Dent Station and Dent Head. It is 660 feet long and 117 feet high, its eleven arches spanning the steep-sided valley. The viaduct had the propensity to become a switchback in hard frost, so much so that there was provision for flagmen at each end, to warn drivers to slow down, before official speed restrictions could be imposed by the 'Fortnightly Notice'.

Off the viaduct and straight into Shale Cutting, bane of snow-clearers. Shale Cutting is sliced through the western slope of Wold Fell, ideally placed to capture snow from easterly gales, dropping their burden in this convenient 'gully'. The snow fences, high on the eastern side, would be of only marginal benefit in winters like 1933, 1940 and 1947. South of Dent Head Box was Dent Head Viaduct, ten arches, 600 feet long and 100 feet high.

In the 1950s, the head of Dentdale was not afforested: Dent Head Farm was a large sheep farm, covering the northern slopes of Blea Moor. An innovation in my time was the installation of a 'banner' repeater signal, on the up line, north of the tunnel entrance. The up distant signal for Blea Moor Box was located just outside the south end of the tunnel, and the repeater gave drivers advance warning: if 'on', they could expect to be slowed or stopped at Blea Moor; if 'off', they had a clear run ahead to Ribblehead.

The banner itself showed to the driver as a white disc, two or three feet in diameter, with a black arm across it, either horizontal to indicate that the distant signal ahead was 'on', at caution; or diagonal to show that the distant was 'off'. The black arm was sandwiched between clear and white glass discs. moved to on or off by a low voltage electrical current, linked to the distant signal. Distant signals, commonly three-quarters of a mile from the controlling signal box. were routinely operated by signal wires, but at two miles from Blea Moor Box, the repeater was much too far for control by wire.

Although on my side of the tunnel, this banner signal was entirely related to Blea Moor Box, so what had I to do with it? The banner arm was electrically operated, but it was illuminated for night observance by a paraffin lamp behind the white glass disc. One of my porter's duties was 'lamping'; cleaning, filling and trimming the oil lamps which lit the coloured 'spectacles' of the lineside signals. By optical condensers, a tiny flame, the size of a nightlight, gave a clear light to drivers, and worked 24 hours a day for over a week on one filling. The banner light was one extra lamp for the Dent porter to attend to on his weekly visit to Dent Head box. Beyond the banner, the tunnel cabin and the north entrance to Blea Moor tunnel, a mile-and-half of darkness and damp, relieved only by the dripping ventilation shafts, an end to my area and also to my account of 'Dent in the 1950s'.