



Viewpoint

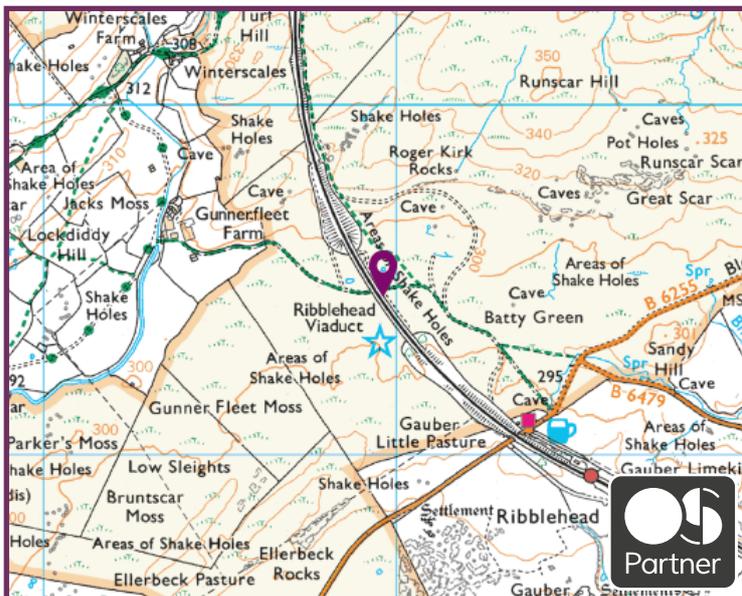
Handmade in Yorkshire



Time: 15 mins

Region: Yorkshire and the Humber

Landscape: rural



Location: Ribbleshead Viaduct, Carnforth, North Yorkshire LA6 3AU

Grid reference: SD 75960 79452

Getting there: Park in the car park where the B6255 (Blea Moor Road) meets the B6479 (Gauber Road) (SD 7654579289). Cross over the B6255 and follow the footpath across the edge of Batty Green to the Viaduct (you can go right up to and underneath it).

Keep an eye out for: Lumps and bumps in the ground as you walk across Batty Green to the viaduct...

Straddling the rough, boggy ground of Batty Green, Ribbleshead Viaduct is a majestic sight in this quiet corner of the Yorkshire Dales. Standing underneath the viaduct, the legs of the arches march away from us like giant tin soldiers setting off for battle.

Gaze around at the bleak but beautiful moorland stretching outwards and upwards to the Three Peaks (Pen-y-ghent, Ingleborough and Wharfedale). Today we share this landscape with sheep and visitors who come to admire the crowning glory of the Settle-Carlisle railway line.

However, if we were here in the 1870s the scene would be rather different!

Why was this quiet moorland once compared to the Wild West?



The answer is towering over us! At 32 metres high and 400 metres long the Ribbleshead Viaduct is a feat of Victorian engineering. It forms part of the Settle-Carlisle line, built by the Midland Railway Company between 1870 and 1874 in a bid to gain a share of the lucrative Anglo-Scottish market.

To compete with existing lines the company needed a direct route to transfer passengers and goods quickly. They chose a 'short cut' through the North Pennines and Yorkshire Dales. But this meant dealing with a challenging terrain of rivers, bogs and crags. For the 72 miles of line they had to build 14 tunnels and 22 viaducts!.

This required a mighty workforce. In the mid-19th century, construction work relied mainly on back-breaking labour with pick and shovel. Gunpowder, steam-powered cranes and steam locomotives were used, but in the main work was done by hand.

Over one thousand men worked on this viaduct alone. These workers were known as 'navvies' or navigators, a term originally applied to the gangs of men that dug out Britain's canals and river navigations in the 18th century.

Frontier Town

Not all of the workers came from the local area; men travelled from miles around to find employment. Thanks to the 1871 census we know that there were people living in Batty Green from 34 different countries! A town of wooden houses sprung up here with shops, a post office, schools, and a bank.

Take a closer look at the surrounding moorland. Some of the lumps and depressions are remains of the shanty town and construction site that once stood here. Look out for the Yorkshire Dales National Park information boards which tell you more.

Living alongside the works - with blasting gunpowder, picks ringing on stone, and chugging steam locomotives - was tough. Conditions were cramped and the exposed moorland and harsh weather made this a difficult life. A tenth of the workforce died as a result of construction injuries or smallpox outbreaks. It was not unusual for workers to let off steam by drinking, and occasionally fighting!

With men drinking, fighting, and labouring away on the land in harsh weather, comparisons were made with the Wild West. 'Navvies' became a Victorian pre-occupation; middle class citizens feared they were a threat to public life with their presumed drinking, brawling and thieving. In reality, most were simply hardworking families struggling to earn some money before the work dried up and they had to move on.

A charity called the Navy Mission Society was set up in 1877 to support workers who often found themselves living in poor conditions in remote locations. The Society estimated there were 40,000 navvies in Britain at this time, with their founder calling them "a great nomadic tribe".

How times have changed?

There are contemporary parallels in Britain today. Large civic and engineering projects rely on a mass of temporary workers, often drawn from across the globe. While conditions may not be as dangerous as in the Victorian era, such workers still face pay, safety and accommodation issues.

During the 2012 London Olympic Games, cleaners were housed in a temporary compound just outside the Park. However there were reports that the portable cabins leaked, there weren't enough showers, and even that people had to share beds with workers on different shifts! They may not be as visible as the Victorian navvies but temporary workers can still face a precarious life.