

BOOK REVIEW
By Bruce Wood, Secretary, The Settle-Carlisle Railway Trust

'BATTY GREEN' by Dennis Brickles

London: Janus Publishing, 2009, ISBN 978-1-85756-725-0

At 336 pages this is by far the most substantial novel I have come across about the building of the Ribbleshead Viaduct in the 1870s. The author combines his fictional plot with many sections about the actual building process and he deserves credit for having clearly done a lot of good research into what went on at Ribbleshead that decade, including the unpleasant aspects such as smallpox and accidents leading to many funerals nearby at the church in Chapel-le-Dale. Thus we get a picture of events underpinning the story of life on a nearby farm interacting with the shanty towns at the viaduct one of which, Batty Green, gives the book its title, and was the name given to the first station at Ribbleshead. The book is essentially about the first two years of building the viaduct and the Blea Moor Tunnel, from Spring 1870 to Spring 1872.

Emily, mid-twenties and wife of George, but still childless is the central character, in a less than happy marriage. But she is amazingly successful as an entrepreneur taking in lodgers to make their farm almost a small hotel; selling milk, eggs and meat to the shanty dwellers; and even establishing a flourishing shop open all week up in Batty Green a mile or more away in the era of slow horse and cart transport. She craves for more love than George can offer and eventually finds it in a couple of brief dalliances. In the final chapters she is at last pregnant but relations with George hit rock bottom and we readers never know for sure who fathered that first child (though its name gives a hint of one of the favourites on the very short list of contenders). At the very end, in the chapter describing the arrival of the very first passenger train at Batty Green station in 1876 we find that another child had arrived later and her reconciliation with George makes him surely the father?

Though it's a good interesting story, this is not always an easy read. A few too many characters and side-plots test the reader's memory. Emily herself sometimes seems a bit too clever for a farmer's wife and more like an educated middle-class young woman than a simple country lass. The descriptive material at times is a bit like a Joanna Trollope 'Aga-saga' piece (i.e. it's a bit 'stilted'). But the dialect research does throw up some archaic phrases which give a picture of the time. And the basic story of what would happen to Emily maintained my interest to the very end.

In short a novel worth reading by anyone interested in the history of England's best-known railway.