

Escape: Rural retreat: Living la vida loco: A remote station in the Yorkshire Dales is offering a dream retreat for trainspotters. (Observer Escape Pages).

David Smith

Midnight at Dent station. I stand alone on a platform illuminated by the orange glow of Victorian-style lamps. The light glints off the train tracks, which bend away into the impenetrable darkness. On the grass banks above, upturned railway sleepers have been hammered into the earth like gravestones to keep snow off the line. All is still and silent - an absolute silence which takes the city-dweller aback. Then comes the deep howl of the wind.

This would be a great place for a haunting. Perhaps a ghost train, steam blowing and whistle screaming, will come chuntering out of the gloom. Perhaps the spirits of the thousands of travellers who have poured through this station over 130 years will return. Perhaps when I go to bed in what used to be the ticket office, I will glance up at what used to be the serving hatch to see an eerie white face tapping at the glass. Better not get spooked - there is no mobile phone signal here, and the nearest village is four miles away. At Dent Station, no one can hear you scream.

Comparisons with the classic comedy *The Ghost Train* apart, this has to be one of the most bizarre and brilliant rural retreats in the country. Dent is the highest mainline station in England and Wales, 1,150 ft above sea level with a bird's-eye view of the gentle contours of Dentdale, one of the most sequestered corners of the Yorkshire Dales national park. It is a Grade II-listed building in the distinctive Victorian 'Derby Gothic' style. You don't have to be a trainspotter to admire it; you just need an appetite for all that is eccentric, lovingly crafted and redolent of the era of the Brontes.

The building has just reopened as self-catering accommodation, and you would typically pay pounds 775 to stay here for a week, relishing the rare solitude, taking walks in the dales and using it as a base for day trips to nearby towns (by car or, naturally, train). A few miles away is the Ribbleshead Viaduct, another awesome piece of Victorian engineering and ambition: 24 arches of monumental masonry, 1,320 ft long and 104 ft high, spanning the Ribblesdale valley. It was built in the 1870s at a cost of hundreds of lives - so many that the railway company paid for an expansion of the local graveyard.

Dent Station is no defunct museum piece, however. Trains continue to pass through as they traverse the sky-scraping Settle-Carlisle railway, acknowledged as one of the world's most scenic journeys. At night, the silence at the station is shattered by the sound of freight trains rumbling by. During summer, one of the most beguiling sights is of a resurrected steam locomotive, appearing in the distance like a miniature train puffing cotton wool clouds in a toy town landscape, then coming closer and closer - though, sadly, not stopping at Dent.

However, five regular services each way do stop here every day. During my stay I awoke to the sound of a train outside the bedroom window and was grateful for the frosted glass which prevented disembarking ramblers glancing in and getting a shock. They are also discouraged from knocking on your front door by a simple fence which separates the public platform from the private residence.

At its peak, more than 90 trains a day passed through Dent, but the station was sold by Railtrack in 1985, becoming a private home. Two decades later it was bought by Robin Hughes, a chartered surveyor and railway enthusiast, who has turned it into his own grand Victorian folly. He paid pounds 250,000 for it and has lavished another pounds 150,000 on a refurbishment, employing local tradesmen to combine the restoration of period glory with high-end amenities. 'I like the great outdoors and the remoteness,' he says. 'It gives you time to think. You've got to go two-and-a-half miles for a phone signal. No one can get hold of you and, in the age we live in, that's a really nice feeling. It's a place for people who want solitude.'

Hughes, 40, is in love with the history of the place: 'When I go to bed at night I think about the life this place has seen. Local people brought produce, and cattle and sheep were unloaded. It was the hub of the community and it remains testimony to the brilliance of the people who built it.'

He is not a man for half-measures. Inside the front door you are greeted with original flagstone floors, Victorian radiators, cast-iron shoe warmers, turn-of-the-century embroidered chairs and an old sign with the legend 'Booking & Waiting Hall'. The former waiting room has been converted into a comfortable lounge, with two large sofas, coffee table, hi-fi and television below a chandelier. Against the wall is the original fireplace and the seat on which thousands of passengers awaited their trains. The original large arched window frame, with its ornately detailed pattern and sensational view, is a work of art.

In the old days, the ladies had a separate waiting room which, with no irony intended, is now the kitchen. Right down to the wall tiles and table mats, Hughes has preserved the station's original cream and maroon corporate colours. The kitchen boasts a coal-fired Aga-Rayburn, but the bathroom offers a spacious power shower. A spiral staircase leads up to another bedroom. Metal toilets based on the original 1892 Thomas Crapper designs carry the embossed words 'Valveless waste preventer'. Throughout the property there are marvellous vintage railway posters. Smoking is banned and guests are asked to wash up after themselves because the housekeeper runs a 'tight ship'.

The station sits at the meeting point of three counties, so walks in Cumbria, Lancashire and Yorkshire are within easy reach. Take a train along the Settle-Carlisle line and the place names resemble poetry: Armathwaite, Lazonby, Langwathby, Appleby, Kirkby Stephen. I walk down the winding Coal Road through farming country and stop at St John's Church in the hamlet of Cowgill, where a sign at the gate advertises a 'Lambing service' on Sunday. Then on to Dent village, complete with historic pub, cobbled street and small museum.

Sitting outside the station on a sunny day, you can sip beer from Dent Brewery and contemplate the occasional train rolling by, hawks hovering in the air and, on occasion, even aircraft passing below you. You are, after all, on the very roof of England. I imagine it would be a treat in winter too, hunkering down to stoke coal in the Aga-Rayburn while the wind moans across a pristine blanket of snow outside. Come nightfall, it's the perfect setting for a ghost story.

ESSENTIALS

To hire Dent Station, call Robin Hughes on 07824 665 266 or visit www.dentstation.co.uk. It sleeps six and costs pounds 775 a week in low season, pounds 1,275 in high season. David Smith travelled to Leeds on GNER (08457 225 225; www.gner.co.uk), then to Dent Station on Northern Rail (0845 700 0125; www.northernrail.org).

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