

Ribblehead

Words and Music: Nigel Harbron

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is simple and folk-like, with lyrics written below the notes. Chord symbols are placed above the staff at the beginning of each line. The lyrics are: "When building rail-ways was the rage, In Queen Vic-tor-i-a's reign, The Mid-land Rail-way hatched a plan that ma-ny thought in-sane: To cross the Pen-nines south to north with a first class rail-way line, The o-ther com-pan-ies' main line routes to beat or un-der-mine. When stan-ding 'neath the vi-a-duct, stone ar-ches o-ver-head, There's an e-ver-last-ing mon-u-ment to those who are long dead."

When building railways was the rage during Queen Victoria's reign,
The Midland Railway hatched a plan that many thought insane:
To cross the Pennines south to north with a first-class railway line,
The other companies' mainline routes to beat or undermine.

*Ch: When standing 'neath the viaduct, stone arches overhead,
There's an ever-lasting monument to those who are long dead.*

Long Preston up to Ribbleshead sees the land rise steadily,
Until it comes to Blea Moss - as bleak as bleak can be.
A viaduct would cross that bog, a mile above wet ground,
With iron rails on pillars of stone - if workman could be found.

To Ribbleshead the navvies flocked, knowing not what lay in store.
They camped in tents around the moss, with rushes on the floor,
At Sebastopol and Jericho, Belgravia, Betty Green -
Four of the camps they made their own, none pretty to be seen.

When it was dry, the clay was so hard - no shovel could it grade;
When it was wet, the clay would stick to any mattock or spade.
Two thousand men gave of their best, to see the job was done.
It took four years of sweat and blood before some rest they won.

And when the work came to an end and Ribblehead stood proud,
The first train rumbling over it was cheered on by a crowd.
But what of the scores whose lives were lost, who now lie underground?
The company bought a grave for them - it cost two hundred pound.

There's not much left 'neath Ribblehead to show what it was then
When men and women and children lived a life beyond our ken.
They said the viaduct would fall down; they should have built with bricks,
And yet today the trains still roll over bridge number sixty-six.



Whilst clearly showing the length of Ribblehead Viaduct (approximately 400 metres), this picture fails to show just how massive it is when one is standing under it. At its tallest, it is 32 metres high. This may not sound a lot, but does 102 feet sound a bit more impressive? The reality is quite breath-taking. Don't take my word for it - go and take a look for yourself. Trains stop fairly regularly at Ribblehead, just a few hundred metres from the start of the viaduct, but wrap up well as the wind always seems to blow up here! Fortunately, the nearby Station Inn is open all day, and usually has a fire burning.

I believe the tallest structure on the Settle to Carlisle line is Smardale Viaduct which takes the line very nearly 40 metres (131 feet) above Scandal Beck. Quite bizarrely given that this corner of Westmorland was (and still is) one of the remotest and least populated in England, the now disused Smardale Gill Viaduct stands just a mile upstream, but is a mere 27 metres (90 feet) high.