

Chapter 11 : Intersection Bridge; The Old Sand Hole; Runcorn Gap Bridges; Leach Hall: Sutton Leach District; Engine and Tender; Wheatsheaf Hotels; Long Lane

The Path Leading to the Intersection Bridge

Leaving Pudding Bag and standing in Monastery Lane with my back towards Robins Lane at the top of Monastery Road, you would see a 4' wide path, with wooden pen fence rails on the right hand side and wooden railway sleepers standing upright to prevent access to the St. Helens and Runcorn Gap Railway. This path, still used, leads to the Intersection Bridge, and thence to Sutton Leach. As a lad, and looking to my right, I would see an open, cultivated field as far as Gerard's Lane, and near the monastery Dam were about six houses with quaint dormer windows. At the end of the Dam was a cottage which was called Victoria Cottage.

Then, at the extreme end, near the bridge which carried the main line to Liverpool, was St. Paul's Villa, where the nuns made their home at one time. But now, the St. Anne's junior school stands on the field, with a football field attached to the school. I now live on the outskirts of this field in my bungalow, and have done so for the last 25 years. This bungalow, with four more and a house, lies between the old Victoria Cottage and St. Paul's Villa. This cottage and villa were demolished in the late 1970s.

No steps are required this side of the intersection because the gradient path reaches up to the walkway, but on the other side are steps leading down to Leach Lane. The sides of the bridge are now blocked off with strong sheeting, but when I was a boy, it was a trellis work of strong iron bars, riveted to each other in diagonal formation. You could almost thrust your head through the gaps, and you had a good view of the engines and trains coming from the St. Helens Junction Station, and coming in from the direction of Liverpool.

Well do I know every inch of this bridge, because it was dare or "croddy" for us to climb on the outside of this bridge and make our way over the permanent way, and to cling on the outside of this bridge, with our eyes closed when the express trains thundered underneath. You shut your eyes because of the thick smoke and the mites of carbon coming from the chimney.

None of us ever came to grief, apart from one lad who climbed over on Sunday and tore his best jacket. He was very reluctant to go home that Sunday, to face the wrath of his parents. Clothes, especially best clothes, were not easy to come by in those days, and any mishaps like that ended in a good hiding when you got home. Parents were a lot stricter in those days, and young ones behaved themselves far better than the present day.

The Old Sand Hole

In the years up to my sixteenth birthday in 1926, you could stand on the Intersection Bridge, overlooking the last part of Leach Lane, and look down on a deeply gouged out hole of red sand. One would stand and watch the boxes or trucks climbing slowly out of this great hole, laden with red sand, and watch the empty ones going down, all attached to a wire haulage rope by lashing chains.

In the 1960s, an elderly lady named Mrs. Hughes, who was well into her eighties, lived at no.50 Leach Lane. She used to visit my wife at our home in Gerard's Lane. She was a widow then, but her maiden name was Elsie Meadows. She informed me that the working of the sand hole went as far back as the late 1820s, and continued until 1926. Her father, on one occasion, fell down the sandhole and fractured his leg. First aid was given to him by one of the boss's wives - a Mrs. Carter who lived nearby at Pen Lake, at the LNWR supply sheds. He survived the fracture and shock, but always walked with a bent leg, due to these early days of medical attention.

Before the Meadows and Whittaker ownership, the hole was started by the Manchester and London glass Company, to provide sand for the production of glass at their works at Lancots Lane and Ellamsbridge Road. The sand hole also provided sand for the moulders and casting of metals at the surrounding steel works. When the works finished, it was being worked by as many as four work people. The workforce was never large, but still, a great many hours were spent in and around that great hole, when you consider that for over one hundred years, small teams of men laboured and gouged that great hole to obtain sand for the local industries.

When production finished, the work sheds were taken over by an undertaker who stabled his horses and cabs there, together with a joinery business. The hole was filled in by the railway people, who employed both men and women to empty ballast wagons into the hole. And now, levelled off, it supports Carol Close, which contains quite a number of houses.

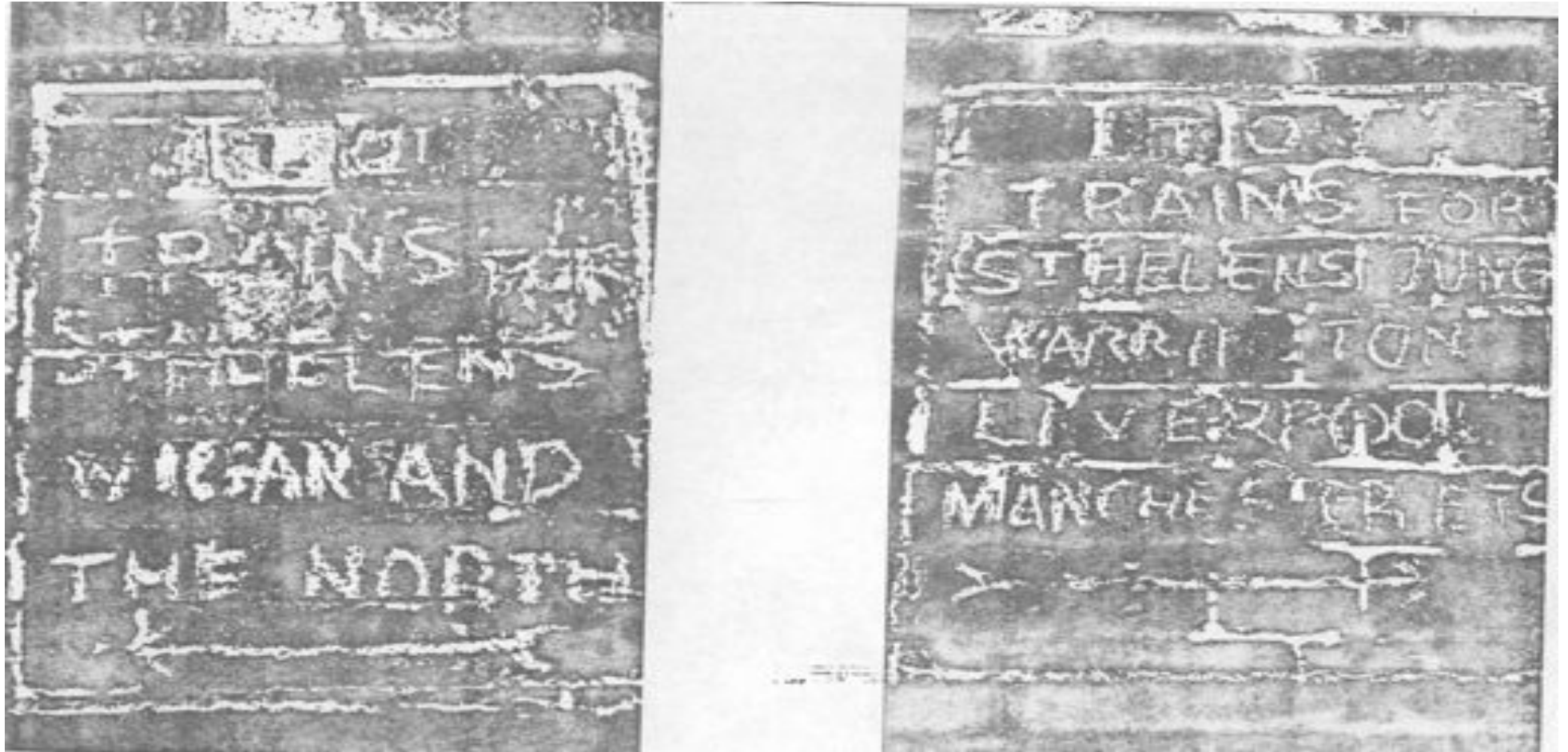
The Runcorn Gap Bridges, Old Leach Hall and Sutton Leach

Coming down the steps from the steel Intersection Bridge (this was the one used by pedestrians to cross the line), and looking towards the St. Helens Junction station, you would see three brick pillars supporting the St. Helens and Runcorn gap lines.

Looking from left to right, the first and central brick pillars straddled the main Liverpool to Manchester line, while the centre pillar and the one on the right straddled the old roadway connecting Leach Lane to Penlake Lane, which has been out of use for many a long year. Up to 1986, it was used as a workshop, being bricked at the rear and boarded with doors and windows fitted to the front. Alas, in line with the present disorderly conduct, it has been severely vandalised.

Looking further along the main railway line, you would see, about two hundred yards in the distance, the old Stephenson Crossing Gate Cottage, at the bottom end of Monastery Lane Pudding Bag. On the right side of the bridge was a high brick wall, which I suppose was built to prevent any kind of landslide from the Runcorn Gap embankment falling into the red sand hole. Now, it protects Carol Close.

Turning to the right and proceeding along Leach Lane and looking to my left, after leaving the outside perimeter of the sandhole and looking to my right, you would see a triangular shaped field, cultivated for crops, before the houses were built along this length of Leach Lane, and returning again to the right down Gerard's Lane to the railway bridge in that lane.



Details of trains leaving the Robins Lane Halt on railway bridge in Robins Lane. This short-lived Halt was in use from 12 October 1936 to 26 September 1938. Trains from St Helens Junction dived under the Runcorn Gap-St Helens line. This Junction-St Helens line closed on 2 March 1969.

At this junction of Leach Lane and Gerard's Lane on the left hand side was the Old Leach Hall, with the main gate and winding carriage drive to the south side of the Hall, where the carriage rooms and stables lay.

According to the early records, Leach Hall went by the name of Toad Leach Hall as far back as the 1600s. There is mention of it being sold by John Yates to Hamlett Yates for £600 and an annual rent of £16. It changed ownership in 1724 and 1800, when Michael Hughes bought it from Edward Falkener for £2,700.

I visited the Leach Hall in the late 1930s and again in the 1950s, when the Thompson family lived there, and a Mr. and Mrs. Sharrock bought and converted part of it into flats. I saw the large banqueting room with the long wooden dining table and also the great iron cooking ovens. These, as far as I can remember, stood approximately 8'0" high by 12'0" wide. Also, the Hall was longer in length than at the present time. It was shortened at the north end by the young Austin Carol, son of Austain Carol, the farmer at Leach Lane, who spent considerable time and money in bringing it back into good shape.

Some of the land belonging to the hall has been retained and put in good heart, whilst the other land surrounding the hall on the north side and the Old Sand Hole, has a small community of houses, called Carol Close, built on it. On the south side of the hall, you will see a small, unpaved roadway coming from Leach Lane, up and passing Leach Hall Farm, which, at one time was a joint farm house and public house called the Engine and Tender. The farmer and publican was Mr. Garton. The public house closed in 1937, when the new Wheatsheaf was opened in Mill Lane.

I understand the New Wheatsheaf was to be called the Engine and Tender, but Mr. Garton turned down the offer of landlord there, so Mr. Dave Rothwell, the demolition contractor, who, by the way, was responsible for the demolition of quite a number of tall chimneys round Sutton, and was also the landlord of the Old Wheatsheaf in Lionel Street, took up the offer of landlord. He took with him the name of the Wheatsheaf, instead of it being called the Engine and Tender.

The small, unpaved roadway continued to be used as a short cut from Leach Lane to Reginald Road in the 1960s, and Reginald Road was known to us boys and the old ones as Long Lane. The unpaved roadway from Leach Lane and, crossing Long Lane, was part of the Abbot's Field Road before the railways came and it ran to Gorsey Lane and so on to Bold Hall.

Long Lane, known later as Reginald Road, ran from Mill Lane and continued through what was called Normans Lane, and came out at Hoghton Road, the way to the Sutton Moss, where the cutting of turf took place. This way was later cut by the Liverpool to Manchester line, and the Crossing Cottage was built to allow the road users to cross the line at that point.

Back to Leach Lane, and across the old, unpaved road was the old, fairly large cottage which housed at one time the Ostlers. When I was a boy, two families lived there, the Owen family and the Jones family. Mr. Jones was the Sutton Scoutmaster, and when I joined as a cub, the scout hut was the old pump house which had its entrance on

Ellamsbridge Road, opposite the signal box on the St. Helens Junction to Sutton Oak line.

You went in the front entrance at pavement level and then you entered into a platform with brick walls and slate roof. This was held up on a stilt-like steel structure high over the old filter beds belonging to the old glass works. A peculiarity of the old cottage was that one family used the front door, and the other family used the back door. Gaming used to take place at the rear of this old cottage under the trees. The old folk at Sutton Leach used to leave the old Engine and Tender at closing time and carry on gambling for money, and numerous old coins have been dug up in the garden of the new houses in Reginald Road, especially the one with the rear garden which ran under the trees. Of course, the old cottage has now been pulled down, together with the old tree at the front which had been struck and split by lightning.

After leaving the old cottage, there were two large detached houses, and these must have been built in the 17th or 18th centuries. The rooms in these houses were large and extensive. The families living there were the Bebingtons and Crouchs. On the right, there was just a large field, where the houses in Leach Lane now stand, and Belvedere Avenue had not been built. The only house in that direction was the one beside the Brooklands Dam, where Becky Riddle, the well-known singer, lived. Crossing Reginald Road we could go two ways, to the Water Mill along Dickies Bruk or keep to the road. We used to go along Dickies Bruk when it was very dry, due to it being on the swampy side.¹

This swampy land beside the brook running from the waterfall and the water mill to the Brooklands Dam, gave its name to Sutton Leach. The old name Leach or Lache meant a stream running through boggy or swampy ground. It was also referred to as Toad Lache.

In the 1950s, the corporation deepened the brook and did quite a lot of tipping refuse etc. on this ground near the Wheatsheaf Hotel, so the boggy slate has disappeared, as has the Brooklands Dam. It is just a deep brook running to the main L&NW railway and through the tunnel, to come out as a stream into what we called Whalley's Dam.

This fairly deep dam has altered, and is now nothing more than a stream. It runs in front of my bungalow in Gerards Lane, and this place was once commonly known as Dyche Hillock. At the end of this dam stood Whalley Farm and orchard, and the farmland here ran as far as New Street. This has now disappeared and is occupied by Beth Avenue. A beautiful hillside of farmland and wild life has vanished, thanks to the progressive ideas of some of our borough representatives. People at one time came and leaned on the old sandstone wall in Gerards Lane, at the front of where I live, to look down into the stream and dam and catch a glimpse of wildlife. Sometime, you could catch a glimpse of colour when the kingfisher darted along the edges of the stream or look at the swans sitting on their eggs on the large structure of twigs and rushes, and see the cygnets, when they hatched out, swimming behind the proud parents. At sunset, I have witnessed the mother partridges coming down the meadow with their broods in single file, going to drink by the brook.

¹ Dickies Bruk got its name due to the farmer there being called Dickie Rimmer.



Known as “The Waterfall” or “The Wash”, this was the site of the Lamb's Water Corn Mill from 1784-1894. The long shed to the right was Copes Tent Makers (“Export to all the world”). The left side shows the “waterfall”, the right hand side, the “Tail Race”. Also on the left hand side is the Mill Dam (the brook called Pendlebury Brook).

But all this vanished with the coming of Beth Avenue. It was goodbye to peace and beauty. In 1986 and 1987, a scheme called Ground Work Trust began trying to make it presentable again, but the irresponsible vandals are trying hard to undo all their efforts. Whether the considerable sums of money and labour will be successful in beautifying this small part of Sutton remains to be seen. It's a case of good sense versus these mindless morons.

In the early part of the century, we regularly used to cross Long Lane on our way to the Wash. The Wash meant a lot of things to us small children. It spelled picnics during the hot summer days, especially at weekends and holiday times. The Wash was the name of the waterfall, and the old water mill was known to countless Sutton children. Lads and lasses pushing trolleys and go-chairs containing toddlers and babies, and also packed in the trolleys were bottles of water, and sometimes (if you were one of the lucky ones), a couple of pop bottles (the ones with a stony in the neck of the bottle), together with jam and treacle butties, all to be enjoyed when we reached this haven of delight.

We would all cross the road, and on our left was Hawthorn Road, which led to the Strappers. At the bottom of Hawthorn Road was a long wooden seat, on which, during the warm summer days, sat the old men of the Leach nearby, all smoking their pipes and, I suppose, talking about their early days: the jobs, the pits, the Lloyd George, the name of the new-fangled pension.

We passed them by, and on the left was a low pebble-dashed shop, which sold almost everything of use to Leach people. We knew it later on as Damsons. On we went, past an old house on the left, about 40 yards further on. Then the shops, and then, perhaps 150 yards further on, a small row of houses, about 4 in number, where two families that I can remember were named the Carols and the Hamblings.

A grandson of the Carols is the latest owner of Leach Hall, and Mrs. Hambling was well known around that area. She was a tremendous worker for the farmers and would spend hour after hour, from sunrise to sunset, either pea picking, potato picking or planting, and at Christmas time, plucking all kinds of fowl. She was not a big person, but very wiry and her face was always tanned by the weather. She could tell quite a few stories about the old days around the Leach, especially the gambling at the Engine and Tender.

On we all went, passing the small row of houses, and a little distance further on, was Abbots Farm on the left. Then we could hear it. What was it that made us all excited? It was the noise of the waterfall hurtling down the stone steps. We turned right off Leach Lane and hastened down the old miller's cart track, leaned over the sandstone wall and watched the water rushing beneath us and out the other side to join Dickies Brook.

After watching the waterfall and looking at the old mill, we made our way on the slopes leading down to the brook. It was a lovely natural glen, and this was one of the places around Sutton where we could go in those happy-go-lucky childhood days to play, bathe and have our picnics. I doubt whether the children of today could grasp what happiness we enjoyed in the natural things of life.

Thinking back to those early days of this century, you could say that, when you turned off Robins Lane and passed by Joe Doffs, you were already in the countryside, and, on reaching the Wash, you had, apart from a few isolated dwellings, nothing but green

fields, with a brook running from and through the four dams. In fact, you passed St. Anne's Monastery, three farms, one public house, one shop, the Leach Hall and, in all, twenty two houses, excluding Pudding Bag, which we passed by on our left. I can also recollect a small brook running down from the old Runcorn Gap railway and moving down on the left hand side (facing the railway) of Wheatsheaf Avenue and disappearing under Leach Lane through a vertical grid.