

Chapter 12: Pudding Bag Bridge, The Strappers, Battery Cob, and The Old Bridge Leading into Pudding Bag.

The Old Bridge Leading into Pudding Bag

How times change. I remember the times when I was a school boy, and later when I was in my teens. I remember the gathering of men folk in certain spots, usually on warm summer evenings. Money was scarce in the twenties and thirties. Entertainment like club artists and bingo halls had yet to come. For those who worked, wages were small. For a family man, the money was urgently required at home. Food, clothing and rent bit hard into those wage packets. About this time, the plate layers on the railway from Collins Green to St. Helens Junction took home £1-19s-6d. The equivalent today of £1.97^{1/2} p. The yard men at the collieries fared a little better. They took home £2-0s-6d, the equivalent today of £2.02^{1/2} p. They were a shilling better off. Then there were the unemployed. What a crying shame that was. A married man was doled out 20 shillings with 2 shillings for each child. A single man received 15 shillings (75p). I remember a pal of mine who had to leave home to get his amount because his father was working at the sheeting sheds. He had a sister who played the piano at home. The officer from the dole told him that he would have to sell the piano and live off the money he got for it. So my pal left home so that he could get the 15 shillings that he was entitled to.

Men used to meet in the evenings to chat about work or the prospects of getting work. Sport was also a topic of conversation. Any topic we discussed relieved the monotony. One place they used to talk was at the entrance of Pudding Bag Bridge. There were stones large enough to sit on there. Some stones had initials carved into them. Each man had his own stone. They had brought them to sit on whilst they leaned on the entrance wall to the bridge. They conversed and watched the world go by. "The world" consisted of St. Anne's churchgoers and people taking their pets to the intersection bridge, to the Leach and the countryside.

My wife and I have had a fondness for pets, especially dogs, throughout our entire married life. At times we had more than one, the sad part of this being the shortness of their lifespan in comparison with our own. Yet, there could be no better companion. I mention this because of the times I have spent with them exploring the countryside around where I live. Especially the old St. Helens and Runcorn Gap Railway and the old Pudding Bag.

On one of my rambles, passing under the old Pudding Bag Bridge, I noticed rather an unusual thing about the structure of one of the supporting pillars. Each pillar left and right, was divided into two parts, making four sections in all. Again I noticed that there was a difference in the quality of the stone. The first two pillars at the entrance were built of a lighter coloured stone. This is what we used to call Billinge Stone (rightly or wrongly). The second part of the bridge was of the more common red sandstone, probably from the Rainhill quarries. Then again there was a disparity in the height of the stone slabs. The first part of the bridge slabs were nine inches and the second slabs were eleven inches. This led us to believe that the two distinctive sections of the bridge had been built at different times. Later on, I learned that the St. Helens and Runcorn Gap Railway had only a single line, due I think, to insufficient money. Half of the bridge was built originally to carry the single line. Later on the bridge was extended to house the two railway lines. So the old stone bridge running over Monastery Lane, must have been the original one standing now for 160 years. It differs from the three bridges

further up the incline - the one over the L.M.S.R. and the road from Leach Lane to Penlake Lane, the one over Long Lane (now known as Reginald Road) and the one over Hawthorn Road. These three bridges had been built by bricksetters and not by stone masons. The changes in bridge structure are clearly shown in the picture by T. Bury in the Science Museum in London. It shows the original stone bridge, built around 1830 carrying the St. Helens and Runcorn Gap Railway, with a vertical boiler locomotive pulling a train of coal wagons. Under the stone bridge, it shows the Liverpool and Manchester Railway with a "rocket" type of locomotive on this line. It also shows the crossing gate cottage at the end of Monastery Lane, with access to the sheeting sheds and general supply stores. It also shows a horse with a laden cart and driver ready to cross the line to take the old cart track to Monastery Road. This was before the gradient footpath and footbridge were erected for a right of way. The old stone bridge must have lasted from the 1840's to the 1880's - a period of approximately 50 years. After this time, it was replaced by a brick work bridge, built on a larger scale to deal with the great increase of coal wagons, rolling stock and at times, the Wembley train specials in the Clock Face and Sutton Leach sidings.

The Strappers

In the early days of this century, right up to the second world war, everyone in Sutton knew the location of the Strappers. Now if you mention the Strappers, people will look mystified. Children of all ages knew it. Tiny children were pushed there in gochairs and tansads. It was a favourite place in the summer for picnics. There were abundant wild flowers growing along the hedges, in the fields and the pastures, a yellow mist of buttercups with white starlets of daisies peeping out. The making of daisy chains and the holding of buttercups under chins to see the yellow reflection, always went with the saying "Do you like butter?" Those were the innocent days of our childhood, spent in the seemingly endless warm days of bygone times.

Then, The Strappers was popular with the older boys for bird nesting "brid neesin" as it was called. We generally only took one egg from a clutch if we did not have one of that particular kind already. There was one field lying at the end of the "magnum". The field was never cultivated. We used to lie there on our backs watching and listening to the skylarks. We watched their upward flight until they vanished out of sight. Even when they had disappeared, you could still hear them singing. We would watch them return to earth. They were very canny, never returning directly to their nests. They would return quite a way from it and then make their way towards it by running through the long, dense grass. You were very lucky if you ever found a nest. There were two kinds of lark, the large ones and the other smaller larks that we called the tit larks.

Then, making our way along the edge of the fields, we could hear the loud, heavy beat of wings. A covey of partridges would fly past, chest high, over the ploughed stretches of the fields. We would see flocks of lapwings, always standing facing the breeze. Occasionally a pair of lapwings would take off, wheeling in the sky above, making their eerie call "pee wit" before landing again to rejoin the flock. Next, someone would suggest that we should go to Websters to see if we could spot any white blackbirds. Mr. Webster was a solicitor practising in St. Helens. He lived in Abbotsfield House, a Victorian building standing in its own grounds at the junction of Abbotsfield Road and Gorsey Lane¹. Our next move was to find a spot, around the edge of the grounds, to

¹ Later lived in by Gil Bond, retired bookmaker and physical culturist.

conceal ourselves whilst we waited and watched for one of the birds to show itself. Sometimes we would see hedge sparrows that we called dunnocks. They were very light in colour, like a light fawn. I have wondered how it came about that these birds should be feathered white. Had some ornithologist in the past bred these birds at Bold Hall? I own a field two fields away from Abbotsfield House. Here my daughter built a bungalow. Now, sixty years later, she has seen blackbirds and hedge sparrows with white markings, when she has put food out for the birds in the morning. Unfortunately, due to new ways of farming and irresponsible youths firing air guns at anything that moves, the majority of bird life has been driven away. Gone are the old attractions of The Strappers.

The Strappers ranged from the Boundary Vaults where Bold Road meets Travers Entry² This ran to the right of the old borough boundary footpath, running all the way to Clock Face Station bridge by Tunstalls Farm, known as Beesleys. The section of Bold Road running from the Farmers Arms (now demolished) at the junction of Normans Lane and Bold Road, had a row of vertical old railway sleepers erected as a fence, with a railway track running from Reginald Road to the boundary path to the left of the Old Sutton Farm³. Moving up the path from the vaults, you would pass the old Battery Cob and its three small mounds of earth. The cob itself was man made. It was approximately 40 feet high and 25-30 yards long. The smaller mounds were about 30-50 yards away.

The end views of the Battery Cob took the form of an equilateral triangle, with a 45 degree slope on either side, approximately 30 feet long, with a flat top of about 8 to 10 feet. When we visited the Cob, it was covered with grass, and when we were quite small (about 5 or 6 years old), it took quite a bit of climbing. We were helped by the long tufts of grass covering the Cob.

You may ask: How did it come to be there? It was erected by the 2nd Lancashire Engineer Volunteers around 1870, as a rifle butt and battery range, for which the army paid an annual rent of £5. Myself and other children spent hours there, roughly fifty years later, gouging out the round shot in the warm summer months, with our scout or clasp knives.

And so for a great number of years, the Cob lay there like some great beast of the fields, drowsing and allowing generation after generation of Sutton children to climb all over it, tugging their way onto its back by the handfuls of hair on its sides and listening to their laughter. Nothing whatsoever disturbed its even temperament - it even allowed them to roly poly down its sides.

And so it continued as a playfield for countless Sutton children until that fateful day during the Second World War when the American 'Liberator' took off from the air base at Burtonwood, loaded with American GIs and nurses. The plane got into difficulties and tried to land in the fields across the boundary path. According to some reports, it flew low over Sutton at a height of 100 feet and shook some of the chimney pots off the houses in Junction Lane. And still losing height, it struck the old Battery Cob, with the loss of all lives on board. In those war years, news like this was censored. It was "hush hush", and so you had to rely on word of mouth about the destination of the Liberator. It

² Later called Bold Road.

³ The Old Sutton Farm was used as a place for the coaching of boxing by Ernie Proudlove and Bold Thomas during the late 1920's - early 1930's.

was the general opinion of most people, true or false, that the Liberator was returning to America.

One might ask: "How did the Strappers get their name?" This is what I believe, and is what I was told as a young boy by my uncle, the Bailiff at Bold, and my aunt. There were strips (or straps) of land running from the Boundary Vaults to Clock Face and from the old boundary path right the way across to Leach Lane. These straps or strips were farmed as small farms, and were there before the advent of the St. Helens Canal and Runcorn Gap Railway. The building of the railway split them up and the land was required for the use of the railway and sidings.

Then there were the copper smelting works which were sited on the Strappers, and belonged in part to Michael Hughes, who came to Leach Hall and Sherdley Hall. These smelting works caused distress by their noxious fumes and billowing smoke all around these parts. I believe Mr. Tipping, the owner of Bold Hall and the surrounding land, put an end to the smelting of copper in the Strappers because the prevailing winds brought the smoke and fumes to Bold Hall.

In 1865, another alteration in the local geography was caused by the Runcorn Gap Railway. The old road, running from Leach Lane, up alongside Leach Hall, past the Leach Hall farm and Engine and Tender public house crossed Long Lane and ran across to Abbotsfield Road and so on to Gorsey Lane, Hall Lane and Bold Hall.

Part of one of these strips of land in the Strappers - around 4,000 square yards - now belongs to me. It runs from the path which the colliers used to reach Clock Face Colliery. It follows the old borough boundary path and runs to Tunstalls Way and the old Clock Face station. It has been in my possession for a great number of years, and on the deeds, it is described as Long Field, with a cottage at the Tunstalls Way. I used it as a small holding for a period of time, but vandalism caused me to cease using it for that purpose. My daughter and her husband with my granddaughter now have a bungalow built on this strip of land.

Another feature, not now in evidence, is the two blocks of cottages in Abbotsfield Road - about six cottages in each block. These were built to accommodate the copper smelters who came from Anglesey, North Wales, to work for Michael Hughes. The Magnum Wall was set back and built around the cottages, which I believe were called Bold Cottages, Abbotsfield. The cottages were there when I was a lad. Some of the children attended the school at Sutton National when I was there myself.