

(1) Turf cutters at work, one cutting and the other spreading the cut turf.

(2) Women working to sort and stack the slabs of turf.

Chapter 15: Parr, Bold and Sutton Moss, Bold Colliery 1876-1986, the Old Cricket Ground, Mr. Barrow “The Firelight Man”, ‘Croddying’

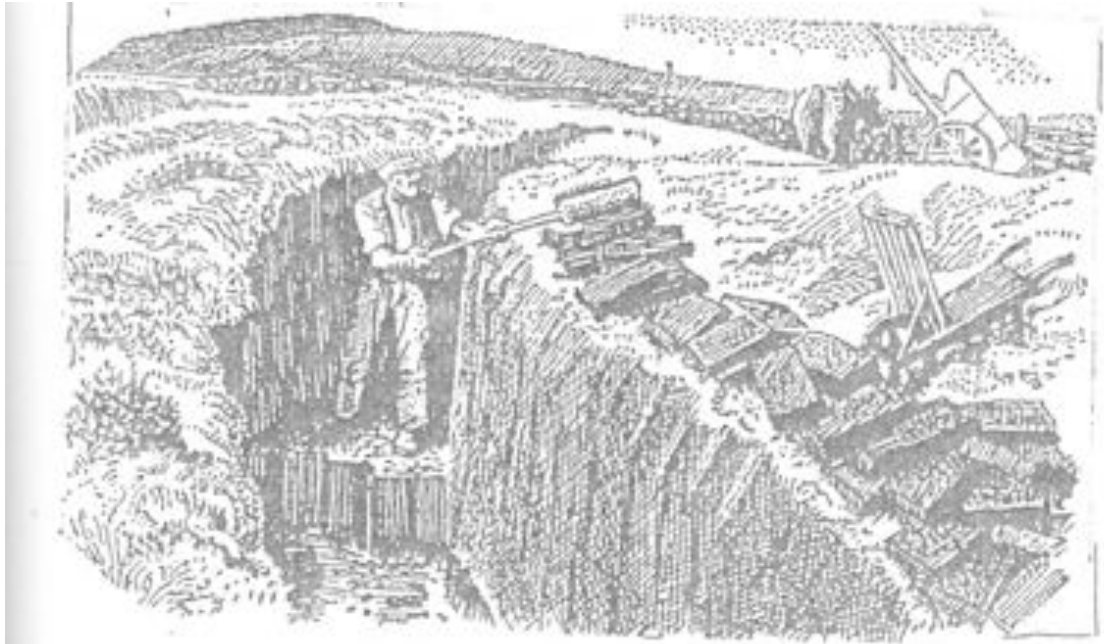
Parr, Bold and Sutton Moss

In line or step with a great amount of changes around our Sutton, the warm, beckoning Mosses we knew in my childhood have disappeared. Bold Colliery, which in the past played its part in supporting many families from Sutton, Parr and Burtonwood for 110 years, kept its slag heaps or Stuff Rooks on the Bold side of the railway. Now, under the National Coal Board, it spews its thousands of tons of slag and rock over the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, and deposits over the warm, brown peat, exerting its great weight. This pressure, like some giant hand over a great sponge caused the peat to roll and rise in great waves, before succumbing to the unyielding pressure and covering of slag and rock.

I well remember one particular day myself and several pals spent on the Moss. It was during the school summer holidays, and the weather was beautiful and sunny. Four of us from around Edgeworth Street and Ellen Street decided to walk to the Moss. On the way, we called for Chuck Lightfoot from Station Road and crossed Junction Lane and made our way up Leonard Street, and passed by the old cricket ground, which was then a small holding belonging to the Unsworth family. This field was purchased by the present Town AFC, and a football pitch, changing rooms, a small stand, sauna baths and a social club, capable of holding 600 members now stands on it.

Leaving the cricket field, we made our way along a cart track which was used by the colliers on their way to Bold Colliery and also by a little, stockily-built man, named Mr. Barrow, who, with his sturdy, shaggy pony and two-wheeled float gathered the cut blocks of dried peat from the Moss to make naphtha-soaked firelighters. He used to arrive at Edgeworth Street every Saturday morning, selling his firelighters. I would go to his cart with a newspaper and he would sell me seven firelighters at a penny each; one firelighter for each day. He was an old world character to look at - short and thick set, with a heavy black moustache, a long jacket on his back, baggy trousers and clogs, and a face the colour of peat. But it was his hands that caught my eye. They shone like polished mahogany, due to always working with the peat and naphtha. After he had knocked on our door, I would smell him. The strong smell of his firelighters coming from him and his pony and cart, laden with firelighters, seemed to fill our part of the street. How I looked forward to seeing him every Saturday morning! He and his pony have long since died, and his business has disappeared, but I, for one, still remember him as the “Firelight Mon.”

Back to my story. We could follow the cart track which skirted the chemical tip, which thrust its way towards the Moss, or climb the grass grown tips. Standing on its edge, we would look over the three Mosses, Sutton, Bold and Parr. This tip was fairly high and steep, and when we were older - say, about fourteen or fifteen - we would shoot over the edge on our bicycles and freewheel for about two hundred yards along the firm part of the Moss. Then we would ride back again, and, with bicycles on shoulders, struggle to the top, and then down again we would go. We got our share of excitement, and exercise, out of climbing up the tip with the cycles.



(1) An old time scene on the Old Moss, showing a turf cutter at work cutting trenches to be built up in pyramids to dry. Note the two-wheeled cart, or wain, the horse, and the distinctive wheelbarrow.

(2) Driver and horse with loaded slatted tram.

Looking down at the Mosses, you would see the long peat ditches, with room for a pony and cart between them - in fact wider than that to make room for the pyramids - and the built blocks of peat, built up to dry with the sun and winds. The blocks were spaced to allow the winds to blow through them. So different from today. We never destroyed the pyramids. Even when the little 'Firelight Mon' was not in evidence, his hard work was left alone. In the present day, with all the vandalism that goes on, the little man would never have been able to carry on his business.

The peat blocks, cut to dry, would be approximately nine inch cubes. These were taken from the Moss to dry and cut into wafers of peat about four and a half inches by one and a half inches thick. the Firelight Mon would make roughly twelve firelighters from each block of peat. After soaking them in naphtha and delivering them, he would make a shilling a block.

When Mr. Barrow finished his business, it passed into Mr. Joe Robinson's hands, and he worked at it for a part time job. I knew Joe well. His regular job, after coming out of the pit, was to grind a certain type of rock into dust. This was done by filling a revolving drum, inside of which were cast iron balls with rocks. When fine enough, the dust was sent down the pits in a covered wheeled truck and used to dust the tunnels and prevent fire damp.

But back again to the top of the tip. Looking across the Moss, you would see, in contrast to the rich brown colour of the peat, the great patches of purple heather stretching in all directions. You would notice the yellow-coloured flowers of gorse and plants scattered far and wide, with cotton like tufts. We called them cotton plants. I was told that when the LNW Railway laid the track across the Moss, they had a lot of trouble stabilising the foundation on the peat, which went down to a great depth. So the peat was dug, cut and bales of cotton waste were laid on one another, and then ballast was laid on the top to give the railway track a good foundation. And this, we reckoned, was the reason for the cotton plants, the seed being blown from the bales across the Moss.

In the dry summer months, the Moss was used as a short cut from Sutton to Earlestown via Collins Green. But in the winter rains, you had to know your way through, otherwise you could sink up to your knees or waist, especially in one particular spot, which was extremely boggy. I used to accompany a boy who lived opposite me in Ellen Street across the Moss because his father was the signal man on the large signal box just below Bold bridge and before the Junction Station. Sometimes he had to work a double shift through not being relieved, and so we used to take him food and drink in a basket.

On one occasion, we were approaching the boggy part just below the signal box when we saw two girls, about fourteen years of age, in difficulties. They had sunk into the bog about halfway up to their knees. Then we heard Mr. Williams the signal man shout down to us from an open window "Don't go in the bog. Come up into the signal box first and hurry up." We went through the railings and up the steps into the signal box, where he told us to look under the signal box, where we would find a long plank. He told us to take the plank and lay it from what we knew as the firm turf and push it as near as we could to the girls. We then managed to pull one leg out at a time, crying "What shall we do? We'll get laid on when we get home. We've lost our shoes." Mr. Williams, who could not leave his signal box, shouted down to us all to come to the box, and when we arrived, he had a bucket of water and some cleaning rags. He told the

girls to sit on the bottom steps and to take their stockings off and rinse them and wring them out and he would hang them out to dry. When this was done, we said goodbye to the girls and my friend's father, and made our way home. We never knew how the girls got on - we never saw them again. But we guessed they would get a warm reception when they got home with no shoes on. In those days, shoes were not easy to come by.

But, back to our day on the Moss. The six of us ran down the tip into the turf. We knew what we were going to do. We were going to do "Croddying". Some people would ask "What's Croddying?" Well, it's a kind of adventure game where one takes the incentive at making some kind of challenge to the others, whether climbing a tree and dropping from a height to the ground, or leaping across a ditch when there was a danger of perhaps falling in. On the Moss, the turf ditches were just the thing. Up and down the Moss we went, leaping one after the other, across the ditches and sitting together, resting at intervals, until we came to the wide ditches which had not been worked for ages. These were half full of water. We looked at this ditch and then we looked at one another questioningly. "Don't think wi con croddy this one, lads." We all agreed, so going back between the two ditches to get a fair run, five of us managed it, and only just! The five of us were fairly leggy, but Charlie Lightfoot was just a bit shorter than us five. Several times he ran to jump across and drew back to get a longer run, and this led to his downfall. He went walking backwards too far, and giving a shout, he disappeared down the ditch he had his back to.

We all jumped the big ditch again and ran to Charlie's ditch, and there he was, standing in the ditch with water up to his waist. He had fallen backwards into the water, and he was like a drowned rat. We could not help ourselves from laughing at his woebegone expression, but we soon had him out, two of us pulling him up by his outstretched arms.

Now the problem was the drying of his clothes, and we decided to get to the warm mound. This mound of peat stood higher than the surrounding moss, and it was exposed to the sun and wind, and you could feel the warmth coming from it. In fact we had, at certain very hot periods, found the surface covering of peat smouldering. So this was our source of warmth to dry Chuck's clothing. Off came his jersey, shirt and singlet, pants, stockings and clogs.

Charlie decided to wring his stockings and his pants out, and to put them on again, with his clogs, and to rely on them drying out on his legs as we continued our jumping on this hot summer's day. After a short while, we came back to the mound and turned singlet, shirt and jersey over and we decided it would not take very long for them to dry out and be fit to wear again. Off we went again, across the Moss, Charlie standing out from the rest of us, with his bare body and his braces over his bare shoulders, holding his pants up, which now, with his stockings, were beginning to dry.

We must have been away from the mound longer than we should have been. When we arrived back to see if the clothes were dry, everything seemed to be alright. But, to our dismay, and especially Charlie's, when we picked the singlet, jersey and shirt up, they all fell to bits. They had smouldered away in the hot sun.

They all looked at Charlie, whose face was a picture. He said, "I can't go home like this, mi dad'll kill me." We said it could have been worse. It was a good job he had kept stockings, clogs and pants on. "Tha'd 'ave luct well gooin wom bout them on Chuck."

It was small comfort to Charlie, but it was better than losing them all, so we had a conflagration and decided that four of us would run home to Sutton and see if we could beg the articles from our homes, which we did. A cast off singlet, a shirt and jersey and we hurried back with these to a grateful Charlie, who promptly put them on. And so, at the end of the day, Charlie got off very lightly, when we went home with him and explained to his mother and dad what had happened.

The alternative way to Bold Colliery and Collins Green Colliery was across the Moss for Sutton Colliery workers when the weather was dry enough instead of going around the Bold Road. It joined the Parr workers a short distance from Bold Bridge and the boggy part around that particular part of the Moss was made that much more accessible by the planting of old railway sleepers and large flat stones. It must have created hazards, especially in the dark and early foggy mornings. Some of the early birds among the colliers were up and travelling to work as early as 4.30 in the mornings.

A few more facts about the peat moss. The twigs of heather which grew to a height of 18" could be used for brooms for sweeping up. I have collected peat from a corner of the Bold Power Station, near the Bold Colliery, which has escaped the covering over of slag and rock. This part is a remnant of the old Bold Moss. We used the peat for the hot house cultivation of plants and tomatoes at the power station in 1970.