

Chapter 17: The Old Bonk “Thowd Bonk”, Barton Bank Colliery, Trench Digging by the Pals”

The “Old Bonk” may have appeared to adult strangers to that part of Sutton as ugly and dreary, with its chemical tips and very old colliery slag deposits, but it appealed to us youngsters, for it was free to roam on, and it had two main attractions. Well one! Two flashes of water which we all knew as the Green Ocean and the White Ocean. The Green Ocean we kept clear of, because a number of our four-legged friends met a sad end there. In those times, old and unwanted pets departed life in those green waters. But now to a great extent, and with the intervention of the R.S.P.C.A, most people give kinder consideration to old and ailing cats and dogs.

The White Ocean was comparatively clear. It was deep enough to swim in, without the danger of drowning, and this is where myself and hundreds of other children of both sexes learned to swim. In the hot periods of summer time, it resembled a lido, and I never heard of any child losing its life there. There were always good swimmers to help out anyone in difficulties. We graduated there as we grew older and were too big to go wading in the old school brook. There was one flat piece of land quite big enough and grassed to stage a rugby or football match on. Ponies roamed the Old Bonk to feed on the sparse grass. They mostly belonged to the firewood dealers and hawkers who lived around those parts.

How did it get its name? No-one seemed to know, or care, when I was young. It just got taken for granted. But I learned that a colliery was once there called Sutton Bank Colliery, and it could have been referred to by the old Sutton people as the Old Bank or Old Bonk.

The area of land which we knew as “Owd Bonk” stretched from the old level crossing at Fleet Lane, past Gittins Pubs towards Sutton, behind Morris Street, and ran along Watery Lane and returned up to Berry’s Lane. The water flowed through it from Pendlebury Brook and what we called the School Brook and coursed its way and became the Sankey Brook. As lads, we travelled over the Bonk on our way to Carr Mill and Haydock; over the level crossings of the old St. Helens mineral railway and, passing over the old St. Helens Canal and locks. There was, I remember, up to the end of my schooldays, a chemical works chimney. That must have been around 1924.

Wild flowers of all descriptions grew there, and it was a common sight to see small children gathering bunches of flowers to take home and place proudly in jam jars in their backyards. First World War soldiers practised digging trenches there, as it was quite near to the barracks in the old glassworks we knew as Sutton Bond.