

Chapter 19: Knocks On The Door

Thow'd Jew's 'Ere

Bessie Haddock lived directly across the street from our house. Whether her name was really Haddock or not, people in the street did not bother to know. As far as I know, she was there, a grown woman, when I was born, and still lived there when I left the street in 1928, at the age of 18 years old. Jim Haddock was a tram driver. He drove the trams from St. Helens to St. Helens Junction in Sutton. The trams were driven to St. Helens Junction at Station Road along a single line track. Trams were then able to pass one another at various loops provided in the roadways.

Jim Haddock's wife was a very large woman who seldom went out, and due to her size, had much difficulty in coping with the household chores, and so Bessie came to live with them, to help Mrs. Haddock. Some say she came from a workhouse. She was rather taller than the average woman, slightly bent, and always wore a small shawl around her shoulders. Her hair was coloured auburn, and she spoke broad "Lanky". I do not think she attended any school, but for all that, she was a clean and good worker in the Haddock household.

There was no mistaking the loud knock on the vestibule door, followed by the opening of the door, and Bessie's voice was loud and clear. No explanation, just three words "Thowd Jew's 'Ere." And then she was gone, to embark on a similar errand round about our part of the street. It was the signal for my mother and other women in the street to pick up their purses and walk across to Mrs. Haddock's house, where Bessie let each one in to sit around in a circle in the kitchen. Who was the Old Jew? I don't think anyone ever bothered to find out his proper name. He was just, in everyone's minds and eyes, Thowd Jew!

The Manchester to Liverpool train would pull up at the St. Helens Junction Station in the early afternoon, and out from one of the carriages would step down the figure of a man different from his fellow passengers. He was dressed in black, from his flat topped, wide-brimmed black felt hat to his clothes, and down to his feet, on which were black laced up boots. His face wore a large, spade-shaped beard, which was grey in colour. He would make his way to the guard's van at the rear of the train, where he retrieved a very large bundle of remnants, wrapped up in a large sheet. Without much ado he would swing the bundle onto his back and, belying his age, would climb over the bridge, show his ticket to the porter and make his way down Station Road into Robins Lane, turning right into Edgeworth Street to knock on the door at Haddocks.

Bessie would open the door and the Jew, with his bundle, would enter the house, whereupon the table was moved back and chairs spaced around the kitchen. Bessie would then let the neighbours know, with her customary knock and shout "Thowd Jew's 'Ere."

The old Jew would sit on the floor with his bag open, and show his different remnants to the womenfolk sitting around him. He would then bargain with them for the remnants they fancied. My two younger sisters Nellie and Doris were often dressed in the materials the old Jew brought. I have a photograph of the pair of them dressed in Shantung frocks my mother made for them with her Singer sewing machine.

How the old Jew came to Haddock's house all the way from Manchester, I will never know. It would be interesting to know this and everything connected with him: his name, where he lived, had they a business in Manchester? Was he the founder of some large business? Alas, I will never know.