



*John "Owd Bally" Whittaker, born 1824, Died 3 July 1894, aged 70 years. Buried at St. Nicholas Church, Sutton, St. Helens.*

## **Chapter 22: “Owd Bally” John Whittaker, Neill’s Row, Bold, “Bally” 3 companions.**

### **Mr. John Whittaker of Neill’s Row**

The first time I heard the expression “Bally” used was when I was about seven years old, during the First World War. It was due to a boy in my class at school named Sidney Ellison. He lived in the caretaker’s house at the Neil’s foundry, where his parents were the caretakers for the offices and foundry.

When I found out that he lived at Bold, not a great distance from my Uncle Jim’s cottage at Bank House, we decided that when it was holiday time and I was at my uncle’s, we would visit one another to play together, and it was on one of my visits that the word “bally” was used.

Sidney invited me into his home and I was struck by the extraordinary width of the doors and frames in the house. When I asked Sidney about this, he said that a man named Mr. John Whittaker built it for himself to live in, and that he was very fat and weighed over thirty stones. He had very great difficulty in squeezing through the average house door. This made us both laugh at the thought of it.

When I returned to my Uncle’s house, I asked him did he know a man named “Owd Bally”. My uncle laughed and said that he did know him and that he lived in the house at Neill’s foundry. My uncle, being a horseman, told me about the strong pony and the specially built and very strong trap he rode about in. He said props were used to steady the trap; one for under the step for Old Bally to climb up, and two for supports under the shafts until John Whittaker was comfortably seated and nicely balanced to take the weight off the pony (or you could call it a small, well-built horse).

Bally, in Lancashire dialect, means belly, and no-one around Bold or St. Helens had a bigger one than John Whittaker. For all his size and great weight, John Whittaker was a very industrious man. He was a builder and carried on his business from Foundry Street in St. Helens. He left his mark on the many buildings and works which are still, in some cases, in evidence around Bold, Sutton and St. Helens. According to the records, he built many of the tall works chimney stacks which figured on the skyline around St. Helens. He was also responsible for the following buildings and works around the St. Helens district: Daghish’s Foundry, Sutton Glass Works, Brown Edge water softening works, the pumping station at Sutton Road connected to Collins Green Colliery pumps, Boundary Road Baths, the Lingholme Hotel, St. Helens Junction Station, the Borough Sanatorium at Peasley Cross, which we all knew as the “San”, where patients with contagious ailments were admitted, St. Mary’s C.E. Schools and mission church, and Neil’s Foundry at Bold. He also built several well known hotels: The Saddle, Pear Tree at Collins Green and the Huntsman at Haydock.

John Whittaker was of a jovial nature, and had two companions - Mr. Joseph Jackson, who was a wheelwright and blacksmith in Jackson Street, Parr. Jackson Street was named after him. He pulled the scales at 22 stones and 2lbs. The other man, Mr. Charles Rigby, a wheelwright in Warrington Road, weighed 18 stones 2lbs. The combined weights of these three heavyweights was within 2lbs of 1,000lbs.

John Whittaker heard that Lewis' in Liverpool were offering suits to measure at 30 shillings (150 new pence). He persuaded Mr. Rigby's brother, a man of average size, to go into the shop and ask would they provide him and his three brothers with suits.. The shopman was delighted to take the order, and invited him and his brothers to be measured. The shopman was staggered when he saw the tremendous size of the three brothers. He was so taken aback that he called his manager, who took one look at the three brothers and realised it would be a great advertisement for the sale of the suits from his establishment. The manager said "Certainly we will provide you with suits. We advertise our suits at that figure and we will be pleased to serve you all." The suits were made, and the fame of them spread to St. Helens.

In the summer of 1987, my daughter took me for a ride around Bold. I visited Bold Park and the Kennel Cottage in Hall Lane, and next carried on to visit John Whittaker's house in Neill's Row, where I measured the doors and frames for width. I found them to be 37" in width, which is near enough 6" wider than the average doors of 30 and 32" used by average people. The house was being used as conference rooms by Capper Neill's of Bold.



***From right to left:** John Whittaker (30 stones), Joseph Routledge, Joseph Jackson (20 stones), William Gardner and Charles Rigby (18 stones). John Whittaker (alias “Owd Bally” Whittaker) was famous for being the heaviest man ever, in St Helens. This picture was taken outside the White Lion’s “long parlour”, Church Street, St Helens, c. 1880*