

Chapter 4: 1917 to 1924 Boys and Girls School

The senior school occupied by boys and girls was a red brick building and the plan of it was L shaped. The girls were on the bottom floor and the boys were on the top floor.

The girls had access to their school via the yard they shared with the infants, whilst the boys had access from Ellamsbridge Road, across the playground and through the large, inward-opening doors into a very large entrance hall which had a wide stone stairway about fourteen feet across and about eighteen steps onto a landing. The landing, in turn, had two stone stairways, one on the right and one on the left which was in a reverse direction to the main stairway. These led on to another entrance hall and then divided off into the various classrooms.

A feature of these classrooms in both the boys and the girls schools was the height of the ceilings from the floor. This, in turn, gave the school the appearance of a very tall building.

Under the stone stairs was the cellar, inside which was a large boiler heated by coke, which in turn circulated round the infants and senior schools.

Mr. Rigby looked after the heating of the boiler and I now mention that he and his oldest son were stonemasons and carried on a business of providing gravestones on the piece of land outside of Crone and Taylors, now occupied by the Esso petrol station just off Ellamsbridge Road.

Crone and Taylors, across the brook along Worsley Brow to the rest of the school, contributed to a large extent to the various noxious smells in Sutton. When they were in full song, in production of what we called at the time the “artificial manure works”, later claimed to be fertilisers and conveyors and light engineering, all windows in the school and the streets nearby were tightly closed.

In 1917 the Great War was still being waged and all us 7 year olds were assembled in the infants school, formed into twos and led by Miss Saunders. We marched into the senior school to meet our new teachers, Mrs. Mills and Mrs. Brown, who taught two classes, Standard 1A and Standard 1B.

Entering the classroom, after being divided, we took our places and sat in the combined wooden forms and desks. Each of these forms sat four of us together. The desks had a sloping top towards us, with four ink wells and a groove along the desk below the ink wells to position the ink pens and pencils. A shelf was also provided under the desk top to place our books and caps. And so we began our education as “Standard Ones.”

In the classrooms we were taught the important “Three Rs” and to speak plain English, but we had a further unofficial education on the playground where we toughened up and picked up the Lancashire Dialect. One had to talk “Lanky” here unless you wanted to be mocked and laughed at by the older boys and called a “Sissy”.

A variety of games were played in the playground, handed down from one generation to another. The first one we encountered as newcomers was “The Lion’s Den”.

Coming out into the playground and turning right around the corner was the door leading to the cellar. The bottom of the floor was approximately twelve inches below ground level and three walls about four feet high were built around it with a three foot opening, initially forming a pit about six feet by four feet and flagged at the bottom. This was called the “Lion’s Den.”

Two big lads manned the opening and another two looked after the outside, while some more big lads got their orders “Gooan Fotchum”. These lads became “The Catchers” - they chased round the playground, rounding up us young lads and we were carried or pulled along and thrown into the “Lion’s Den”, where we all struggled and tried to get out. The lads on the outside did their best to keep you inside and you could be there all break if you were not quick enough to get out.

Everything was taken in good part. There were no complaints, and later on, as we got bigger and older, it became our turn to become “Keepers” or “Catchers”

The type of clothes we wore and the composition of the ground in our playground had a bearing on the type of games we played there. Some boys wore jackets and deep celluloid collars, short pants, stockings and boots and caps. Others from Sutton Road and Watery Lane wore jerseys, three quarter length trousers and clogs. Myself, and a lot of others where I lived, plumped for cap, blue jersey, short pants, stockings and clogs. The clogs I always wore were my Sunday boots. When they were too far gone to sole and heel I took them to the cloggers Mr. E. Whalley in Robins Lane to be clogged and have irons nailed on them. This type of boot clog was warmer in winter and supported your ankles when jumping, not like the slipper type clogs worn by some lads, and all the girls who also wore clogs. By the way, anyone who was presumed cheeky or hard faced was promptly told “Thi face ull stand cloggin”“. Girls were referred to as “brassy faced” or “brassy faced huzzy.”

The ground in the schoolyard was ideal for the games we played. It was unpaved and comprised of very fine cinders and soil. One could fall on it without hurting oneself. You could mark a bait line with your clog for you to jump from or set a strong bait.

From the bait line you could make a standing jump or a running jump. The hop, skip and jump was also a very popular competition to see who was the best jumper..

Then there was the handstand against the brick wall. Likewise the crab walk, which was very hard to do, with nearly all the school walking behind you, urging you on. There were quite a lot who could not master the crab walk.

The general procedure to decide who had to start a game was very simple, although rather crude, but was always used. The one who was selected was called out “You are it.” A ring was formed and the one who decided to chant and point in a clockwise manner began as follows:

“Inky Pinky Pen and Ink
Who made that big dog stink.
I say it was You”

The one who was pointed at as “you” was “It”.

Seven An O’er was a very popular game. The lad who was “It” bent down on the bait line as in leap frog, and the rest of the lads would jump over him. The best jump would be marked as the second position to jump over. It would now be “one an o’er”. This would continue until it was “seven an o’er”. If one of the jumpers overbaited or did not complete the jump, he became “It”.

Pie Crust

Twelve or fourteen lads would divide up into groups of six or seven and toss up who was to take up position. Usually the strongest lad stood solidly in an upright position, grasping the first lad by his arms, who then bent down and grasped the one in the upright position. The rest of the lads bent down and grasped the one in the front,. When they had positioned themselves firmly, the leader would shout “Set”. The other boys would shout “pie crust coming” and one after the other, everyone would leap on the bent boys’ backs. When they had all jumped, the lad in the upright position would count up to an agreed number, say ten. If they held up, the other side would have to get down and take up the bent position. If, on the other hand, the boys who were bent down failed to support the weight, the lads on top would shout “Weak horse” and would be entitled to a further leap on their backs.

Tick

The one who was “It” chased after the other lads, and when he touched or ticked one, that lad became “It” and it was his turn to chase and so on.

Rec’s Rugby

As we got older and fond of games of rugby, we would play with any number and number off, say one to thirteen or more.

Number one would be given a few yards start and then the other lads would chase him around the schoolyard, either to tick him or tackle him according to the state of the floor in the yard. When ticked or tackled, the lad would shout out a number, and the one who had that number would run around, trying to evade the tick or tackle.

Very Cold Weather

When conditions were very cold in the playground Mr. Plews, the Headmaster would come down the stairs into the playground for the fifteen minutes we had and make us all run round the playground like circus animals. If he found anyone shivering behind on the wall, he would produce his strap and use it on those not moving by hitting them on their buttocks or backs. But for all that, Mr. Plews was well liked and respected and his efforts were to get us all warmed up in the cold weather.

Raining

It was raining, it was playtime and the bell had sounded. Everyone ran across to the toilets - there was no cover apart from the W.C.s - and ran back as fast as they could through the big double doors and into the stone floored vestibule or hall which stood at

the bottom of the wide stone stairs. These stairs led onto the first landing, which was about fourteen feet across. On this landing the Standard Seven and Ex Seven lads stood shoulder to shoulder waiting for the coming onslaught which would be coming up the fourteen steps. The younger boys from the lower Standards would all get together and crush up the stairs holding on to the handrails to gain a foothold on to the wide landing and then make a breakthrough up the other stairs to the cloakroom above.

These younger boys would, in most cases, be thrown back and caps would be snatched off and thrown down into the hall to make them go back to find them. It was all good-natured fun, and everyone enjoyed this fifteen minutes to let off steam.

Less Physical Games

Cigarette cards or “Fotus”

Cigarette card collecting was very popular. There was plenty of scope to collect a full pack. These cards were very interesting and educational. Some of the packs I had were “Wonders of the World”, “Strugglers for Existence”, “Wild Flowers”, “British Birds” and many others. If you had a “twicer” you would go round the playground to try and swop it for one you still had not got. They were always called “Fotus” and you could play for them if you wished. When two of us decided to play, you shuffled your cards and then split them with the number side down. Your opponent would then bank a number of cards, say twenty, and you would say to him “Odd” or “Even” and hold your two sets of cards, which you had split in both hands, towards him. If he touched one of your sets of “Fotus” and called “Even”, you turned your cards up and if they showed an even number you gave him twenty cards. If he called wrongly, he gave you twenty cards.

Marbles

Summer was the time for playing marbles. We called them “Stoney” or “Stonks”. Your favourite stoney was called a “Taw”, and quite a busy time was had buying, selling and playing. The price we paid or charged was twelve a penny, the price we paid for “Attys Mint Balls”.

We always played and set our stoney up on the warmest wall. Some lads would stand with their backs to the wall and set their stoney up on a “Cockey” (a little mound of earth), and wait for the lads who would shoot their Taw at the stoney on the cockey. “Ar fare wilt gimme?” would enquire the one who was to shoot. “All gie thi theer”, said the other one, drawing a clog bait in front of his cockey, so he had to decide whether to shoot from there or move on to someone else’s stoney. Or then he would decide to shoot “Cully”. “Ar are wilt gimme if ah shoot cully?”, he would draw a line a bit nearer his stoney.

Now I must explain the two ways of shooting a stoney. The easiest and most forceful way of shooting was to rest the stoney in both your index finger and your thumb nail and rest your little finger, knuckle on the ground, turning the hand away from you. This shot was mostly used on “Ring Out” (a game we played away from school on firm, clayey ground and was of greater range and force.)

“Culley” position was to place your stoney on the middle joint of your index finger in front of your thumb nail with all your knuckles of the shooting hand on the ground, holding your hand in an upright position, without turning the hand away from you.

When the shooter was successful at hitting the cockey stoney, he received his Taw back and one of his stoneys. If he missed, he would get his taw back on giving a stoney for it.

I was fairly successful at using the Culley shot and the washhouse at home was my storeroom. I had lots of jam jars of stoneys. On leaving school I sold them at twelve a penny and realised five shillings towards a second hand bike I had my eye on.

There were other stoney games we played away from school because you needed dry packed clay ground. We played “Three Hole Stoneys”, “Ring Out”, “Chucky Hole” and “Bobbers”. You could also play along the pavement gutters.

The Cocks and “Feighting At Back Ot Church”

There were times among the rough and tumble of the schoolyard when the urge became strong to prove to oneself that one was good enough to become either “Cock ot class” or before leaving school, to become “Cock ot school”.

Although us lads at school were all Suttoners, we had our “Come Froms”, like tribes. There were “Edgeworth Streeters”, “Showbackers”, “Herbert Streeters”, “Pen Lakers”, “Mossers”, Indian Villagers (Hills Moss Road”, Baxters Laners and Coal Yarders (Top of Peckers Hill).

All these lads knew who was the best man with the fists among their section, so some of the lads would approach the best lad of another lot and the conversation would go along these lines: “Heh sorry, Tommy Smith of ar lot sez “I con lay on thee”, so the lad approached either had to nod his head and agree if he did not want to be involved (which was a victory for the challengers), or say “Let Tommy Smith try it on an all knock ‘im as flat as a pancake”, or words to that effect. So then the challengers would go back to Tommy and repeat what Jody Moss had said.

Then Tommy Smith, if he fancied his chance, would go to Jody Moss and, tapping him on the chest, would say:

“One two three
Ahm cock o’er thee
An theers a thump fot prove it.”

Jody Moss could ward the thump off and say “Awreet al si thi at back ot church after school toneet”.

“Back Ot Church”

“Back ot church” to our young minds was a grand place to go to and settle a “feight”. Very rarely did a fight take place in the schoolyard, because we were always under observation by one or other of the teachers, and it was woe betide the two who took part because Mr. Plews, the headmaster, would seize each one in turn and hold them with the scruff of the jersey or jacket and belt the living daylights out of them with his lecturer strap.

So, everybody kept mum when a scrap was on, and after school had finished we all poured through the gates, past the “little pig”, Tripe Shaws and the four houses and Kenwrights plumbers shop and into Goodban Street. Heading through the opening onto the “tip”, in half a minute we were at the back of All Saints Church.

The church did a grand job of screening the two battlers and spectators from the main Ellamsbridge Road and generally we had no interference from anyone except a very big woman who, at times, would rush across the field from Carnegie Street with two buckets of water and try to hurl the contents at us. This prompted us to either cheer, jeer or boo her. It was all good fun and excitement. Before the battle commenced, jackets were taken off and handed to seconds and short sleeves were wrapped up. If you wore a gansey, like I did, you just put your fists up and tried to get the first clout in.

A ring was formed with the two battlers in the centre using bare fists. There were no boxing gloves in the school and we never used our clogs for kicking or “purring”, as the old colliers used to do. If one went down he was given time to recover and carry on or give up, as the case may be. You could, if possible, get the other one’s head under your arm and pummel it. The way to get out of that situation was to trip or wrestle the other lad down. There were no rounds - you just carried on till one gave in and the victor would say “Ast ad enuff?”, and the loser would nod his head, or say “Ay”.

Cock Ot School

The fastest fight I ever witnessed was when I was thirteen years old. The two lads who fought were ready for leaving school. They were both big lads, and one was called Mick Lilley. He was a Sutton Roder and he and his mates claimed he was “Cock ot school”.

He was big and rough looking, shock-headed, and he dressed in old, ill-fitting clothes - an older brother’s cast-offs, I should imagine, - and long trousers. He was the type who did not worry about his appearance.

The other lad came from Baxters Lane and he also was a big, strapping lad. He wore a suit and long trousers, a man’s cap and boots. He was fair-haired and something of a loner. He kept himself to himself and used to walk home with two girls from the girls school. He was not interested in sport and wasn’t interested in being cock ot school. But the matchmakers from Baxters Lane told the Sutton Roder that Henry Lee could flatten anybody from Sutton Road “any day int week”.

And so it came about that Mick Lilley challenged Henry Lee in the schoolyard with the customary “One, two three, ah’m cock o’er thee”, but Henry Lee knocked his arm away and said “All sithee at back ot church, mek sure that tha theer at wom tarm.” That night at “back ot church” all us lads gathered there, with a few girls, to see the gladiators. We formed a ring and Mick Lilley took his jacket off and handed it to one of his mates. Henry Lee took off his jacket and cap and handed them to the two girls, rolled up his short sleeves and exposed two big muscular arms.

They both faced up to one another and Mick said “At ready?” Henry nodded, stepped forward and planted a great thump in the region of Mick’s stomach. Mick gasped and bent forward and Henry hit him again, this time on the nose. Blood spurted from Mick’s nose and he dropped his arms. Henry quietly said “Dost want some moor?” Mick shook

his head, Henry immediately turned round, put his jacket and cap on and walked off home with his two girlfriends.

He was acclaimed “Cock of school” the day after and no-one disputed it, but Henry wasn’t bothered about it. The fight did not last above a minute from forming a ring to the finish. It was the fastest one we ever saw.

Owd Fletcher’s Abattoir

The next best entertainment when coming out of school at night was “Owd Fletcher’s abattoir”. ‘Owd Fletcher was the local butcher and his shop then was on the opposite side of the road from the school, a little to the left in the centre of a block of terraced houses with the Post Office at the far end of the block.

At the rear of his shop premises across the entry was a rectangular piece of land where Mr. Fletcher kept his animals in line for slaughter. This slaughter yard was enclosed by a six foot high wall running round three sides, and at the far end, was a loft running across and one loft returning down the side. Under the far loft was the place where the butcher stood for scalding and scraping the carcasses and a low, wooden bench for bleeding and carving. Coming out of school at finishing time, the leading lads would turn around and shout “Cum on lads. Tha con ‘ert pigs squealin’. Owd Fletchers at it.” On hearing this, there would be a rush through the gates across the road, passing the “Little Pig”, up Edgeworth Street and turning left at the Ellamsbridge Road entry. Next was the problem of scaling the walls. “Leg ups” were called for, and, sitting astride the walls, we were soon giving pull-ups to those down below. Soon the walls were packed with us spectators. Owd Fletcher would indicate the pig he wanted to both his sons, whose job it was to bring it out and try and get it near the trestle, or bench, while he stood ready to swing at it with a long shafted big hammer, probably about seven to nine pounds in weight. He would aim at the top of the head, and the idea was to stun it. While this was going on it was pandemonium. Us lads were shouting and clapping - “Knock it bog-eyed” was the cry. Owd Fletcher was shouting and giving orders, the pig was squealing its loudest, realising its time had come, and this set the other pigs off squealing. At last, the blow was struck and they wrestled it on to the low table, where Owd Fletcher gave an extra sharpen to his knife on the steel. A bucket was placed under the pig’s throat to catch the blood when its throat was cut. This was used for Black Puddings.

That was the end of the pig’s life, but not the end of its usefulness. The pig was scalded, scraped, washed and hung up by rope blocks, and what an important service it could provide for us, especially in wartime. There was bacon, ham, pork, ribs, neck, trotters, tail, the head was boiled, liver and lights for “Savoury Ducks”. The left over bits and pieces were all boiled together and moulded into a meat and jelly like substance called “Brawn”. Slabs of fat bacon provided the fat, after frying, for “Dip Butties”. Everything about it was, and is, so very tasty.

It played its part in providing us lads with many an hours sport. We, who were customers of Fletchers, would ask him for a pig’s bladder which, when blown up and tied, provided us with a football. Sometimes the pig’s bladder was inserted into the outer cover of a football, blown up which we called a case ball, brown and leather and laced up. So different from the modern piebald football used at the present time.

Quite a number of people in Sutton at this time kept the odd pig or two, and as there were no canteens or restaurants in those days, the owners relied on neighbours to save all their household scraps, such as potato peelings, cabbage leaves and old bread - anything at all edible. These were put in a bucket and then us lads would take them back road, up the entries to the keepers. We would be rewarded with a penny for the contents and our trouble.

Owd Fletcher versus the Big Pig

Oh, the laughter and excitement we lads had on this occasion! It carried on all that night and throughout the following day at school. We came out of school that night and raced to Fletchers slaughter yard, scrambled on top of the walls and waited for the show to begin.

All at once the lads nearest the pig sty started shouting "There's a whopper of a pig in ere. Its biggest grunter wiv ever sin." "Ar big is it?", shouted us lads who could not see into the sty. "Thall sken it when they let it goo", they shouted back. The two Fletcher brothers went into the sty, but they were having a handful with it to drive it out. Owd Fletcher shouted "Try and let its head come through the gate. I'm ready with the big hammer." He swung at the pig's head and gave it a hard blow, hard enough to kill the average pig, but not this one - its skull must have been abnormally thick. The pig came charging out at Owd Fletcher, who threw the hammer to one side and took to his heels around the yard, to the accompaniment of loud shouts and applause from us lads on the wall.

The two sons ran out of the pig sty to try and divert the pig from chasing their dad, but the pig soon had all three running around the yard. Now, the only escape from the floor of the yard, apart from the big double doors leading to the entry, which they could not open (as the pig would then have been running wild around the estate!), was a ladder leading up to the loft. It was the old fashioned type of box ladder, used in stables for access to lofts. It was perpendicular, fixed to the walls and had sides approximately six inches deep with a front board fastened to these, with stirrup shaped holes cut out for hand and foot holds. This, then, was the only avenue of escape for them, but only one at a time could take advantage of it. Meanwhile, the pig was still chasing them, determined to get its own back.

The two sons shouted "You get up the loft first, Dad". So Owd Fletcher made a mad rush to the ladder and just managed to climb and get clear of the pig and into the loft, where he sank into the hay, exhausted. I suppose he had not had such violent exercise for some time.

The big pig was still chasing the sons, but was slowing down, and first the younger son made it up the ladder, followed, next time round, by the older brother. They also sank into the straw and hay with evident relief, and were quite content to stay there for a while. Meanwhile, the pig, having lost its opponents, was quietly rooting round the floor of the yard.

Time was getting late, and the Fletcher family did not seem eager to resume, so we all dropped off the wall and made our way home, still laughing about the way the pig had turned on Owd Fletcher and his two sons.

The School Brook

The fascination of water, especially running water, will forever be a source of wonder and delight for all children. For us at Sutton National School, our brook was a never ending source of changing moods during the ten years myself and others attended there.

Always early for school, and living close to both school and the brook, the weather had to be really bad for me and others to miss running down to the brook each morning to witness whether it was running high or placidly flowing sweetly along its course.

The closing down of the Manchester and Liverpool Glass Co. in 1903, and with it the cessation of effluent and adulterated water from the filter beds into the brook, meant that the stream ran clear again, and sticklebacks or jack sharps swam about in abundance. Down where the brook turned towards Watery Lane and Berrys Lane, flocks of tame ducks swam about.

The brook ran clear until the Nuera Silk Co. came, and when they finished, the British Sidac Cellophane Manufacturers came, and with these the pollution of the brook returned in 1926.

I refer to this, because from 1910, when I was born, to 1926, when I was sixteen years old, the brook ran clear and it would be about the year 1913 when I first recollected the brook and it was so unusual, it has always remained in my mind.

Across from the house where I was born at 64 Edgeworth Street was an opening between the house across the way and Davies Milk Dairy, which led onto the "Show Back" or "Show Field". This was a rectangular piece of ground about 100 yards long and 50 yards wide, lying between the rear of Edgeworth Street and the rear of Peckershill Road, bounded by the rear of Robins Lane, and at the opposite end, Fisher Street, with the other opening onto Taylor Street.

On this piece of land, the travelling show people came at various times in the year. There were wild beast shows, circuses, fairs selling all kinds of wares, and the fairgrounds, with merry-go-rounds, coconut stalls, clay pipe stalls and flying boats. People living at the Robins Lane end protested to the Council about the noise etc. caused by the wild beast shows - at night restless animals such as lions and tigers roared - so these were stopped from coming, but the circuses and fairgrounds carried on with their visits.

One particular morning, I remember my two older brothers hurrying me through the front door onto the pavement and holding me up to see the elephant with its trainer coming through the opening opposite our house. It walked ponderously down the street, stopping at times to take crusts of bread and cabbage leaves from people thronging the pavement, and then it made its way down the street, followed by a good number of people. It turned left at the bottom into Ellamsbridge Road and then up the 'brow', which led to the infants school and then into School Brook to sink its trunk in to quench its thirst, to the great enjoyment of all those who watched. So that is my earliest recollection of the School Brook.

When the warm summer days came round, all us youngsters would make our way down to the brook armed with a fishing net attached to a cane, and a jam jar, searching for jack sharps. Clogs and stockings would come off and into the clean stream we would wade, up and down without a care in the world.

And what warm summers we used to have. They seemed to last much longer than today. The “water cart” would work its way around the cobbled streets to deg the dry dust and the tar would melt and blister between the sets in the roadways, and these blisters would burst between our fingers. But alas, the seasons change and winter, following autumn, would remorselessly come upon us and the heavy rains and snowfalls, followed by thaws. Then, as we ran down Edgeworth Street, we could hear our brook, a strange mixture of sound, gurgling and roaring through Ellamsbridge Road. Down to the bridge we would all run and lean over the sandstone wall that ran from the gable end of the old public house called the Red Rat, and the water would have risen over the archway of the bridge and with the weight of water behind it would be fighting to go through the tunnel and then we would run across the road to see it emerging shooting up into the air and spraying all around, before racing down Worsley Brow to Watery Lane and Berrys Lane.

Going into school, the register would be called and some schoolmates from the Watery Lane area and “Rolling Mill” would be absent, and the cry would go up saying to the teachers “They can’t come today, teacher. It’s flooded all round Watery Lane.”

Some of the houses in this low lying area had both front and back doorways bricked up about two feet high to prevent floods in the lower rooms.