

## **Chapter 5: The Boys School, Clergy and Religion in Sutton**

From 1917 to 1924, I attended the large school. I enjoyed every year I spent there, from Standard One to Standard Ex Seven. The teachers were kind and considerate with the exception of one poor man. I only realised later that he was neurotic and patience was not one of his strong cards. He was unhappy and the times that we spent with him were unhappy. Mr. Arthur Helsby was his name. He was the music teacher and the choir master. He taught arithmetic, mental arithmetic, composition, dictation, spelling, poetry, science, art, geometry, drill and exercising and scripture (both Old and New Testament). On a Tuesday morning, we all assembled in the schoolyard. We then went into school for prayers and the calling of the register. We then went back into the schoolyard where we formed into our classes. We were then marched off, two by two, to All Saints Church accompanied by our teachers. Once we reached the church, us boys filed off into the left hand side of the church, the girls to the right.

Hymn books were given out and shared between two or three of us. Looking back, the hymns appealed to most of us but I cannot remember a single sermon preached by the vicar. The vicar was known as “Owd Colegrove”. To my mind, he lacked the common touch. We never saw him smile. He was remote from us and there was a period where the parish split through his arrogance. He had decided to alter the church service to what we call high church. This led to two services taking place every Sunday at All Saints.

The vicar was to be seen coming out of the vestry followed by a man named Eardley carrying a candelabra. We referred to him as “Owd Colegrove’s Disciple”. “Owd Colegrove” would then commence his service from the pulpit end of the church whilst another band of worshippers conducted their own “regular” service at the front end of the church under the guidance of J. Thompson. These people called themselves the “Ironsides”

I knew Mr. Thompson from being quite small. He was the agent for the Collins Green and Bold collieries. He lived in the “Bank House”, Bold. I remember lengthy letters appearing in the St. Helens Reporter by the vicar in defence of his change to the service and the criticism by the “Ironside leader”. Mr. Thompson was in favour of retaining the old service. Mr. Thompson later retired from the colliery co. and bought Leach Hall. The vicar’s attitude caused quite a lot of people to stop attending All Saints Church. Instead they went to St. Nicholas or “top Church” at New Street. The service was not interfered with there.

### **My first Visit to the Vicarage, 1919**

It was Saturday and the day was hot and sunny. There were four of us lads aged eight to nine years old. We decided against going to the “penny rush”, the Saturday afternoon matinee at the “Sutton Empire” in Junction Lane, which was nick-named the Sutton Bug. We decided to walk to New Street to watch the cricket. There was always a match taking place. We could watch the match and when we grew bored, we could tumble and wrestle in the long grass outside the boundaries.

As the afternoon wore on, with the hot sun beating down on us, our thoughts turned to our thirsts. One of us said “I’m dying for a drink of summat”. “So am I”, replied the three of us together.

We had no coppers in our pockets to buy “pop” at the old wooden pavilion. We decided to walk down to the vicarage, to ask for a drink of water. One of us said hopefully “hey we might get a glass o milk iff wi show ar manners”.

We knocked on the front door, but there was no reply. We tried a couple of times. Eventually the door opened slightly and we could just see the vicar’s wife’s face. Before we could speak she barked “what is it?” We all spoke up together “can we have a drink of water Mrs. Colegrove please?” She then said “where do you live?”. We said “down Sutton”. “Then you will have to manage till you get home”. With that final sentence, she banged the door shut, and left the four of us looking at each other. One of us then said “that’s goodbye to that glass of milk”, I said “never mind, with a face like that she’d have turned it sour”. With this, we Christened her “Owd vinegar face”.

### **My Second Visit to the Vicarage, 1923**

It was four years later that I had to visit the vicarage again. I was now in the top class called “Ex Seven”. In those days you could reach this class on “exam merit”. However poor progress and poor exam performance also meant that lads could stay down in a particular class. Some lads even at thirteen or fourteen never left standard five. I never remember anyone making a song and dance about this policy. It was looked on as the norm. If they were good at sport, this did not prevent them playing for the school. No fun was pointed at them. They were our school mates.

The headmaster Mr. Plews sent for me and asked me if I could ride a bike. I replied that I could. He said “I have some magazines that the teachers have finished reading. I want you to take them every week to the vicarage for Mr. Colegrove to read. You may take one of the teachers’ bicycles from the bike shed. When you have finished delivering them, put the bicycle back in the shed and see if it is all right”. I picked my bike out, one that I could reach, and rode off to the vicarage. When I arrived, I went to the front door and knocked twice. The door opened and that face showed again through the aperture. Before I could speak she hissed “take them to the parish room” and she again slammed the door shut. I thought to myself that Owd Vinegar Face had not improved before I started to think about the parish room. You see I, and the others like me, have always regarded the “Blinkhorn Rooms” as the parish room. The Blinkhorn Rooms were situated in Waterdale Crescent, but have now been demolished to make room for the curate’s or vicar’s house. The rooms had been presented to the parish in the nineteenth century by the manager of the Sutton Glass Works Wm. Blinkhorn. It was used in the early days for schooling and in my early days as a place for Women’s Fellowship to meet. After I had left school, it was being used as a gymnasium. We subscribed for three old pennies a week.

Having pondered such rude behaviour at the vicarage, I made up my mind to take the magazines down New Street to deposit them through the letter box of “Blinkhorn Rooms”. I then returned to the school, returned my bike to the bike shed after inspecting it and then went to see Mr. Plews. I explained what had happened to Mr. Plews who smiled and said “you probably did not know that the parish room she was referring to lies to the rear of the vicarage. Mrs. Colegrove should have had the courtesy to explain that to you. Never mind this time, you will know in the future”. I came to the conclusion that Christ’s way of teaching and examples had little impression on this unlovely pair - the vicar and his wife. They had so little love and understanding in their make up. The vicar himself, with his red owl like face always seemed to be



*Billy Hardy, Sutton Evangelist*

looking up over our heads whenever he passed us by. I don't think he was dwelling on Heavenly matters. I came to the conclusion that he had an unpleasant upper lip and if he and his wife reached heaven, then there would be a safe passage there for many of us. The vicar was assisted by two curates, Mr. Yorklodge and Mr. Garbutt. Yorklodge was an elderly man who seemed to be in poor health. He would sometimes stumble as he walked and he would often stutter when preaching. I never partook of communion when he was conducting the service. He had a permanent drop on the end of his nose "nuff said". Mr. Garbutt was a much younger man. He was well liked by his parishioners.

### **The Churches and Chapels in Sutton**

The two main bodies of religious following in Sutton were the Church of England Protestants and the Roman Catholics. Other smaller denominations held worship in small chapels. One such chapel was the Independent Methodist Chapel in Herbert Street. Here I have distant memories of "magic lantern shows" on winter nights. I recall Billy Hardy and Dick Kitts breaking away from the Herbert Street chapel to build the "Emmanuel chapel".<sup>1</sup> Billy Hardy later emigrated to America as an evangelist.

The Welsh people, as far as I can recollect, had three chapels. One at the bottom of Peckershill Road near Hoghton Road, a Welsh Baptist chapel in Robins Lane<sup>2</sup> and the "old copper slag chapel" at the corner of Sutton Road and Lancots Lane.

Then there was a small Methodist chapel at the corner of Edgeworth Street and Robins Lane known as the Tin chapel. Its outside walls and roof were encased in corrugated sheets. When support faded, it was taken over by St. Anne's R.C. Church for receptions. It has now been demolished. There was a Wesleyan church in Sutton Road, a large building where we used to socialize on an evening after leaving school. Here we played all sorts of games, blind man's buff, guessing games and kiss in ring. We greatly enjoyed ourselves here. This building has now finished serving as a place of worship. A smaller and neater looking building has been built in New Street. It will take a lot of faith and perseverance to offset the vandalism taking place in the neighbourhood.

St. Anne's Monastery and church were built and opened in 1852. They were largely built under the directorship of John Smith, a Roman Catholic benefactor. Unfortunately, due to subsidence, the steeple was removed and the church itself was later demolished. The new church was opened in 1973, a smaller model of the Liverpool Roman Catholic Cathedral. Adjoining this lovely modern church is the "shrine" containing the remains of Father Dominic Barbari.<sup>3</sup> Fr Dominic was an Italian born in Italy 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1792. He later died in Reading in 1849 aged 57 years. He was a very learned man and became a Passionist priest. It is believed that he had spiritual power which he used to comfort and heal the afflicted.

Two more bodies rest in the shrine. One is an English man named George Spencer, a son of Earl Spencer and uncle to Winston Spencer Churchill. He was a converted Anglican clergyman and a great friend of Father Dominic. Another conversion to the Roman Catholic faith was a Protestant girl named Elizabeth Prout, who later was known as Mother Mary Joseph. She was the founder of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion.

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<sup>1</sup> Later known as "The Church of the Nazarene" in Helena Road.

<sup>2</sup> Used as a food store and then taken over by East Sutton Darby and Joan senior citizens club

<sup>3</sup> Now known as Blessed Dominic after beatification

She died on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1864, after making great sacrifice in her life among the millworkers around Manchester.

Due to the fact that I and my wife have lived within the old curtilage of St. Annes for many years, we have witnessed the pilgrimages and changes made over the years around the monastery.

### **The Peacemakers**

When I was quite young, it was a common place sight to see the priests from St. Annes clad in their black robes and sandalled feet hurrying across the opening in front of our house and crossing the Show Field to the streets around Peckershill Road.

Could it be that someone was ill or nearing the end? Possibly, but that was not always what made them hurry. Sometimes it was the fact that a member or members of their parish were engaged in a bare fist fight or fights.

Coming out of school we would hear shouting and large crowds would be seen in Peckershill Road, outside the "Round House"<sup>4</sup>. The first lads out of school would shout "Come on lads, there's a feight on again" and as fast as we could, we would run to join the crowd.

In the centre would be seen the two battlers. They might just be two locals settling an argument, or a local man fighting an Irishman. In most cases they would be inflamed, with drinks after being in one of the trio of local pubs - the Round House, the Alexandra Vaults in Fisher Street, or the Prince of Wales at the top of Junction Lane. Now only the Prince of Wales remains; the others have been demolished.

Most of the menfolk in the crowd would be shouting advice to one or other of the fighters, and some women or friends would be shouting "Stop 'em", but all to no avail. The local policeman on his beat would be notable only for his absence, so someone would be dispatched on a bicycle to St. Anne's Monastery to inform the priests that another fight was on outside the Round House, and one or both of the fighters belonged to the parish.

So, the priest would come in his cloak and sandalled feet, and the crowd would open up and he would be in the centre of the ring with them, firmly rebuking them for their disorderly conduct, and telling one or both he wanted to see them at church. That would be the end of the fight and everyone would disperse.

On reflection, I never saw our Vicar at one of these battles. I think he lived on a different planet to us common, down-to-earth Suttoners.

### **The Local Preachers: John Kitts and Chippy Southern**

At the turn of the century there were the horse drawn wagonettes; later on the petrol driven, solid wheeled "charabanc"; and later still the "saloons", with their pneumatic tyres. Whenever a party departed from Sutton on some visit outside and a sprinkling of Methodists were on board, one of the local preachers, a lay preacher would climb aboard to say a prayer for the safety of all passengers and for the safe return of everyone.

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<sup>4</sup> It was called this by the locals due to its curved front, but its proper name was the Locomotive Inn

They were devout men, sincere and easily understood - as we used to remark, "They have no edge about them."

And so I would now like to pay tribute to two men of this kind. They were two of a kind and of the same mould, both in their religious outlook and physically. Both were thickset, of medium height with ruddy features and generous moustaches.

They wore suits of warm, heavy tweed, and, above their strong boots, their trousers were gripped to their legs by two pairs of bicycle clips. They would be seen either riding abreast or in single file, coming up the road on their old-fashioned strong framed bicycles with a large carrier box secured over their rear wheels. After reaching a particular spot, they would dismount and either prop their bicycles against a wall or grassy bank and then, standing shoulder to shoulder, with a hymn book in their hands, they would raise their lusty voices and sing a hymn to all and sundry within earshot. Next, one would preach his sermon. They had no need of a pulpit. The ground or pavement they were standing on was good enough for them. They waged an endless war against the taking of strong drink and the excess of it. The spots they chose to preach would have daunted a great many, but they had the courage of their convictions. The ones that spring readily to my mind was one at the top of Junction Lane, opposite the Prince of Wales public house; Bold Road, outside the Farmer's Arms; Reginald Road, outside the Engine and Tender; the Pickled Egg in Sutton Road, and the occasion of the opening of the new Wheatsheaf at the bottom of Mill Lane in 1938.

The opening of the Wheatsheaf was a great day for the ale drinkers. Greenalls, the Brewers, promised to give a pint of ale, free of charge, to all who came to the opening. Before opening time a great crowd had assembled of men with great thirsts, waiting expectantly for the doors to open and opposite, standing shoulder to shoulder, were these two resolute characters, John Kitts and Chippy Southern. They sang and preached and warned about the perils of strong drink and said that when the men entered through those doors, they were entering the "House of the Devil", and that if they carried on with this way of life, they would eventually go to Hell. However, when the doors opened, the thirsty men all trooped into the New Wheatsheaf - a pint of free ale was more enticing to them than the thoughts of living an afterlife in Hell, and only John Kitts and Chippy Southern remained outside. But you could not dishearten this great-hearted pair of men.

The Old Wheatsheaf Hotel, now closed, was in Lionel Street, alongside the St. Helens Junction Station. The last landlord was Dave Rothwell. Sam Tickle was also at one time a landlord of the Old Wheatsheaf and a colliery winder at Bold Colliery when I started at Bold. He looked after the main ventilation fan in the Fan House at Bold, having been moved from the job of winding because of his age - he was then over 80 years old. He and his brother, Billy Tickle, both looked after the Fan House, continually walking round the bearings in the fan machinery. They both worked twelve hour shifts - 6am to 6pm and 6pm to 6am.

### **John Kitts**

John Kitts never did things by halves. His early life as a young man was spent in the ale houses, drinking, gambling and brawling. His dog used to accompany him wherever he went and in the pubs, for a bit of fun, he trained his dog to nose his way into fellow

drinkers' pockets for odd coins, causing much laughter. He was a collier, and worked down below.

Suddenly, he changed his way of life. He deserted the pubs and took to working on his plot in Sutton Road, where the Metaline firm now stands. He kept poultry, and the eggs they produced went, safely packed, in the carrier box at the rear of his bicycle. Alongside these were collection boxes which he distributed around the district to various people to collect money for the missionaries, who went out to the Belgian Congo to bring Christianity to the black people out there. To the people who helped him to collect he would leave whatever eggs he could spare.

He carried on this good and Christian work to the grand age of 87 years, when fate struck him a cruel blow. He left his bicycle in Gower Street, and when he came to collect it, the bicycle was gone, stolen. He decided to walk home and slipped and fell on the cobble stones in the road and broke his legs. Complications set in and he died. In every sense of the word, he was a true Christian. From the Emmanuel Church, John Kitts' son, John, left Sutton in 1938 to take up missionary work in the Belgian Congo for a period of ten years.

### **Billy (Chippy) Southern**

Chippy Southern also was a collier and worked down the pit at Bold Colliery. His early life at Burtonwood was spent on the same lines as John Kitts, working hard and drinking hard at night, and game for a scrap anytime. He came home one evening worse for drink, and he beheld his wife and quite a lot of neighbours listening to a travelling preacher, who was appealing to his listeners for help to enable missionaries to be sent out to Africa to teach Christianity to the uneducated black people out there. He asked for people who were prepared to help to follow him and form a procession. Chippy Southern said to his wife "That man is a good man. I believe him and what he says. I am going to follow him." Chippy's wife said "Don't be daft, Billy. You'll make a show of yourself in your state." But Chippy was determined to follow the preacher and fell in behind the procession, and from that day on he never took any alcohol. He teamed up with John Kitts, preaching against the drinking in the pubs, and both of them collected for the missionaries.

### **The New Chapel**

Billy Hardy and John Kitts, strong Methodists, were fired with the ambition to build a new church on a plot of ground in Helena Road. They left the Methodist church in Herbert Street and, with Chippy Southern, they founded the Emmanuel Church on this piece of ground. Later they changed its name to "The Church of the Nazarene" and Billy Hardy left these shores to take up the work of evangelism in America.

### **Chippy's Son Tom and My Brother Fred**

Earlestown Market acted like a great magnet to people of all ages on Fridays, especially Friday nights. They came in coaches, some walked, and some came by train from the surrounding districts of Newton, Sutton, Clock Face, Sutton Manor, Parr and Haydock. In the absence of entertainments such as TVs etc., it became a meeting place for people to shop and look for bargains, a meeting place for teenagers, and the pubs were there for the drinkers.

It was somewhere to go, especially in the dark nights of winter. It had a special attraction of its own. The market stalls were all lit up, with naphtha flares making their sizzling and hissing noises, the cries of the stall holders selling their wares, and the “Lino Slappers”. The “Lino Men” auctioned rolls of linoleum - people were covering the old red and blue tiles in their homes that needed scrubbing and washing each day with these rolls of linoleum - and crowds of people surrounded them as each roll was placed on its end and the auctioneer shouted out his price and emphasised it by hitting the lino roll with the flat of his hand. He would bring the price down a bit to suit his customers’ pockets. Times were bad, and men stood by when a purchase was made by some housewife, ready to ask if they could carry it to the train for them, for a tip of some kind.

The age of the motor car had not arrived at that period of 60 years ago, and the problem of bulky goods being taken home was sometimes a difficult one to solve. The people who came by train could, for a small charge, put the goods in the goods van, and could leave it at their destination in the left luggage office, to be picked up later by their own menfolk. Those that came by coach, or charabanc as they were called in those days, were advised by the driver or proprietor how to get the goods home if they were too large for his vehicle. A firm doing such trips was Bridges in Ashcroft Street, who ran trips to Earlestown on Friday nights. They catered for the people round the Fingerpost area in Parr.

And such a Friday night as this was when Chippy Southern’s son Tom, who was nicknamed “Tor”, came down Sutton from Burtonwood on his motorcycle to pick up my brother Fred to go for a ride out together. They rode around for a time and then decided to ride to Earlestown Market.

They came roaring up Market Square and came to a halt by the roadside alongside Market Square. Little did they know that, unknowingly, Chippy Southern and John Kitts had forestalled them and had set up their position alongside the market stalls to sing and preach to the people thronging the market.

Chippy was holding forth about the folly of drink when he heard the motorbike pull up and immediately recognising his son, Tor, he pointed an accusing finger at Tor and Fred, and shouted to the bystanders standing around “There’s an example of a young lad and his mate on that machine of the Devil. There’s only one place that they will end up and that is through the Gates of Hell.” Fred told me afterwards that all eyes were turned on him and Tor, and Tor said “Hang on Fred, let’s get out of this.” With that, he jumped on the kickstart and roared off to the Railway Inn, parked the motorcycle and went inside, where they both saw the funny side of it and started to laugh. The regulars wanted to know what was amusing them, and when told, they had a good laugh as well, for they knew as well as anyone the tactics Chippy Southern and John Kitts got up to in their ceaseless war against drink outside the public houses.