

## **Chapter 8: 1917 to 1924. Sutton National C. of E. Boys School and Teachers**

They were a grand lot of teachers in our boys school. Now I think they will all have passed on. God bless them all. There was one exception. No one liked him, some even hated him. I suppose, looking back, he drove himself and others under him, too hard, to improve their teaching skills. He took the classes for music. He was the choir master for All Saints church and he was always referred to by us as "Owd Tolly". The writing on walls, seen frequently these days, was seldom seen then. I remember coming to school one Monday morning to see the words "Tolly is daft" written in large letters with white chalk around the playground walls. After prayers that morning, Mr. Plews, the headmaster, thundered out that if he found out who the culprit was who had defaced the walls around the playground, he would flog him in front of all the school. The warning went home there and then. There was no further writing on the walls.

When you are seven years old, even the youngest of teachers look grown up. It was not surprising that several teachers changed their name due to marriage. Miss Golding became Mrs. Langford, Miss. Simms, the art teacher, became Mrs. Russell, Miss Wilkinson became Mrs. Mills and Miss. Smith became Mrs. Brown. Miss Saunders, daughter of the old Bold blacksmith, remained a spinster. She was tremendously fond of children and she was well liked. Mrs. Belshaw, a Scotch lady, was already married making the total number of ladies teaching in the boys school six. They taught the lower classes with the exception of Mrs. Langford who taught the XVII standard. Myself and others moved from standard V to VI, leaving the female teachers behind. We moved to be taught by Mr. Joseph Pritchard. In class we referred to him as "Owd Joe". He was a great character and had spent a great number of years at the school. In fact, he had taught some of my classmates' fathers. He was a good teacher. He had a good sense of humour and he told us a joke now and then. He was loved and respected by all my classmates.

I can see him now walking from St. Helens Junction Station with slow and measured tread, wearing a bowler hat, a clerical grey suit, a grey overcoat and carrying an umbrella tightly coiled, which he used as a walking stick. "Owd Joe" came from Liverpool but he spoke in plain English without a trace of a Scouse, Lancastrian or indeed any other accent.

Mr. Pritchard was of portly build His iron grey hair was thinning and it was on the short side with a neat grey moustache. I imagine he must have been sixty plus when I reached his class, Standard VI. He told us that he had come to teach in Sutton well before the turn of the century. He recalled his first day at the Sutton National School.

"I left the train at Junction Station and descended the steps outside, before crossing Station Road. I passed by the Junction Inn and looking across Junction Lane, I saw a group of men standing outside the Barber's shop. The shop was situated at the corner of what we called "the Cinder Walk" (now called Cecil Street), due to it being an unpaved road. They looked a rough lot to me. Some were wearing scarves around their necks. Some wore a tie without a collar. All had cloth caps on. It wasn't so much what they were wearing so much as the fact that they were eyeing me all over. I steadily walked towards them. One of them shouted "who's yon?" to which the others replied "don't know". Others then shouted "let's clod a brick at 'im". At this point, I held my hand up and asked "Can you direct me to the Sutton National Boys School? My name is Joe

Pritchard, I have come to teach there”. That inquiry dispelled any trouble that could have followed. “Up lane mister, turn reet and then left bit Round House<sup>1</sup> and its on’t reet pas tripe shaws thall not miss it” came the answer to my question. I thanked them and from that day on, I always got a cheery “good morning” from them and everyone I met on the way to school.

After prayers in the morning, the screens separating the hall into rooms were pushed into place. We assembled in the correct classroom to have the register called. “Owd Joe” would sit on a form to take us for a scripture lesson. His favourite stories were taken from the Old Testament. He told us about how the Israelites were in bondage and about their flight from Egypt across the Red Sea and the fate of the Egyptian hosts. He used to tell us about the customs and the way of life in Hebrew families, and about modern Jewish Life and traditions in Great Britain. We sat intent that we would not miss a single word. He had nicknames for us. Billy Critchley was called “Jody Moss” because he had taught his father Joe who had lived on the Moss.

Some of the lads were not too clever at spelling. Whenever we were reading, we had to stand up and read out loud. Some of the boys used to stumble and stammer over long words. Mr. Pritchard would shout “Call it Manchester if it’s too big for you.”

He was a good teacher. He took the trouble to explain matters and he had bags of patience. It was a rarity for him to use the strap.

Now it was the last day before the Christmas holidays. We had had our exams and a number of us had been told that we were going up into standard VII. That was the class Mr. Helsby taught. When I looked round at my classmates who were moving up, I could see nothing on their faces but gloom and in some cases, fright.

The ones who were staying down were full of glee, and we were wishing we could stay down with “Owd Joe”.

The Christmas holidays over, we were back at school. Prayers had been said, and we fled out of the main room, prepared for the worst. Before we came into school, those of us who were moving up into Standard VII had been taunted by others who were staying down, saying “Wait till Owd Tolly gets owd o’ yo with ‘is strap. Eel murder yo.”

Some people say there is a Devil, and we believed it then. I suppose the Devil can come in different guises, and we pictured him as “Owd Tolly”.

I remembered “Owd Joe” telling me to mend the case ball prior to games. I sat on the floor in the cloakroom, putting a patch on the bladder with a tube of solution, near the washbowls, when “Owd Tolly” came in and stood watching me without saying one word and no smile on his face. I remember thinking “What’s up wi’ ‘im? He doesn’t look so pleased. I think he must hate football and rugby.”

Well did I know it. The next music lesson, he switched over from singing out of the song books, and, after a brief explanation on the blackboard, he made us all stand up with music books in hand and he picked on me to begin. I was completely at sea. It was

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<sup>1</sup> Now called the Locomotive Inn.

foreign to me, and after a second or two, when he insinuated I was a “dunderhead”. He said “Hold out your hand, Bamber. I cannot waste time on you.” With that, he hit me across the hand and then said “Hold the other one out.” He hit me again, with force, and when I leaned forward to hold my hands together and then place them under my armpits, he struck me across the back. He continued along the class, giving others a single strap across the hand when they failed to describe the correct note.

I well remember that lesson. There was more weeping than singing. When we returned to our own class under “Owd Joe”, he could tell we had all been through it and said “Let me have a look at your hand, Bamber.” I showed him both hands, and on the back of one was a red weal, the shape of the strap. “Owd Joe” shook his head from side to side and said “Take it easy till going home time. You don’t need to write, with your hand like that.”

That was the difference between “Owd Tolly” and “Owd Joe” - the difference between good and bad.

I remember Tolly asking me if I would like to join the choir, to which I shook my head. I then said I would blow the organ for him when he played on Tuesday mornings for the school assembly in All Saints Church, a duty which I did until leaving school. It got me out of singing in the choir on a Tuesday, and also got me out of listening to the prattling of the vicar, another man I did not like.

“Owd Tolly” was devoid of all sporting instincts. An instance of this was whenever it was games time, he put sums on the blackboard and told us that they must be done before we could go out and play football, cricket or rugby. Some of the lads never got out to play because of this. This stopped us practising together and forming a school team. Standards VI, VII and Ex VII all had games time together and he had it planned to make most of the lads miserable, oh yes!

It was common knowledge amongst us lads how he came by his nickname “Tolly”. The older boys said that during a music lesson, we had to sing “toll for the brave”. Mr. Helsby told us that it was better to sing “toll” rather than “tole” and so with this, he earned his nickname. Empire day was “Owd Tolly’s day”. We would assemble in the long room. Some of us would have roughly made swords, painted with silver paint and wooden Roman shields. They would wear paper hats and they would wave their Union Jack flags. In the centre of the room was a piano with “Owd Tolly”. He would play with great gusto patriotic songs, which we would all sing. We sang such songs as “Wider still and wider shall thy bounds be set”, “There’s a land a dear land that from East unto West” and “What is the meaning of Empire Day?” Everyone seemed to be proud of being British and the fact that the British Empire reached to all corners of the world. However, looking back, to when our country was looked upon as the wealthiest, that wealth did not reach the poor or the working classes. Many a time I had to stand on my seat whilst an inspection was made of our clothing and footwear. Many of my classmates wore cast off clothes from an older brother, regardless of how ill fitting they were. Often breeches were patched up on the seat so that they could still be worn. There were clog and stocking funds for those who had no footwear at all.

Head examinations for “nits” were also common. Notes to attend the clinic were made out for those who were found to be “suffering”. When we went home and told our parents that they were searching for dirty heads at school, talk about the Spanish Inquisition! We had to kneel down in front of our mother with a newspaper on her lap beneath our face. She then got busy with her steel comb.

One lad went through his schooling in a form all by himself, in different classes to the others. I suppose all of us lads were cruel in those days. We all addressed the lad as “stink”. This name calling did not seem to affect him as he had got used to it from a tender age. It was his parents that were at fault. He later left home, married and corrected himself. It is ironic that now our Empire has been ripped apart to exist as a small shadow of its former self our schools, are like palaces, our children are well nourished and our working conditions have improved beyond recognition. It makes one think where did the wealth of that Empire go in the early days of the 20th Century?

Back to school. As I have already described, “Owd Joe” took us for the “Old Testament”. “Owd Tolly” took us alternately for the “New Testament”. He used to set us a chapter or some verses from a chapter to learn off by heart. Two days later, he expected us to recite it from memory as best we could. We all had to stand and if we failed to recite it, we got the strap. There was more strapping than reciting! Some of us described this lesson as “murder lesson”. I recount one such time. We left prayers and filed into the classroom. Preparing for the worst, we took our places, standing up behind our desks. We hated every moment, expecting “Owd Tolly” to walk in any moment. To our joy, “Owd Joe” walked in. He smiled and said “Good morning, it’s quite a surprise for you is it not? I am now in charge of Standard VII, Mr Helsby has moved down to take charge of Standard VI!” We replied “Good morning Sir”. Everyone’s face was wreathed in smiles. We had escaped the dreaded “Tolly” - except for music and the New Testament that is!

Our good fortune continued. It was 1922, I had two years to go at school and I was tremendously interested in sport. I had already played cricket for the school team and I was looking forward to playing football and especially rugby league. The school had brought in a new master, a younger man than Mr. Pritchard and Mr. Helsby to teach Standard V and to take standards V,VI, VII and ExVII for sport. This altered a lot of things for us. His name was Mr. James Webster. Twice a week, we assembled in the schoolyard at 3.30pm. to be addressed by Mr. Webster. The first time we met he said “Are we all here?”. I replied “No sir, Mr. Helsby keeps his boys in to do sums before they can come out to play. He does not like sport and that makes it difficult to pick the best team”. Mr. Webster looked grim but he didn’t comment on it. He then said “Have we a football strip?” We replied that we had played Robins Lane in our own clothes and an assortment of jerseys that we had borrowed. We had two footballs, a rugby ball, a set of wickets, a ball and three sets of pads. Mr. Webster then said that he would inquire about getting a strip for us. The following week, he said that we shouldn’t hold out too much hope about getting our strip this season, perhaps next season we would have it if the authorities could be persuaded to help out. We were all disappointed but I was dead keen to have a football strip. Next day I put it to the lads, to see if they were agreeable to bringing their pennies into school. If Mr. Webster agreed, he could hold the money until we had enough to buy the strip. Mr. Webster went further than that. He went to see Mr. Plews the headmaster. Next morning, Mr. Plews said that anyone interested in contributing to the acquisition of a set of football jerseys and pants could hand it in to

their own teachers, who would keep account of it. In a surprisingly short time, the school had collected enough money to buy a complete set of jerseys and pants and weren't the lads proud and excited when the time came to wear them! We wore them to good purpose playing football and rugby. Our first game was against Robins Lane School, a council school, well equipped with sporting tackle by the council authorities. Not like us. We were a church school like St. Anne's School. We did not get the assistance that the council schools received.

We drew with Robins Lane, two all. We played on our pitch which was the sand tip that stood above the brook alongside Watery Lane. We were watched by a crowd of approximately 300 schoolboys. Matches in both summer and winter were watched by a good number of Sutton people. The goal posts belonged to Sutton Wesley who played there at weekends. The posts were left in position throughout the year. This in itself shows the differences in attitudes to this present day. Today, goal posts have to be taken down and put in a safe place to prevent breakage.

We played our first game of rugby on the "Saints" ground at Knowsley Road. They were a bigger and heavier lot and we lost 19 points to 0. I was asked, after the game, to turn up and practise with the town team. However, my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday was in September and I had two chances of a job. I left and I took up a job as an apprentice joiner at Bold Colliery. The other job I turned down was as an apprentice loco fitter at the engine sheds in Baxters Lane, near to the St. Helens to St. Helens Junction Railway line.

In conclusion, I moved up from Standard VI and left Mr. Pritchard to be taught by Mrs. Langford. She was a lovely person. She taught us science amongst other things. She used to come by bicycle from "Pecks Hill" where she lived. On our last summer holiday from school, she invited all the class to her home. We had a picnic there and she provided sandwiches, cakes and drinks of cocoa. I left behind me ten years of happy schooling, happy memories, good teachers and a good old school. They have pulled it down now to make way for new schools and different methods of teaching. That's the way it goes! Out with the old and in with the new. The old school welcomed hundreds and thousands of Sutton children through its doors. It has seen them make their exits into all walks of life. As I write this narrative now, I know that many of my classmates have departed this life and there are very few of us left.

I know the old school has gone, but what about our teachers? You lose touch with them when you leave them behind to make your own way through life. I have neither heard "top nor tail" of any of them, nor how they have fared, There is one exception, none other than Mr. Helsby, "Owd Tolly" teacher and choir master. He came to a tragic end. He was killed by an express train under Marshalls Cross Bridge, on the main Manchester to Liverpool Railway. He was, to my way of thinking, an extremely unhappy man. A man who never smiled or broke into happy laughter. He looked on the black side of life, never on the bright side. He missed the good things of life. May he find it on the other side.