

Chapter 9 : Clothes, The Last Top Hats and the Funeral of the Soldier

How times change, and fashions too. Up to 1926, when I was sixteen years of age, everyone wore some type of head covering. Some wore cloth caps, some trilbies or so-called soft hats, whilst others wore hard hats called blockers, and men and boys wore overcoats in the winter if they could afford them.

The girls in the winter wore Tam-O-Shanters and scarfs with matching muffs and gloves, with buttoned up boots which they secured with a boot hook. The hook was pushed through the eye of the boot and hooked round the button and pulled through to fasten.

Older ladies wore hats and veils. I well remember my mother going to town, on a Saturday afternoon, shopping, wearing her hat secured with a hat pin and wearing a black veil. The ladies clothes were worn long and reached down to their ankles.

Some of the poorer class of women and girls wore shawls around their shoulders, and when it was cold, over their heads. Some footwear had buttoned up boots, whilst others had neatly made slipper clogs. Girls at school, as far as I can remember wore ankle socks. Legs were bare, and often in the hard, winter months, they had chapped legs as well as us boys, because the majority of us wore short pants and often as not, our stockings were down, but it was something you were hardened to. Later on, the fashion for girls at school and those in their teens was to wear black stockings. Ladies hairdressers came into being, but, to help the customers and the hairdresser, clubs were formed. The girls paid so much a week and had a subscription card and lots were drawn. The first one out of the hat could have the choice of the first week, and the second drawn out got the second week and so on. This helped out the ones who could not pay in full. In Sutton in the early 1920s, there were four barbers' shops: Jack Heyes at the junction of Junction Lane and the Cinder Walk, Peter Evans, where the Sutton Trustees Bank is now, another in Peckershill Road at the corner of Powell Street, and one in Waterdale Crescent, owned by Lawrence Fowles. At present, there are none. The Barber in each shop cut hair at prices of six pence to a shilling, while he also shaved men's beards for the price of twopence.

Each barber employed "Lather Boys", two in number, to do the lathering. One boy was on duty Monday and Wednesday nights, the other boy Tuesday and Thursday, and both on Friday night and all day Saturday. School boys were employed, and for about twelve months or more, four of us boys in Standard EX VII did duty as lather boys. I myself worked for Lawrence Fowles. I received half a crown for three night's work and a full Saturday, and lads were waiting for half a chance to step in your shoes.

This was the way we went about lathering: we arrived at the barber's at five o'clock; we had to be clean and presentable. On the door leading into the kitchen were our white bib aprons, put there by our boss's mother, who made sure they were spotlessly clean. After putting on the aprons, we would check the water in the copper urn, which was coupled to a white water basin, was hot, and then adjust the tap to the gas ring underneath. Next was the soap powder in the tin holder, making sure it was not empty and that our two large lathering cups were clean and the shaving brushes alright and that pieces of paper, about 8" square were handy to place on the customer's shoulder for the barber to wipe the surplus soap and beard off his razor. In those days it was the hollow ground razor -

about three inches long, with a longer handle, which could be moved to suit the angle of shaving.

Looking round the room you would notice three large chairs, and each one had adjustable head rests, with a peg thrust through the support and located in a hole at the back of the chair.

One such chair was facing a table with a large mirror on the wall. On the table rested the barber's shears, clippers, scissors and combs. This chair was used for hair cutting and in those days electricity had not arrived for working tools, so everything was done manually.

The other two chairs were used for shaving. The customer would arrive and usually the barber would ask "Haircut or shave, Sir?" and then indicate his own chair for hair cutting or one of the chairs, usually the one nearest the wash basins, for shaving. I would step forward with a cloth to put around the customer's shoulders and tuck it in carefully around his throat and neck, so the lather would not touch his clothes. Next, I made sure his head was leaning back in a comfortable position on the head rest, fill my cup about three parts full of hot water, making sure it was not too hot, dipping the brush in the cup and sprinkling the soap powder on the brush and trying it out on my left hand for a good lather.

I then stepped forward with the cup in my left hand and brush in my right hand and applied the brush to the face, getting a good rich lather all over his face and throat. Next, with the right hand, the lather would be briskly, but carefully rubbed onto the beard and upper lip if he was clean shaven. This would be done for a couple of minutes, lathering and rubbing around the face until the barber gave you the nod and you would then relather the fellow's face again.

The barber would then break off his hair cutting and, with a few deft strokes of the razor on his strap, step forward and proceed to shave, wiping his razor on the piece of paper resting on his shoulder. This completed, you would lather the face again quickly, and the barber would go round him again for the second time. This done, I would step forward with a small clean towel and dry his face off and ask him if he wanted a puff of powder on his face. Most men said "No", so you would take the towel off from round his shoulders and brush his coat with a clothes brush. All this for two pence and, you know, on a Saturday, one or two customers would have a full week's growth of beard on their faces. This meant three lathers at times.

The barber returned to his hair cutting and I would say "Next for shaving, Sir", and repeat the process over and over again. Come a slack moment from shaving and you would brush the hair up off the floor and, with a clothes brush, brush down the customers who had had their hair cut. When it was busy, time would fly very quickly, and in no time at all, it was finishing time, time to say "Goodnight" to the barber and you were free again.

While on the subject of spare time jobs, two more lads in our class got jobs at the Co-Operative stores, delivering bread each evening. Their job was to load a small red van, which had two large wheels, a covered top and two drop supports from the shafts to keep it level when stationary, with unwrapped loaves of bread and deliver it to

customers round about. One worked for the stores in Peckershill Road, the other at Robins Lane Stores, lying between Oxley Street and Waterdale Crescent.

The half crown I received for my wage under the old monetary system, that was before 1971, was referred to in different ways. It was called half a dollar, two and sixpence, and in present day values, was 25p. The one shilling charge for a haircut was known as a bob and twelve pence - its present value is 5p. The shave which cost two old pennies was called tuppence and its value now would be 5/6p.

And now back to the wearing of top hats and frock tailed coats. As far as I can remember, there were only two people I saw wearing the top hats and frock tailed coats - that is excluding mock top hat weddings, clothes you could hire for the occasion. No, this was the real occasion when they wore the clothes on solemn occasions, not for photography and wedding mementos to be placed in an album.

I would be about five or six years old, and it was during the First World War when we heard people hurrying down the street outside our house and then we heard the sound of slow and solemn music being played. My brother Fred seized me by the hand and we ran to Robins Lane, where people were lining up each side of the road. All the menfolk had taken their hats and caps off and were standing bare headed. We saw a gun carriage being hauled along by soldiers in uniform and on the carriage was a coffin draped with a Union Jack.

The strains of music being played had a very sad and disturbing effect on the people standing in the lane; some women were weeping and the menfolk looked very sad. I looked up at my brother, as I always did, for an explanation, and he said "It's the dead march they are playing, Frank." There was quite a large number of mourners, all dressed in black, walking behind the gun carriage, whilst heading the cortege was Mr. John Duffy, the headmaster of St. Ann's school, dressed in his black frock tailed suit, and carrying his top hat in the crook of his left arm.

We watched them go under the railway bridges and turn left up Monastery Lane, making their way to St. Anne's Church. Who the soldier was, we never knew. These were the times when the two religions of Roman Catholics and Protestants remained aloof from one another.

Now, a few words about Johnny Duffy, as us lads called him. He was tall and of slim build and carried his clothes well. I can see him now, with his distinctive walk, walking down the lane, and a moving scene like this remains indelibly in your memories.

Johnny Duffy was keen on discipline. He was feared by all his pupils. He never spared the cane on the lads who did not try to learn, and to those who did not, his favourite expression was "When you leave school, you will be wheeling a wheelbarrow." The lads who did not attend church on a Sunday were kept back in school on a Friday night, and Johnny Duff and Father Felix, one of the priests at that time, would lecture them about not attending church. Father Felix did not wrap things up. He would say to them "You want a good sized boot behind you on a Sunday morning.", and that was the kind of expression the lads understood - soft talk and pleading would go in one ear and out of the other.

Mr. John Duffy, headmaster of St. Anne's Roman Catholic schools, was a local man, and his family lived in Robins Lane. The house he lived in has now been demolished. In the spaces where the houses stood, now stands the present doctors' surgery, near the Vulcan public house.

Mr. Arthur Helsby, schoolmaster, church organist, music teacher and choir master at All Saints Church, was also a local man. He lived at, and kept, a general shop in Robins Lane, next door to the Red Lion, also known as the "Glass Barrel", on account of a glazed barrel suspended at the front of the public house.

The first time I saw Mr. Helsby wearing a top hat and frock tailed coat was on a visit by the Bishop of Warrington to All Saints Church. Mr. Helsby headed the procession of all our schoolchildren - boys, girls and infants, plus teachers, making their way to their places in church. I also saw him on the occasion of the confirmation services at All Saints, when the Bishop did the laying on of hands. Although you know from my previous writing that I disliked Mr. Helsby, I was very friendly with his two sons, Arthur and Kenneth. They were of a different nature to their father. I liked the pair of them. The other son, Sidney, went to Cowley School and I knew very little about him.

And so those were the only two people in Sutton I saw wearing the top hats and frock tailed coats. It would cause a sensation in Sutton to see the old dress paraded down Sutton. It is hard to believe nowadays, with the majority of people of both sexes going around hatless outdoors, that at first, us young ones felt a certain amount of embarrassment on the first occasion we ventured forth without anything on our heads.

It would be about 1926, and we had all made arrangements to visit Sherdley Park, where the annual Field Day was taking place. A knock came at our front door in Edgeworth Street, and it was 1.30pm - the time we had all arranged to meet.

Much to my surprise, when I beheld the lads, none of them had any headgear on. I remember them laughing and saying to me "Come on Frank. Leave your cap behind. We are all going to the field as we are." With that, I turned out with them just as I was, with nothing on my head. And you would not believe the looks and stares we endured on that walk up Robins Lane and on the field itself. We had indeed joined the "hatless brigade", and in no time at all, other youngsters of our age joined in, and people accepted it.

As with all changing fashions, however, it took a short while to adjust to anything new. My two older brothers were in their early twenties, and still wore their trilby hats, walking sticks and gloves when walking out with their friends, but by the time myself and my friends reached eighteen to twenty years, we never used the walking sticks to walk out with, and that fashion died out, apart from the elderly people walking on a Sunday.

The Red Rat

People have wondered about the odd sounding name given to the little public house standing at the end of a row of houses, with its gable end built on the edge of the school brook at Ellamsbridge Road. How on earth could it have been called the Red Rat?

In the hot summers we had when we were children, and we fished and bathed in the school brook, you would see men sitting, drinking and talking outside the little public

house. The public house closed down on the 29th January 1927. It was in the 1950s, at British Sidac, that excavations and pile driving took place in preparation for new buildings which were to be erected. These excavations revealed a number of old brick tunnels or culverts, that had carried surplus used water and other liquids out from the old works and under the railway and Ellamsbridge Road to the filter or settling beds, and so on into the old school brook. In some of these old culverts were residues of rouge, used in the process of glassmaking, which would eventually make its journey down into the school brook, and colour its water red. In later years, British Sidac also used a surface culvert for waste water and liquid dyes, in the same way as the old glassworks did, and after, when the dye was red and released into the culvert, it made its way to the brook and coloured it.

On one of the occasions when this happened, I was near the main gates when a man came to the gates and asked Mr. Bagot if he could see the manager about a complaint he had to make. Mr. Bagot, the gateman, asked him what was wrong, whereupon he produced a duck out of a cardboard box he was carrying. The duck at one time had been coloured white, but was now coloured red. He also said that his other ducks were coloured red, through swimming in the brook. I realised, on listening to the man, that other inhabitants of the brook would be that colour - namely the water rats. It did not need a great deal of imagination on my part to draw a parallel between the red colouring of the duck, and the appearance of a red rat or rats around that area of the brook when the public house was being built in the old glassworks days, during the last century, for the builder or landlord to call it the apt or odd name of the Red Rat.