

The Brook

Silently coursing, unnoticed below the heaving traffic of present-day Oldbury, is the source of the River Tame. From here it flows east, mainly unseen, through Birmingham until, after 60 miles or so, it joins the Trent at Alrewas.

Growing up in the 1950s though, I knew nothing of this. The sometimes yellow, sometimes blue pungent stream that flowed past our beloved Billy Bonks and briefly surfaced alongside our house - only to disappear underground to see the light of day once more by Broadwell Park - we simply called The Brook.

For my parents, The Brook was a constant cause for concern during periods of heavy rain as our cellar regularly flooded. For us kids it was simply another source of adventure in our polluted urban playground.

The Brook was only accessible in two places.

The field between the Billy Bonks and Low Town provided us with an ideal spot for some fishing. Of course, no fish could survive in these contaminated waters. Instead, we fished with tadpole nets for circular steel blanks. The rusty blanks, around two inches in diameter and a quarter of an inch thick, were an unwanted by-product from the stamping works which stood on the far side of the stream. These blanks were a real favourite of ours and were highly prized for skimming across the canal. Who could get the most bounces on the water and enjoy bragging rights for the rest of the day?

The second access point provided us with a different adventure and a real challenge. Shod in welligogs and armed with stout wooded staves and torches, we tramped across Birmingham Street and down Flash Road. There, in between Oldbury Technical School and Broadwell Park, The brook emerged from its culvert alongside a steep, grassy bank, booby-trapped with nettles and brambles.

The challenge was to descend the bank and wade into the dark, smelly culvert and emerge unscathed, some 200 yards away, outside our house.

'Cum on, yow goo fust.'

'No, I aye. Ar went fust last time. It's yowr turn now.'

There were so many obstacles; discarded pots and pans, broken bricks, coils of wire, old chimney pots, empty bottles, buckled bicycle wheels, smashed tiles. Worst of all though were the rats. There were rats everywhere, or so we thought. And our fear of the rats was contagious, amplified by exaggerated tales of the enormous rodents we'd spotted on previous expeditions.

We never did reach the end of the culvert, as it always ended in disaster. One of us would slip or stumble on something or other submerged in the foul torrent of water. Sometimes tearful, but always dripping wet, we'd climb back up the bank and anxiously trudge home to face our angry mothers.

'Ow many times av I told yow not to goo in that blasted brook. Get them filthy shorts off now and ger inside. Just yow wait 'till ya ferther gets um.'

Happy days!

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