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## Icknield Street, Part 3

Apparating Potteresque on the page before you, I am atop Birchfield Island in Perry Barr. Beneath me the traffic roars through the Walsall Road Underpass. It is one of the few fixed points that remain more or less unchanged amidst the recent spells of urban regeneration spells cast by the corporate sorcerers at UrbanBlandalism.com. Still, the train station is a nice shade of orange. Or is that Perry the Bull Pink?

I have no affinity to the rebranded Perry Barr, it's difficult to forgive such wholesale destruction of a place. The Perry Barr of my youth was such a vibrant place, my frontal cortex is flushed with fond and enduring memories. This place gave me a chance, to learn and to better myself, at Birmingham Polytechnic. Faces and events shuttle up and down and round in my mind like the Baker Building paternoster (riding it all the way round in your first term was very much a thing, aye!). It's changed so much that I'm almost beside myself with annoyance at how little is left. My Alma-mater has fled the scene, its Perry Barr skin shed and swallowed up by the (unused) Commonwealth Games Athletes Village. It was never a pretty place, but it had soul and was filled with such a mix of people from all walks of life. Now it's just another memory, like the Flyover, whose heavy presence has similarly been excised into the ether.

I totter onwards, past the dizzy dog track that goes round and round and round. Down College Road as it quietly morphs into Aldridge Road, the constant thrum of vehicles shaking the foundations of all asunder. Tall turn-of-the-century town houses mix it up with industrial units and rundown hostels whose auras bespeak more of hostility than a welcome bed and breakfast.

On my walk along the lost route of Icknield Street I've been chasing memories, hunting for dreams whilst misremembering stories and places that I've never seen. Northwards I walk on a road that is possibly not even there, rumours of it linger in signs and street corners, but memory is an unreliable friend. Epithets and stories, personal and possible, have kept me company along the way, allowing me to connect with this lost highway and the places I have seen. It has been a highly personal voyage, the memory of my late father, Pat, high on my mind. Along the way a word, or more definitively, a concept, has cropped up time and time again, that perhaps best encapsulates the purpose of my journey. Pilgrimage.

It was during the second stage of this three legged journey that I made a pithy comment to my wife, Susan, referring to myself as “an urban pilgrim” whilst out lost in the fogs of Edgbaston. It was only later, on my journey home that I realised the truth hidden in that blithe comment. Dad’s absence hangs heavy over me. Grief is complicated, full of one sided conversations and never to be fulfilled wishes. Dad’s adherence to Catholicism and my own rejection of it was the source of lifelong disagreement. But still, on this walk, I find myself searching for places that remind me of him and his story. The places he lived, the buildings he worked on and the churches he inhabited, they’re are all here.

Pilgrimages are not just about the journey, but the destination. In researching the route of the Roman road I’ve happened upon so many opinions and essays that it has become almost apocryphal. Icknield Street is a chimera, a beast of many stories, none of them necessarily true, but all holding just enough veracity to sate the average cleric or diarist. Today’s route to my eye is good enough, and my destination, well I’ll come back that later.

The road now crosses the Tame at Holford, using not one but two bridges, the older livestock bridge comprising of pleasing sandstone arches and a zig-zag parapet. Apparently the original river crossing was via a nearby ford, (hence “Holford” across the Holbrook) through a bed of shallow gravels, two hundred yards east of the modern road. I consider looking for it, roving across the bordering industrial estates. Google Maps makes it look easy to find, and with such lofty views it also makes it easier to approximate a connection with the nearby Kingstanding Road. But I can’t be arsed.

Another crossing lies ahead, stolidly modern in the near distance, the M6 viaduct. It straddles neighbouring Perry Park like a dark concrete fact, dirty with all manner of pollutants. I drift on through, irked briefly by the ridiculous amount of pedestrian crossings needed to cross and re-cross the roads here. I’m now on Kingstanding Road, which disappears uphill in a haze of grey suburban housing. I’d like to say it feels right, that I’m now back on the right path again, that I feel somehow closer to the Roman way, but I don’t really, probably because Kingstanding Road is the dual carriageway equivalent of boredom. It just goes on and on, uphill and uphill, an onslaught of suburbia anon. I feel dizzy again. Going round that dog track would be preferable to this endless hill.

I stop at one point, my knees are not what they were, erring toward Rice Krispies these days, all snap crackle and pop. I see the skyline revealed through the trees, beyond the motorway. Birmingham, Brumtown, her glittering glass towers shimmering in the sun. My heart skips a beat. I must push on, to Kingstanding Circle, where my body requires servicing and sustenance. I settle for a bottle of Pop and a brief pause behind the Mecca Bingo, admiring its lovely art-deco curves as a sudden warm shower rains down.

Back on the road now, bound for the Elysian uplands of the Sutton Plateau, that rise determinedly toward the rolling pastures of southern Staffordshire. I'm beginning to think this road is taunting this weary Pilgrim. Mature Sycamores and Plane trees line both sides of the road creating a pleasantly leafy rhythm, and lo, there are blue skies ahead.

At last the sky yawns above and over, I am released! I'm on Sutton Oak Rd, heading towards Streetly (its name derived from the Roman Street). The road here is wide and expansive, with views across playing fields to pylon-freckled hills in the distance. The sparseness of the buildings up there suggest agriculture and livestock thereabouts. I wonder, knowing the history of this old road, how many fires have burned up there on a dark winters nights, cooking food for traders sheltering with their Celtic brethren.

With such thoughts of sustenance I grab myself some lunch at a latter-day trading outpost, a humble corner shop. The Proprietor grumbles at me about customers not paying with cash anymore and the Powers-that-be turning everybody Plastic. She waggles her index finger upwards, in the direction of the Authority, her bony remonstrations wafting and weaving like a hooded cobra. I thank her, withdrawing hurriedly before her hypnotic fingers have me in their thrall.....

I walk slowly for a time, savouring the sunshine and sweet acid tang of an apple. I am aware that I am nearing the end, the very last leg of my pilgrimage. Sutton Park, awaits just beyond. I feel aggrieved suddenly, how can it be over? Is that it? Is there nothing more than this?

The Chester Road bars my way, humming with the snarls and spit-bubbles of traffic. The Streetly side of Sutton Park is screened off from the road by an impassive wall of greenery, thick and determined. Crossing the road is a feat of daring-do and as I walk finally through Streetly Gate, I feel like I'm crossing through the barriers of time. The roar from the road quickly disappears into a sudden hush of quiet nature. Sunlight splashes and sparkles through the trees, there is vivid birdsong all around and the gentle chuckle of waters from a nearby stream. I've arrived at last.

To my left a small metal pyramid marks the embankment on which the original Icknield Street still runs. After all this time I feel an electric thrill of excitement at the sight of its metalled surface, a multitude of cobbles and pebbles glinting in the sun. After a few strides along I can't resist the urge to crouch and run my hands across the surface of the road. The ghosts of travellers long past fizzing through my fingertips, an ancient static flowing from its ancient foundations. What drew me here initially, was the opportunity to visit and walk upon this stretch of the Roman road. It runs straight and mostly true, for a mile or so through the north-west quadrant of the park, across heathland, wooded scrub and a leisurely Golf course. But in

truth, my reasons for walking the road have belied a more complex need, deeper than merely honouring this Road. My path a pilgrimage, a final journey with my Father, a gentle goodbye honouring my memories of him in my own peculiar way.

I walk along the road for a while, enjoying the starkly beautiful heathland that endures today. The romantic in me wants to say that the landscape remains unaltered since Roman times, but hang on, they never played golf back then and then there's that deep railway cutting running right across my path.... Still, there's enough here in this wilderscape to let my mind wander. A Roman legion, following a solitary track through hostile Celtic lands. Trenchant and ever watchful, they march as a company, longing for the comforts and safety of home, ever fearful of raiders from vengeful Boudicca...

In keeping with the underlying theme of my walk, pilgrimage, I have one final place to go and it's not far. There are three holy wells within Sutton Park which have long attracted the sick and the spiritual, seeking redemption, healing or some sort of rebirth. Rowton's Well is one such place, built around local springs in whose waters bubbled the hope of healing. I walk slowly, with my Dad squarely in my mind, hearing his voice, hoping he would have appreciated my gesture in visiting this place. A track takes me gently down amongst the heather and low tussocks of sedge and rush, the trees sparse and stunted. The sun is bright as this last path undulates through clumps of gorse and hawthorn, belying the sudden troughs of rivulets that cleave through this marshy landscape. Hop, skip and a jump across, my knees doth protest. Muddy steps follow downwards on an increasing torturous path, I tread carefully, mindful of memories that flow like wellsprings of loss. A last drop downwards through the mud and the circle of the well appears below me. It is simple and unadorned, surrounded by rough-hewn stonework and lined with cobbles. I can see the surface bubbling occasionally in the sunlight. I stand at the edge, looking into the well for long moments, catching my breath. In those long seconds, welling with memories, I realise my final gesture.

I kneel, dipping my right hand into the cool waters. I bless myself, touching dripping fingertips to my forehead, my shoulders and my heart. I'm here Dad, we made it.

The waters runs down my face.