

## Marauding with The Beast

Bob Forster

**B**OB FORSTER was a graduate at ten years old, graduating from a tricycle to his father's bicycle, aka The Beast. His life with a vivacious velocipede had just begun.

Dad's bike had come of age. Gone were the flaking enamel, bowed saddle and straight handlebars. Its new red livery shone, although close up you could see the brush strokes and it had matching mudguards. There was no getting away from the fact that it was an old bike – the three speed derailleur gear block and the hub dynamo on the front wheel saw to that, but age didn't come into it. With this bike the world held no limits; indeed, the world lay at my wheels.

It was never a toy. I can't remember riding around with a crowd of adolescent bikers, drooling over our gear ratios or admiring our sprockets. A bike was for travelling, it had a purpose.

Before long I was cycling to secondary school, four miles away. Uphill in the morning, downhill on the return, saving bus fare and building my stamina. Cycling now seemed so natural and yet the bike remained my prize possession.

Not that life was all plain sailing. Starting on the long downhill from school in Bartley Green one day I saw another lad crossing the road in front, some way in front. The gap between us closed quickly. Should I go to the left or right of him?

I forgot the bell and my decision-making dithered fatally. Left or right, left or right, left or..... I hit him. Or rather my bike did but I came a close second as all three of us lay spreadeagled on the tarmac.

I don't remember the other lad's reaction, which is perhaps just as well, but whether it was the addled brain, the shock or the grit up my nose, I got up very gingerly, though not half as gingerly as The Beast. He was big, he was strong, he was brave; but he was damaged. My ills came after his. Resuming my journey, the crank grated on the frame every time I turned the pedals. It felt like a death in the family.

But fears are usually worse than the reality. I got it as far as Noel's house where his dad looked at the patient. Examination over, the operation began.

Dear reader, if you ever take a loved one to the doctor's, or visit them in hospital, you will know that their treatment is not for your eyes. You hold their hand and look away or, better still, get right out of the way. But with The Beast it was different. He looked so sad and each turn of the pedals sounded like a death rattle. I couldn't take my eyes away as a succession of tools went to work; a large screwdriver, a pair of pliers and, wince upon wince, a lump hammer. I felt every stage of that surgery but at the end, with first aid complete, The Beast was rested

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against the wall, presumably in the recovery position. Never mind the bike, what about my hyperventilation? I needn't have worried. Both patients resumed full health and Noel's dad will never know the extent of my gratitude.

Soon afterwards I discovered the joys of cycle touring. The first tour was around the Welsh Borders, with Malvern Wells being the very first youth hostel I ever visited. That gave me the bug. At the age of fifteen, three of us cycled from Birmingham to Cornwall and back in a fortnight's youthful leisure. Not even the accident on the first morning could deter me. Going up a rise outside Evesham, David lost his balance, grabbed my saddle and that was that.

Every fingertip scraped the ground as I stung and cursed simultaneously. But after that, the sun shone, the ice creams melted and the youth hostels provided that wonderful combination of quiet structure and carefree recreation that was so appealing to the budding pubescent.

What could be better? Nothing really, yet envy gets at most teenagers one way or another. He's got five gears. He's got centre-pull brakes. He's got alloy wheels. He's got one of those micro-thin racing saddles which threatens to saw you in half from the buttocks upwards.

My mind was turning towards a Five Star Beast.

(To be continued.)

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