

## Rebirth of a veteran

Bob Forster

(**A**T FIFTEEN YEARS OF AGE, Bob Forster knew every spoke and bearing of his father's three speed tourer; but his mind was becoming fixed on a better breed of bike, a bike without limitations).

Ambition is one thing; paying for it is something else altogether.

My bike had done everything asked of it so it seemed churlish and ungrateful to be casting around for something better. But I couldn't help noticing the gleaming chromium on my friends' bikes, the ten gears or the whitewall tyres.

A new bike, however, was out of the question. Pocket money and a morning paper round would never elevate me to cycling heaven; they barely kept me in aniseed balls. Surely, somewhere, there was a disused bike just looking for a new owner who was keen to do it up so that it could hold its handlebars up with pride. I searched the white cards in the shop windows and spread the word I was in the market to upgrade my 'wheels'.

Which was how I came to be in Paul's shed. He had heard my requirements at school. Yes, he had a bike which he didn't use. Yes, it needed some attention. And no, it wouldn't cost the earth. So here we were and here I was, tingling with a five year old's excitement.

At first sight, the word 'unprepossessing' would have been suitable, if I had known how to use the word, let alone spell it. It was black with a frame far bigger than its 26 inch wheels suited. Made by Hopper, presumably the forerunner of Elswick-Hopper, it bespoke antiquity.

The wheel rims were rusty, the tape on the handlebars looked like the intestines of a stressed-out rhino and the whole was thick with dust and grime; Noah must have had hours of fun on it.

Closer inspection, however, revealed its potential. Although both tyres were flat and the saddle was ideally fit for a rheumatic vicar, it had brakes which worked and eight gears - four Benelux rings and a double changer. With care and attention, the contents of a large ragbag and some economical modifications, this bike had potential, the potential of a thoroughbred. And when the price of two pounds ten was agreed, my day was made. The future was black but the future was glorious.

I rode it home. I'll repeat that: I rode it home. For just two pounds and ten shillings I had a bike which was immediately roadworthy. Looks didn't matter - it worked; the same could be said of its owner. With such a large frame it was vaguely lethal for my size, but the tyres had inflated first time, the gears changed and the brakes really did work. Eight gears! - there was no looking back now.

The first stage of restoration was purely cosmetic : was it really black or did it just seem that way? Several filthy rags later and the tincture was confirmed. All the nuts were checked and I sprayed oil around as if 3-in-1 came in Moët et Chandon bottles. There was little likelihood of the chromium ever gleaming again but the smooth whirr of a well-lubricated chain, plus gears that changed with a whisper, more than made up for this. Now for the modifications.

Handlebars and saddle came first. A new set of drop handlebars was wrapped around meticulously with black tape before I turned my attention to comfort in place of geriatricism. This came in the shape of a Coureur plastic saddle, rather than the more favoured leather models, a saddle just wide enough to ensure that the touring cyclist could still walk at the end of the day and

sprung enough for a rider who has the padding of a stick insect. Next there was a pair of red mudguards and a new pump which just left sufficient for a red bell before the pocket money expired.

Black and red and purring; my veteran was indeed the cat's whiskers.

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