

## Rejuvenating a beast

Bob Forster

**L**IKE ANY WELL LOVED CAR, The Beast has its annual service, rather akin to Midnight Mass for the almost agnostic. This usually takes place in early summer when the cyclist of mellow years and vacillating enthusiasm turns his mind from winter, rheumatism, Philosan and piles, and remembers that youthfulness is a word, not a memory. The concept still lies within his grasp, albeit a little tenuously. The Beast has hibernated since the previous autumn, emergencies excepted, but now its chain calls out to be turned and its bell to be rung

With newspaper on the garage floor, the bike is grasped warmly by the frame and, in one graceless movement, is turned upside down. Even rude awakenings were not as rude as this. It is not only graceless but downright demeaning to a vintage velocipede. All its underside is revealed, plus a few of its scruples.

The ragbag has memories of its own. Out comes the sleeve from an old pair of pyjamas, a T-shirt full of holes, revealing close encounters with barbed wire fences during cross-country runs, and a pair of livid purple athletics shorts, reminding me of the halcyon days of Rugby A.C. All are put to good use in an effort to restore The Beast's pride.

The process is part cosmetic, part functional. Wheel rims are cleaned then wiped with a freshly-oiled cloth in an attempt to uncover past glories but, come to think of it, in the thirty years that I've owned the Beast, I can't recall any such glories. The rims have always been dull and spattered with rust spots, but disintegration appears as far off as ever.

Frame, handlebars, brakes, pedals, chain - they all receive similar treatment.

Next comes the checks. Wheelnuts, cones, gear levers, brakes and all moving parts known to Halfords are tightened, eased or adjusted. Everything needs ticking off the list; you can almost hear the familiar drone of "upper left four buckle, upper left three, two, one, two, three, upper right four cavity" - it would go on but all my rear teeth seem to have vanished. Not so much Jaws as Gums.

And finally the lubrication. If in doubt, oil it. The can of Three-in-One sprays its bounty far and wide in a seriously satisfying search for mechanical perfection. Everything turns without squeaking, without wobbling, and there's even a hint of a shine from the chain. Once back on its wheels again, The Beast is ready for a road test.

In our case, this comes in two parts. Living in a circular cul-de-sac, The Beast is pedalled endlessly around the central island in an anti-clockwise direction, left hand on the handlebars while the right reaches down to the gear levers. Change after change after change of the gears whilst keeping half an eye open for the neighbour's Siamese, lest mog gets fresh chain oil where it least expects it. Imagine Three-in-One trickling over its pores and paws; worse still, imagine trying to clean it off. Apparently petrol works well. And when mog meets its match.....!

But this slow circling only tests the mechanisms; The Beast still needs putting through its paces assuming, that is, that he has any paces left at his age.

As the main road through our village drops steadily towards the river, this is an ideal testing ground. First there's the ride to the top, standing on the pedals while listening out for stray noises from the bearings which this pressure can induce. Then back down again, pedals flashing, legs pumping and eyes fixed on the speedometer:

24.....25.....26.....27.....28.....29.....  
DAMN!.....28.....27.....26 and so on

until it's time to check that the brakes still operate and prevent my breast stroke being called into action

With a degree of satisfaction, not to mention smugness, The Beast is returned to the garage. All is ready for Le Grand Tour. But more of that when the sun comes out to stay. Until then, The Beast may well be willing, but the rider is unable.

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