

## Reflections at fifty

Bob Forster

I'M NEARLY THERE; not all there, my friends assure me. Just room for improvement. But in a few weeks time I'll be fifty. Forget the huddle of balloons with "Congratulations Alicia, thirty today" – that's just for posers or senior wannabees. Fifty is a proper milestone. Or should that be 'millstone'? Whichever it is, it is nearly upon me. A good time to look back, to reflect and to look forwards.

My childhood seemed very ordinary, but perhaps with a mum and a dad, abnormal in today's world, (oops! is cynicism a sign of old age?), plus two sisters and twenty contented years in the suburbs of Birmingham, progress was entirely predictable.

Primary school, where my only claims to fame were breaking my arm twice and leg once, not to mention being hauled over the coals for scrumping apples, then grammar school, followed by university and teacher training college.

But these were the years when character was formed and values grew. In amongst a church-going family, Christian values were always prominent but personal faith was, perversely, kept at arms' length. Ironically, a church which represents God can easily become a religious comfort zone or an institution which pedals religion not faith. Once the church stood back, faith flourished and, as the hymn writer said, "I know who I have believed."

Now, faith establishes the ground rules in my life, and all my attitudes but, with the best will in the world, standards often slip. I'm usually the first to feel the draught.

Years have moved on. Successive teaching jobs have taken us to Rugby, Derbyshire, Milton Keynes and, for the past fifteen years, Oxfordshire. Good years, full years, challenging years but, above all, immensely satisfying years.

Nothing stays still for long in education, but the children make it all worth while. Mind you, there's a few I could tell you about.....!

Life has been very good to me. I've stayed sickeningly healthy but behind the scenes, changes are taking place, and not necessarily all for the better.

First to go were the teeth. A lifetime of running has addicted me to nothing more harmful than biscuits and cake, but try telling that to my teeth, or at least to those that remain. I've got a terrible sweet tooth – yes, that's right, just one.

But seriously, ever since my dentist in Clay Cross, at the unforgettably named "Ivory Towers Surgery" told me that I'd have false teeth by thirty, I've acknowledged the inevitable. No false teeth yet, but that's surely due to advances in dental technology. That old hymn, "Crown him with many crowns" might have been written especially for this old mouth.

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Now, my dentist in Witney smirkingly informs me, I'm his biggest investor.

For leisure I have a push bike while he has a sailboard and a yacht which says something about my level of investment. It must have been his boat, or that of one of his colleagues, which I saw bobbing in Portmadoc harbour recently; it was called "Drill 'n' Fill".

Losing teeth can tinge every mealtime with apprehension. That hard bit of muesli, is it roasted barley or is it .....? But there is a plus side. One dad came seething into school last term, plainly intent on rearranging my features but when I opened my mouth to lisp my protestations, he couldn't help see the gap at the front, the result of a contretemps minutes earlier with a Penguin biscuit. All the wind went out of his sails as he doubtless realised that the job of ramming my teeth down my throat had largely been done for him.

I've always been proud of my eyesight. I can identify a Mars Bar at fifty paces. The rest of the family all wear glasses, but not me. Tell-tale signs, however, are beginning to appear. The first came one evening at a Bible study when I sat next to a friend of similar vintage. Gradually, I eased my Bible further from my face. Next to me, I saw Joy's arms begin to lengthen. Imperceptibly, our Bibles moved away. Glancing across at each other, we grinned sheepishly, the problem shared and recognized.

Bibles are nothing, however, compared to telephone directories. It's not long until I need a pair of glasses or a longer pair of arms.

And if you, dear reader, identify with this situation, have you also found that not only do you read beside a lamp, but you keep the main light on as well?

Life is too good, and maybe too short, to moan. There's nothing better than watching the weather change, seeing the sun coming out and resurrecting my rusty steed from the garage.

It's tangled with cobwebs and lies slumbering for weeks on end, rather like a velocipedal Sleeping Beauty, then along comes a knobbly stick insect with fluorescent skin and Lycra shorts, grabs it roughly by the handlebars and wheels it out, eyes blinking in the sunlight. It's a sight for sore eyes, and Rosemary, next door, usually squeals in mock disgust as I scrunch up the drive, mount the beast and pedal off into the sunset with the panache of a Dayglo banana.

That ancient bike is widely admired. Staying recently at a youth hostel (no don't laugh) I stood in the bike shed, locking up the beast for the night. In came a couple of cycling 'anoraks.' Phrases like 'wearing well,' 'good lines,' 'light and manoeuvrable,' 'beautifully maintained' and 'perfect nick' were soon being bandied around; but were they referring to the bike or its owner?

Nothing better than cycling? Well, there's always running. And there always has been running. It all started with padding round Birmingham suburbs in my pumps with my dad after dark and it soon graduated to the school cross country course – through the woods, past the reservoir, up Frankley Beeches (as in Frankley Service Station), repeat, then up the schoolboy-named Dung Hill, through the stream and back around the rugby pitch.

I loved it. In a school where rugby was the sport, I had too little speed, non-existent brawn and too much brain for the oval ball game, but in running I could shine.

My love of running continued at university, although unlike at home, I couldn't just take clotted kit back at the end of the mudbath, leave it soaking in the bucket and rely on somebody else to do the honours. Road races as well as cross country proved to be happy hunting grounds with a regular supply of absolutely unmissable prizes. "What was it this time, dear," Lynda asked, "more glasses or yet another stainless steel dish?"

The first marathon, however, was not a success. Everybody was directed off course and many consequently dropped out while this noble novice decided to finish, come what may. At the twenty-four mile mark I was huddled at the side of the road in Chiswick where an old lady helped me into her car – oh, the indignity.

Enjoyment and second-class success continued for many years, culminating in a marathon victory in Milton Keynes, a cupboard full of stainless steel dishes and enough blisters to fill a beer glass – happy days.

To this day, enjoyment remains but even second-class success eludes me. It's very strange but, as I run, I feel as fit and fast as ever, but two things bring the truth home. One is that the stopwatch never lies. Two and a half hour marathons – in your dreams! Now even three hours is beyond me. The second is my shadow. Gliding down past Bruern Woods I feel great and, I imagine, I look great, but then I look down. There on the road is a shadow which shows, all too clearly, an athletic has-been with all the grace of a ruptured hefferlump.

The totality of physical, and indeed moral decline, is shown by the fact that the only prize I've won all year was a second place in the Moreton-in-Marsh show..... for my particularly lethal brew of marrow rum, circa 1978!

So, half a century gone, the next one to conquer. But no matter what the state of my teeth, eyes, shadow or knee (I won't bore you with my encyclopaedia of running injuries) two things are already decided: one, I'll go for a run on my birthday, come what may, and two, I will always try to smile through life, enjoying each year to the full and doing my best to help others do the same.