

The New Toy

IT had been a long wait. A very long wait. But, apparently, "All good things come to those who wait". And fifty years is an exceedingly long wait. The phone call, however, galvanised the wait.

"Mr. Forster? Your RSO is ready to be collected."

It didn't sound exciting to the layman and it didn't come gift-wrapped with a big pink bow. It wasn't even a surprise having ordered it six weeks earlier. For all that, within a quarter of an hour I was parked in Carterton, virtually running into the shop.

And from out of the stockroom emerged the RSO. Magnificent. Black and red, lean and mean, built for speed and just waiting to be ridden. The RSO might be Raleigh Cycle's basic racing model but to one who had been brought up on second hand bikes, this was a magical beast. How could others compare?

What is it with this piece of engineering genius? What makes it so different?

For a start there's the saddle. No longer a padded seat, more a streamlined launch pad with the comfort of a rusty razor blade. Nothing, though, that the padded lycra shorts can't deal with. Their gelatinous comfort is one up from a large helping of piles cream. Sexy, however, they aren't, although our next-door neighbour won't let me stand sideways-on when I'm wearing them.

Then the gears. Nothing special in themselves but the change mechanism is light years removed from the lever on the downtube of the Hopper. There, you pull the lever into the approximate position, jiggle it to perfection and proceed on your sedentary way. No gear levers, no jiggling and not a sedent in sight. Gears are changed with the hi-tech brake levers.



Just a twitch of the levers to the side and the gear snicks seamlessly into position; one lever for the derailleur at the back, one for the chain wheel.

The brakes themselves have the grip of an adult Rottweiler, ready to propel the rider effortlessly over the handlebars at the merest hint of exuberant braking. The wheels are slim and minimal, coated with tyres like black worms, all in an effort to reduce friction and maximise speed.

So much for the essentials. But the very post-pubescent cyclist needs the extras. The pump is an extra. Without it there would be a lack of air in the tyres alongside that in the rider. Mudguards are for amateurs and wimps. I bought a pair. The thought of mud and grease being sprayed randomly up my back held little appeal. Then there was what looked for all the world like the wife's make-up bag strapped beneath the saddle. Big enough, just, to hold a spare inner tube and a midget's toolkit.

Two additions completed the entourage. First there was the helmet. For all these years I've resisted a helmet, but the thought of breaking the sound barrier made up my mind for me.

So I bought a shimmering red helmet with great slits cut into its surface to reduce the weight; it resembles nothing so much as a fire service colander. Then the "piece de resistance" – a bell; not any old bell but one chosen specially by my sister-in-law, sporting a black and red Dennis the Menace. Thus attired, the Tarmac was my oyster. My wonderful amalgam of futuristic technology, pragmatism and unashamed effeteness was ready to hit the road.

Sadly, that was almost the first thing I did. At the end of my first ride, in which I covered a regular circuit around Ascott and Chadlington over a minute faster than the Hopper had ever managed, I braked to a halt on the drive.

Bathed in a lather of frothed saliva and steaming breath, I ogled at the cyclometer – another extra I meant to mention, and forgot to remove my spare foot from the toeclips. Euphoria turned to "serve-you-right-you-smug-little" and I tumbled gracelessly onto the gravel.

Nursing a splattered elbow I was glad to see that all the leaves were still on the trees; otherwise I feared the neighbours would be gloating from the upstairs' windows holding up 5.2s for the first public dive in the wally position.

I recovered. So did my pride. Within a month, that same course was taking four minutes less than before, a reflection less of my fitness, more of my control of that purring machine; control? – well, more or less. But control is only the thickness of those ultra thin tyres. The scene was set for a spectacular fall from grace.

It was late November. A mild Saturday morning. That purring machine was through Milton, Fifield, Westcote, Rissington and Great Barrington before you could read "War and Peace". Just Taynton, Downs Lodge Lane and the final descent back into Shipton. I was cautious turning through Great Barrington as the damp road was glistening under a veneer of slime. But then the straight road beckoned and the cyclometer edged past thirty as I crossed the stream at the foot of the slope.

A slight rise, maintain the speed, stand on the pedals and suddenly the weight is off the front wheel, the handlebars jerk under the effort and with no warning at all, this fine ancestral snout was caressing the road.

There was no time to prepare; cycling cocksuredly one second, dragged across unyielding Tarmac the next. Bleeding chin, bleeding knee, bleeding arm, bleeding elbow, bleeding hands – amess! Not that I noticed straight away. I was too busy recovering from the shock.

My head reeled. Brain singing, I retrieved the bike and laid it on the grass verge. And there I sat. And sat. Nothing passed me in perhaps five minutes barring two motorists who might have pondered why a red-lidded, gangly and ga-ga cyclist was sitting on a damp verge beside his dead bike. Ask no questions.

With infinite care, I walked as far as the nearest tree simply to see if the moving parts retained any co-ordination. Returning to the bike just slightly reassured I looked fearfully down.

Barely a scratch. I knew exactly where all the scratches were. And even these were superficial – painful, colourful but superficial.

I remounted and pedalled onwards very gingerly. Just a quarter of a mile towards Taynton and there was the sign – “Caution, -- mud on road”. Now they tell me. Up the hill, along the crest and freewheeling apprehensively into the village. I crept shamefacedly into the house

and it was five minutes later that the wife discovered me in the shower doing my Psycho act, dripping hot water, blood and chagrin in unequal parts.

Recovery was quick. An afternoon's rest befitting my advanced years and then off to the school disco where I skulked in the shadows. Next morning at Milton church my guitar playing was unaffected, as confidently ramshackle as usual, but when it came to The Peace I was in trouble.

At this point in the Communion Service everyone shakes hands. Cautiously I proffered just my fingers but then I was totally unprepared for the firm, enthusiastic and manly handshake which I received from a nameless charmer in a dog collar. There's no doubt about it – the bread and wine taste even better when you've peeled yourself off the rafters.

Monday's school assembly saw three hundred gob-smacked little poppets observing my Lennie the Leper hands. My street cred shot up as those children acknowledged one of their own – another big boy who falls off his bike.

Now I await the spring. The RSO slumbers in the garage, resting alongside the Hopper. Then when the sun comes out and abrasive Tarmac has disappeared from memory, on will go the colander, the padded shorts and the yellow fluorescent shirt and I'll be away.

Cotswold lanes will once again beckon the purring machine and its contented rider.

Bob Forster