

Special Feature

Is 56 The New Middle Age?

The ageing process attracts a decidedly mixed press. Gustav Holst in his *Planets' Suite* portrays Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age, in a composition of plodding melancholia. Yet two of the most common modern sayings on the subject state that 'life begins at forty' and 'you're only as old as you feel. Spotted recently on the main road was a large board propped up on the signpost at the Kingham turn announcing, 'Alice 30 today.' Attached to its corner was a sad cluster of flaccid balloons. Alice's friends were clearly in two minds: was 30 a rite of passage or an occasion for the last rites? Only time and a bottle of Lucozade would tell.

Lager, Aga, Saga or Gaga?

So what is middle aged and what is elderly? If there are three ages of mankind namely youth, middle age and old age, paralleled by three stages of activity namely preparing for action, being active and recovering from action, then middle age lasts from around twenty to sixty at least; 56 is therefore quite definitely in middle age.

By 56, there is a gentle acceptance of one's limitations, frustration has largely disappeared and life is lived at its own level. Sport can still feature as long as it's the taking part that counts rather than the winning.

And at 56, the sportsman comes to terms with his condition, settling, maybe, for something a little gentler. The runner takes up cycling, the cyclist takes up



golf, the golfer takes up bowls and the bowler takes up angling. Nearly forgot: and the rugby player takes up inebriation although after a lifetime of practice, the transition is seamless

Simple Pleasures

There are other pleasures. At 56 there's time to stop and stare, time to appreciate and time to realise that things formerly taken for granted now have real value. That bare winter tree silhouetted against an early evening sky has always been there but only now is it the subject of attention and appreciation.

Other little pleasures pepper mid-life. It is acceptable to ask someone to pass the newspaper rather than rising from the settee. Then, of course, there's the anticipation of retirement to raise a further smile. Such thoughts are triggered by glimpses of the newly-retired rambles on a late summer's afternoon strolling hand-in-hand towards nothing more demanding than an evening meal. Or seeing newly-retired couples wandering back to the caravan site from Moreton market carrying just a carrier bag and a smile; at such times, retirement can seem very attractive.

So to answer the question: yes, 56 is indeed the new middle age. And as if to prove it, this 56 year old can still fling his right leg across the bike saddle without the risk of terminal emasculation. Or as Macbeth said, "Vaulting ambition o'leaps itself and falls on the other."

Bob Forster