

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

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Many of you will be enjoying retirement. The rest of you can look forward to it. It comes with its satisfactions and disappointments like the rest of life. There are gains and losses – like this one narrated by an old pal in a nostalgic mood.

How I Lost My Bike.

It was a Sunday morning, at least 10 years ago, probably more. I set off on my old bike, as was my wont on Sunday mornings, for Beacon Fell Country Park, a “designated area of outstanding natural beauty” about 6 miles or so from our village. It is the first bit of high ground one reaches if travelling east from the Lancashire coast across the flat Fylde plain, and stands in splendid isolation. Sadly it is only 873 feet high, and therefore does not qualify as a Marilyn.

The views from the summit are magnificent – the Lancashire coast to the west, and the Isle of Man on a clear day, the Lakeland fells to the north, the Forest of Bowland to the east and the Welsh hills to the south - with Deepdale, the home of Preston North End, in the foreground.

It is covered with coniferous woodland, criss-crossed by trails, has a one-way circular road around it below the summit, and a little café – an ideal destination for a bike ride. It derives its name from being one of a chain of exposed hills where fires were once lit to warn of imminent danger. The earliest recorded beacon was in 1002, and beacons were lit there to warn of the Spanish Armada in 1588. They were also lit to warn of those pesky French in 1795 and 1815. The last time a beacon was lit was in 1977 to celebrate the Queen’s Silver Jubilee.

My bicycle had an interesting history. It had belonged to the village policeman, and, legend has it, had been handed down over the years to each incumbent. At the time of my story Constable Martin had been our local bobby for some years. He lived with his family in the village police station a couple of doors down from our house, Downing. It is the same name as my Cambridge College, but I must make it clear that our house was not named by me in some daft act of self-aggrandisement. Its origins went back to 1767, some 30 years before the college was established, and it had been known as Downing ever since. Just happenchance that we came to live there.

Today the police station is still there, but sadly no local bobby. He has been replaced by two PCSOs, who are rarely to be seen. Former PC Martin, on the other hand, was always to be seen pedalling his way round the village during the day, and in our local pub in the evenings. All crime times covered.

I have to say, I greatly admired his bike. It was a traditional policeman's bike, possibly a BSA, A sturdy structure with big, heavy wheels and tyres, upright handlebars, mudguards of course, a Sturmey-Archer 3-speed gear, plus a large, soft, comfortable saddle with saddle bag, a front wheel dynamo, a chain cover and a loud bell. Immaculate.

Martin and I retired about the same time. As a consequence he had to relinquish the police house, and left the village. I did not know what had happened to his bicycle. But then, at my next birthday, my wife presented me with the finest present of all – PC Martin's bicycle! A secret deal she had made. Joy of joys. And so began my regular rides to Beacon Fell.

The route took me along quiet, flat country lanes for several miles until the approach to the Fell, when an ever-steepening lane led to the Fell circular road. No problem for me - and my Sturmey-Archer, of course (well, most times, anyway). Then a circular ride round the fell and a stop for a coffee, followed by the easy, downhill cycle home.

Then came the particular day in question. I was about half a mile from home when I was passed by another cyclist. He was wearing a cycling helmet, special cycling shoes which were held to the pedals by fancy clips, and he was clothed from neck to knee in lycra. I assumed he was a MAMIL (you know, a '*middle-aged man in lycra*'), or something younger. I noticed that his cycle was in sharp contrast to my bike. It was ultra-light weight, with wheels so thin that they looked as if they might buckle at any minute, with similarly flimsy looking tyres. It had drop handlebars, an extremely thin and painful looking saddle, and a 1920-something derailleur gear. No mudguards, no chain cover, no lights, no saddle bag. What sort of a bike is that?

Then I noticed that he had stopped a hundred yards or so ahead. As I approached, I saw he had removed his helmet, and that he was an elderly man, probably in his eighties, and certainly a good ten years older than me, an EMIL (*an 'elderly man etc...*) rather than a MAMIL.

He was breathing heavily and I wondered whether he needed assistance, especially when he waved me down, but no, he was fine. He soon got his breath back as I pulled up alongside him.

Then came the bombshell. "Sorry to stop you", he said, "but I just wanted to tell you that, in all my years of cycling, you are the first rider I have ever overtaken".

With that, he unsteadily mounted his cycle and accelerated smoothly through his twenty-something gears into the distance. Then I pedalled slowly the short distance home, deeply distressed.

I was not to be consoled. I left my bike in the garage and hung up my bicycle trouser clips. The following day my bicycle was collected by a local charity. My cycling days were over.


