

My bike.

During the pandemic of Covid-19 I acquired a bike. I have only ever had two bikes in my previous 72 years. The first was a second-hand Hercules County with 3-speed Sturmey Archer gears which cost my Mum and Dad 10s 6d. The second was an old bike without markings on the frame which my wife bought me about 30 years later for a tenner.

Like countless others in this time of Covid-19 I fancied a bike. Like countless others I found there weren't any, or at least not within the price range of mortals. I asked at a new bike shop in town and was told they had nothing under £1200 and that nothing was being imported into this country. So I dropped the idea. Then a few days later I popped round to my neighbour to ask if he had a small quantity of tile grout. He was in the process of building a deluxe bike shed for bad-weather cycling on a Wattbike and for servicing his bikes. He is a serious cyclist whose idea of a bike ride is to cycle over Exmoor to Minehead and back. I told him about my failed aspiration to have a bike.

"I've got one for sale," he said. "I was going to put it on Ebay. You can have it if you like: £50. It's over there look." I could see it through a pile of builders' equipment. "You can try it out for a few weeks and see if you like it: save me putting it on Ebay. I'll bring it round to you when I clear that stuff."

To my surprise, and delight, my neighbour appeared with the bike less than an hour later. The bike is a Raleigh Cyclone with bullhorn handle bars and Shimano gears. Red. Later I looked it up on line: it is old enough to have been built in Nottingham, a British manufactured product! Not China, not Vietnam, but England!

I oiled the chain and lowered the saddle. My neighbour is no taller than me but he must have longer legs. Then I tried out the bike on the local railway path. I knew that I needed a helmet and was pleased to see that I could get one online for £20, but I needed one now. I knew it was important and my family were watching! Ron's Cycle Shop was closed and so I went to the scene of the £1200+ bikes. I said, "I need a cycle helmet. I'm not a serious cyclist so I just want a bog-standard one." The salesman replied, "Bog-standard start here at £60." I blanched. He measured my head and gave me instructions for adjustments whilst I silently juggled cost against need. Need won and I now own a hi-vis yellow helmet. It cost more than my Bike!

The following day I set sail on my maiden voyage to Knightshayes Court and discovered that the sloping drive feels steeper on a bike than when walking. I continued where National Cycle Route 3 turns up a track which climbs to Firebeacon Farm and Hone Hill. It was once tarmaced but has degenerated into gravel and potholes between small patches of tarmac. I have walked this way before and found that I had to resort to walking again on the steepest section when my legs were wobbly. The track feeds into a narrow lane that runs gently downhill. I was just celebrating freewheeling when I saw the cab of a tractor approaching above the hedge. I braked and pulled tight into the bank. As the tractor appeared round the bend I saw it was brushing both banks. I turned and fled like a civilian fleeing an invader's tank and found security in a gateway.

After this, I sped downhill from the top of Hone Hill, 3 miles of hard-earned easy-riding, wind in my face and the squeak of brakes in my ears. It was fun despite saddle-soreness. Back home I discovered my muscles were soon starting the process of stiffening up.

A few days later, I had a further chance to cycle and I chose a more sensible route along another old railway track to the towpath of The Grand Western Canal. The sun shone and the verges were bright with Purple Loosestrife and I arrived at Halberton Court Farm Shop where I bought some farm-grown strawberries and other produce. My return journey with a carrier bag swinging from my handlebars showed me that wise people wear backpacks.

I knew that I needed a bell, because it has irked me that cyclists on the tow path approach without warning, and a pump and a water bottle to fit the carrier on my bike. I imagined the bill from the new shop and headed to Ron's Cycles.

And so began a joyous encounter with Ron, who has been running his shop for as long as I can remember, and probably before. The door was open but further entry was blocked a few feet inside with a barrier of boxes to maintain social-distancing. "Alright if I come in?" I asked.

"You're already in," Ron replied as he straightened up from working on a bike.

"I need a bell, a pump and a water bottle."

"No parts, no bikes, have come in since January. Nothing has come out of China since January. But I've got two bells here." Ron lifted a small chrome dome from a faded box and ping-ed it. He winced and sucked air in to demonstrate how piercing was its ping. Then he looked out of the window at my bike propped against the kerb. "No inner tubes coming in neither."

"I don't think I need inner tubes at the moment."

"No. But I need to know what sort of tubes you've got so I can see what sort of pump you need."

Ron went out the back and reappeared on the street whilst I stepped out of the door. He bent down to look at the front wheel. "American. Them's American. I've got a pump for them." He fingered the gears. "Them's the best. They don't break. He fingered the front brakes. Them's best too. They don't break neither. See that? They replaced them with Y-shaped and they break, they do."

I told him my story of how I acquired the bike. "You've got a good 'un there, you have. How much did you pay for it?" "Fifty quid," I said, feeling even more chuffed after Ron's comments. "Yes, you've got a good one." The bike still has a shiny sticker for 'Ron's Cycle's' on the frame. "I fitted them," said Ron, touching the bullhorns. He straightened up and said, "There's no bikes coming in, not even second-hand. Everyone wants 'em." Ron then pointed to a smaller-framed bike at the kerb. "Though that's come in, just come in; I haven't even brought it into the shop yet."

We went back into the shop by our different routes. Ron picked up a small black pump. "Look at that," he said. "It even clips to your bike." "Wow!" I commented, "The last time I looked at a bike they had a pair of metal lugs on the frame for fitting a pump. I wondered how I would manage without them."

Ron pumped the pump to demonstrate it. "So," I said, "I also need a bottle narrow enough to fit the carrier because our ones at home are too wide." "There's none of them coming in but I've got a clear one and a red one." They were near me on the counter and had both been around long enough to have dust on the tops. "Red to match the bike I reckon," I said, and Ron picked it off the crowded counter and walked round the back again, saying "Check it'll fit." It did. "Matches the bike," said Ron with obvious satisfaction. And again we re-entered the shop by separate routes.

Whilst Ron looked up prices, I told him about my Hercules County that weighed half a ton and which I had ridden down a steep hill and broken the speedometer. "I had a French speedometer, Huret, mounted on the handlebar and the clock went up to 40mph. I lived in Surrey at the time and there was a 1-in-5 hill, Pebble Hill, that I rode down with a couple of friends. The challenge was to go down without touching the brakes and I broke the speedometer."

"Did it have a disc on the wheel?" asked Ron. "Yes."

"And did it have a cable going down?" "Yes".

"I've been looking for the clock for one for years. I've got the disc and I've got the cable but I've not got the clock."

We talked again about the lack of bikes and parts from China. I said, "It's our own fault, switching manufacture to China and the Far East. We should be manufacturing here." Ron said, "I used to sell Raleigh, Dawes, Claude Butler, Carlton, Brooks, all made here." He ticked off a list on his fingers including more names that I don't remember.

"I've just ridden along the canal to Halberton. Only my second ride. On the way back I remembered as kids we named our saddles 'Major Bumsore' because of they were so hard." Ron stopped his calculations. "What you need. I'll show you. For the fourth time we met out on the pavement. Ron stood by the other bike. "Feel this. It's solid gel. You'll be comfortable on that." I gave the saddle a squeeze and then Ron peeled off the elasticated gel-filled covering and fitted it on my saddle. "How much do I owe you for that?" I asked. "Nothing. I'm giving it to you."

Back inside the shop I asked Ron, "Do you prefer cash or card?" "Can only do cash. Card machine's broke and that's another thing I can't get." For £11.49 I got a pump, a bell and a water bottle, probably a fraction of what I would have paid elsewhere. And a free saddle cover.

As I was about to leave, I asked Ron if I could take a photograph of him in his shop. "Wait a minute then. I'll come round the counter." He stood looking straight at me, surrounded by his wonderfully scruffy shop and I wondered how long he would be able to continue.

On my short ride home, I thought about Ron's shop. Ron's Cycles is the bicycle equivalent of the old corner shop except that it is in the middle of a row, not on the corner. The narrow street of 19th century terraced houses opening straight onto a narrow pavement could be anywhere in England: Walsall, Stockton-on-Tees, St Albans, Truro. By contrast, The new shop is a glass-fronted build on the site of a car showroom with a wide concrete forecourt and 21st century display boards on the street. I would be disingenuous if I gave the impression of there being something

wrong with it—I was simply not their target market. They impressively recycle almost everything; cardboard, oil (through a local garage), metal parts, even inner tubes which are passed to the owner's sister to turn into wall-mounted sculptures. The only thing that defeats them is tyres.

The two shops are within 300 metres of each other, one long-established, sole proprietor, in a dark, cluttered place with bare floorboards and smelling of oil; the other so sharp and bright, all glass and steel and minimalist, and so well displayed that you feel as if someone must re-adjust positions of products every hour on the hour. One with customers bikes and parts on the shop floor, the other with the bikes under repair concealed in a custom-built workshop. One where you feel ordinary peddlers tread regularly and one where well-groomed aspirants gleam in lycra and discuss bikes costing thousands of pounds. It is not just the money. Can anyone explain why the mess of Ron's shop is so inviting? Is it sheer sentiment, maybe even nostalgia, knowing nothing much has changed in thirty, forty or more years? Is it the same appeal of traditional hardware stores where the same bare floorboards lead through shelves and drawers of individual screws and fitments, and the intoxicating smell of oil, beeswax and paraffin fill the nostrils? Or is it about human interaction; Ron pinging the bell, walking out onto the street four times and nattering about 60-year old speedometers? Ron's shop is undeniably Ron's place. There are shelves filled with cups, glittering prizes that make me want to go back to hear him talk about his experiences; old Dinky Toys of cars and vans, most of them battered and scratched rather than in mint condition, not collectors' items but simply Ron's.

Or is it about continuity? My bike has Ron's sticker on it. Ron has a stock of old brake blocks that would fit my brakes. Ron's Cycles is where we brought our children's bikes for servicing when gears failed or brakes didn't work. I suppose my preference for Ron's shop says more about me than about the two shops. I felt comfortable at Ron's. Somehow the modern high-tech environment was for the lean athletes with shades on their heads and specialist footwear with reflectors built into the heels and their lightweight racing bikes outside. At Ron's I had propped my 30 year-old Raleigh against the kerb and asked, "Alright if I come in?" "You're already in," said Ron, in his broad Devon voice. And I was.

(A year later the new cycle shop closed down. Ron's is still going strong. What does that say?)