

ON YER BIKE



Richard Barr on how two wheels led to a legal life

I owe my legal career in small part to my bicycle.

You see it was like this: when I was studying for my finals I was living in London. I had already spent two years travelling into the City of London where I toiled on the top floor of an office at the St Paul's end of Cheapside (the building has since been demolished).

I was what was called an articulated clerk - the equivalent of an apprentice. My duties involved carrying my principal's briefcase to meetings with barristers, looking up the law for the senior partner's golf club and avoiding a formidable secretary called Muriel who could reduce grown men to tears simply by looking at them. For these responsible activities I was paid £16 per week.

The year was 1970 and I was sharing a flat on the edge of Primrose Hill with another trainee solicitor, his girl friend and a tour guide called Linda. The rent was £4.50 a week.

It was a famous house with a blue plaque on it proclaiming that it was once the home of the Irish poet William Butler Yeates. Not only did he live there, but only a few years before I moved in, the same flat was occupied by the English poet Ted Hughes and his wife the poet Sylvia Plath. Sadly Sylvia Plath had committed suicide in the kitchen where we opened our cans of baked beans (and also did not do the washing up)

My room had been previously occupied by Whispering Paul McDowell of the trad pop group the Temperance Seven. Rumour had it that he grew mushrooms in one corner but they had gone by the time I arrived with my small quantity of worldly goods.

The apprentice system did require that I also had to undergo periods of intense study, the last of which was spent at the College of Law, Lancaster Gate, London. Lectures took place every afternoon and we were expected to study in the mornings. Even then £16 did not go very far and I decided that the most economical way of getting to and from college was by bicycle.

I bought a rickety model on Camden market for £1 and invested in two new tyres and a large chain and padlock. We did not bother with helmets or day-glow sashes then.

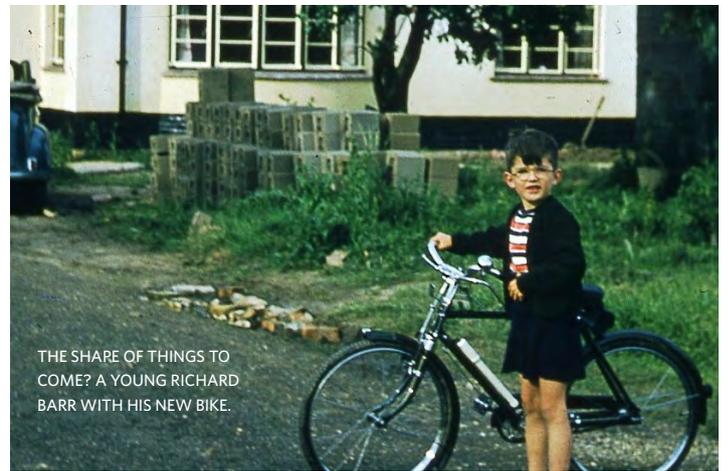
For the next six months my daily routine was this:

- Study till lunch time;
- Cycle to the Beer and Curry restaurant in Belsize Park,
- Eat their cheapest set lunch while studying obscure legal text books,
- Then, smelling strongly of curry, cycle the 4 ½ miles around the edge of Regent's Park, through Camden Town, along Marylebone Road, and eventually into Bayswater Road and Lancaster Gate.

By the time I arrived glowing with unaccustomed exercise, overheated and smelling of curry, I cannot have been a very pleasant classmate to sit next to.

When, several months later, the results came through and I passed but several of those sitting near me did not, I can only conclude that my class mates were so badly put off their studies by this strange pickled creature who showed up every afternoon and affronted their olfactory senses, that they all lost the will to become solicitors, leaving a clear run for the examiners to scrape me through.

I never became an enthusiastic cyclist, possibly because as a child I had a spectacular accident when riding down a hill in some woods. I became airborne for quite a while (an



exhilarating feeling while it lasted but a painful landing). I still have the scars on my hip and knee.

Nonetheless I had an office bicycle for most of the quarter of century that I worked as a solicitor in King's Lynn. It was one of those bicycles that split into two halves so that it could fit into the boot of a car. You had to fit the halves together correctly or it would let you down (literally) and leave you trying to ride a unicycle (which did happen to me more than once).

The courts were on the other side of the town and I was always short of time. I am one of those people who are seldom late for an appointment, but never early. We used to have to wear gowns in the county court, so I became a familiar sight as I raced through town, my gown flowing behind me as I rushed (Batman style) to get to the court in time for the judge to berate me for not dotting an 'i' or putting enough Latin into my documents.

One of the barristers I instructed in those early days was one Rupert Jackson who is now Lord Jackson, the Court of Appeal judge whose proposed reforms of the legal

system have been causing us all a considerable amount of grief. As it happens I was late for the hearing on that day. Perhaps, years later, that is why he has it in for solicitors.

On one occasion the bicycle was stolen but the thief did not score very high in the IQ stakes. The back wheel had a lock on it. As he dragged it away he left a trail of rubber behind him before he abandoned it. That enabled me to retrieve the bicycle from a mile away.

The great thing about a bicycle is that you do not have to worry about traffic and parking. If King's Lynn had one of its regular traffic jams I could slide easily between the traffic and turn myself into a pedestrian at red traffic lights. It was very useful for serving court proceedings on reluctant defendants.

I was able to preserve the spirit of the College of Law. One lunchtime activity I followed for many years was to cycle to the St James' Pool, swim a dozen lengths and return to the office smelling sweetly of chlorine. No wonder my afternoon clients never stayed very long for their consultations.