

When I was ten years old I remember bouncing up and down on the seat of a little grey stationary Massey Ferguson tractor on the farm where I was reared. Later when my legs were long enough to reach the clutch and brake pedals I started to drive. Fuel was scarce after the war years. As a result tractors were started on a rich mixture of petrol and air. When the engine was good and hot the driver switched over to TVO (tractor vaporizing oil) a lower grade fuel oil in more plentiful supply. In time I also learned to drive a car. A natural progression at a time when there was no certification, no examination of one’s knowledge of the rules of the road or independent test of one’s driving skills. Something my daughter never fails to remind me of, years later, with unfeigned glee.

At an early age I also learned to ride a bike. A big heavy mans bike. Not being able to reach down to the pedals, my father improvised. He placed a piece of timber over and under each pedal and nailed them together to form a sandwich, with timber on the outside and pedal in the middle. It wouldn’t pass modern safety standards but worked at the time and allowed me to cycle the three miles to and from Primary school each day.

I also learned how to fall. Not by design, I may add. It was part and parcel of learning how to stay upright on the bike. With no stabilisers to save me I often ended up with prominent parts of the body being skinned, elbows, hips, knuckles, knees. I didn’t know about road rash in those days as I hopped around in short trousers in the scalding pain, the blood drying up on my skin in big red blobs. Mother would prepare a basin of lukewarm water clouded with Detol. She would swab the mixture of blood, road grit, and fine dust in the wound with some cotton wool, place some of her favourite healing cream on a piece of lint and bind up the wound. A day or two later it would be opened up to the fresh air to complete the healing process. Scabs would form and last for weeks. That is until I got sick of looking at them and gradually picked them to pieces.

It wasn’t until later in life when the family stated growing up that I came back to the bike. I took it up as a hobby and for exercise. A tiny group of us met at the Tesco supermarket each Sunday morning. In time it grew and grew into the sizeable club we have today. In those days there were young racers, also skills competitions for those who wished to get into the sport.

It was not however until years later that Hugh, our ex club chairman set up the Fáilte Group, an adult training facility for new members. About this time I was absent from the club for about six months. When I returned the Saturday Inbetweeners was in full swing. It was a stepping stone for those coming from the Fáilte Group to improve their cycling. Going out with the group one Saturday morning I noticed an influx of new members. We set off from the Caragh Road Leisure Centre. Before long we came to a junction. In a loud voice someone called “Clear Right”. My hearing not being the best I thought I heard “veer right”. I turned to the right whilst the rest of the group turned left.

From there on it was like a new language to me. “Roll Over” in my young days always meant a day off from school. One tucked oneself more tightly under the blankets and pushed the little brother over to the edge of the bed. Tighten up meant tightening the belly band on the farm horse. The poor horse, as its belly was pinched, craned its head and neck around in pain champing his teeth as it tried to nip its aggressor. “Nobody gets left behind”; my teacher never heard of it as I lagged behind my fellow students in class. “Car Up/ Car Down” yes there were cars on the road that time but they were scarce. It was an occasion to stop and stare in wonder.

Over my lifetime there were many occasions when I was reduced to self learning. It can be a lonely and ‘hit and miss’ affair. The Fáilte Group produced an element of formalised training to the club, something which members should be proud of. Things have now moved further afield. With the Cycle Right Program new membership has been given a fresh impetus. Hopefully those taking up the course will realise how privileged they are in having the benefits of formalised training at their reach. As we wait for the first graduates to emerge and join our regular rides I must say I feel envious, if not downright deprived.

Tom Ryan

