

Written on the eve of my 69th birthday, this is the story of how polio has affected my life.

It was my sister's birthday, July 28th, but there was no party on that day in 1955 because I was being taken to St George's Hospital, Tooting, suffering from polio.

I spent several months in St George's and I have a vivid memory of the day I left, walking down the long corridors with my mother holding my hand. Every time I took a step with my weakened left leg, the knee gave way and I performed a little genuflection. My mother was crying.

I went back to school and got on with life, with the recommendation that I ride a tricycle to strengthen the affected muscles and have a lift built into my shoe to prevent my left foot from turning inwards. I was collected once a week by ambulance from school and taken to St George's for physiotherapy.

For the rest of my school life, I was the kid with a limp. I walked, cycled, played football and cricket. I was not spared the hell of the cross-country run. On my journey home from school, I would often pick out a pedestrian some way in front of me and make every effort to walk fast enough to overtake them before reaching my house. This "I've had polio but so what" carried on into teenage years and into the world of work. I remember one manager asking me if I would register as disabled (so he could meet his quota); I refused indignantly.

Then followed marriage and parenthood. The lift on my shoe was replaced by a cork insole. I hit 30 then 40 then 50. I could walk 15 miles. I climbed Pen-y-Ghent. I walked a mile or two every lunchtime. I took up cycling again and duelled with the Range Rovers in the lanes of Surrey. This activity continued with cycling holidays in Holland (flat) and France (not flat).

Between 2000 and 2004 I completed a part-time degree course, rushing around London and hopping on and off trains and Tubes. We went on group walking holidays, which proved to be disastrous as I could not keep up with the rest. A friend recommended a podiatrist, who scorned my NHS cork insoles and had a pair made (not just the left foot) from hard plastic, which was agony until my feet adjusted to the new shape.

At about the age of 58, I began to find walking an effort. No longer was I overtaking pedestrians. My daily walk to the station went from 10 minutes to twelve to fifteen. It was as if I were willing my legs to move but they could only respond sluggishly. The lunchtime walks came to an end. The bike went in the shed.

I took redundancy/retirement at 60. The bike came out of the shed and was overhauled. I joined a gym and worked ferociously at the treadmill, rowing machine and exercise bicycle. That was perhaps unwise, as I could not stop myself going flat out – something not recommended for post-polio muscles. About this time, my 'good' right foot displayed an alarming tendency to collapse to the right, throwing me off balance and landing me more

than once in the gutter. I had some new insoles made and started using a walking stick. I joined the BPF. The bike went back in the shed until I gave it to one of my sons.

With help from the BPF, a pain in my knee, which I mistakenly took to be polio-related, led to an appointment with a post-polio specialist at Kings College Hospital. I learnt that there wasn't much to be done, and that my right foot had also been affected by polio to some degree. I was referred to a rehab centre where I was fitted for an ankle-foot orthosis (AFO) for the left leg and a re-modelled insole for the right foot. For 55 years, I had been walking with my left leg straight and the knee locked rigid; the AFO forced me into a more normal gait.

About 18 months ago, I became aware that my left quadriceps had become weak. It meant I could not use alternate legs when climbing stairs, not without hauling myself up on the banisters when it was my left leg's turn to do the pushing. A physiotherapist recommended some exercises but it has not been possible to regain strength in that muscle.

Most of my cars have been manual and I've been able to work the clutch, though my left foot becomes tired after repeated gear changes in heavy traffic. However, in the last month or so, I have had difficulty pressing the clutch all the way to the floor in any circumstances, resulting in some expensive-sounding grinding noises.

I can walk a mile or so, with regular rest stops to give my legs a chance to recover. Luckily my town is quite well provided with benches. I am well-known to local bus drivers, but my visits to London are rare these days. That's partly due to the fact that step-free access is still some way off and partly because I've got out of the habit of being in crowds.

I fell down some steps during a French walking holiday in 2005, and this has made me very wary of descending stairs, for fear my left leg will give way and propel me forward – and downwards. If nobody's looking, I often undertake part of the descent on my bottom. I dread leaving aeroplanes via steps, but even using BA is no guarantee of an air bridge.

Where does that leave me, at 69 with PPS? I am mentally alert, can get about at my own pace, can drive (though may need an automatic). I can't walk in a group, cycle, run up and down stairs, or swim. My mobility has worsened over the past 10 years. I have no idea what the next ten years holds, but I will deal with it, with the help of friends and family.

