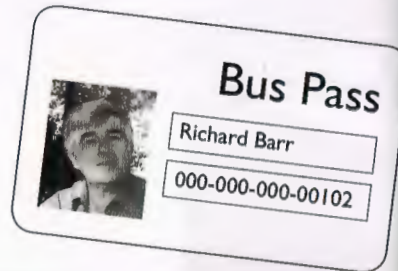


How to be a young-age pensioner

Richard Barr on being over 65 but not over the hill



Suddenly age becomes important. So when the 20-something lady in the North Walsham flower shop (the Daisy Chain - I recommend it. They provide a bouquet every week for our holiday cottage - I recommend that, too. Commercial over), told me that her father was in hospital with kidney failure I was very concerned.

But then she added that he was in his 90s and I pricked up my ears. I calculated that if her father was that old, he would have been older than I am now when his daughter was born. That seemed to be going some, and I said so. There was hope for the future - not that I was planning any begetting now or any time soon.

She looked perplexed before correcting me - it was her grandfather who was in hospital - as I slunk out of the shop in confusion leaving a trail of petals behind me.

July saw a milestone in my life that I had not been looking forward to passing - a milestone that read 'you are now an old age pensioner'.

The transition came gradually - at 60 I obtained my bus pass and my senior rail card. For a long time I found no use for my bus pass. There are only four buses a day from where I live (Bacton) and they go only to North Walsham, taking nearly half an hour to do a journey I can make in about five minutes by car. Later, thanks to my streetwise daughter I discovered that I could use my bus pass on London buses, so I now sit triumphantly upstairs and take black and white photographs of the passing sights.

At about the same time I became entitled to my winter heating allowance. Our house has such ill fitting windows that all the extra £200 does is to provide a little more heat for our part of the Norfolk countryside.

But there is something much more life changing about becoming a real life

pensioner. It smacks of wooden canes, of teeth that go into a glass beside the bed and copious medication; of people giving up their seats to me on the tube (it has not happened yet) and of being helped across pedestrian crossings by well-wishers.

But not for me I thought - until I got the telephone call.

I had volunteered to take part in a research project - looking into whether consuming plant based foods can reduce the risk of heart disease. They wanted men aged between 50 and 75. I had kept guinea pigs as a child but had never been one. Now was my chance.

The study started in earnest with soy bars, which I was required to eat before my assessment for eligibility. I followed the instructions, including fasting the night before (with the tantalising prospect of eating a sandwich of my choice when it was over).

Came the day and I was weighed and measured, had my blood pressure taken several times and one arm almost drained dry of blood. I was told that they would be going forward with the study with the middle range - excluding men who had a very low risk of heart disease and those who had a high risk. Quietly I speculated to myself that I might fail because I was too healthy.

Then -
'I am afraid your cholesterol is too high'

'How high?'
She would not say. I would have to see my doctor. I decided to think about it, but not for long as the following day my doctor's surgery rang and sent for me.

Until that moment in my life I had felt perfectly healthy. Then the aches and pains started. Because I was told I was or should be ill, damn it, I began to feel ill.

That lasted until I saw a sensible

doctor. He told me that my BMI (body mass index) was within normal limits, my blood pressure was fine and my cholesterol was not that bad, 'so go away, eat properly and take some exercise and I will see you in a year'. He did not add: 'if you are still alive' and I hope that was not the subtext.

At about the same time I watched the Olympics and was won over by the sheer determination and enthusiasm of the competitors and all who were involved in running the show. A huge waste of money it might have been, but in my book we can waste that kind of money any time if it unites the country in such a flood of enthusiasm.

You will not find me long-jumping, hurling javelins or leaping over hurdles. But one thing I could do was dust off my old bicycle and explore the numerous country lanes round here. And it has enhanced my life. You miss so much as you race along in a car. You never see enough if you are walking, but bicycling is a delightful compromise enabling you to see hear and smell swathes of the countryside.

You may think that Norfolk has no hills. Try riding a bike and you will find plenty of them. I always choose my excursions with at least one long hill to go up, forcing my pulse rate into overdrive and my lungs to fill with air. Already after just a few weeks I can take the hills more easily and I have even lost weight.

And the cholesterol? I have a favourite client who is anxious to make sure that I survive till the end of her case. Her advice: cut out bread, cereal, potatoes and other carbohydrates, along with fizzy drinks. Drink grapefruit juice and eat plenty of types of fruit (including especially blueberries). There is plenty more advice on the internet (much of it conflicting), but I am too terrified of my client not to do as she says, because I do not want her coming to my funeral saying 'I told you so'.

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