

**WALKING ON WHEELS:
A Mobility Memoir by TONY GOULD**

Walking, like talking, is one of the simple pleasures of life. Whether it's a stroll in the park, a walk through the woods with the dog, or a ramble over moorland or on a coastal path, it's something we mostly take for granted. If you lose your voice, the inability to communicate verbally cuts you off from other people; that much is obvious. But an inability to walk, or walk properly, isolates you physically. You become housebound and, when you do go outside, car-bound. You can talk to people in the house, or in the car with you, and you can also talk to people on the phone. What you can't do is meet someone by chance – stranger, or friend, or acquaintance – and have a chat with them, as so frequently happens when you go out for a walk, in the country at least.

I have been unable to walk any great distance for fifty years now, ever since I contracted polio during my military service in south-east Asia at the end of the 1950s. For more than half that time I did not really consider myself disabled, though it was fairly obvious to anyone else, since I had a pronounced limp and walked with one or two sticks. I couldn't run, or dance, or play cricket or football. But I could play croquet (of a sort) and table tennis – though having to remain rooted in one spot did put me at a disadvantage against a ruthless opponent who exploited the full width of the table and played drop shots I couldn't reach. In the late 1960s and early 1970s I used to attend Chelsea's home matches at Stamford Bridge. I often had to park my car the best part of a mile away, walk the rest of the way to the ground, go through the turnstiles and climb up the back of the West Stand and down the other side to my seat.

These days I can hardly believe there was a time when I could do that on a regular basis or that I once walked on Dartmoor from Two Bridges to Wistman's Wood – no great distance to be sure, but over challenging terrain if you're shaky on your feet and walk with sticks. The decline in my walking capacity has not been dramatic; indeed, I would hardly be aware of it but for the memory of what I could once do (including climbing five or six flights of stairs if necessary) and the knowledge that I could not begin to do such things today. Even standing for any length of time is now out of the question. If I go to a party or an art gallery, for instance, I have to sit down or, more likely, use a wheelchair to get around.

For years I resisted the idea of getting a wheelchair; I saw that as a form of surrender. I feared that if I once succumbed to using one I would never walk again. What changed my mind was a visit to the Sister Kenny Institute in Minneapolis, when I was in the United States doing research for *A Summer Plague*, my book on polio. Dr Richard Owen, the director of the Institute, suggested I try out some of the wheelchairs they had there. He, too, had had polio and walked with two sticks, but he sometimes had recourse to a wheelchair and was an enthusiastic wheelchair basketball player. He was playing once when somebody had an accident and needed medical attention. Another player asked if anyone there had any medical knowledge and Dick admitted he was a doctor. All the players looked at him in amazement: 'You – a doctor?' It didn't fit their image of a doctor that he should throw himself into

the rough and tumble of wheelchair basketball and play as mean and dirty as the next man.

I tried out various sporty models, learned how to do ‘wheelies’ and on one occasion was showing off this new accomplishment to my wife Jenny when I overdid it and tipped over backwards, giving my head a nasty bang. Even that did not deter me. For the first time I understood that a wheelchair could be liberating. Just wheeling along the corridor to the Institute canteen was a pleasure; it was a novel experience to be able to go faster than Jenny and have to wait for her to catch me up; it had always been the other way round.

Back in England, I acquired a lightweight wheelchair of my own. It was a compromise between the sassy, sporty models I’d been trying out in the States and the clunky standard NHS issue model and, though I found – and still find – it useful on occasions, it has been a disappointment. The fault probably lies in me rather than it. Polio did not just affect my legs; I was in an iron lung initially and only my face and hands were unaffected. Though I have strong biceps and triceps as a result of walking with crutches or sticks most of my adult life, my upper-body strength is no longer sufficient to enable me to whiz around on a wheelchair. The slightest hint of an adverse slope and I am labouring. Rather than liberating me in the way I had anticipated in Minneapolis, it has merely highlighted my physical limitations. Nowadays Jenny does most of the pushing and I help out when required.

I didn’t consider getting a motorised wheelchair because that would have been too heavy and too hard for Jenny or me to lift into the boot of the car. After years of practice Jenny can assemble and take apart the manual one very quickly and even I can do it if necessary – much more slowly – by sitting on the rim of the boot (we have a hatchback car) and taking out or putting back the parts one by one.

Besides, for me it was a *macho* thing; I had an image of myself as Marlon Brando in *The Men*, a war veteran looking moody and sexy in a wheelchair... Pathetic, I know, for someone then approaching sixty. But it wasn’t entirely a matter of image, or even of the practicalities of lifting the thing in and out of the car boot. It was also a craving for activity, for a physical form of self-expression. Disability reduces you to passivity; the more disabled you are, the more you can’t do – especially as you grow older, when even if you are able-bodied your strength is on the wane.

When I was young I comforted myself with the thought that with my experience of disability I would be better equipped to deal with old age than my able-bodied contemporaries, who would be facing physical limitations for the first time. I could not have been more wrong. What I had not taken into account was that I would suffer a complementary decline and, given that I was starting from a lower threshold with my already greatly reduced capacity, it would not be half but *twice* as devastating for me.

So, no wheelchair basketball for me. For several years I put aside my dreams of greater mobility. In our retirement Jenny and I continue to divide our time between our house in rural Devon and our flat in central London. The former is on the eastern edge of Dartmoor, near where I was born and where I still have family living; and the latter is close to both the British Library and the Wellcome Library, two of the places where I do research for the books I write. Increasing age and disability have put me off foreign travel and Jenny

and I share a fear of flying – though we have conquered it in the past, to the extent of making two trips (in my case) and several (in hers) to her native New Zealand. She enjoys travel and has travelled more widely than I have, but understands that my recent reluctance to go anywhere other than London and Devon stems from frustrations over access and mobility.

The last time we went to New Zealand (and Australia and the west coast of America) we took the wheelchair with us, at Jenny's brave insistence – since she would be responsible for it at airports, in particular. During the Australian leg of our journey, in Sydney, in the Blue Mountains and in Tasmania, where we stayed longest, we were pleasantly surprised by the number of boardwalks provided, even on remote parts of the coast, where we could use it. New Zealand is not so good in that respect but even there we made some use of it, and of course in America, where disability awareness is strong. I wouldn't have enjoyed the trip half as much as I did if we had not had the wheelchair with us. But even so, I was frustrated by my dependence on Jenny or our other companions for getting around.

For in addition to the desire for physical self-expression that had attracted me first to the wheelchair, there was also the yearning for independence, which had been satisfied (briefly) in those long, flat corridors in the Sister Kenny Institute in Minneapolis where my ability to set off to the canteen *on my own* rather than wait for Jenny or have her push me was a huge boost to my morale. Now that my physical weakness had rendered that hope illusory, I began to consider possible alternatives that would not so much replace the wheelchair as complement it.

Initially I focused on London where, at the time, I was working on a commission to produce a book about the Wellcome Library and its collections. Jenny was helping me and in London we would drive there daily and hope to find a free disabled parking space outside the back entrance to the Library's temporary accommodation. Jenny would then get out the wheelchair, put it together, wheel it in and lift it backwards up the three steps there, while I clambered up these steps on foot and got into the wheelchair on the flat. It was a laborious process, which had to be reversed at the end of the day when we went home.

So I began to wonder if there wasn't a mobility scooter that would fit my particular needs. It would have to be small to fit into our one-bedroom flat with its narrow hallway, but at least we lived on the ground floor, our front door opening into the communal courtyard of the block. A little research and inquiry convinced me that a scooter with the attractive name of Rascal was the one for me. The only question was whether to go for the four-wheel or three-wheel version of it (actually the three-wheeler also has four wheels but the front two are very close together). I chose the latter because there didn't seem to be much difference between them in terms of stability and that one had a tighter turning circle, giving it greater manoeuvrability in small spaces. We also had to have a ramp made for the front doorstep.

Rascal has greatly improved the quality of my life in London, enabling me to go along pavements at a brisk walking pace and cutting the time it used to take me to get to the Wellcome Library (or British Library) by car and wheelchair. It has also given me far more independence, since I don't need Jenny's help to get out and about. If we go out together, she doesn't have to push me and I can even help with the shopping, going up and down the aisles

of the supermarket and carrying bags or wine bottles in the basket under my seat. I can go and browse in the nearest Waterstone's on my own or, if it's a nice day, sit in the communal garden of Gordon Square or one of the other open spaces nearby and read the paper or a book. Everything within a radius of two or three miles at least (a battery charge will only last so long) has become that much more accessible to me.

But while Rascal opened up new possibilities for me in London, I despaired of ever finding a rural equivalent. What scooter could cope with our steep hills, narrow roads and rough lanes, let alone our woods, footpaths and moorland tracks? Just contemplating the difficulties convinced me that no such beast existed. But it turns out I was wrong. A newspaper article, with a picture of a woman seated on a kind of miniature tractor – its back wheels much larger than the front ones – caught my eye one day: this looked to have possibilities. I found out the name of the company that manufactured it and sent off for a brochure. It came with a CD, which I inserted in my computer and watched with mounting excitement. Here was a scooter that seemed to do precisely what I had deemed impossible: going along narrow, uneven paths, through deep puddles, across open moorland, over ploughed fields, even on sandy beaches; it would go on roads and pavements as well, of course, but it was designed as an *off-road* buggy and could not only climb 1-in-4 slopes but could also negotiate the same gradient sideways. It was called a Trampler.

I immediately phoned Beamer Ltd, the company that made it and arranged for their representative to visit me. When John Hammond arrived and unloaded the Trampler from his van, he asked, 'What would you like to do?' I pointed to the hump of moorland rising above the wooded valley directly opposite our house and said that what I really wanted to be able to do was get up there. I expected him to demur, but not a bit of it. 'Let's go then,' he replied, as though that was the simplest thing in the world. He explained the controls to me – light switch, indicator switch, battery power monitor, forward/reverse switch, speed adjustment switch (from 4 mph for pavement use to 8 mph for roads) and throttle-cum-brake on the right handlebar. Then off we went.

We took the road down into the valley, going under the old railway bridge where trains used to run when I was a small child during the Second World War but have long since been axed by Dr Beeching, leaving sturdy bridges and viaducts as memorials of a more confident industrial age when things were built to last. We crossed the two rivers, the Wray and the Bovey, that converge a little way further down the valley and turned off the road into Pullabrook Wood, owned and managed by the Woodland Trust and much used by local riders and dog walkers. We followed the main track up through the wood towards the moor, a gentle ascent to begin with but rising ever more steeply until the last twenty or thirty yards, which looked distinctly challenging to me. But my companion assured me that the Trampler could do it and I gritted my teeth and hunched forward over the handlebars as it skidded on the loose stones that littered this precipitous slope but kept on climbing and still had power to spare, I felt. At the top of the track we went through a gate and out on to the old Manaton road, a part of which is still tarmac'd in places, but is marked as 'Unsuitable for motor vehicles', which indeed it is. Apart from the roughness of the broken surface, it is crossed at intervals by deep open

concrete drains carrying water off the moor. To get up on to the main Bovey Tracey to Manaton road I had to ease the Trumper over these obstacles, which caused it to lurch sideways in a rather alarming way, threatening to unseat me if I let go of the handlebars. Yet these manoeuvres also convinced me of its essential stability as we made the final ascent to the main road.

We followed the highway for fifty yards or so and then turned into a pull-in. We were now on the moor proper. John suggested I tried the Trumper on a soggy moorland path with a large lump of granite in the middle of it; he thought that if I couldn't go over it I would be able to go round it without too much difficulty, which proved to be the case. We squelched our way along the springy turf for a while and, though John was quite happy to keep going for as long as I wanted, I felt it was unfair on him (who's not much younger than I am) to make him walk any further on this difficult terrain, especially as we still had to go all the way back. I told him we could either go back the way we had come or we could take the easier (though less direct) option of going back along the road. He said it was up to me; he was easy either way. In that case, I thought I should test the Trumper (and myself) by taking the tougher route that we had come on.

The descent was, if anything, trickier than the ascent had been in that, faced with a sharp decline, it was all too easy to apply the brakes unwittingly and slither down in a stop-start manner (later I learned you could turn down a speed control button on the panel to make it easier to prevent this happening). On our way down through Pullabrook Wood, I pointed to a grassy path rising steeply to one side of our track and asked John if he thought the Trumper could get up that one. He said, 'Try it.' Challenged thus I had no alternative but to give it a go and halfway up I rather wished I'd kept my mouth shut. We got to the top, however, though John did say that it was a good thing I had been leaning so far forward as the front wheels had lifted off the path in places – rather like a bucking bronco.

By the time we got back to the smoother surface near the bottom of the wood we saw Jenny who, wondering what had become of us, had bicycled down to look for us. I put on a spurt to demonstrate the Trumper's capabilities and my delight in it so touched her that after John Hammond had packed it away and gone, when we were discussing whether or not we could afford to shell out the serious money required to buy one, she said the look on my face alone had been enough to convince her we should go ahead. With my seventieth birthday approaching, it was a case of now or never...

Now that I have had my own Trumper for a few months and go out on it whenever I can, it is hard to imagine how I managed to survive for so long without it. It has opened up new horizons for me. If I have to go any distance, of course, I still use the car, but it is years since I got any pleasure out of driving; the car is merely a means of conveyance between A and B. Every excursion on Trumper is a bit of an adventure, even if it's only to go a mile or so into the village to pick up the newspaper. I never know which friend or relative – or stranger – I may run into, what birds or beasts I may spot, what trees and shrubs I may notice coming into leaf or flower. Mostly I don't hurry – because going along on Trumper is my equivalent of going for a walk and if I go slowly I see more of what is around me. The fact that the buggy is battery-powered, and therefore makes no noise, also makes me feel more at one with nature.

If I want a more challenging ride, there are several off-road routes available, including variations on the one through Pullabrook Wood I first essayed with John Hammond. I have done a circuit through this wood so often now that it no longer feels as formidable as it did the first time, but the rougher and steeper parts of it still require total concentration. Slightly further afield there is the Yarner Wood nature reserve, which offers several different paths and tracks as well as a bird hide, from which spotted flycatchers may to be seen. Following one track, leading I wasn't sure where, I was rewarded with the sight of a deer calmly crossing the path a little way ahead of me.

On another occasion I climbed to the top of Yarner wood on the south side, where part of the Templar Way (an old stone railway track once used for transporting to the coast granite quarried on Haytor down) is well preserved, and followed it out of the wood and across a field where an inquisitive horse came to investigate what manner of beast was coming through the gate. This hampered my progress, as I had to open the latch, get Trumper through and then close it – not an easy manoeuvre – without letting the horse out. The only way I could do this was by scaring it off and taking advantage of its retreat to a distant corner of the field to negotiate my entry, and then repeat the process when making my exit at the far side of the field. Such are the joys of tramping.

But the ultimate challenge (to date) came when I took part in a Trumper Day organised by Dartmoor National Park to familiarise park rangers – a number of volunteers came from English Nature and Exmoor as well as Dartmoor itself – with what Trampers could do, the hazards they faced and problems of access in general. It was educational but it was also fun, since the rangers took turns to try out the Trampers. In the morning the group I was with stayed in the environs of the DNP headquarters at Parke, a National Trust estate through which the River Bovey runs, with woods, fields and part of the old railway line, now used by dog walkers and cyclists. Our task was to test and evaluate a number of different fastenings on gates scattered around the estate without – in the case of the able-bodied rangers – dismounting from the Trampers. Some rangers were better at this than others, but they all seemed to enjoy their Trumper rides.

Meanwhile, the other group had been trying out Trampers up on Hound Tor. We all had lunch together at Parke and then switched roles: we went up to Hound Tor, while the others remained at Parke trying out the various gate latches. My Trumper, which I had plugged into the mains and recharged during the lunch break, was taken up to the Hound Tor car park in a van while I went up in the DNP minibus, along with the rangers and an old hand from Disabled Ramblers (who had provided some of the Trampers). The bus ride reminded me of a school outing or, even more, of my National Service days when, as an eighteen-year-old recruit at the Depot Devons and Wessex Brigade barracks at Topsham Road in Exeter, we would be driven out in one-ton trucks to the nearby Rippon Tor rifle range to learn how to shoot. It was as bitterly cold a day as it had generally been on those occasions and there was the same camaraderie – something I hadn't experienced for fifty years and didn't realise until that moment how much I missed.

Despite the cold, I was really looking forward to this Hound Tor trek. I had no idea what route we would take and I certainly hadn't imagined we would tackle Hound Tor head on, so to speak. In Trumper terms, this was like

ascending Everest. Obviously, there was no way we could climb the giant granite boulders themselves, but could we get to the grassy summit between the two piles of great rocks? Surely not. It was not so much the steepness of the ascent; the slope, though deceptive, is quite gradual. The problem is the number of boulders scattered everywhere; and the nearer you get to the top the more densely rocky the terrain becomes. But one of the rangers had been over the ground in advance and worked out a possible route.

This ranger was our guide and Robin Helby, from Disabled Ramblers, was a natural group leader. At the car park, he gave the rangers brief instructions on the use of Trampers (from which I, too, learned a thing or two) and off we went. As we fanned out over the grassy bit of the climb, the inappropriate image of tanks in the North African desert came to my mind. This was a different kind of cavalry in a very different terrain. Soon, as we approached the harder bit, we fell into line, following Robin's lead. Our chosen route took us on a detour round to the right and back of the Tor, whence we would launch our individual assaults on the summit. Had I been on my own I would have chickened out at this point, but the example of the intrepid Robin and the handy presence of several able-bodied would-be rescuers on all sides gave me the Dutch courage I needed to steer my Trampler over the final barrier of humps and bumps on to the grassy knoll between the towering rocks.

It was a moment to savour. If I didn't plant a flag to mark the occasion, I did recall the time when, lying prone and immobile, encased in an iron lung, in the Kowloon British Military Hospital half a century before, I had been overcome with a sudden yearning to be transported to this precise spot, with its long, almost aerial views over and off the moor. This was my landscape, known and precious to me since earliest childhood, but for the last half-century I would never have believed that one day I would be, if not standing, sitting here, having arrived more or less under my own steam. If the cold had not brought tears to my eyes, this reflection certainly would have.

But with a bitter wind funnelling between the twin peaks of Hound Tor, there was neither time nor inclination to linger there. This was merely a staging post in our afternoon ramble. So it was onward and upward – or rather downward, because our next objective was to reach the mediaeval village excavations on the far side of the Tor. We took a circuitous route to avoid the worst of the rocks and the bogs but still sometimes sank so deep into the mud that the back wheels skidded and we needed a helping hand to get going again. By this time my hands and feet were numb and I was more than ready to call it a day. But Robin, veteran of many disabled rambles, was not giving up that easily. So I plunged on in his wake while the rangers took turns on the other Trampers. We made it to Greater Rocks, overlooking the mediaeval village from the far side, but could get no nearer than that and had to admit defeat, comforting one another by saying there wasn't much to be seen there anyway.

The return journey reminded me once again of tank warfare, as we swept across the open, boggy moorland in a wide swathe, the rangers making the most of their time on Trampers. By the time we reached the car park, all the Trampers were thickly spattered with mud. We climbed into the minibus and dropped down off the moor to Parke for warming tea and cakes and a debriefing discussion of what had been achieved during the day, which gate

fastenings had won most people's votes, and so on. Everyone seemed to think it had been a worthwhile exercise.

But for me it was much more than that. The day had shown me that there was an outdoor activity I could participate in *on equal terms* with able-bodied people. If we were both on Trampers I could keep up with any ranger crossing the moor. My Trampler had done for me what the wheelchair had signally failed to do; namely, reduced my feeling of isolation, restored some of my independence, rekindled a taste for adventure and reconnected me with the physical world I had despaired of ever enjoying again, except through the tinted windscreen of my car or the double-glazed windows of my study. For that, at seventy, I am truly grateful.

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Edited version

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For years I resisted the idea of getting a wheelchair; I saw that as a form of surrender. I feared that if I once succumbed to using one I would never walk again. What changed my mind was a visit to the Sister Kenny Institute in Minneapolis, when I was in the United States doing research for *A Summer Plague*, my book on polio. Dr Richard Owen, the director of the Institute, suggested I try out some of the wheelchairs they had there.

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But while Rascal opened up new possibilities for me in London, I despaired of ever finding a rural equivalent. What scooter could cope with our steep hills, narrow roads and rough lanes, let alone our woods, footpaths and moorland tracks? Just contemplating the difficulties convinced me that no such beast existed. But it turns out I was wrong. A newspaper article, with a picture of a woman seated on a kind of miniature tractor – its back wheels much larger than the front ones – caught my eye one day: this looked to have possibilities. I found out the name of the company that manufactured it and sent off for a brochure. It came with a CD, which I inserted in my computer and watched with mounting excitement. Here was a scooter that seemed to do precisely what I had deemed impossible: going along narrow, uneven paths, through deep puddles, across open moorland, over ploughed fields, even on sandy beaches; it would go on roads and pavements as well, of course, but it was designed as an *off-road* buggy and could not only climb 1-in-4 slopes but could also negotiate the same gradient sideways. It was called a Trampler.

I immediately phoned Beamer Ltd, the company that made it and arranged for their representative to visit me. When John Hammond arrived and unloaded the Trampler from his van, he asked, 'What would you like to do?' I pointed to the hump of moorland rising above the wooded valley directly opposite our house and said that what I really wanted to be able to do was get up there. I expected him to demur, but not a bit of it. 'Let's go then,' he replied, as though that was the simplest thing in the world. He explained the controls to me – light switch, indicator switch, battery power monitor, forward/reverse switch, speed adjustment switch (from 4 mph for pavement use to 8 mph for roads) and throttle-cum-brake on the right handlebar. Then off we went.

We took the road down into the valley, going under the old railway bridge where trains used to run when I was a small child during the Second World War but have long since been axed by Dr Beeching, leaving sturdy bridges and viaducts as memorials of a more confident industrial age when things were built to last. We crossed the two rivers, the Wray and the Bovey, that converge a little way further down the valley and turned off the road into Pullabrook Wood, owned and managed by the Woodland Trust and much used by local riders and dog walkers. We followed the main track up through the wood towards the moor, a gentle ascent to begin with but rising ever more steeply until the last twenty or thirty yards, which looked distinctly challenging to me. But my companion assured me that the Trampler could do it and I gritted my teeth and hunched forward over the handlebars as it skidded on the loose stones that littered this precipitous slope but kept on climbing and still had power to spare, I felt. At the top of the track we went through a gate and out on to the old Manaton road, a part of which is still tarmac'd in places, but is marked as 'Unsuitable for motor vehicles', which indeed it is. Apart from the roughness of the broken surface, it is crossed at intervals by deep open concrete drains carrying water off the moor. To get up on to the main Bovey Tracey to Manaton road I had to ease the Trampler over these obstacles, which caused it to lurch sideways in a rather alarming way, threatening to unseat me if I let go of the handlebars. Yet these manoeuvres also convinced me of its essential stability as we made the final ascent to the main road.

We followed the highway for fifty yards or so and then turned into a pull-in. We were now on the moor proper. John suggested I tried the Trampler on a soggy moorland path with a large lump of granite in the middle of it; he thought that if I couldn't go over it I would be able to go round it without too much difficulty, which proved to be the case. We squelched our way along the springy turf for a while and, though John was quite happy to keep going for as long as I wanted, I felt it was unfair on him (who's not much younger than I am) to make him walk any further on this difficult terrain, especially as we still had to go all the way back. I told him we could either go back the way we had come or we could take the easier (though less direct) option of going back along the road. He said it was up to me; he was easy either way. In that case, I thought I should test the Trampler (and myself) by taking the tougher route that we had come on.

The descent was, if anything, trickier than the ascent had been in that, faced with a sharp decline, it was all too easy to apply the brakes unwittingly and slither down in a stop-start manner (later I learned you could turn down a speed control button on the panel to make it easier to prevent this happening). On our way down through Pullabrook Wood, I pointed to a grassy path rising steeply to one side of our track and asked John if he thought the Trampler could get up that one. He said, 'Try it.' Challenged thus I had no alternative but to give it a go and halfway up I rather wished I'd kept my mouth shut. We got to the top, however, though John did say that it was a good thing I had been leaning so far forward as the front wheels had lifted off the path in places – rather like a bucking bronco.

By the time we got back to the smoother surface near the bottom of the wood we saw Jenny who, wondering what had become of us, had bicycled down to look for us. I put on a spurt to demonstrate the Trampler's capabilities and my delight in it so touched her that after John Hammond had packed it away and gone, when we were discussing whether or not we could afford to shell out the serious money required to buy one, she said the look on my face alone had been enough to convince her we should go ahead. With my seventieth birthday approaching, it was a case of now or never...

Now that I have had my own Trampler for a few months and go out on it whenever I can, it is hard to imagine how I managed to survive for so long without it. It has opened up new horizons for me. If I have to go any distance, of course, I still use the car, but it is years since I got any pleasure out of driving; the car is merely a means of conveyance between A and B. Every excursion on Trampler is a bit of an adventure, even if it's only to go a mile or so into the village to pick up the newspaper. I never know which friend or relative – or stranger – I may run into, what birds or beasts I may spot, what trees and shrubs I may notice coming into leaf or flower. Mostly I don't hurry – because going along on Trampler is my equivalent of going for a walk and if I go slowly I see more of what is around me. The fact that the buggy is battery-powered, and therefore makes no noise, also makes me feel more at one with nature.

If I want a more challenging ride, there are several off-road routes available, including variations on the one through Pullabrook Wood I first essayed with John Hammond. I have done a circuit through this wood so often now that it no longer feels as formidable as it did the first time, but the rougher and steeper parts of it still require total concentration. Slightly further

afield there is the Yarner Wood nature reserve, which offers several different paths and tracks as well as a bird hide, from which spotted flycatchers may be seen. Following one track, leading I wasn't sure where, I was rewarded with the sight of a deer calmly crossing the path a little way ahead of me.

On another occasion I climbed to the top of Yarner wood on the south side, where part of the Templar Way (an old stone railway track once used for transporting to the coast granite quarried on Haytor down) is well preserved, and followed it out of the wood and across a field where an inquisitive horse came to investigate what manner of beast was coming through the gate. This hampered my progress, as I had to open the latch, get Trampler through and then close it – not an easy manoeuvre – without letting the horse out. The only way I could do this was by scaring it off and taking advantage of its retreat to a distant corner of the field to negotiate my entry, and then repeat the process when making my exit at the far side of the field. Such are the joys of tramping.

But the ultimate challenge (to date) came when I took part in a Trampler Day organised by Dartmoor National Park to familiarise park rangers – a number of volunteers came from English Nature and Exmoor as well as Dartmoor itself – with what Trampers could do, the hazards they faced and problems of access in general. It was educational but it was also fun, since the rangers took turns to try out the Trampers. In the morning the group I was with stayed in the environs of the DNP headquarters at Parke, a National Trust estate through which the River Bovey runs, with woods, fields and part of the old railway line, now used by dog walkers and cyclists. Our task was to test and evaluate a number of different fastenings on gates scattered around the estate without – in the case of the able-bodied rangers – dismounting from the Trampers. Some rangers were better at this than others, but they all seemed to enjoy their Trampler rides.

Meanwhile, the other group had been trying out Trampers up on Hound Tor. We all had lunch together at Parke and then switched roles: we went up to Hound Tor, while the others remained at Parke trying out the various gate latches. My Trampler, which I had plugged into the mains and recharged during the lunch break, was taken up to the Hound Tor car park in a van while I went up in the DNP minibus, along with the rangers and an old hand from Disabled Ramblers (who had provided some of the Trampers). The bus ride reminded me of a school outing or, even more, of my National Service days when, as an eighteen-year-old recruit at the Depot Devons and Wessex Brigade barracks at Topsham Road in Exeter, we would be driven out in one-ton trucks to the nearby Rippon Tor rifle range to learn how to shoot. It was as bitterly cold a day as it had generally been on those occasions and there was the same camaraderie – something I hadn't experienced for fifty years and didn't realise until that moment how much I missed.

Despite the cold, I was really looking forward to this Hound Tor trek. I had no idea what route we would take and I certainly hadn't imagined we would tackle Hound Tor head on, so to speak. In Trampler terms, this was like ascending Everest. Obviously, there was no way we could climb the giant granite boulders themselves, but could we get to the grassy summit between the two piles of great rocks? Surely not. It was not so much the steepness of the ascent; the slope, though deceptive, is quite gradual. The problem is the number of boulders scattered everywhere; and the nearer you get to the top

the more densely rocky the terrain becomes. But one of the rangers had been over the ground in advance and worked out a possible route.

This ranger was our guide and Robin Helby, from Disabled Ramblers, was a natural group leader. At the car park, he gave the rangers brief instructions on the use of Trampers (from which I, too, learned a thing or two) and off we went. As we fanned out over the grassy bit of the climb, the inappropriate image of tanks in the North African desert came to my mind. This was a different kind of cavalry in a very different terrain. Soon, as we approached the harder bit, we fell into line, following Robin's lead. Our chosen route took us on a detour round to the right and back of the Tor, whence we would launch our individual assaults on the summit. Had I been on my own I would have chickened out at this point, but the example of the intrepid Robin and the handy presence of several able-bodied would-be rescuers on all sides gave me the Dutch courage I needed to steer my Trampler over the final barrier of humps and bumps on to the grassy knoll between the towering rocks.

It was a moment to savour. If I didn't plant a flag to mark the occasion, I did recall the time when, lying prone and immobile, encased in an iron lung, in the Kowloon British Military Hospital half a century before, I had been overcome with a sudden yearning to be transported to this precise spot, with its long, almost aerial views over and off the moor. This was my landscape, known and precious to me since earliest childhood, but for the last half-century I would never have believed that one day I would be, if not standing, sitting here, having arrived more or less under my own steam. If the cold had not brought tears to my eyes, this reflection certainly would have.

But with a bitter wind funnelling between the twin peaks of Hound Tor, there was neither time nor inclination to linger there. This was merely a staging post in our afternoon ramble. So it was onward and upward – or rather downward, because our next objective was to reach the mediaeval village excavations on the far side of the Tor. We took a circuitous route to avoid the worst of the rocks and the bogs but still sometimes sank so deep into the mud that the back wheels skidded and we needed a helping hand to get going again. By this time my hands and feet were numb and I was more than ready to call it a day. But Robin, veteran of many disabled rambles, was not giving up that easily. So I plunged on in his wake while the rangers took turns on the other Trampers. We made it to Greater Rocks, overlooking the mediaeval village from the far side, but could get no nearer than that and had to admit defeat, comforting one another by saying there wasn't much to be seen there anyway.

The return journey reminded me once again of tank warfare, as we swept across the open, boggy moorland in a wide swathe, the rangers making the most of their time on Trampers. By the time we reached the car park, all the Trampers were thickly spattered with mud. We climbed into the minibus and dropped down off the moor to Parke for warming tea and cakes and a debriefing discussion of what had been achieved during the day, which gate fastenings had won most people's votes, and so on. Everyone seemed to think it had been a worthwhile exercise.

But for me it was much more than that. The day had shown me that there was an outdoor activity I could participate in *on equal terms* with able-bodied people. If we were both on Trampers I could keep up with any ranger

crossing the moor. My Trumper had done for me what the wheelchair had signally failed to do; namely, reduced my feeling of isolation, restored some of my independence, rekindled a taste for adventure and reconnected me with the physical world I had despaired of ever enjoying again, except through the tinted windscreen of my car or the double-glazed windows of my study. For that, at seventy, I am truly grateful.