

Give it some stick!

Phil Beckett



I decided to try walking with a stick with some trepidation. It would help my balance a little, but the main benefit would be that most people would give me a bit more space. That would reduce that slightly claustrophobic feeling I get in crowded places because I cannot manoeuvre as adeptly as I once could. The thing is, using a stick feels like an admission of defeat, or an advertisement of infirmity, whichever way you look at it.. But I have always

worked to the maxim that what is right for me is something everyone else will have to accept, when it comes to coping with Parkinson's, at least.

So I set off along the promenade at Bridlington, a local seaside resort, with a stick that had been my dad's and that I had kept for sentimental reasons. He had bought it in Switzerland and had attached those little metal badges to it, proclaiming that he had climbed the Matterhorn (or some such) and several other Alps - probably foothills, to be honest, with the aid of this trusty walking stick. The prom at Bridlington should be a doddle, I thought...

My Parkinson's is left sided, so my first instinct was to place the stick in my left hand, to help support my left leg - WRONG! Apart from the fact that my left hand and arm are affected by Parkinson's, I had great difficulty in co-ordinating my movements, ending up doing a passable impression of Cleese's "silly walk" for the first few yards.

Swapping hands and hoping no one had noticed, I then began to develop a rhythm and was doing tolerably well, until we reached a gentle incline. The end of the stick was metal tipped for durability whilst tackling the edelweiss-clad Alpine slopes, but it was no match for the challenges of the paved sea front walk



frequented by toddlers and pensioners alike. It slipped and slid along, giving me no confidence that, once planted on a solid surface, it would remain there until I lifted it for the next step.

I realised that I had to seek out a rubber ferrule for it - not the first thing Sunday retailers setting up shop in a seaside resort decide to keep in stock, you will realise.

A foray into the backstreets was required and I tracked down a hardware store - and found it embarrassing to have to try a couple for size! If you must carry a walking stick, you at least want to appear competent with it! "I may be a bit shaky, but at least I am competent to manoeuvre this stick!" is the message you want to give passers by, not "Look at that idiot, he nearly had someone's eye out with that thing!" (to quote Harold Godwinson, Hastings, 1066 AD - anecdote for history buffs).

The princely sum of 49 pence exchanged hands and the rubber tip was put in place with a certain amount of "Quick, no one's looking!" The transformation into a useful implement was instantaneous! As I browsed the shops, trying to avoid the chill wind and occasional shower, I was growing in confidence with my stylish piece of walking equipment.

The next thing I didn't anticipate was a problem in the gents, of all places! I went to use the facilities in a shopping centre - I'm not really disabled, I tell myself - I just need a little bit of help from time to time, so I avoid using disabled facilities, leaving them for someone in greater need. But I discovered too late that they don't give you anywhere to park your stick! I propped it against the tiled wall and after 3 seconds it clattered noisily to the floor, so that I had to grovel to retrieve it - how unprofessional. Can you take driving lessons on walking stick techniques? I think I might need a little tuition!

