

Riding for life: Patrick's story

Emily: Today we're here with Patrick, whose retirement journey has taken him from his commute into work to continuing his beloved hobby in his post work years. Since retiring, Patrick has spent the last eight years supporting his local blood bike group, the Freewheelers Emergency Voluntary Blood Bike Service - part of the Nationwide Association of Blood Bikes.

Rob: Freewheelers EVS is a charity that provides an unseen emergency service, delivering vital support to the NHS in the southwest of England. Patrick has helped the charity as both a rider and coordinator, providing an out of hours service, delivering anything from blood, donated breast milk and tissue, to medicine and even specialist surgical tools.

Emily: Patrick, it's such a pleasure to have you with us today. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.

Patrick: Well, thank you very much for having me.

Emily: Can we start with you telling us a little bit about yourself and your civil service career?

Patrick: Well, where can I begin? Uh, I'm Cornish by birth and, uh, even as a child, the weather always, um, fascinated me. So, I would spend time sort of on my back looking at clouds and things.

And when I was at secondary school, there was a particular teacher who had an interest in meteorology. And I think he was, uh, my key into my career, if you like. Um, so when I'd left school in 1970, I went into the civil service, into the Met Office, and, in my career from that time, I've, mostly been working with, uh, defense, occasionally, though, with the civil, side of meteorology, which most people know of, which is the television, the media, um, and also the general public, local authorities, and that kind of thing, providing a service to them.

And the beauty of the Met Office was, at that time, there were opportunities to do, um, lots of different aspects of meteorology. So I started off working with artillery, I'd been there for about, um, eight months, and then, um, I had to do some training.

We were flying balloons, and that was one of the things that actually, as a child, sort of attracted me. Can you believe it? Flying balloons. And, um, uh, one of the side aspects of that was, uh, the weather ship service. So I spent three years in the North Atlantic working on the Ocean Weather Service.

And that was taking soundings of the whole of the atmosphere as well as doing some, little bits of oceanography and things thrown in as a sideline. So when I finished there, um, I did a couple more years in the Met Office, but then, I left the Met Office to help the family business, which was actually a greengrocer. Can you imagine anything quite as diverse between meteorology and greengrocery?

Rob: Very much so.

Patrick: But it was an aspect I really, really enjoy, which is actually, serving people and helping people. I always like chatting to people. So I did that for four years.

And the other thing I missed was the actual, uh, the brain work. the science and everything was, was actually, quite natural to me. So when I went back into the Met Office, yes I went into forecasting, initially with the civil side.

So I was thrown to the deep end with, um, dealing with the public, dealing with the media and, uh, doing breakfast time radio live and this kind of thing. Um, which is the kind of thing, as I said, that people most associate with the Met Office. But then, In about 1993, um, they decided they were going to close Bristol itself.

So I decided I would actually go back into defence. And there I went into, um, forecasting at RAF Lynham with the Hercules aircraft and I stayed there for 20 years. And it was an absolute joy. You know, it became a real pleasure dealing with aircrew and the very specifics of flying heavy aircraft, dropping parachutists and, landing in fields and this kind of thing, you know. So it was very much the sharp end of what I was doing. And it was really, really interesting work.

Patrick: I then was also going down to Ascension Island in the, um, in the tropics, working down there for a short period, six months at a time with the aircraft.

So, this was fulfilling my natural tendency to want to jump off in different places. So that was really, really interesting and, uh, really helped my career, uh, because I found that I actually had an affinity with the air crew and I became, um, a bit of a go to person because I actually tried to provide a service that was more useful to them.

And, um, that actually helped me in my later career. I actually became an operations manager and my role was changing the way we worked with the military. And I really, really enjoyed that aspect. So I met a lot of wonderful people in my career. And, that sort of set me up until I came towards retirement.

Rob: It must have been hard to retire because, you know, you've spoken with such passion and such enthusiasm about your work and, you know, you've even said, you know, how much you loved it and what a joy it was.

So how did you feel about leaving? Because you obviously made a decision to retire, like, what sparked that decision for you?

Patrick: Oddly enough, it was change. Although change is, actually, was my role, it got to a point where, um, there were sort of, um, changes expected of the Met Office out with the area that we could have 100% decision over, and I ended up, um, as a round peg in a square hole, if you like. Um, for one thing, although I was still largely dealing with, um, aircrew and flying, I was, oddly enough, posted back to my, um, office, where I started my career in 1970, can you believe? So I sat in an office at Lark Hill on Salisbury Plain with, um, the Royal Artillery. Which, for somebody who was actually dealing closely with, um, aircrew, was a bit odd, and I put up with that for about a year and then I decided I'll have a final tour of Ascension Island. So I went down to Ascension Island, did another tour and whilst I was down there, I thought actually, I don't really want to go back to something that I didn't feel a hundred percent a part of.

Emily: Yeah.

Rob: Yeah.

Patrick: It was one of those natural things that happen, you know, and also by that time I was 64, so I'd already done four years. I mean, I'd obviously, I'd left the Met Office for four years to sort of get my full pension. I had this target of being 64 and then finishing anyway, but I was still thinking all the time, I'm really enjoying this, I'm really enjoying this, until that decision in 2012/13 sort of time.

Uh, because in that period, actually, just as an aside, I was really lucky and did quite a bit of work in Rwanda on a project sponsored by the United Nations, the World Meteorological Organization, to help them develop their meteorology in the country, which actually really suffered during the time of the troubles between the, um, peoples of Rwanda, which is very sad. My experience of Rwanda was absolutely lovely.

Lovely people, very friendly. You never really got a feeling that there was, um, any sort of, um, conflict going in there. So that was a real pleasure. So that was something as well that when I lost that kind of opportunity to do those sorts of things, yeah. Time to retire.

Emily: Yeah.

Rob: So, what made you go down the route of partial retirement rather than full retirement?

Patrick: I mean, just to see what it's gonna be like really. I was traveling further to go to work. My commute was further. It was about, um, an hour and a half a day, even though I was on the motorbike. I mean, because I was commuting, it was wet or dry, you know. I thought, well, if I do, um, partial retirement and I have a bit of say in what hours I work.

And so I, I actually had longish weekends. Worked for a few days during the middle of the week, um, to actually cover the things I needed to do and what have you, which I was quite capable of doing, but the one thing of course, with partial retirement is that, um, your work piles up in the days you're not there. So that you quite find that the three days you're working, or three and a half days, you have as much work you would normally do in probably a week. So that's a consideration of partial retirement, is that if you're in one of those roles where you can't actually step away and leave it and just say goodbye, like I used to be able to do in forecasting, yeah, you just have this extra bit of work sometimes.

Rob: I don't think we've heard that point of view before, that when you're partially retired, the work bit. People always focus on the non-work bit of partial retirement, but that the work piles up and you find you have to be a bit more efficient when you were in work and you had to get through a lot more in the time that you had.

Patrick: Yes, that's very true. Yes. I mean, there's obviously, there's so many diverse roles within the civil service. I mean, I suspect there are differences, but that's something to just to bear in mind.

Because the balance between the work and the retirement part, if you actually work the hours you want to, in my view, it's going to be most useful to find out what it's going to be like

to have long weekends, so I'd have four days at home. Can I fill four days at home and not get bored, this kind of thing, you know?

Um, Some people might choose to sort of do sort of a different spread, but that, I felt, was going to work for me. It also just happened that most of the things I did happened sort of on Mondays and Fridays. Weekends with family, but Mondays and Fridays were things when other opportunities to do things I liked doing came up. And, thing I do regularly, up until fairly recently, like last week, I was a Rotarian with a local Rotary group and it was there that I actually heard about Blood Bikes.

Emily: Ah, well that's interesting.

Patrick: That is where this sort of kernel of interest came from.

Emily: Where the connection came from.

Patrick: Yes. Um, apart from the fact I just loved motorcycling anyway. I'm not saying I was good at motorcycling, but I've actually motorcycled since I went to Lynham in 1993, so I've been riding for 10 years. 20 something years, 25 years regularly. It's one of those things you either, you either dig or you don't. And it just sort of, uh, uh, grew on the motorcycling.

Emily: Yeah.

Patrick: And then that link through the Rotary Club. Finding out about what they do and, you know, the service they deliver, which I thought that sounds so good.

Emily: Yeah.

Patrick: Um, it really sort of appealed to me. Um, it's got big, big downsides, but the balance was, yes, it's something that, um, you know, really fits with what I feel like I can do.

Emily: Yeah.

Rob: So you'd make the decision to get involved with Freewheelers EVS after hearing about it through the Rotary Club. Interesting that you talk about big, big downsides. I want to, I want to dig into that and find out what they are. So can you tell us a little bit more about what you do? You know, obviously you got involved with them, like, what happened from there?

Patrick: It started off as a small group in Bristol. It's one of the early groups. The first group was based in Yeovil in Somerset. About five people set up this service for Yeovil Hospital. Most people are aware that the NHS is under pressure with beds in hospitals and things. Some of the reason for this hold up in beds is down to decisions on things like medications and treatments at certain times of the day. Now, during the daytime when all the pathologists and everything are around, then it's a case sometimes taking a blood sample, whisking it to pathology, and then they have a route. Whereas if somebody's admitted, sort of, in the afternoon/evening time, then the process can be delayed overnight because you haven't got the right consultant, you haven't got the right information from pathology and this kind of thing to actually take it further.

So one aspect is this business of allowing the NHS to continue working, as closely as possible, through the night as through the day. Um, so this group in Bristol saw this little group in Somerset. This was 30 years ago. And they decided to do the same, and it's grown from there. So it started off in, sort of, Greater Bristol, um, the two hospitals there and the pathology labs.

So between, the GPs and some of the other medical units that needed to send things to pathology, they would give us a ring. "Can you take this sample either urgently or perhaps non urgently?" You'd have to sort of mixture of the two and work out how to do it. And, um, that then expanded into the hospital at Bath, the Royal United Hospital. It expanded to Taunton in Somerset, the Musgrove Park Hospital. So now our patch goes from Minehead way down in Somerset, all the way up to Chippenham in North East Wiltshire. So it's about 10,000 square miles, something like that, we have to cover. So we have five bikes going now, every day. Uh, covers all out of hours, so it's overnight, weekends, and all public holidays. We're all scooting around, picking up samples and taking them to pathology and things.

Emily: That's so interesting, I'm fascinated by it. Five bikes, that's such a massive patch. Like that must be, they must all be so busy all the time.

Patrick: And it's getting busier. Yes. The word gets around, if you like. Yeah. So, I mean, typically over a weekend, you could be riding for 700 miles over a weekend, something like that. Uh, and that's the way the coordinating role comes in. That's the guy who takes the call from the hospital or whoever, um, asking you to take, um, samples around. One of the growing ones is actually delivering, um, medications to people's houses. Because part of the bed blocking problem was that, um, they needed sometimes to just put somebody on an ambulance to take them home to discharge them rather than having them in bed. But that would be before they'd been signed off with their medication and what have you, and they'd been signed off by the consultant, purely because of the logistics of using an ambulance because it just happened to be available.

Emily: Yeah.

Patrick: So they would be at home without their medication. So quite often, we would pick up the medication and take it to their home address. And that's a growing sort of service, part of the service.

Rob: So you're, you're obviously a volunteer.

Patrick: Mm hmm.

Rob: But does it feel like this has become sort of a second career for you?

Patrick: Very much so, yes. Although I'm actually pulling back from the riding side now. Um, I'm not well suited to riding at night anymore.

Rob: Is that one of the downsides that you mentioned?

Patrick: One of the downsides, yeah. Up to um, about 18 months ago I was quite happy riding through the evenings. But more and more as I'm aging into my 70s, I struggle with my eyes adjusting to the headlamps and things like that. So as a motorcyclist, you're very

vulnerable anyway, and you really have to just say, enough's enough, kind of thing. And that's one of the things that's true of all the bikers, you know. If you start at seven in the evening, if you get to midnight and you haven't had a break, you've got to be grown up enough to say, I need a break.

Emily: Yes.

But they, they're not like that. They're people who just want to carry on and on and on and on. And it's the one of the really difficult parts is actually being a coordinator saying, look, you've got to have a break. You know, it's all very well just wanting to carry on riding, but no, no, you know, safety comes first.

Emily: Yeah, absolutely. It's so important, isn't it? As you say, on a motorcycle, you're so vulnerable already. You have to be very disciplined, I suppose, um, and kind of change your way of thinking to like, "But I just want to help people and I can do more and I can keep going. So actually, the safest thing for me and for people around me is for me to take a break".

Rob: So when you transitioned from partial retirement into full retirement, had you already got involved in the charity?

Patrick: Only in terms of making contact and finding out what they did. Because, um, you can't just jump on a high-powered motorcycle with blue lights and just go off, you know. I mean, even though I was an experienced motorcyclist, um, I still needed to have advanced training to actually do that. So you have training in blue lights, training in carrying medical equipment. Because at the end of the day, they belong to somebody. If you give a sample, that is your sample, and you want to know that it actually has got a recorded pathway to the service it needs to go to. So there's a lot of this sort of, there are procedures in place whereby, you know, there is that confidentiality and also the protection of your property through this process. So that's one of the things that you have to do. Um, but advanced motorcycle training was the other thing.

Patrick: I actually struggled with it

Rob: Hmm.

Patrick: Because I was trying to get rid of bad habits and start new ones.

Emily: Yeah, yeah.

Patrick: And, I actually got there in the end. Uh, but then I found actually this is, this is good as well. So I actually expanded my motorcycling into actually becoming an observer/ trainer of advanced motorcycling, which is another aspect of what I do now. Um, so I'm part of the Institute of Advanced Motorists, and I train on their behalf. I'm a National Observer, so I've had quite a lot of training to get to that standard.

And I also help Wiltshire Police with *Bike Safe* to help other bikers keep safe on the road.

Emily: Right.

Rob: Wow. So you've been busy.

Patrick: I keep myself busy. Yes, but it fulfills this business of me getting fidgety and wanted to find new pathways, you know. So yeah.

Rob: So do you think that all those things have helped you make that transition from sort of, full-time work, partial retirement, to full retirement?

Patrick: Yeah, yeah i'm having a ball again, like I was when I was uh with the air crew, you know. It's just a a place where i'm happy

Emily: Yeah, that's brilliant.

Patrick: And it fits my personality and, you know, the things I like to do.

Emily: Yeah, that's so interesting. I'll change the subject ever so slightly with this next question.

Patrick: No carry on. Yes.

Emily: We know the cost of living has affected everyone all over the country over the past couple of years. Has it created any particular challenges for you in your retirement?

Patrick: Not in a big way. The thing that's really affected me up to now, and my wife, um, was the fact that she was an NHS worker and she had a plan to retire at 60. Her being four years younger than me, actually, my retirement was still 65, so 60 was going to work for her as well. And then, of course, this business of actually making the people of her generation work on until 66 was a massive, massive problem for us.

Emily: Okay.

Patrick: We sat down and talked about it and we worked out that, yeah, we could probably manage on my pension alone. One of the problems being an NHS worker, she was in the community and did a lot of kneeling and working on people's legs, and that took a massive toll on her joints. So for her to carry on working was not realistic, certainly not in that environment. So we made a conscious decision, we will manage on my pension. And that was quite tricky up until last year when she actually was able to contribute her state pension. Her, NHS pension was only very small because she'd spent all her time bringing up the kids and what have you, and then went back into nursing for about the last 10 years. So she had about 10 years of pension built up, which wasn't a huge amount.

Rob: So the one thing I'm always interested with, partial retirement is, you know, is, is that sort of just that financial aspect. You know, you talk about sort of, has the cost of living affected you. Did you feel that financially it worked for you doing partial retirement?

Patrick: Yes it did. Obviously your general income goes down a bit. I think what helped with us was that we get our joy from simple things. We're not great overseas travelers. We have traveled overseas, as I mentioned, I went to Rwanda. So, the kind of overseas travel

inclination wasn't there for us, and also having worked in the Met Office, I'm a bit of an environmentalist anyway, so I just thought, no, we'll pull away from that.

So we didn't have that kind of expense. Our joy is going to Cornwall to see our kids, we've got grandchildren down there. So we, we just decided we could actually make do and live a nice life, which we do, without, sort of, being particularly materialistic and, apart from the motorbike, of course.

Rob: Yeah.

Patrick: That has to be there.

Rob: Well, you do seem like a really sort of happy, sort of content person, you know. The way you talked about, you know, your career and the stuff that you're doing now, you know, you're so sort of like animated and passionate about it, it's really good to see that you've been able to get that for yourself. Because a lot of people don't get it, do they?

Patrick: I think it's really important. Um, a lot of people I know who have retired seem to be doing a lot of gardening. I mean, I do a lot of gardening, I've got quite a big garden, but I don't make, I'm not a slave to it. It has to wait, kind of thing, you know. But I do see a lot of people who lose that social contact, and the social contact, for me, was fundamental. Having moved from an environment where there's always people coming to consult me and me helping them and what have you. That was, I think, one of the key areas I needed to cover when I left the Met Office.

Rob: So on that sort of train, if you were speaking to someone now who is kind of thinking about retiring in the next few years, what words of wisdom would you give?

Patrick: Have a plan. There's two aspects. There's a financial one and there's also the social one. Never underestimate the importance of keeping contact with people and find outlets where you can maintain that. I have tended to always want to do that, which is why I became a Rotarian because again, that was meeting people within the group and also on the street when we were collecting money and chatting to people about the work that Rotary does.

And that I carried all the way through. And even now into when I'm training motorcyclists, I have that connection. And I think people need to ensure that they sort of fertilize their minds with contact with other people, finding out what they do, where they get their buzz from and this kind of thing, and seeing if there's this common ground where you can sort of, you know, actually get to know people.

I've made some absolutely wonderful friends since I retired. Absolutely wonderful friends from all walks of life as well.

And the financial side, I think probably it's really important that people take advantage of, um, I think the civil service retirement seminars that they offer.

Emily: Yes.

Patrick: I was on one of those. There were aspects of that which I found quite useful and probably one of the things I'd never even considered is the fact that you have to adjust your spending to how long you're going to live. And the one thing none of us understands is how long we're going to live for. So, uh, I had to sit down one day with my wife and said, "Okay, uh, how are we going to go about this? Um, you know, how long are we going to live?" And she said, "Oh, we're going to live till whatever". And I said, "I'm going to live till probably same, similar sort of age". But then you say, well, how much of that is going to be active?

Emily: Mm.

Patrick: Because, yes, I'm slowing down gradually now. I can feel myself slowing down, now I'm in my 70s. It's not the same as when I was in my 60s. And I can project that forward to a point where I see friends I've had for years who are now quite elderly and you realize that eventually, you're going to have less requirement of your money.

It will be mostly around food, comfort, things like heating and things like this, and, you know, your house itself, maintaining your house, whereas the early part of retirement is like I am now, you know, doing this, that, and the other, going to all sorts of places. So, you know, part of understanding your pension is to see how you want it to work for you. Whereas early in retirement is when you're still really wanting to get out and enjoy life and do things. And so, um, you know, you need to adjust your spending if you like to still allow for this funneling of your activity, but equally you don't want to sort of run yourself short towards the end. So that's quite a tricky one and I don't know if anybody ever gets it perfect, but, yeah, I think we have a bit of a plan and hopefully it's the right one.

Emily: Yeah, I think it reminds me of one of the big positives of the civil service pension in particular, is the type of scheme that it is, in that it's a defined benefit scheme, which means that the money from your pension that you receive every year, you get it every year until you die, no matter how long you live. There's no, kind of, cut off and it's not a finite pot, if that makes sense. So I think that's something that I would hope a lot of people a lot of reassurance as well when they're doing that financial planning, thinking about retirement in the future.

Patrick: Yes, and I think that certainly goes back to your question, "Have I found it a struggle with the financial situation?" To be honest, I haven't. Because I've understood that I have got this regular income coming in and we're quite lucky with that. And I think one of the things that civil servants and generally people who work in service, like National Health Service, Police and everything, tend to forget is that, um, our pension schemes are, almost mandatory from when we join. They become, they're part of our salary. So, towards retirement, I actually became more and more aware of the fact was that this money's been going into this pot of money from my pension for years. I know it's not quite like that, but it, it is that kind of activity that you've got no choice over, but it's really, really valuable. And I was very aware, in fact, that, my level of management level, um, if I did that in the private sector, I would probably get paid a lot more. But then they have to finance their own pension schemes, quite often, and they're not as secure as the one we're in as government.

Emily: It's very interesting that you say that. I've been having this very conversation with my partner in the last few days. He's a civil servant and occasionally it crosses his mind. "Oh, if I had this job at this level in the private sector, maybe I could earn more money. Maybe, you know, it would help us buy a house", that kind of thing.

And I always say to him, and obviously I'm biased because of my job, but I always say to him, "Yes, but really in the long term, it isn't better paid because of the pension scheme and the benefits that you get from that in the long term from the civil service". So you've hit the nail on the head. Absolutely agree.

Emily: I've got one final question for you. If you could turn back time, is there anything that you'd do differently?

Patrick: No, absolutely not. No, I could probably. As I expect you've probably gathered, I've had a really good time through my life and I wouldn't uh change it for the world.

Emily: Oh, well that's lovely to hear and that's a really nice note to end on.

Rob: It very, very much is. It's been great chatting to you today, Patrick. Thank you for joining us and thank you for sharing your story.

Patrick: It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Emily: To find out more about anything that we've talked about today, or to tell us about something you'd like us to cover in a future episode, head to civilservicepensionscheme.org.uk/podcast. You can also find links to information, transcripts and accessible versions of this podcast in the episode description.

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Emily: This episode was recorded in July 2024. All information is accurate at the time of recording. Thanks for listening.