

# Looking back at it now



**S Hancocks, OBE\***

There is a temptation, which I suspect is based on all sorts of primeval human needs and insecurities to go back and it applies just as much to dental practice as it does to other fields of life and work. But, as we all learn, it's never quite as it used to be.

To begin with, going back takes all manner of forms and covers a multitude of emotions.

There's nostalgia for one. The soft-focus lens, fluffy-round-the-edges memories of how it used to be in any particular circumstance. Conveniently forgotten are the dreadful damp Tuesday afternoons or the roasting-hot, non-air-conditioned summer days or the aggravations of Mrs Tatersall's never ending veneers saga. Remembered instead are the good times, the happy times and yes, even some of the bad times were good times because you were part of such a wonderful team who all pulled together. If only that was the case now...you see it's happening already, instant uptake of the rose-tinted retrospect scope.

Then there is curiosity. The desire to find out what happened to the people you left behind and how they managed without you. I wonder what happened to old so-and-so? It would be fascinating to know if whatshisname ever did manage to do such-and-such. Did that dental nurse, oh what was her name? the one with the big hair and the rabbit, ever marry that fat builder called Dean?

This jumble of feelings combines with a usual nervousness when actually returning to a former workplace. Things that have remained the same reinforce the 'when we' memories. 'Oh, seeing that x-ray unit against the wall there, reminds me of when we ...' and the listener, if you're watching them carefully, as you never are on such occasions because the enthusiasm for telling the tale overwhelms your usual sensitivity to the tedium you might be creating, sighs imperceptibly, smiles a stretched grin of politeness and glazes over, probably going into their personal store of 'when we' stories to blunt the boredom.

But it's when things have changed that bewilderment, irritation and sometimes

anger can creep in. It's very like when you're looking over a property as a prospective buyer. The vendor, casually pushing aside the bathroom door, says 'and finally our pride and joy, the avocado suite with contrasting black and white floor tiles and art deco fittings. It's taken us years to get this just to our liking.' And you think, 'and it'll take just hours to have this all ripped out and a tasteful bathroom installed instead.'

So you find that the reception area that you spent agonising meetings designing, discussing, re-designing and re-discussing before suffering months of builder's dust and disruption, has been swept away and merged with a crèche and preventive den-

tal has been sold off and converted into luxury fully fitted apartments with 'original features', wooden flooring and views over a marina that occupies what used to be a nurses home and boiler block. No longer a practice, the premises have reverted to a residential dwelling, or a greengrocers or a video shop.

The world of going back is now only in your memory, no one on the street, no one viewing the ducks on the marina from their cosy duplex, no one renting Annihilator 4 will have any idea that you used to do Class II amalgams on that very spot. Or, frankly, be in the least bit interested.

Not that it is just the physical surroundings that make you want to retrace your steps. The people were the central part of your existence there, colleagues and patients in whose daily trials and tribulations you shared. What of them? The leaving party when you all swore to keep in touch come what may? Not like all the other previous times when such promises

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tal unit. Well, if they're happy... Or, with a pang of great if guilt-ridden self-satisfaction you note that the leaky window frame in the rear surgery about which you complained again and again still has a small drip tray underneath it with its familiar, resident little pool of water.

Sometimes you go back and there's nothing there at all or it's changed so radically that you can't exactly find it. Perhaps it's on the way back from a visit or a weekend away and you take a diversion to be able to drive past your former haunts.

A vague recollection of the road layout guides your route until the growing confidence of lost familiarity ceases abruptly at the end of Baggly Street. Where the launderette was on the corner there is now a Cinema complex and car park. The hospi-

had lead to nothing, no this was different. Well of course with busy lives and not having that particular practice in common anymore and moving away and then the family coming along and...it turns out that the only person still there is the receptionist who you didn't especially get on with anyway and who has obviously confused you with someone else.

But the patients, what of them? Those who were so sorry to hear that you were leaving that they sent in a sack load of good luck cards. In reception you recognise at least two of your old regulars, each of whom eyes you suspiciously before one of them says, 'aren't you the man who used to run the Bingo sessions at the Day Centre?' Never say never, but never go back unless you really have to.