THE IMPERIOUS MILE

Come, join the cavalcade of cyclists down the High,

Early May, at Oxford, nineteen fifty-four;

We leave our college quads drawn by this simple cry:

“Roger Bannister is knocking at our door”.

Cross at Magdalen Bridge and follow round.

We are propelled, the wind is at our back,

To reach the Iffley Road Athletics Ground

Which has a bona-fide running track.

Three Achilles meet; a target - theirs to snatch.

One of them to run four circuits on the track

Against the second hand’s four circuits of a watch.

Something that the record books still lack.

The wind is going to be a problem, though.

Saint George’s flag flies from the church nearby;

All day it’s had a thorough testing blow.

While there is wind; the record? Wave good bye.

Saint George is both sentinel and messenger;

His English sons are under his command.

With minutes left, the sign could not be clearer-

The standard drops – execute the plan in hand.

The plan is simple – four laps at an even pace,

With Brasher pacing at laps one and two;

And Chataway to take the third lap of the race;

Leaving Bannister to do what he can do.

With two saints Christopher, a glory route to forge

Cry “God for England, Roger and Saint George”.

A Brasher false start in the interim

No harm is done - helps boost th’adrenalin.

The crowd of several hundred cognoscenti

Feel the burden of those waiting years;

Chances like tonight are far from plenty;

All the more reason to boost our cheers.

Fifty- seven point five, time at the quarter;

Is this good or is this bad? Who can say?

People are confused; it’s not what it aught-er;

But, keep on shouting - on your feet, come what may.

At the half : One fifty-eight point two – looks good;

Brasher he’s done well – Chataway takes the lead,

Beyond his best, but pushing, as he should;

“Go on” the crowd shouts; must not lose this speed.

The watchman calls “Three minutes and a bit”,

When Bannister is greeted by the bell.

Time stood still; we question: “Is this it?”

The crowd decides: “It is” and starts to yell.

Chataway grimly paces into the bend

Where Bannister takes over, with his stride for glory;

The crowd , united in the message that they send:

“Go on, go on, go on, go on,”: repeat this simple story.

His adversary, the watch’s sweeping hand,

Is ruthless, chasing like the reaper’s scythe;

He knows his pace; this stage has been planned.

The hope of triumph is, still, very much alive.

Unbroken is his unrelenting stride;

He breasts the tape while several watches click.

A final act - his arms are open wide;

So, after all these years – has he done the trick?

McWhirter, Norris of the Guiness Record Book,

Agent, friend, chauffer, coach; official - or not?

Declaims the result, whatever it took;

And spins it out with whatever he’s got.

We’d no idea what his plan would be;

When it came to times all we heard was “THREE”.

The crowd, released at last, go wild, show no restraint

Grown men waive and shout and jump up in the air

Like anything we’ve felt before, it surely ain’t

Oxford, centre of the world*…. and we were there!*

**Fated, we thank the gods for Iffley Meadow**

**And I can claim: “Et in arcadia ego”**

*©Roger Shakeshaft. March 2024.*