



NEW HORIZONS

A new year is a great time for a new challenge – so be inspired by Virginia Pawlyn, who took up marathon running just before her 70th birthday. By Caroline Roberts



As Virginia Pawlyn made her way along the wide bay near the end of the Jersey Marathon course, she kept thinking: I should be walking by now. But somehow she just kept on running. It was her first ever marathon – a challenge she had set herself as she approached her 70th birthday – and it was going better than she had ever dared expect. But there was an even bigger surprise in store. Her finishing time of four hours and 26 minutes ranked her second in her age group for the whole of the UK. 'I couldn't believe it,' she says. And neither could a group of her friends from Evesham Vale Running Club, who had come along to do the marathon as a relay. 'The relay starts half an hour after the main race, and the idea was that the last



runner would catch me up and we'd finish the race together – but they never quite caught me.

It just goes to show that it's never too late to discover a hidden talent. Virginia certainly took the long route to marathon success. At school, she had no interest in sport, and later on she was busy bringing up her two sons and working as a manager at the Citizens Advice Bureau. It was only after her retirement that she joined a gym and took up walking to keep the weight off.

But in 2007, a fellow gym member asked her if she'd like to try out the new local running club. 'I went along out of curiosity, and someone I vaguely knew invited me to run with her group. I thought it would be embarrassing, but halfway through the run she said, "Can you slow down, Virginia. We can't keep up!" I was on a real runner's high and was hooked.'

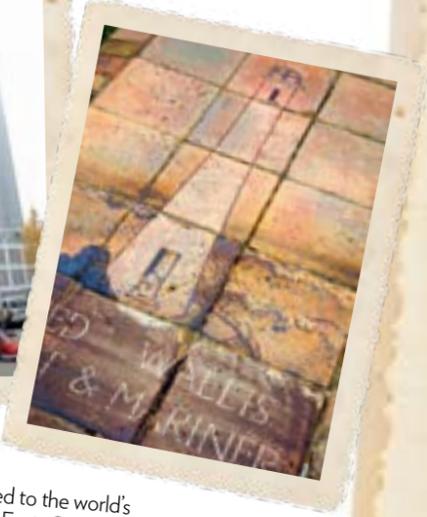
Since then, there's been no stopping her and she has taken part in several other marathons and a variety of shorter races. In 2011, a year after her success in Jersey, she ran a marathon at Lake Garda. In 2012, it was Chester, where she achieved her fastest time of 4:14, and the London Marathon, where she ran in aid of Age UK. 'I thought that was an appropriate charity,' she smiles.

The Boston Marathon in 2013 was the only race she didn't complete, but that was because she was half a mile from the finish when the bombs went off. In the ensuing confusion there wasn't time to feel scared, she says. It was only when she saw the TV coverage that the seriousness of the situation started to sink in.

Virginia's passion for running has also taken her to a remote part of Ethiopia. After an organised tour of the country last year, she set off alone on a pilgrimage to Bekoji, which was featured in the 2012 film *Town of Runners*. It's the base of the



PERSONAL BEST



LATE BLOOMERS

- Virginia's a spring chicken compared to the world's oldest marathon runner, Londoner Fauja Singh (above left), the 'Turbaned Torpedo'. He ran his first marathon at the age of 89 and finally retired from running aged 101, having completed six more.
- Mary Wesley (right), author of *The Chamomile Lawn*, published her first novel at 71 and went on to write 10 bestsellers during the last 20 years of her life.
- Cornish fisherman Alfred Wallis won acclaim as an artist after taking up painting (above right) in his 60s following the death of his wife.
- Harland David Sanders, aka 'Colonel Sanders', founded the Kentucky Fried Chicken company at 65, and went on to become a multimillionaire.
- Peter Roget put his lifelong obsession with list-making to good use when he created the first thesaurus in 1852, at the age of 73. *Roget's Thesaurus* has never been out of print since.



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famous coach Sentayehu Eshetu, who trains the area's young runners and has been responsible for the early development of many of Ethiopia's Olympic and world champions. 'I went out with the runners on two training sessions,' she says. 'The coach ran after them, and I ran after him.' It was hard going as the town is at an elevation of almost 3,000 metres, but, she says, 'It was a wonderful experience and so interesting to see how they do things there.'

Of course, you can't run over 26 miles without putting in a huge amount of preparation, and Virginia credits her personal trainer, Dan Fivey, with getting her to the starting line. In the lead-up to the Jersey Marathon, he designed a rigorous programme that included training runs which gradually got longer

and longer until, nearing the race, she was covering 40 or 50 miles a week.

So doesn't she suffer from aches and pains? 'Everybody gets injuries. But you don't sit and worry about it; you just wait for it to go away.' She certainly has no plans to hang up her running shoes. 'I'd like to complete the other majors of Berlin, Chicago and New York,' she says. So Virginia is back in training with another club, Almost Athletes, in Cheltenham, where she now lives.

And what advice does she have for others thinking of taking on a new challenge in later life? 'You've got to push yourself out of your comfort zone, and when you do, great things happen. Don't imagine that getting old means you'll be just sitting around. There's a lot of fun and excitement out there if you look for it.'