

Back to braces ... the best thing I've ever done

◆ Project Nice Gnashers was a bit of a commitment, but I'm so glad now that I stuck it out, writes Gaby Soutar



Today I ate a Moffat Toffee for the first time in ages. I've been on something of an epic tooth journey, and these were on my avoid list for a while.

For 18 months, I was in the thrall of Invisalign. They're the clear retainers that are usually advertised on the window wraps outside dentists, with smiling folk grinning as if they've lost a penny and found a tenner.

Before I tried them, the only thing I knew was that Tom Cruise wore them in 2002.

The last time I had braces was when I was a teenager. I didn't get train tracks, but the more casual ones that you can remove, with a single wire. Let's call them tram tracks.

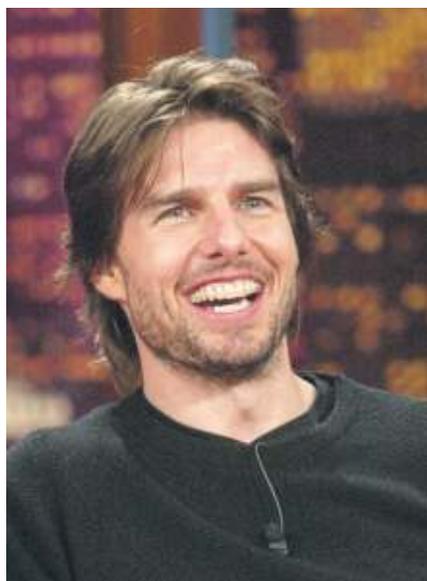
They did a semi-okay job, but who knew that your teeth continue to move throughout your life? They're like shifting tectonic plates and apparently they get more itinerant as you age.

You're supposed to wear a retainer every night to make sure they stay put, post braces. I never did that, or was offered that option. Thus, my teeth were kind of snaggly, the colour of watery chai tea, and I was always very gummy.

Not Shane MacGowan level, but David Bowie-ish, which, ironically, I think is very attractive on others, though not on myself. Still, I didn't ever think about getting braces again, until I had a consultation at Edinburgh dentist The Row. It's in a beautiful Georgian property in the New Town. This swish clinic is painted white inside, with a waiting room that has cream-coloured sofas, jazzy music and loads of natural light. I met with a lovely cosmetic dentist, Dr Slaine Ker.

You can't imagine anything painful or upsetting ever happening on her watch. I don't think I've ever had a dentist who's been this nice to me, though I've never been private before. My usual NHS one is harassed and swamped, but doing her very best against the odds.

It was when Ker showed me a before and after simulation of my future teeth, when



I thought, YOLO, and signed up for the direct debit before I changed my mind.

I thought the process might kill two birds with one stone. I've had problems with my teeth since I was a child since I had three sets – really – and had to have lots of operations. I've ended up with squinty teeth and a phobia.

It was time to chuck myself into the deep end, with Project Nice Gnashers. At least you can barely see the clear Invisalign when you're wearing them, so nobody would think I was the oldest teen in town.

You change the retainers every week, wear them for 22 hours a day, and they get tighter as you go. There are little knobs of fluoride applied to your teeth, so the plastic can get a purchase and shift things around.

Week one: I had regrets. My teeth ached and they made me feel strangely claustrophobic. But it was bearable. Soon, it hurt less, then not at all. The hardest thing is not being able to eat what you want, when you want. At mealtimes, you have to pop them out for no longer than around an hour. My teeth didn't feel as stable as they used to, and they were tender, so I'd chew in a certain spot and dodge nuts and crisps.

Then, you have to clean your teeth before



Invisalign, the clear retainers for teeth, as worn by Tom Cruise, left, in 2002

“
Just when I was reaching the end of my tether, we were done
”

putting them in again. It is a hassle, but I became used to taking my mini toothbrush and toothpaste so I could brush in restaurant toilets.

At the beginning of the Invisalign process, I was very strict, but in the last weeks I got naughty, and, with them still in, I drank the occasional coffee and imbibed a chocolate button or two. I'd see Ker every couple of weeks, to get my next sets and for a check-up. When we began, the process was only going to take a couple of months, but it kept extending. I think that's standard for Invisalign, and 18 months is around the average.

Just when I was reaching the end of my tether, we were done. The finishing touches included whitening with gel, and I had a bit of composite bonding done on one of my stunted front teeth, since it's the Ronnie Corbett of incisors. This involves building up your tooth with resin, and Ker is an artist and perfectionist, who mixes shades of blue and ivory, to ensure your faux half-gnasher looks entirely realistic.

I needed a local anaesthetic in my gum for this. I didn't even feel the injection. Just two years ago, at the suggestion of this procedure, I would've gone screaming along Albany Street, such was my

dentophobia. I also had a permanent wire placed along the back of my front teeth, so I'm not entirely reliant on wearing a retainer at night – I know, sexy – though I still have to do that.

Annoyingly, nobody really noticed the results. I have a friend who had the same reaction, after having a mid-life nose job. Even her parents didn't notice.

Still, I know. I'm amazed that I'm not gummy any more, because my teeth have been pushed outwards. When someone takes a photo, I proudly do the full toothy 'cheese'.

While I used to only floss the teeth I wanted to keep, now that I prize the whole set, I floss and even do interdental brushing. I have raised my hygiene game, and hope my NHS dentist will be proud and not give me the usual gum-disease lecture when she sees me for my regular check-up.

Occasionally, I find old selfies on my phone, and the before and after is extreme. When something happens gradually, you don't notice the positive changes. However, maybe it's still best to go easy on those toffees.

www.therowdental.com