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Taking stock of fond memories



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THIS time of year I can't drive out of Newton Abbot on a summer's evening, along the road to Kingsteignton, without feeling a sense of deep and poignant regret. It is an elegiac regret for times gone by. Poets and writers of elegant pastoral prose might long for the sound of skylarks rising above the sun-kissed fields or the echoes of long-lost Victorian farming machinery.

But my misty-eyed longing is for the throbbing of a home-tuned Ford engine and the precision application of a lump hammer to a recalcitrant piece of dented bodywork. For the smell of fried onions and the flickering flames of a small oil fire in the sump of an Austin Cambridge. For me, summer Wednesday nights should always be spent in that first corner of Newton Abbot racecourse, the corner tucked in by the trees by the side of the river, the corner you see first as you pop over the railway bridge en route for Tesco.

If you look on Google maps at the satellite picture of Newton Abbot racecourse you can still make out the oval shape of the stock car track that used to be in that corner. It was a tiny track — one of the smallest in the country — but what times we had there. It had a marshalling tower in the middle, and spectator banking all down one side and part way round both corners.

A wall of white-painted steel and a big net protected the spectators from any cars, wheels or other bits of debris that might come their way. The wall got a coat of paint every season or so, when the tyre scuffs and dents got too bad. On the back straight, where no spectator was allowed to stand — only confused language students who were quickly sent on their way by the track announcer — a row of poles and steel hawsers separated speeding cars from the perfectly manicured green of the horse-racing track.

The pits turn had a gate protected by a giant lorry tyre which would be wheeled aside so that the gladiators could emerge for their races, and the trackside scenery was completed by the commentary hut and race control office, where the announcer made sense of the frenetic action and announced everything with an extra 'ah' syllable on the end: "***Winner of Race Nine-ah, number 667-ah, Billy-ah Batten-ah.***"

Promoter Trevor Redmond — an ebullient Kiwi former speedway rider in a big hat — brought us hot rods and midgets and nippy Formula Two stock cars that lacked the grunt of the Formula Ones that hurtled around the big shale tracks of the Midlands but made up for it in non-stop action. Once you had been going to the track for a few weeks Trevor would greet you like members of the family.

But the cars we loved best — and motor racing purists might like to look away now — were the bangers. I'm sure there were rules concerning banger racing, about what kind of car you could use and what you could actually do with it once you had it on the track, but the fine details were lost on us.

Wednesday nights brought huge crowds to the racecourse, and being a canny old promoter, Trevor the Kiwi knew how to make the most of them. There were two main language schools in South Devon back in the Seventies, EF and SiS. EF's colours were — and still are — blue and white. SiS's were red and white. And so some drivers painted their cars blue for EF, and others red for SiS. In every banger race the busloads of foreign students had their own drivers to cheer.

And cheer they did. They packed the pits bend and roared. And clever Trevor smiled and greeted his regulars and filled his big Kiwi hat with pound notes.

During the breaks between races you could walk out through the paddock and pits, taking your life in your hands as cars charged to and from the track gates. Over by the Tote building the technically advanced stock cars had their wing angles adjusted and their tyre pressures raised or lowered by an ounce or two per square inch. Back over by the golf driving range where the banger drivers worked in the dark and only the bravest spectator would venture, the fine tuning was done with heavy hammers and big boots.

Many's the time an old Rover would be helped from the track at the end of a race, bodywork crushed beyond recognition and wheels hanging off at crazy angles, coolant haemorrhaging from beneath and the driver walking disconsolately behind. Then, out in the darkness by the driving range, out where normal people feared to tread, illuminated only by the headlights of a Transit van and the glow from a dozen cigarettes, the Rover would be battered back into shape, clouted and hammered and yanked and belted, topped up with its vital fluids and sent back out again. How we would cheer when it reappeared from the darkness.

Other tracks were available, of course, and with the help of those who had already passed their driving tests and bike tests at a young age we watched races at St Austell, St Day, Smeatharpe and the Mendip Raceway. But there was nothing to come close to a summer Wednesday night at Newton Abbot, and we'll never see them again.

The track is long gone, of course, and so is the affable Mr Redmond. But the good news is that the memories live on thanks to the world wide web. David Kipling, who lives way out west in the Canadian province of British Columbia, has compiled a wonderful website dedicated to the golden age of stock car racing. He has pictures from tracks all over the UK, but he has recently uncovered a goldmine of Newton Abbot material.

Local ex-racer Kevin Crabtree sent him more than 100 photographs of stock cars at Newton Abbot from 1970 to about 1976. The pictures show cars in that gravel paddock, and even have the cooling tower of the long-lost Newton Abbot power station as a backdrop.

David, whose website is a non-profit-making labour of love, said: "Stock car racing has always been a rather looked-down-upon sport but it has touched so many people. The reward I get is thanks from families of drivers and mechanics from way back, who never dreamed their dad or grandad could be featured and given credit, because it was never a glamour sport. It was very much a working man's hobby."

If it was a hobby of yours, you can take a lap of the nostalgia track by visiting David's website at www.oldstox.com. The section with Kevin's fabulous Newton Abbot pictures is labelled 'Juniors/F2s'.