

Saturday Nights in Dudley Wood

It used to be a speedway track they told me. To be honest, I didn't need reminding as I turned left into Stadium Drive, then right into Racemeadow Crescent. Pulling up outside the parcel's destination, my mind jolts into nostalgia mode and I suddenly hear the roar of throbbing engines and inhale the distinctive smell of methanol fumes. A vision of Dudley Wood Stadium circa 1985 appears. It wasn't the grandest arena for bike racing, but a nostalgic charm oozed from the Victorian-style shed coverings and cracked terracing.

Now who would have thought that this corner of the Black Country could shoot to international prominence and become a widely renowned Saturday night experience. One that evoked a community spirit like no other. Crowds flocked in vast numbers from all parts of the boroughs of Sandwell and Dudley to this motor sport Mecca. Retro tastes ranged from the Banks's Bitter, best sampled in the neighbouring Vic pub, to the legendary hot pork sandwiches.

The whole entity of Cradley Heath speedway didn't always transmit around the country. I recall hearing a late-night sports presenter on BBC Radio 2 once announce 'Cradley Heathens 52 Swindon Robins 38', enraging thousands of listeners to yell 'it's Cr-ay-dley not Cradley' at their transistor radios.

However, not all successful stories have happy endings. The signs didn't look good when the owner's eyes lit up to an offer from Barratt Homes. That was only going to end one way. Tears not cheers.

Therefore, the gates were locked in 1995 and Saturday nights in Dudley Wood Road, or indeed the boroughs of Sandwell and Dudley, were destined to never experience the roaring engines or pungent aroma again. The Vic was spared, but the Banks's Bitter never quite tasted the same.

In this environmentally conscious age, it is impossible to imagine a densely populated residential suburb exuding the sounds, smells and bustle of word class motor sport. Maybe time moves on. Yet nothing can diminish the memory of something unique, intoxicating and alluring, for Black Country folk.

After a moment of deep thought, I come around to the modern surroundings of Racemeadow Crescent. It is light years away from 1985 or indeed 1995.

One final close of the eyes and more memories come flooding back. Gundersen imperious from the gate, Penhall breathtakingly passing visiting riders and Pedersen cruising round the last bend to victory. All culminating in the chorus of Jan and Dean's memorable pop song, *Wipe Out*, booming out to herald a home team clean sweep.

My visit to Racemeadow Crescent has been brief. There was somebody in to sign for the parcel. I felt like asking them, 'What is it like to live in this iconic location?' I refrain, as time ticks towards the next drop. Just as quickly as it has done since 1985.

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