

Book Extract: Shifting Shale

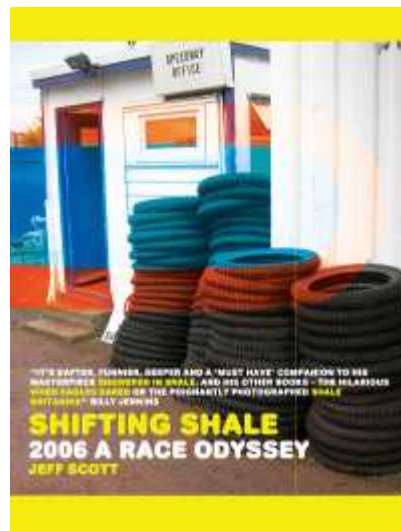
By Jeff Scott

Butterflies, the Five Ps and Big News in the Sun

26th October 2006 - Poole v Coventry v Eastbourne

(Craven Shield Final, 3rd Leg)

38-29-41 (aggregate 114-105-105)



Another day, another drive and another chance to listen to programmes on the radio I'd otherwise miss. On Radio 4, many theories about the nature of 'love' and also the species survival of the human race are hotly debated. As usual, talk of the 'fight or flight' mechanism is never far away when it comes to love or battle. Butterflies in the stomach or an enervating sense of nervousness are generally common symptoms of 'love sickness' and anxiety before important events. Glenda Jackson noted, "unless you're nervous, you're not going to give a performance that is as good as it could be!" I wonder how nervous the riders are before the third and decisive leg of the 2006 Craven Shield Final at Wimborne Road. They've certainly had long enough to contemplate things since it was postponed yesterday due to bad weather (I was already at Southampton – gnash, gnash before I learnt from the always well-informed Weymouth press officer and photographer Julie Martin).

For the first time on my many trips to this part of Dorset, I notice that nearby to the Wimborne Road stadium there's a slightly run down building that houses the "Poole Conservative Club" on the opposite side of the road to the fire station and the slip road to the match-day car park. The newest building in the vicinity is the glass-fronted grandstand of the greyhound/speedway stadium, while the Tory club echoes the bygone era of the brutalist 1960s and 1970s architectural school of urban design that is typified by many of the buildings close by – the town centre arcade of shops, the car park and even the flyover road. To the sound of announcements from the railway station and the clatter of passing trains, when I wander up to the turnstiles of the new grandstand I'm greeted by the always seriously taciturn and friendly Poole

copromoter Mike Golding, “Oh – I wonder why Gordon [Day] forgot to tell me you were coming tonight?” “Probably because I arranged it with you directly at the Isle of Wight when you said ‘just turn up anyway’”. With his memory jogged, Mike confirms that it’s highly unusual for Gordie to ever miss a Poole speedway meeting before he quickly adds in extenuation, “it’s only his second holiday of the year”.

Despite the recent heavy rain, Mike is excited about the prospects ahead, “The track looks really good though it’s a bit damp on one corner – it should be competitive again tonight,” ignoring Scotty had Adam Shields and Nicki off at Arlington. “How’s the new book going?” My reply that “I sold so many when I launched it at Arlington that I nearly got writer’s cramp,” gets the quick as a flash response, “Did you have to write them out for them, then?” Mike kindly allows me to choose where I’d like to have my display so I decide upon what I hope will be the prime position right by the programme stall and toilets. So often this year my book display has been located by the toilets that I’m thinking of calling my next book – an account of my 2006 season – *My Year by the Bogs or Everything You Wanted to Know About Speedway & Toilets, But Were Afraid to Ask!* Shortly afterwards the friendly Dorset Echo man arrives with the evening papers and also sets up close by, to create what I hope will be a ‘golden’ rather than a ‘Bermuda’ triangle of sales. The back page screams with a headline that speculates that present World Champion, Jason Crump, will leave the Belle Vue Aces to become a Poole Pirate next season. “I heard it was Oxford he was going to anyway but isn’t this headline just an ‘accidental’ form of tapping up, that the Poole promotion can deny any association with, as he’s still under contract elsewhere?” I innocently ask. The Echo man doesn’t care how contact is made with Jason just so long as he rides in Dorset since he believes that it would be great for the club and for attendances, plus it would carry on the recent tradition that finds world-class riders (like Tony Rickardsson) racing for the club just when they’re at the height of their power.

I’m in an optimistic mood as I hope sales will boom and because my horoscope in the Sun claimed, “moonpower in your truth chart makes this the day true love could walk into your life”. While this spot doesn’t attract sales, many people stop for a brief word as they pass, though none of them appear to be my “true love”. The eponymous Eastbourne fan, Sid Greatley, stops by to grumble about his photograph in my latest book, “I wish you hadn’t put a photo of me in eating as it makes me look greedy!” Also the news that new Eastbourne owner, Bob Brimson, will bring some fresh thinking from his experiences in the music industry to the club has filled many fans with optimism for the future. They quote Bob favourably since he apparently drew a comparison with the recent history of cinema audiences and the potential of speedway to emulate its success, “15 years ago cinema was dead, old-fashioned and no one went – now it’s reinvented itself and has attracted a whole new audience and some of the old one back too”. I can’t wait for the comfy chairs and the giant buckets of popcorn to arrive at Arlington!

There are also large numbers of Coventry fans that have made their way down to Dorset in anticipation of another possible trophy success for their club. These include Russell Lowry (and his teenage daughter Jodie), who viewed the incident that saw Adam Shields part company with his bike under the close attentions of Scotty differently (“Adam admitted he had laid it down”) to many of the Eastbourne fans

I've spoken to ("yeah, he only laid it down 'cause otherwise he had nowhere to go – it can't be what you'd want or choose to do the week before your wedding!").

Sadly our discussion is cut short by his need to return to the car park to urgently search for a lost bag. Someone who isn't exactly that happy, is the regular Speedway Star seller who dashes anxiously about the place still waiting for his delivery of this week's issue, even though the turnstiles have already opened. He expects to sell about 150 copies very quickly on a night like this but can't as, "I'm waiting for a bloke from the Eastbourne track shop to bring them". The great and the good of the speedway world also pass by, particularly from the Isle of Wight speedway club, on their way to points unknown within the stadium. Dave Pavitt passes with a cheery, "You get everywhere – don't you have a bloody job?" and the Islanders very own 'Mr Bling' - adorned with enough jewellery to fit seamlessly, except for his age and ethnic background, into any recent rap, hip-hop and R&B video – Dave Croucher, stops for a few words. He outlines his rather alliterative but pedagogic approach to team talks, "At the start of the season at my team talk, I give each of the riders a 5p coin while I speak to them, though last year I made a point of not giving one to Craig. Then they say 'what's this for?' and I explain it's the five Ps – Perfect Preparation Prevents Poor Performance. Boycie knows this already and anyone who watches him quickly learns that. Doyley [Jason Doyle] has had so much help from Boycie it's unbelievable. All the Aussies have a real sense of community cos they're so far away from home but Boycie has gone out of his way and now Doyley is a real perfectionist too. He never gets a puncture, or grit in his engine, as he knows that hours spent in the workshop mean success on the track. I just wish they'd all learn that!"

Dave really enjoyed the SRA dinner held at the Coventry Hilton the other night and thinks that it's the kind of event that can only be good for the sport. He speaks very highly of another very motivated and hugely community minded Australian rider, Shane Parker, "He's the driving force behind it – the SRA I mean – some promoters see the SRA as 'rider power' which if it happened would tear the sport apart but I think they're just trying to help the young lads, pass on their experiences and point them in the right direction. Just like the Aussies look after their own here but on a wider scale and that has to be good for the sport. The whole event was huge credit to the sport and the SRA. The idea of a 'Speedway Oscars' is a good one and it looked really brilliant – it will continue to grow and grow, so long as Sky back it. Personally I don't think that they should have a 'best promotion' or 'best track' – it's different on different nights – as these things only upset people. And anyway, Buster is as crafty as a box of bollocks! He sent all seven of his riders along to the meeting where they voted beforehand, which is just what Len will do next year if he thinks it'll help. They [King's Lynn] deserve it but I still wouldn't have this award in future 'cause of the effect it could have. Overall, it was brilliant though!"

Just as the riders are introduced on the pre-meeting parade, I rush my books and shale-splattered sign back to my car and so have to pass Mike Golding as he watches the last few of the stragglers as they make their way through the turnstiles. "I just heard that Billy Janniro has broken down on his way here and won't be coming – one of ours, Danny Warwick, has rushed home to get his stuff – really bad news for them but, sad to see it that way, excellent for us!" This news definitely appears to signal that the Craven Shield will be going into the Wimborne Road trophy cabinet unless something miraculous happens for the Bees or something equally disastrous happens

to the Pirates. To think that a season's quest for honours can come down to whether one of your riders has taken out one of the many AA or RAC policies that they will have been repeatedly offered throughout the season at motorway service stations up and down the country! It's also a shock given how often Billy Janniro has specifically gone out of his way to ride for the Bees when he should have been absent to compete in his US national championships or when his injuries should rightfully have dictated that he didn't venture out onto the track. I arrive on the third bend just in time to see Tommy Allen and Dan Giffard (only in this race because of the absent Janniro) crash dramatically to create a spectacular tumble of bodies and machines that has the ambulance immediately zoom onto the track to attend to them. While they're checked over, I wander into the compact but cosy track shop where you're always guaranteed a warm welcome from Anita (and her daughter Katie) who, as she serves a steady stream of customers, is concerned to hear about the crash, "has anyone gone into the wagon?" Outside the track shop, I bump into the well-travelled and knowledgeable speedway fan, Arnie Gibbons, who is always a mine of information and insight on speedway matters and many other things. He used to be a local councillor and when he was younger he "wanted to be a meteorologist", so he's very familiar with the meaning of all those funny information symbols you get on a weather map. A quick glance at the isobars means that he's able to advise me on the weather I'm likely to encounter over the next few days when I go to display my books at King's Lynn ("it will stay fine") and Rye House ("likelihood of rain"). I also learn that, according to Arnie, the end-of-season interviews with the riders conducted by Kevin Coombes at Arlington that I'd missed last night when I'd been at the SRA Awards dinner "were very revealing – only four are coming back next year or are up for it: Nicki [Pedersen], Lewis [Bridger], Adam [Shields] and David [Norris]". We stand together on the fourth bend to watch the re-run of Heat 1, which takes place without the excluded redhead Tommy Allen and, just after the riders pass, we're coated in a thin film of dust that lightly sprays – well, it gradually wafts towards us like a deadly cloud of poison gas – any fan foolhardy enough to stand on the bends in its gentle path en route to the car park. To try to escape the eddies of these fine particles (though without success) I retreat to the home-straight grandstand in time to see the dramatic start to Heat 2 when Lewis Bridger blasts impressively round the outside of the Coventry pair of Chris 'Bomber' Harris and Olly Allen on the second bend of the first lap. The only other drama in this race arrives when Bomber recovers sufficiently from his appalling start to display a unique interpretation of team riding when he aggressively dives under his own partner, Olly Allen, on the fourth bend to secure third place and thereby keep all the valuable third place points money for himself. Inevitably Lewis can't resist the chance to do a few wheelies in celebration, though normal service has been resumed with Nicki who immediately skulks back off to the pits with only the vaguest twirl of his arm in a brief self-congratulatory wave.

It appears that any passes during the night have to mandatorily take place on the second bend of the first lap and Krzysztof Kasprzak executes this with some élan when he appears to fling his bike dramatically past Adam Shields to gain the lead. The real excitement in the race comes from Dean 'Deano' Barker who appears fast, committed and galvanised enough to try to repeatedly force his way past Grzegorz Walasek for the next two and half laps without ever quite managing to find the room (though he had the speed) past the cunning, but experienced Pole who covers the various possible passing lines of the track in the manner of a gifted mind-reader. By now, I've noticed that the Poole start-line girls have taken on the duties and mantle of

the start marshal when it comes to the flag-waving duties required to signal the penultimate lap and to signify the end of the race when the riders cross the finish line. On cue, they are passed the requisite yellow or chequered flag to wave, which they each do, in contrasting styles. Some of the girls wave it with incredible gusto whereas some others appear half-hearted, nonchalantly detached or even as though it's something that they definitely don't want to hold for any length of time. They say that you can tell many things about a woman's attitude to the sensual side of life by the gusto with which she eats and maybe roughly the same idea holds true for its speedway equivalent – flag waving? On this basis, judged on tonight's exhibition of flag skills only one of these girls has an unashamedly expressive, abandoned and sensual approach, that almost verges on Latin, towards her life!

Prior to the meeting, the Eagles trailed the Pirates and Bees on aggregate by 12 points and were largely expected to be the makeweight spoilers in a two-way contest between the other two teams. With the non-arrival of Janniro (before Heat 5, the announcer Clive Fisher informed the crowd that "I can tell you that Billy Janniro has been reported to the SCB by the referee for his non-arrival this evening"), the title was effectively gifted to the Pirates. However the Eagles riders rode with a vim, brio and a vigour that indicated that they hadn't been informed of their allotted part in this supposed script. In order to retain the outside chance they have of victory, the Eastbourne riders will consistently have to best their Poole counterparts throughout the night. They achieved this in their first race against the Pirates and they looked likely to continue this dominance in Heat 6 until misfortune struck when Deano fell spectacularly on the second lap and was excluded for his troubles. Unfortunately, the immutable law that surrounds re-runs dictated that while Adam Shields easily led Bjarne Pedersen in the initial attempt to run this race, he wouldn't be able to repeat the surprise or the medicine a second time. The scores move to an ungainly 16-8-12 on the night and 92-84-76 on aggregate with all the teams having ridden four times.

The need for the Bees to urgently seize back the initiative is paramount, and with Harris in the lead, Tommy Allen aggressively muscles between Boyce and Lindgren at everyone's favourite spot to overtake – the exit from the second bend on the first lap. This manoeuvre might be enough to intimidate some of Tommy's nervier erstwhile Premier League rivals but cuts absolutely no ice with the experienced Poole pair. Rather than be psyched out or intimidated, they completely ignore his intervention to confidently pass either side of him, at speed, as they all enter the third bend. By the time they have negotiated the corner, they have effectively extinguished his challenge. The drawn race result suits the purposes of the Pirates campaign for the trophy but not that of the Bees.

Rory Schlein attempts to help the Bees regain some of their customary buzz when a slightly discombobulated rise of the tapes allows the Aussie to escape with a flyer before the consistently impressive on the night, Edward Kennett, blasts superbly round him on – surprise surprise – the second bend of the first lap. Since Giffard trails in far behind David Norris the opportunity to affect a dramatic comeback further recedes from the hands (antennae?) of the Bees. Edward is very familiar with the Wimborne Road circuit from his difficult season at the club in 2005 and in every race he demonstrates, to great effect to the home support, the considerable strides he has made with his confidence and riding style since then. If this improvement and skill is one of the Eagles' secret weapons on the night, then the form of Lewis Bridger round

the outside of the circuit is another. The not-so-secret brilliance of Nicki Pedersen provides a role model for Lewis to copy and try to emulate as well as tyre tracks/racing line for him to follow. Pitted against the all-Polish pairing of Kasprzak and Walasek, Lewis rides to a truly exhilarating last place! Prior to the race Lewis warmed up with his very own speedway equivalent of Anthea Redfern's twirl on the Generation Game ("Give us a twirl, Lewis", as Brucie would doubtless put it) – in his case a few pre-race warm-up mini-wheelies. Lewis then spends the race almost hugging the safety fence, while sparks repeatedly trail from his steel shoe every time he accelerates along the back straight but simultaneously attempts to 'slow' for the third bend. His never-say-die full throttle approach is hugely compelling to witness and would be difficult to counter but for the ever-wily Walasek's knowledge of the circuit and canny assessment of the psychology of his young opponent. Though markedly slower, Grzegorz repeatedly uses Lewis's own speed to counter his own progress past the Pole with blocking manoeuvres that appear to confound Bridger into slightly shutting off at each and every corner. The rhythm of huge acceleration followed by rapid deceleration mesmerises the crowd and enthral us, though the Pirates fans enjoyment of these skills is enhanced by another drawn heat that has them now lead the Bees by an almost insurmountable nine points.

The confidence of the home side is such that in the next race against Coventry they only track one rider since Tommy Allen has "officially withdrawn from the meeting because of his injuries". It's a well-founded confidence that a comfortable victory for Bjarne Pedersen, their only representative in the race, capably confirms. Sadly the chance to reorganise the race order of your team between fixtures is a feature of the regulations that govern the Craven Shield competition so the crowd are deprived of the opportunity to watch another epic tussle on the track in the rematch between Scotty and Nicki but, in Heat 11, we do get to see the next best thing with an encounter between Scotty and Shieldsy. The race between them the other night appears to be very much on Adam's mind when he makes the start from gate 2 and immediately moves aggressively towards Nicholls who is outside him. So far so predictable, until Shields picks up some unexpected grip and bullets in a straight line, without the merest hint of a turn, into the air fence on the apex of the bend. Excluded for his troubles, Adam soon hobbles to his feet, but the impact on the air fence leaves it in the same state as the Bees in this competition – completely deflated. During the ensuing 25-minute delay for repairs by a no-doubt dying breed of skilled air fence repairmen, I bump into Julie Martin and her partner John on their way to the "Pirates Bar" in the main grandstand. "Heat 14 is the big one as far as bragging rights go. Dan [Giffard] was better than Lewis when he started at Weymouth last year, then Lewis passed him and now we'll see what the difference is after they've both had another good season in different leagues". In the way that only ladies can, Jules also has the inside scoop on tonsorial matters – namely that the UK's only (white) dreadlocked speedway rider, Danny Warwick, is going bald and hides this with these dramatically different hair extensions (that I've often thought must make things a little cosier than normal underneath his helmet). In the re-run, the Bees extract the necessary but not quite enough 4-2, though Dean Barker again races with some aggression and determination to ensure that he easily secures second place.

During the unexpected interval to repair the air fence, an older lady sat in the seats in front of me asks, "Can I borrow your Sun?" When I ask "why?" she says vaguely, as she manically leaves through it, "I dunno, it's someint to do with speedway".

Whatever “it” is, is soon drawn to her attention and she reads it with an earnest, enthralled expression for quite some time. I’m pretty curious myself too by now but, before I can retrieve the paper, it has been passed on to someone else who immediately becomes enthralled and cast under its amazing spell. I ponder if there’s a particularly juicy letter on the problem page with a speedway theme? Or maybe “Striker” has retired from football to seek pastures new on the shale? Or possibly “Deirdre’s Photo Case Book” has some bitingly original and incisive story about sexual politics that features the relationship agonies of dating a speedway rider? Perhaps Mr Perkin has written another missive to the letters page? Or more predictably turgid news has been wrung from the Sun’s ongoing fascination with the Scotty and Sophie situation? Whatever it is fascinates everyone who encounters it and they become temporarily frozen in mute concentration before the paper is passed on as though it’s in a game of ‘pass the parcel’. It certainly wiles away the time and, as this is the ideal moment to try to read your own paper, I cheekily ask for it back from the 74th person it has been passed to. They glare at me as though it’s ignorantly rude to make such an impertinent request. I soon find the article in question, which bizarrely appears on the “TV Biz edited by Sara Nathan” page. The first sentence starts, “Bosses of speedway reality show The Race”. The full horror of this phrase simultaneously evokes pride, curiosity, anger and repulsion in me. Complicated stuff and it’s difficult to concentrate. The essential details are:

1. It will be shown on Sky One.
2. Apparently insurance costs have spiralled after Richard Hammond’s accident on Top Gear awareness of possible “danger” among the “celebs”.
3. The show will “pit” a men’s team against the women’s.
4. Celebs already signed up include Jenny Frost, Ingrid Tarrant, Les Ferdinand and Gary Numan.

My mind boggles. I’m simultaneously insulted and fascinated by the post-modern irony of it all. Hasn’t Les already done enough with getting his helicopter pilot’s licence or by helping to vandalise the Blue Peter garden in his youth? Will Gary race on an electric-powered bike? Can Ingrid phone a friend and will it be Chris? Who from the speedway world will be prepared to prostitute themselves for this base oxygen of increased publicity and national fame? Probably everyone. My mind whirrs and I decide maybe this is the ideal stage for those who love the television limelight to strut their funky stuff? Where will it all take place? Can I go and watch? Will Nigel Pearson commentate? What will Kelvin think? Will Sam be able to read these riders’ thoughts as easily as he apparently claims he can in the regular season speedway meetings? Will anyone get injured when, inevitably, they crash? How will the Speedway Star report it? Will various posters agree to differ on the British Speedway Forum about the implications of it all in a ping-pong match of bickering and increasingly abusive late-night comments and excessively pointless use of the available emoticons? Why is speedway still only ever really shown on satellite? I really think that we should be told... no wonder I couldn’t get the paper back off anyone! I’m interrupted from my reverie by the roar of bikes – albeit without “celebs” astride them – signalling that they’re back on the track once more now that the air fence has been re-inflated almost as much as my expectations of this yet to be recorded or televised satellite show.

One faultless display of track craft by Walasek is quickly followed in the next race by another equally impressive example of the genre when Edward Kennett uses all his wiles and hard-earned knowledge of the Wimborne Road track to hold off Freddie Lindgren for three laps. The Eagles thereby gain another welcome 5-1, this time against the Pirates, as the exhilarating 2004 version of David Norris wins the race with some brio, to leave the scoreline much more poised for a possible Bees fight back at a weird looking 26-20-26. Before we can get our collective breath properly back, we're served up another thrillingly competitive race – this time between Harris and Walasek who pass and re-pass each other again and again as they ride handlebar to handlebar for three laps as though it has been rehearsed and carefully choreographed beforehand. Harris eventually masters his opponent though, up front, KK has sailed on oblivious to an untroubled and routine win to extend the Pirates lead on the night and on aggregate to a convincing eight points. The best Eagles combination of the night – Pedersen and Bridger – serves up the killer blow when they race to their second race maximum of the night over the weakened Coventry partnership of Schlein and Giffard. This Eastbourne pairing works very well together, since Nicki can blast off from the tapes in his trademark combative style unencumbered with any vague thoughts about the need to team ride or even the more philosophical need to ponder the exact whereabouts on the track of his team partner. Lewis has his own personal rites-of-passage duel to resolve with Dan Giffard who determinedly manages to pressurise his young erstwhile rival for the first lap. From a Coventry point of view, this has the unfortunate consequence that it severely holds up Schlein in the traffic of their mini-contest. It's an unnecessary delay that Lewis compounds the consequences of when he blasts away from Giffard on the second bend of the second lap. Giffard is left way behind the trademark trail of sparks from Lewis's steel shoe and cuts a forlorn figure off the pace of the race at the back after he's easily passed by his Australian partner.

Bjarne Pedersen, tonight's Poole specialist at race victories in heats where he has no race partner, repeats the medicine against Norris and Kennett in Heat 15, though Edward definitely ensures that he knows that he's been in a race until the latter stages. The Poole announcer, Clive Fisher, has verged on the edge of ecstasy all evening and almost gives full play to his delight when he practically yelps, "we just need a third place in heat 16 and the Craven Shield will be ours!" All that's needed to complete the effect is a flash of lightning, a clap of thunder and a diabolical cackling laugh but instead KK powers to another routine victory. The always keen-to-celebrate Pirates crowd go bonkers, the joy is unalloyed, though the calibre of the trophy is slightly less exalted than it was in the still very recent glory days of treble and double triumphs. Nonetheless, all the riders, mechanics and assorted track staff rush through the second bend pits gate onto the track to administer some full bloodedly energetic bumps to Krzysztof in celebration. Though they're definitely not in a relationship with anything other than Poole Speedway, two Old Age Pensioners in front of me in the grandstand kiss passionately and reactions throughout the stadium border on the continental among the exultant locals.

All that remains is for the formality of the final two races to be run before the trophy can be presented and the laps of honour undertaken with gusto by all connected with the Pirates. Rather than a pedestrian run-of-the-mill affair, Heat 17 has Deano again show his new-found steely determination and huge desire to win or, at least, really assert himself. He does this in a fashion that leads you to wonder why or where this

level of controlled aggression has lurked dormant for so long? It's a performance not without a strong end-of-era hint since, if the rumours are to be believed (and heaven knows they're usually completely inaccurate) that this could well be his last ever official ride in Eagles livery. If it is, then there really should have been a cry from the terraces of "Deano – we salute you!", rather than just allow him to slope quietly back off to the pits to pack up his bikes and probably prepare to make the appropriate entrance at the bar by the bright lights of the grandstand disco shortly afterwards. If Eagles fans will look back on Deano's last track manoeuvre with affection then the last heat win for the Pedersen/Bridger combination serves notice about the possible thrills to be experienced at Arlington in the future. Nicki completes his untroubled maximum, though he goes easier on the post-race celebration wheelies than the autumnal madness that briefly infected him at Brandon caused him to do there. Whereas Lewis is so naturally and youthfully exuberant that he would do wheelies until the cows come home, both before and after a race whether or not his actual performance merited the celebration (though it often does). Tonight, his performance does merit acknowledgement (later in the bar, his granddad and mechanic Tony professes to be "really proud of all that he's achieved this season in the Elite League – amazing when you think about it really!"). The Eagles have gained a surprise victory on the night to ensure that they tied on aggregate with the depleted Bees and that, unusually, none of the home teams in any of the home legs of the Craven Shield actually won on their own track.

The Poole celebrations are unalloyed on the track and among the crowd, before they switch inside to continue in the bar and on the dance floor.

Shifting Shale by Jeff Scott

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