

An Interview with Kenny Taylor



Kenny (top left) with the 1977 Berwick Bandits

The Berwick Bandits celebrate their fortieth year with a special meeting at Shielfield Park this Saturday evening. It was the summer of 1968 that the Bandits first took to the track in the newly formed second division. Danny Taylor, who had previously promoted at Glasgow, opened the track as a family concern, being assisted by his wife Elizabeth and son Kenny. We caught up with Kenny at his Jedburgh home to reflect on those early days at Shielfield and the move to Berrington Lough that came later.

Even now the small town of Berwick is an unlikely venue for a speedway track, it was even more so back then when the majority of circuits were still located in the UK's largest cities. So our first question to Kenny was simply, why Berwick?

"My father decided he wanted to bring speedway to the borders. He looked at Galashiels because it was more central but there was nothing there. Berwick was the next choice because of the old running track around the football pitch."

It now seems to be virtually impossible to open a speedway track. There are so many restrictions on noise and there always seem to be a plentiful supply of objectors amongst the local community, so was it difficult to obtain planning permission?

"No, it was really open, the bungalows at the other side of the car park now weren't there and the old grain drying facility was at the bottom end. There were houses at the top end but nobody complained, it was pretty easy to get in there."

Sadly, Danny Taylor died after that first season and it left Elizabeth and Kenny with a tough decision to make.

"It was very sad, but life can be cruel at times. We talked about it for a long time during the winter, whether to keep it going. It was quite an ontaking as I had to keep hold of a full-time job also. We decided to give it another year and it just blossomed. We kept going from year to year because we had such a good following of supporters

at the time. The crowds then were anything from 2,500 to 3,500. It was going well, but everything was going up in price so we had to put a bit on the price and that took a few off the crowd."

One of speedway's problems has always been its reliance on stadium facilities owned by others. So how did the Taylors get on with Berwick Rangers FC?

"In the early days the board at Shielfield were fantastic. I think it was the fifth season there and we'd had a really bad season financially. We always went at the start of the season to have a glass of whisky with them and discuss terms and that year they actually gave us a reduction in rent to help us. They were fantastic, just ordinary people like ourselves."

The mother and son partnership of Elizabeth and Kenny served the Bandits well. Elizabeth was a popular figure around the track and was fondly known by one and all as 'Mrs T'. So how did the partnership work in practice?

"She was the boss. I was down there twice a week doing the track, trying to get it as good as possible."



'Mrs T.' with Alex Nicol and Tom Blackwood

Speedway promoters tend to fall into two categories - businessmen and hobbyists. We asked Kenny which group the Taylors fitted into.

"We tried to incorporate it into a business that made money but we couldn't. We cleaned our feet every year but there was very little left in the pot at the end of the season. We had to start from scratch the next year, trying to make deals with the riders and what not. Hence the reason we were always near the bottom of the league! No, that was due to the fact that we raced on a big track, most of the other tracks were a lot smaller."

The Bandits raced at Shielfield Park from 1968 until 1980, staging hundreds of meetings. Kenny didn't recall one particular favourite but admitted to many happy memories:

"There were such a lot of good meetings, we had some really great ones. There was one year we had thirteen last heat deciders and we only lost one of them. It was always Andy Meldrum that pulled us out of the fire. It was fantastic, it didn't do much for you health wise but for the fans it was nail-biting stuff. Much better than walkover victories."

Berwick Rangers served the Bandits notice to quit in 1979 and asked them to be out by September 1980. They didn't return to that track until Mike Hope reopened it in 1996. Kenny told us about the circumstances behind their departure from Shielfield.

"That was down to one man, but it's in the past now. We tried really hard to stay, there was one day that we wanted to shift the safety fence for crowd safety, for the new health and safety rules that were coming in at the time. We agreed to everything that they wanted and the late Ian Graham asked if we could go inside to discuss it. Mr McNab said 'No', and that was the end of our time at Shielfield!"

After leaving Shielfield the Bandits were unable to find an alternative stadium into which they could move immediately, suitable venues aren't exactly ten a penny in Northumberland. They therefore moved their operation to Barrow-in-Furness for the 1981 season, thought it was shortlived and they subsequently shared Blantyre Greyhound Stadium with Glasgow for a while. Kenny recalled that traumatic season.

"We were all over the country, the nomads! Our hardcore of supporters followed us everywhere. It did cost us a bit of money, but we wanted to keep it alive. The thing had been running so long that we didn't want to let it go. The guys that have kept the club going since I was there have done a wonderful job."

A new venue was purpose built for the 1982 season at Berrington Lough, a piece of farmland a few miles from the town. It was almost certainly the most remote venue to ever stage professional speedway. Luckily it was well sign-posted as you'd never have stumbled upon it by chance.

"I think there was far better speedway at the smaller track. A lot of people wanted a big track because they'd had it for years, but the new track was better. It wasn't supposed to be quite as small as the one we finished up with. We laid the track and started to put up the safety fence and then thought 'where's the track gone?'. A lot of the riders who came for the first practice session were thrilled with it, they really liked it."

Given the remote location, we asked Kenny whether they were concerned about the venue's viability.

"We had such a good hardcore of supporters that we knew we'd get enough turning up. The first meeting we had there was a full house and it was quite emotional after all the hard work that everybody had put in, it was a fantastic effort. Some of the council

guys tried to knock us back - 'do this, do that etc' - when we did 'do that' they'd say 'oh no, that's not quite right, change it to that!'"

"The number of hours I spent down there was unbelievable. Of course there were a lot more directors by then Davie Fairbairn, Paul Cooper, all that crowd. They turned up on the Saturday and thought 'this is looking good', they didn't realise that I'd been there until twelve o'clock on the Friday night cutting the grass with the lights on! "

"We had many a good night down at Berrington Lough. I just about lived there if I wasn't really busy. I had a caravan there and I'd spend a lot of time there."

Of course, it's now twelve years since the last meeting at Berrington and little now remains of the amazing little track. Kenny saw the recent pictures on our website and found it an emotional experience.

"When I found those pictures I got a lump in my throat, all that work I'd done! It was quite heartbreaking to see it like that. I'm not sure what happened there, because in the agreement when we got that bit of land, if we ever left there it was to be put back to what it was. That was the agreement that Berwick Speedway had with the boy that owned the land at that time - it was actually my cousin Stewart Taylor."

The Taylor family severed their ties with Berwick in 1983, a full fifteen years after Danny, Elizabeth and Kenny founded the club. Kenny still finds it difficult to talk about it, so we didn't press him.

"It was a bit political, there were a lot of other directors in by then and something happened that they didn't like and I thought 'you're out of here Kenny boy!'. I completely cut myself off from speedway, I was bit cut-up about what happened."

Fifteen years is obviously a long time to be involved with a speedway club and many riders turned out in the Bandits' colours. Which ones did Kenny recall most fondly?

"Two that spring to mind are Graham Jones and Andy Meldrum. They were two fantastic guys to work with, they never let you down and gave 150% in every race they were in. There were a load of other riders, but I'd put those at the top of the tree. They gave so much effort, nothing was too much bother and they were so easy to deal with. Some of the other guys wanted the moon and the stars, but Andy and Graham were good guys to deal with and we treated them fairly too. Graham actually came up for Anniversary meeting the other week and there was nothing on at Berwick. He came up too early!"

Kenny stayed away from speedway for twenty-three years, but he's now back travelling the motorways once more assisting young Greg Blair.

"I'm gradually getting phased back into it. He's my nephew's boy, my mother's great-grandson. He's looking pretty good, he started last year and had a few knocks, a broken collarbone set him really back. He just wasn't interested then, but this year he's started off and he's riding for Cleveland Bays and he's been second top scorer in every meeting so far. There's quite a few good Scottish boys coming through, Gary Beaton,

Adam McKinna and the boy McDade. If only we can get one of them to come through right to the top and fly the flag for Scotland."

After so long away from the sport, what key difference has Kenny detected?

"The bikes have changed for the better. They're so much smoother, I'm no rider myself but from speaking to the guys that ride them, they reckon they're so much smoother. Some of these boys couldn't ride the old Japs and Jawas, they wouldn't be able to hold onto them."

Kenny will be one of the former Berwick heroes taking a bow at Saturday's anniversary meeting and he's looking forward to it.

"Dick Barrie's been emailing me and keeping me informed as to what's going on. I talked him into coming to Berwick at an ice meeting at Murrayfield and he's still there now, he's a fixture. My sister and my younger brother will be there also. My brother actually rode for the Bandits as our number eight at Birmingham. Instead of taking someone else we shoved him into the back of the car! He wasn't any good, he was worse than me!"

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