

IS THIS THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS MOTOR SPORT?

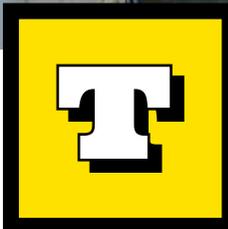
THEY'RE THE POSTMEN, TEACHERS, CARERS AND SCHOOLCHILDREN WHO SPEND THEIR WEEKENDS CRASHING CLAPPED-OUT CARS FOR FUN. *FHM* VENTURES INSIDE THE WEIRD, THRILLING AND DOWNRIGHT LIFE-THREATENING WORLD OF BANGER RACING



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he scene in the pits is one of absolute chaos. A stench of motor oil, burnt rubber,

chip fat and sweat clings to our nostrils and mini tornados of dust coat our face and teeth with grime.

To our left, a bloke aggressively jumps on his car's bonnet – keen to iron out its wrinkled hood by way of a Dr Marten boot – while on our right, a buzz saw carves through a twisted wheel arch, sparks flying worryingly close to a swollen tyre that looks ready to blow. With a deafening concerto of engines completing the sensory overload, crumpled motors become mechanical miracles by grunting back to life and edging towards the track for just one more ride – albeit chased by puddles of oil and a fog of black.

Welcome to the world of banger

SPEDEWORTH'S GAVIN BOTFIELD ATOP HIS BELOVED HOT ROD. DESPITE CURATING EVENTS ON EIGHT BRITISH TRACKS, HE'S "TOO SCARED" TO DRIVE A BANGER

racing: the planet's most exhilarating, grease-splattered motorsport – available to men, women and children aged six and up. Health and safety enthusiasts need not apply.

Hours earlier, *FHM* is stepping off the train in Aldershot, Hampshire, a town trumpeted as 'Home of the British Army'. But we're not here to see squaddies on manoeuvres. No – Aldershot is also home to Spedeworth Motorsports, a promoter that stages banger, hot rod and stock car races across eight British tracks, along with events as far afield as Ireland, the Netherlands and South Africa.

Meeting us is Gavin Botfield, heir to the Spedeworth empire and occasional hot rod racer (a class where contact between cars is forbidden). Working seven days a week in the family business – orchestrating races, building custom race vehicles, then cleaning up the stacks of mangled steel left behind afterwards – Gavin lives speed, breathes danger and sweats petrol. And yet...

"You wouldn't get me in a banger – too scared," he tells us, as the paint fumes in the Spedeworth workshop make us feel light-headed. "It's the thought of going into a bend and knowing the bloke behind you could pick you up and drive you straight into the wall. In a hot rod, that very rarely happens, so you don't have that fear."

As British as pie and mash, snoozing and lobster tans rolled into one, banger racing first smashed its way on to our shores in the 1960s. A spin-off of traditional stock car racing, it saw light after promoters realised the loudest cheers during a race meet were after the occasional collisions. Thereafter, crashes took centre stage.

In the modern scene, banger drivers are divided into two groups: rodders (in it to win), and crashers – there for the adrenaline alone. The rules state you can't hoon it into another racer's door (though this does often happen), and... that's pretty much it. Everything else is legal.

After returning home from another

Spedeworth event in Ipswich ("our Wembley," Gavin tells us) at 2am this morning, Gavin was up early to get Aldershot Raceway ready for today's meet – a testimonial for John Dodge, a 68-year-old whose racing career is in its fifth decade. With 'Back to Basics' Bangers, Historic Stock Cars, Junior Rods and Ladies Bangers formulas all on show, all classes except the juniors (kids aged 10 to 16 zooming round in hatchbacks) allow some degree of car-on-car contact.

Given it firmly flicks the Vs to the bubble-wrapped, politically correct backdrop of mainstream motorsports and, moreover, modern life, racing bangers does come with risks. A number of deaths, of both adults and children, have marred the sport in recent years. "It's always a tragedy for our community," says Gavin, stoney-faced. "Deaths do happen, but they are rare."

Injuries, though, range from whiplash and fractured bones to plenty of cuts and bruises. Safety is by no means overlooked – each car is stripped out, equipped with a roll cage and five-point harness, with racers duty bound to wear a helmet, gloves and fireproof overalls. But such scrapes are mere collateral damage for the pure,

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unadulterated rush on offer, in what is essentially bumper cars on amphetamines.

"It's the thrill of it," says Heather Parker (who'll later smash her way to victory in the Ladies Bangers final), on what lures her into the driver's seat. "It's the excitement of seeing cars being crashed up, you know?" At 51, Heather is a mild-mannered carer by day, yet, come the weekend, she – along with her husband, sons and daughter – unleashes hell behind the wheel of a screeching motor. This, as far as her colleagues are concerned, is her dirty, oily secret.

"The people I work with don't know I do this," she says, beaming. "They'd be shocked, because I'm this gentle carer, then I change into overalls and off I go. It's like Clark Kent putting on his Superman pants – I become a totally different person."

Amid the toxic fumes that'll likely shorten life expectancy, one thing unavoidable in the pits is the strong

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sense of family. Fathers race alongside sons, mothers with daughters – multiple generations coming together to cheer on a racer, inflate a tyre or wallop a door back into shape with a hammer. John Dodge, the pro in whose honour today's event is being held, has two sons, a daughter, a niece, two nephews and a grandson competing today.

Though Spedeworth's Gavin claims "rich businessmen" running cars worth £40,000 are regulars at hot rod events, Henley Royal Regatta this is not. There's no shortage of men in shorts, tapestries of tattoos and panting dogs on chains, along with cheeseburger vans and lager stands open from mid-morning. And yet, with a crowd ranging from ear-defender-clad toddlers to OAPs

napping in chairs, it is a wholly welcoming environment, even to us – the confused, mechanically dunce outsider.



Tyler Proudlock is 11 years old, yet he owns six Vauxhall Novas. We stumble across him and his dad – former Hot Rod World Champion, Shaun Proudlock – reliving every bend of the first Junior Rods race, in which Tyler just finished fifth. Proudlock Senior believes it's all-action hobbies such as racing that keep youngsters like Tyler on the straight and narrow, rather than doing doughnuts in car parks.

"He's gonna get his anger out on that track – you put your foot down and the aggression comes out," says Shaun.

**FAR LEFT:
11-YEAR-OLD
TYLER PROUDLOCK,
OWNER OF SIX
VAUXHALL NOVAS**

"I was racing before I went on the roads, and I failed my first driving test for going too slow. I was overcautious!"

Of course, the bangers scene is not without its critics. Race car fans shed actual tears about the finite circle of classics made smaller in the handful of vintage-car-only meets held each year. "Anyone involved with this event should hang their head in shame," Nick Larkin of *Classic Car Weekly* said in 2011 of an annual race of vintage Austin Westminsters. "These were rare cars, part of our heritage."

But Deane Wood, Spedeworth owner and Gavin's stepdad, hailed that meet as a "great success", responding: "No salvageable cars were used and the cars raced yielded a lot of almost impossible-to-find spares [...] that would otherwise have been lost if the cars were left to rot." Deane has spent the past decade since purchasing the company attempting to redraw the blackened image and stereotypes of banger racing that, it seems, still run deep.

"Don't talk to any dickheads," he growls at us when we first meet,

holding out a swallow-inked hand. "This sport used to be full of scumbags. Years ago, it would be: steal a car, bring it to a race track and smash it up as a banger."

Gavin agrees: "To some, banger racers are the lowest of the low. It gets a bad reputation because cars do get nicked, and people think it's the racers. I'm not saying it doesn't happen, but it's stigma more than anything. Shit sticks."

Out on the track, *FHM* – dressed in a fetching high-vis tabard – has been granted access to the track's centre, providing the best and also pant-spoilingly scary view of proceedings. As 40 clapped-out bangers eagerly whizz out in turn, every one a write-off to any garage, we can practically taste the petrol stripping the back of our throats. And we're fairly sure we've perforated an eardrum.

As the safety car peels off and the motors speed into the first bend, the action that unfolds is what can best be described as X-rated car porn. Brightly coloured machines – sporting adverts for local companies, or slogans like 'Keep Calm and Crash On' – thunder in to each other without mercy. A lime green Vauxhall flies into the air after being shunted into the wall, as a silver Citroen with a crumpled-origami bonnet slams into its backside, the driver unable to see through the ink-black plumes billowing out.

Fans grip the wire fence baying for more, as the rodders navigate their way around the carnage in a desperate bid to register laps. With cars spinning out and piling



up – one ending up on its roof – we have no clue who's winning. But then, like every other fan here, we're not sure we care.

The red flag falls, and hunks of metal and bumper pieces are cleared from the track; cars exiting the arena either of their own volition or with the help of a forklift. In the pits, last-minute repairs are in overdrive, as it's just been announced the day's final event will be a destruction derby, where several cars relentlessly batter each other until just one car remains. Keith Reynolds, a scene legend who proudly claims to have destroyed over 900 cars, is swapping out a radiator ahead of the final showdown. We ask if he's a mechanic for his day job, too.

"I'm a postman," he says, chuckling. "I couldn't work in Kwik-Fit, but we will do anything just to get the car out on the track again. We once fixed a car by using a ring-pull off a Coke can."



seconds from the climactic destruction derby, there's electricity in the air – despite the resident DJ playing an Ed Sheeran ballad that threatens to flatten the mood. "I'm sure there's going to be a bit of cleaning up after this one," shouts the announcer, as the motors that have somehow survived this far without being destroyed assemble on track. Not that they look like cars any more: most look more like scrunched-up pieces of paper.

The flag drops and the crowd roars. Each driver loudly selects a rival and hurtles towards them as fast as his juddering engine and depleted tyres will allow.

Within minutes, most cars are stationary – due to either a hefty whack from behind or simply a spluttering, packed-in engine. Postman Keith is tormentor-in-chief. With his nickname – Keefy – adorning the side of his motor in bold, capitalised letters, the crowd applauds each collision and chants his name.

Just as Keith reverses hard into what appears to be his final opponent – a five-door that now resembles a hatchback – his own car shudders to a halt. It would appear that, as the last car standing, he is the DD victor. Then, suddenly, another car strewn to the side of the

EVERY BANGER DRIVER WEARS A HELMET, FIREPROOF OVERALLS, GLOVES AND A HARNESS

course – that had appeared to have long since conked out – resurrects, accelerating round the track and snatching Keefy's win at the final moment. It had been playing dead since the start.

It doesn't matter that Keith lost. The spoils in banger racing aren't exactly plentiful; all you net for a win is £10 – £15 if it's a final – plus a cheap-looking trophy and victory lap of the raceway. For Keith, like most others, banger racing is about none of these things. No, for him – and the hundreds of racers who don overalls and helmets and clamber into smashed-up bangers to smash them up some more – it's the stomach-churning buzz he'll never find driving his post van around Guildford.

"Adrenaline's like a drug – it's good

“**TO SOME PEOPLE, BANGER RACERS ARE THE LOWEST OF THE LOW**”

gear," he says. "From your very first time racing, you'll never forget the smell. People say hot bread or freshly cut grass is the nicest smell. But for me, nothing beats the smell of a burning clutch."

As scattered piles of debris are swept up by recovery vans, the crushed remnants of cars are stacked neatly by a forklift truck, from which they will soon be dispatched to the scrapyard in the sky. Showtime over, hundreds of fans take their leave, trusted to drive responsibly – and not headlong into each other – on their journeys home.

We follow the crowds towards the exit and spot crusher supremo Keith again, mopping the sweat from his shaven head with a gloved hand.

We have one final question: what's in his garage? "I drive a Nissan Micra – it's good on fuel," he says. We laugh. Keith doesn't. He's deadly serious. "Honestly, if you got in the car with me, you'd think I was an old granny."

He pauses, as if reliving some devastating, life-altering memory, then adds, "Someone called me an adrenaline junkie the other day, and it really offended me. I'm not at all. I wouldn't jump out of an aeroplane and I think rollercoasters are dangerous. I just race cars. I'm not looking for the next massive buzz. This is enough." **FHM**

TALK THE TALK

Our guide to understanding the banger racing lingo

RODDERS

A driver intent on getting round the track as quickly as possible, in hope of bagging a trophy.

CRASHERS

Adrenaline-fuelled racers that love nothing better than rear-ending a driver, even if it means ending the race upside down.

BUMP AND RUN

A move where the chasing driver unsettles the car in front by giving it a whack, then overtaking and leaving him behind.

BLITZ

Any manoeuvre where a car is mangled to the point of being undriveable.

THE BIG ONE

A massive pile up involving up to 40 cars – most likely to be seen in a banger race or destruction derby.

BROWN TROUSERS

The feeling of dread a driver experiences when, broken down, an opponent speeds at them head on.

GUY FAWKES

A car that's received such damage that, though able to carry on, bits hang off and sparks fly.

T-BONE

Technically illegal, the action of pelting a rival's car on the driver's door – the shape resembling the popular cut of beef.

TAKING IT TO THE WALL

Ramming an opponent into the track barrier, with a view to murdering their motor.

