

Leslie ("Les") Walter Eaton
1928 – 2012

Les Eaton, 'Mr Stock Car' and the man who founded the Spedeworth empire, has died aged 83.

Born in Hampshire and raised in the original Eaton family seat of Alton, Les grew up around his parents catering business which was based, for many years, in Turk Street. Eaton's caterers was principally a bakery, although the company contracted for outside work, where the young Les would be called upon to help out at such events as local cricket club teas.

Later, he became a carpenter and subsequently, a chance meeting in a park brought him together with a young nurse by the name of Mavis Gay, the pair marrying in 1949. It wasn't too long before Les and Mavis started their own family with Sue, Roy and Mark.

So often in life one is tempted to ask the what-if question. Most assuredly, the biggest 'what if' of all with regard to the Eatons would be the one about 'what if Les Eaton had never run into Ron Amas?'

It would seem that serendipity was to play a large part in carving out Les' life and another chance meeting, this time with Ron, eventually saw the two men working together at Ron's Ruislip Manor garage and car dealership.

Ron was already a stock car driver and one day, Les volunteered to drive the lorry carrying the stocker to far off Belle Vue because he had "nothing better to do". Taking Mavis and the kids along for the ride, Les basically viewed the expedition as little more than a day out for them all. Even once at the track, he was not that struck by the racing to begin with. What he was struck by, was the number of people there and the fact that all of them had paid five shillings (25p) to get in!

Back at work on the Monday, Les and Ron were chatting and Les offered the opinion that promoting stock car racing looked like a good business and that it was a shame there wasn't a suitable track locally

for them to try it. Ron knew better, pointing out that there was a disused track almost on Les' doorstep, at Aldershot. Les did not believe this, asserting that if such a thing existed in Aldershot he would have known about it. Ron's response to that was to get Les in a car and set off for the track in order to prove his point!

The pair arrived at the stadium to find the owner actually on site. A deal was soon struck for a rental which Les described as "next to nothing". Quickly settling on the name Paramount Promotions, Les and Ron were in business. Helpfully, Staines stadium had closed its doors for the last time only a couple of weeks before the planned Paramount opener on August 11th, which should have provided a ready made audience not too far away. Unhelpfully, the heavens opened, causing the meeting to be postponed until the following week. Regulars at the Tongham track during the next three decades were to become all too familiar with that sort of weather...

According to Les, they arranged fourteen meetings in that opening season and it rained at thirteen of them. Cancellation was forced on them more than once. When they did run, the crowds were poor, but the drivers and the rent still had to be paid. It was a disaster in the making and by year's end the enterprise was bankrupt, with Eaton and Amas soon to part company.

One good thing did come out of that season however. Prior to 1960, there had only ever been the one type of stock car, but that year saw the launch of a smaller, cheaper, class known initially as Junior Tens. There was a quick uptake of interest in these cars and they were soon supplementing the big cars at several tracks, one of which was Aldershot.

Having borrowed money from his parents (who apparently sold their house in order to do it), Les pressed on at Tongham but was looking to spread his wings, particularly as he soon had a reasonable number of Juniors supporting his meetings. It was at this point, in 1961, that this wing-spreading activity led him to re-open the dormant Arlington track. Les had tried to get a licence from the British Stock Car Racing Board of Control, which appeared to be going through satisfactorily but, on race-day morning, the promoter and BoC officials were advised that the licence application had been refused. The reason for

this was never made clear but, this late in the day, Les had little choice but to go ahead and run the meeting anyway.

Confusion reigned for a few weeks, with nobody too sure if they were allowed to race for Eaton at either of his tracks but, on July 17th, it was officially announced by the BoC that Les Eaton's Aldershot licence had been revoked and that drivers who raced for him would have their racing licences withdrawn. 'The Split' had begun.

By this time, Les had already decided that the term 'Junior' for his cars suggested that he was peddling an inferior product and so he came up with the handy title Formula II stock cars and renamed his firm The Formula Two Stock Car Company. Naturally, he was now barred from using BoC personnel but took on the commentating duties himself while Mavis taught herself to lap score. Fortunately, quite a number of other competent officials either 'switched sides' or put themselves forward. Les was soon able to count on the support of people like Frank Howlett, Mavis' brother Dave Gay, and Roy and Gwen Cecil, the husband and wife team who would prove so important when the company later branched out into Scotland. Lesser known but equally important behind-the-scenes roles would be played by stalwarts such as Johnny Butler, who took care of maintenance issues, and ace electrician, Mick Ware.

It soon became clear (or at least, it is to historians today) that the BSCR Board of Control (later to become BriSCA) had made a major error of judgement. They hadn't counted on Les' determination or that many of the Southern based drivers would stay with him. They certainly foresaw no possibility of a relative newcomer with little previous experience of promoting, founding an operation which would eventually evolve into the largest single promotion in the UK. Or even beyond...

Les wasted no time getting on with the job of expanding his little empire either, and before the end of the season had re-introduced racing at Norwich, Southampton and Ipswich. The last of those three would become very important to the company later, but it also played a pivotal role in the latter part of 1961. For one thing, Les had determined that the opening meeting would also be the first ever World championship for the FII cars. Not only did this bold move beat

the first BriSCA version by two years, but Les also came to an arrangement with the speedway promoter, Vic Gooden, to set up a separate company in which they would both have shares and each take a proportion of the profits. At the last minute, Gooden changed his mind and decided to settle for just a rental sum instead. However, the separate (off-the-shelf) company had already been purchased and the first of the heats at the World Final meeting was raced for 'the Spedeworth Trophy', the programme for that meeting representing the first time the name ever appeared in print.

That initial period of expansion roared right on into the 1962 season, the Spedeworth ball gathering up more and more drivers and tracks as it rolled along. Reading and Rayleigh were already in the fold by September when Les scored his next major coup by moving into the capital at the plush Wimbledon Stadium, which had been seemingly impregnable by stock cars before this. As with Ipswich the previous year, there were no half measures here either, the stadium opening with the second FII World Final. The Plough Lane venue would become part of the Spedeworth repertoire for the next fifty years.

With those turbulent first three seasons under their belts, a blow-by-blow account of the years which followed could easily fill a book. Suffice it to say that Les and Spedeworth became an almost irresistible force within the sport, ignoring BriSCA just as they were in turn ignored. Les continued opening new tracks, operating the existing ones and introducing new ideas and gimmicks, all the while traveling tens of thousands of miles as his portfolio expanded to the point where they were sometimes racing seven nights a week. And this was without the company's further diversification into operating cinemas, such as The Palace in Alton and another in Odiham.

Not all of these lasted a long time but, aside from the tracks already mentioned, the Spedeworth flag was also flown at Oxford, Newcastle, Weymouth, Great Yarmouth, Ringwood, New Cross and Walthamstow. There was the move on to using road racing circuits like Brands Hatch and Lydden. Some tracks were truly historic landmarks along the way. London's White City was one of these, where Spedeworth became the first stock car promotion to be allowed to use the former Olympic stadium. At the other end of the scale in every sense came the construction of the iconic Cross in Hand, a

rough, tough concrete raceway on a hillside in Sussex woodland. The local residents may not have liked it but everyone else did.

Then there were the forays into even more grass roots (literally) venues like Padworth Park, Billingshurst and Great Chart. Not as glamorous as some tracks, but offset if you like by the establishment of links with Europe and of course, South Africa.

Another land mark track which was to assume great importance in the Spedeworth story was Wisbech. Opened in 1970, the South Brink raceway proved an ideal venue for speed weekends and served East Anglia well for many years, even becoming the company's head office for a time. Then there was Cleethorpes, an entirely 'new build' stadium that proved Les hadn't lost his sense of adventure even in the 1980's.

But it wasn't all just about the tracks.

Having pioneered the rise of Formula 2, Les was always more open to the idea of diversification in oval racing than his predecessors. By 1968 he was starting to look around to see what else might work. Quickly settling on the idea of a cheaper, saloon based class, Stock Cars were launched, with the F2's now re-named Superstox.

Some experimentation with Bill Morris' Hot Rods the previous year saw this class now adopted as a Spedeworth formula. Within another year, Les took the plunge and re-launched Midget racing. Later, came his apparently almost snap decision to run a World Hot Rod championship at Ipswich, forty years on, the centerpiece of the now traditional July speed weekend. In fact, speed weekends generally were another Spedeworth invention, both Ipswich and Wisbech proving ideal venues for these forty eight (and sometimes seventy two!) hour celebrations of oval racing.

Always open to new ideas and innovations, Les had no problem with the concept of 'not invented here'. If it looked like a good idea, he ran with it. For instance, Spedeworth may not have invented Banger racing, but they soon figured out what to do with it once they had it.

Yes, innovate, never be afraid to try something new, and always make the show the most important thing. This might have been the Eaton motto. His BriSCA counterparts certainly thought it was and many of them openly acknowledged that there was no equal to Spedeworth when it came to presentation.

Of course, the years and the miles took their toll. Les would never have used an expression like 'burn out', and certainly not about himself. But in the end, it became time for him and Mavis to take things just a little easier and hand over the day-to-day running of the organisation to other people.

Son Mark, long time friend, colleague, co-builder of Cleethorpes and legendary start marshal Ted Weaver, and the equally legendary flag man Dave Smith (who'd been with the company since the Norwich days) all had turns in the hot seat. However, even during these interludes, one always knew that Les still had his hand resting – however lightly - on the tiller, and that nothing much important happened without his say so.

Undoubtedly, the beginning of the end for Les as a promoter came with the enforced closure of Aldershot in 1992. His bitterness with the situation came through clearly, both in his editorial for the last ever meeting programme, and in conversations we had at that time. His disillusionment was not helped by what he saw as increasing interference from such quarters as Health & Safety and, in 1993, Les and Mavis finally called it a day and officially retired.

Perhaps unsurprisingly after all those years, they were never all that far away from the action and at one time lived in a house which was actually within earshot of the racing at Foxhall. "Retirement" is a relative term though, for somebody as dynamic as Les, and he never found any shortage of things to keep himself amused. He was, for example, able to devote more time to his little known interest in organs and organ music.

I'm sure everybody will have their own personal memories of Les and there are undoubtedly many thousands of stories that could be told, but there is a couple I'd like to share with you. These were also

related during the 'This is Your Life' part of Les' retirement party, so my apologies to those who may have heard them before.

Back in my first days of writing about the sport, which would have been in the very early 1970's, I had just been given my first Spedeworth press pass by then Racing Manager, John Clark. One of the first meetings I reported on was a truly dreadful evening at Wimbledon. It was one of those nights when the track was thick with shale, the entry wasn't good and the racing even worse. Sticking to my principles of always trying to 'tell it like it is', I had duly given the meeting the slating I felt it deserved. It was only after I saw the piece in print that I realised my unflattering description could very well get me into trouble and that my new pass might turn out to be remarkably short-lived.

I decided that I had better try to stay out of John's way for a bit. I had never given any thought to what Les might say because, firstly, I was fairly sure he didn't know who I was and secondly, the thought of a rollicking from the head of the mighty Spedeworth empire was too awesome a prospect to dwell on in any case!

The very next meeting I went to was at Walthamstow and naturally, I ran slap into Les (accompanied by John Clark just for good measure) coming through a doorway – there was no escape in other words.

"Ah, it's you", he said. "Aren't you the one who wrote that bit rubbishing our Wimbledon meeting?"

I was forced to admit I was indeed that person.

"Hmm, yes, it wasn't very good that night was it", he said.

I mumbled something about how I'm glad he agreed with me, but thought that perhaps he might not have liked my saying it quite so publicly.

"Oh, I never worry about things like that", Les replied, adding, "You write what you like; all publicity is good publicity. Just make sure you spell our name right"

That incident gave me the confidence to keep on doing what I was doing in the way that I was doing it. Although I expect there are lots of people, promoters and drivers alike, who've had reason to curse him for it, I have always been grateful for the confidence Les gave me that night. I only hope that, as a result, I didn't upset him too many times in the intervening years.

One always tends to think of Les as being very laid back and unflappable but there was another occasion which proved he could move very fast when he wanted to.

This was at the time when Cleethorpes was still under construction. It was winter time, and Spedeworth had got together a whole gang of people, marshals, officials, press and drivers with their cars, to go up there for an open evening. It was just to let the locals see the sort of thing that was going to be staged at the track when it was open.

The only bit of the place that was anything like finished was this bar-cum-clubhouse, which I suspect might have been a hangover from the zoo which had originally occupied the site.

I ended up sitting with Les at the bar, just chatting and having a couple of drinks. It was a freezing night and I knew virtually everybody at this small gathering so not too many locals had been tempted out.

Above Les' head was a skylight with an outside light shining on it. I thought I could see moths or midges in the light until it dawned on me that what I was actually seeing, were snowflakes. I told Les I thought it might be snowing outside but he told me not to be ridiculous and simply ordered us another couple of large ones!

Suddenly, in bursts Little Roger, Colin Facey's mechanic, shouting, "It's snowing, it's snowing!"

Nobody had any intention of being stranded in this godforsaken place by blocked roads or snowdrifts, least of all Les, who was not living up there at the time. He had us all organised, cars on trailers, bar shut and everybody else back on the hired bus in about five minutes flat. It

was certainly the quickest end to any social gathering that I can ever remember!

Despite his official retirement as the head of Spedeworth and having handed the reins to his two sons, Roy and Mark, Les still maintained his links with the company. This continued even after control of the firm passed from the Eaton family to Deane and Janet Wood.

After some years of ill health, Les lost his beloved Mavis in 2009, although in more recent times he had found companionship with the new lady in his life, Sheila.

Les had been fighting a battle with cancer for the past year or so but, in typical Eaton style, had refused to let his illness interfere with his lifestyle.

He finally lost that battle on the morning of January 23rd.

Les is survived by his children Sue, Roy and Mark, grandchildren Shelly, Ryan, Kelly, Ross, Barry, Leigh, Kara, David, Jack, George and Charlie, as well as a further ten great grandchildren.

In racing terms, his legacy is immeasurable. He founded a company which has been the largest, and probably the most influential, promoting body in Europe for years and remains so today. But he also created an institution which has literally touched the lives of thousands.

Les had a favourite story about how, when he first set out to go it alone as a promoter, it was said he'd be 'a one day wonder'. He used to finish this story by saying, "If that was a one day wonder, it hasn't been a bad day".

Indeed it has not.

RIP Les and thanks for everything.