

# Killing field of the dog racing industry

Another day, another death: this man slaughters greyhounds on an industrial scale

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With his chained-up rottweilers looking on, the bearded and bespectacled Smith led the lithe racing dogs — one a fawn- coloured brindle and the other black with white markings — across his plot and into a breeze-block shed.

The animals appeared sprightly and alert as if they hoped they might soon be allowed off the lead for a run. But seconds later two sharp reports rang out. They had been killed.

Anyone who had worked in an abattoir would have recognised the sounds as the discharging of a bolt gun, a weapon that fires a metal bar with enough force to smash the toughest skull.

The dogs emerged lifeless and limp in Smith's bloodied wheelbarrow. He dumped them in a freshly dug hole on one side of his one-acre garden before covering the grave with earth using a mechanical digger.

Smith contemplated his garden for a moment with a look of satisfaction. On the other side of his plot his lettuces were coming up nicely.

The episode, on Wednesday, was captured on film by a photographer for The Sunday Times. It was repeated again the next day, this time with greyhounds emerging from a white van and a silver Ford Mondeo before disappearing into Smith's killing shed.

It was a scene that has been repeated regularly in this secluded corner of the seaside town of Seaham, in Co Durham — a slaughter business that can be exposed for the first time today after a Sunday Times investigation.

Smith's unofficial abattoir and graveyard have quietly serviced the greyhound racing industry in the north of Britain for about 15 years. Calculations by this newspaper suggest that over that period at least 10,000 dogs have been killed and buried in the plot at the back of his house. Before Smith, his father, now 81, provided a similar service.

According to a dog track insider, the trade has been a secret that greyhound trainers and owners have been keen to keep. "Only doing two dogs a day is a bad day for him. It is not unheard of for him to do around 40 a day and if anyone ever digs up that garden it will be like the killing fields," we were told. "He has made a mint out of it.

"This service is for the licensed trainers who have 50 or 60 dogs in their kennels. The greyhounds are used for the afternoon races that appear on television. These dogs have made a lot of people a lot of money and they don't deserve to be shot in the head. It is a scandal that the industry should be ashamed of."

Campaigners have long suspected that such an operation was being run somewhere in Britain but have never been able to pinpoint its location. The RSPCA says about 12,000 greyhounds a year disappear and are unaccounted for.

Greyhounds have only a short racing life. Once they reach 3½ to 5 years old — out of a natural lifespan of about 12 to 14 years — they are considered too slow to compete. Some go to new homes as pets, in accordance with the official policy of the National Greyhound Racing Club (NGRC), the industry's governing body. Many others simply vanish.

Debbie Rothery, who runs a greyhound sanctuary in West Yorkshire, said thousands of greyhounds were disposed of each year under the noses of the NGRC. "It is a sordid secret but nobody wants to know and it is about time it was exposed," she said. "The RSPCA have told me they have not got time to pursue greyhound abusers and parliament does not do anything because they are making too much money from the industry."

Greyhound racing is big business, attracting 3.5m people to its tracks each year, with millions more watching races on television. Every year £2.5 billion is bet on the sport and about £70m goes to the government in tax.

In recent years greyhound racing has upgraded its public image, helped by regular television coverage of meetings and by celebrity owners such as Freddie Flintoff, the England cricketer.

The scandal of the disappearing dogs has, however, remained hidden and even those within the racing world who have attempted to expose it have been thwarted.

One is Pauline Harrison, a greyhound owner from Barnsley, who met evasion and lies when she tried to find out what had happened to her race- winning dog, Stormy Silver. He was five years old when she decided to retire him in 2002. Terry Dee, a registered trainer attached to Kinsley stadium, a licensed track near Pontefract, West Yorkshire, offered to find him a new home.

"He took him off me but when I tried to find out how Stormy Silver was doing in his new home a few weeks later Dee kept putting me off. In the end I rang the retirement home and they said they hadn't had any dogs from Kinsley.

"Then Dee said he'd lied and in fact he'd given him to a woman but it took weeks to get the number. In the end, I spoke to this supposed new owner and she said he was doing fine. But Stormy Silver had a toe missing and when I asked her which foot it was on she didn't know. She said she would call back but after that the number became unobtainable."

The owners of some of the 52 other dogs entrusted to Dee also want to know where they went. After they complained, Dee was brought before the NGRC and said he had given the dogs away at motorway service stations but had not kept records.

He was stripped of his trainer's licence but the former owners still did not know what had happened to their dogs. The suspicion is that Dee, who died several months ago, took them to Smith. The industry insider said: "Everyone knows the dogs went there. The inquiry swept it under the table; once Dee was no longer a licensed trainer they had effectively washed their hands of him."

When informed of her dog's fate by The Sunday Times last week, Harrison said: "It is horrific but I had come to suspect that something like this had happened."

The Sunday Times began its investigation after a tip-off from a racing insider who also felt it was time to expose and end the practice. A reporter, posing as a greyhound owner who wanted to dispose of his dogs, rang Smith, whose wife Maureen answered the phone and asked what he wanted.

"It's about some dogs," said the reporter and offered to call back. She interrupted and said in a matter-of-fact tone: "You want to put some dogs down, do you? Half past nine in the morning, down by the garden gate." Every morning? "Every morning, barring a Sunday," she said.

Last week the reporter turned up at the Smiths' business just as two other dog owners, a man in jeans and a baseball cap and a woman in a quilted waistcoat were leaving together in a powder-blue van.

The plot of land where the slaughtered greyhounds are buried is on a secluded plateau just below the Smiths' large redbrick dormer bungalow. Nearby is a stream into which the residues of decaying dogs could leach, although it was dried up last week.

As Smith emerged from the shed where he had just ended the lives of the two dogs, the reporter told him that he had eight greyhounds he wanted put down. Smith, who at no point asked why he wanted them dead, indicated that that was no problem as long as he hurried up as he had to get back to his work as a builders' merchant.

He bemoaned the fact that many of his customers balked at paying his £10-per-death fee. "When you think it's 60 or 70 quid at the vet, what am I gonna do? I'll be honest with you, I was thinking of putting it up," he said.

"If some hassle us (over) 10 quid I am gonna put it up to £15. Don't hassle us for a discount — at 10 quid I'm doing it for nothing.

"I am doing a service because the council and everyone who comes here, the RSPCA . . . begged us not to pack in because if I pack in there will be dogs all over the streets.

"People are not going to pay 50, 60 or 70 quid at the vets, they will just let them loose. That's what they said to me."

He continued complaining, saying that he found the endless killing "a hassle".

"I've done it for that many years, and my father done it before me and I've done it and I'm not really bothered. If I had to pack in tomorrow I'd pack in. It's the hassle. For what? For what I make out of it?" When the reporter suggested that he might run out of room to bury the dogs, Smith pointed towards the far corner of the plot and said: "It takes me about three years to get across there and by the time I get across I can start here again and there's only a few bones left so it doesn't worry us."

The RSPCA denied having any record of meeting Smith.

A spokesman said that such killing was unjustified and unnecessary, although not necessarily illegal.

Since 1997, anyone can own a bolt gun to kill animals without a licence but can be prosecuted if the animals are put down inhumanely.

The RSPCA put down 1,045 dogs last year for non-medical reasons but insists that it is done only as a last resort once all other options have been exhausted. "This is a sad reflection on the greyhound racing industry, which should be cleaning up its act," said Steve Cheetham, the RSPCA's veterinary spokesman.

"It is imperative that the industry finally admits there is a problem and works with welfare organisations to look at ways of tackling this as a matter of urgency."

Alistair McLean, chief executive of the NGRC, said that the industry helped to fund the retirement of about 3,000 of the 10,000 dogs that stop racing at its 30 registered tracks each year. But although they ask their trainers to confirm what happens to dogs after they retire, making exacting checks is difficult.

"Our policy is clear, which is that we would wish the greyhound to be suitably rehomed. Greyhounds make great pets. It is absolutely against our rules to use someone like this," McLean said. Clarissa Baldwin, chief executive of the Dogs Trust, said: "One of our very big fights with the industry is that they have no idea what is going on in their 'sport'." When confronted, Smith denied any knowledge of killing dogs but later said he was doing it only to "do society a favour" and gave the proceeds to charity. He claimed that most of the dogs were sick or injured. He refused to estimate how many dogs he had put down and said that some weeks he did not kill any. "But I am stopping it now," he insisted.

## Run into the ground

Many greyhounds are kept in cramped conditions for much of their lives and are sometimes required to run several races a week.

There have been persistent allegations that some are doped to slow them down so that bookmakers will offer better odds next time they run.

An industry insider said: "There are many ways to do that — excessive feeding before a race or giving it beta blockers. To speed it up you give it cocaine, which works in seconds." Critics claim that trainers can get round drug tests.

Three-quarters of the greyhounds racing in Britain are born in Ireland, where breeding and exporting them is a big enterprise.

They are ready to compete at 16 months. The elite few that are fast enough for the open races carrying substantial prize money and kudos will be treasured and will eventually be put to stud. But most will be fit only for the graded races that make up most of the 71,000 run in Britain each year.

"The dogs in the afternoon fixtures are just made to run, run run," said the insider. "Then, when they go lame or get too old and lose a bit of speed, they are just disposed of."

## Welfare bill loophole

The government set up the Greyhound Welfare Working Group — made up of the sport's various official bodies together with groups such as the RSPCA and the Dogs Trust — last year to advise it on its animal welfare bill, which is likely to become law later this year or in early 2007.

However, despite much parliamentary debate, the bill will not make any specific provision for greyhounds and the group has been told that they will be covered only by secondary legislation.

According to a draft drawn up by Defra, the environment ministry, this is likely to state that "where destruction is inevitable, greyhounds must be euthanased humanely by the intravenous injection of a suitable drug administered under the direct supervision of a veterinary surgeon".

Maureen Purvis, of Greyhounds UK, a pressure group that gave evidence to a House of Commons select committee regarding the new bill, said: "We wanted the tracks to come under the jurisdiction and inspection of the local authorities. The industry has had 80 years to regulate itself and it plainly is not working."