

SHAUN BELCHER

THAMES VALLEY TEXAS



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+ dead centre

If England was a target and you were looking at cross hairs
In the centre of the cross hairs would probably be Didcot
The most normal town in England according to the pollsters
The 11th worst place to live according to crap towns

My home town, the town my family still live in, die in
A town that should not really be there, a ghost town
Only there because the residents of Abingdon and Oxford
refused the nasty dirty mess that they called a railway

So Brunel bent the line through a village called Didcot
They been taking other people's shit there ever since
First it was provisions for the railway and a huge depot
Logistics was invented there to provide fodder for horses

Didcot has been a place to move stuff through and to ever since
From the army barracks, to the brand new Tesco mega storerooms
Where my family froze in huge freezers as warehouse operatives
Work for people with nowhere to go or reaching the end of the line

It's the town people joke about, Didcot Parkway, gets its mentions
A place to glide through on the way to better destinations
Poets and novelists mention it in passing never stopped there
Never ventured off the trains to actually see it, a place holder

A place fit for commuters and immigrants, CHAVs and drug dealers
No place that anybody wants to live in for long, or stay forever
My parents grave is situated 500 yards from their council house
Now partitioned and resold built on a prisoner of war camp.

Thousands of lifetimes wiped away now and brushed into the past
Like the post-war immigrants who found a home there that could last
From Poland and Italy, Germany, Slovakia and the death camps
They preferred the dead centre of everything to anywhere else

They escaped the cross hairs and started again.
Built new lives and blessed every day that was normal
Thrived and felt safe.

Normal. Ignored.

No longer a target.

Dead centre. +

privilege

Is mine and always will be it is my birth-right
I am born to this and never shall let it slip
I am the world king and God's chosen one
To let go of power is to betray you all

I will make the problems disappear
All it takes is character as my masters told me
Drilled with a sense of purpose and entitlement
From a young age to handle the reins of power

The ethos at Eton and Oxford is always to be right
even if found out never let the mask slip
For that is a sign of weakness and I am not weak
I am the firm hand, the strong voice, the liar

Who can not ever be found out to lie
The philanderer who can buy secrecy
The fool who cannot be judged wrong
For there is no other King

This morning the cloak of privilege
Is torn and stained but still wraps me round
With banker friends and people of high birth
who will take me in and bathe my wounds

I will return to the battle with my Excalibur
Smite my enemies and ride again into battle
This county needs me in its darkest hour
I watch re-runs of Churchill in a darkened room

This is my right my destiny

I am alone.
A king of no country.

substitute

Looking on from the sidelines came naturally,
a boney slightly effete lad who wanted to be what his Dad wanted him to be.
Every Xmas Meccano and Scalextric (or a cheaper version from Bosleys toy shop)
When all I wanted was pen and paper or an Airfix Saturn V and some comics.
Happy with my mum's Encyclopedia of Animals and a set of colouring pencils.
I even built my own museum of antiquities in my bedroom.
Including a glass topped case of oddments my Dad dug up with his JCB.
A meteorite, a bit of roman pottery, fossils or so he told me and who was I to argue.

I spent hours kicking a ball against my neighbour's shed.
The smell of tarmac and sweat oozing from his pores after a day labouring
as he showed me how to dubbin my boots. How to pace myself, avoid injury.
In kick-arounds I wasn't bad, no Tony Adams I struggled at left back.
A position the better team I clawed my way into could not fill so there I was.
Sunday morning in Edmond's Park living my father's dream in his position.
Trying to live up to the photograph of his team shot at Reading FC ground
before winning the North Berks Cup (I have photo, medals and programme.)

My mother watched me take a few knocks and struggle as a defender.
Not 'filled out' enough to stand up to the bigger boys. Immature and sensitive.
The inner poet derailing my ambitions to play for Arsenal from an early age.
I look at photos of me aged 14 and wonder I didn't break something.
But my father's advice came good. Don't get angry get even.
They score one you go back and score one against them.
Remember your second wind. I wrote a poem titled that.
Mum played the long game wanted me to go to University. First in family.

The rest all drove trucks, laid tarmac or went into the police or army.
One Sunday my Gramp Ernie challenged a semi-professional team to a match.
His family and mates from the Working Men's Club against them as a bet.
Our whole family of Butlers and Belchers turned out on a frosty morning to watch
them win on the park I had been substituted most games on.
My Dad and Uncle Dennis and others ran rings around the so called professionals.
There was a big celebration at the club that evening. Ernie had won his bet.
I learnt then that there is no substitute for perseverance, talent and a bit of luck.

Now I stand on the sidelines again.

Recovering from a host of bad tackles, unlucky injuries and plain bad-timing.

Always a substitute never a first-choice.

Stepping across the poetic line.

Taking on the professionals at their own game.

Waiting for the final whistle.

looking like a poet

The agency have been at work again
He just didn't look like a poet so they set to work
Told him to lose a few pounds and get a new stylist
The shabby chic look to match his fake poverty lyrics
Helped sell the gig and books in the provinces
Bolstered the teenage girl clickbait on tiktok
It was so much easier to sell the image than the contents
After all style over content the norm so no matter
His youtube and whatsapp ratings were off the scale after the
revamp
His poetry books flew of the amazon print on demand presses
Soon even the arts council wanted a piece of the action
After all WWCB had just come onto their radar
Meanwhile his poems started to falter
The early promise based on genuine family history
Gave way to more and more internet copped falsities
His heroes had blundered on through addiction and blank pages
Now he was dropping more pills to keep the words coming
His apps were full of half-finished ideas and poems with no ending
Then one day it all ended
In a fast food stop on a motorway
He caught his reflection in a window
His eyes hollow, his hair teased by a stylist
Into the Victorian waif look
Another Delivery driver just like his father.
Another acronym to play with WWCBWP
White Working Class Boy Without Poetry

knowing my place

Doff your cap,
Toe the line,
Do a good job,
Know your place,
Speak when spoken to,
Don't talk back, keep mum,
Be reliable
Hold your knife properly,
Don't leave the table until told to,
Watch your step,
March in time,
Defer to your betters,
Salute the flag,
Be punctual,
Do a good job,
Never argue,
Be polite,
Bow,
Scrape,
Be invisible.
Political

If you do not do as you are told you have...

A chip on your shoulder,

Are bitter,

Difficult

A maverick

A born troublemaker

An outsider

A thief

Or worse

Working Class

A writer.

loops

Sparkling green walls covered in frosted webs
A thousand hedges grid-locked our estate at dawn
October school-runs on foot, lawns damp with dew
We'd strip privet sticks and collect them in loops

One web on top of another until a sticky shivering
Vibrated in our hands, dew running down stalk to palm.
We knew nothing then, spun our own stories as we traipsed
Slowly toward a school playground fuzzy with chalk

Circles on walls, boards, exercise books and balls
Punctured and hiding below those spun nets
The exhaled breaths of football careers not yet dead
We curved balls endlessly at bare walls

They came back every time, thuds ricocheting
Against the garage walls our only release
Drum n Bass lives before we knew the words
Stamping out glam rock tunes in our heads

Now the lawns and hedges torn up turned to gravel
Commuter belt rentals cars packed in like terraces
Nothing breathing just dead ground that floods easily
The earth covered and the dreams we had floating away

Over the hedges, nets, lawns like vapour trails
Heading west to unknown futures no longer there.
A new boy in my old bedroom repeats an overhead kick
On a digital platform.
Dreams of escape as a ball lands in a net.
Cannot hear the milk train on the loop.

Ignores far sirens and sticky hands cradling the dead.

thunder circling

He needed to talk to someone.

It happened to be us.

His rolled tobacco slipped from his fingers

as he went over events fifty years before.

The harbour, Singapore, thunder circling

and lightning flashing across the sea.

A merchant navy man,

sitting on deck with his mates,

watching a free show.

'If they's could only 'arness that energy'.

The same bar two hours later.

Someone else who wanted to talk

but blocked by E's, drunk,

it came in staccato bursts, the sense,

mouthed through a vocabulary

borrowed from rap, rave and T.V.

Eighteen, jobless, staring through glass

at a wet car park, he rocks gently

like a ship stuck in harbour.

Outside, flashing lights, sirens.

diving for change

Below and to my right from this window a Volvo lorry crunches gear shredded leaf, dust and gravel trickles from bumper and wheel-arch. The digging of the new pool has been going on now for two weeks. Yellow digger-buckets mouth the park's soil and turf into lorries that rumble off, indicators flashing, down dusty A-roads to tip their loads as land-fill or as embankment on the new trunk road.

I used to swim badly across the old pool that's been demolished splashing a clumsy trail from three to six-foot but no further. Now a JCB arm is swinging deeper than the best then could dive clanking engines and carbon fumes replacing yells and splutters. Pale teenagers, we swarmed round a tin and hardboard kiosk where we'd buy ice-cream speared with flakes every summer.

Now sub-contractors, mis-managers and bankrupts delay completion. Keep us waiting for a false vision of the sea in middle England. Meanwhile every other council-painted door has a fresh veneer and satellite-dishes mark the newly affluent from the newly poor. Communal flats have been knocked down, replaced by home ownership whilst the council chambers echoed to private sector linkage.

Down the road kids clutch change that grows sweaty and sticky as the division between white and blue collars frays at the edges. The water is milky like a disinfectant bath, ice-cream melting. Every Friday my school class fizzed in that copper sulphate pool. Some from that class dived into the eighties, came out with coins but others still stumble round the wire slaked in mud and urine.

arteries

“Never knew what hit them ,
the impact must have been tremendous
to have left that much blood on the road,
looked like it had exploded”.
My father talking about the accident.
One side of the car had caved right in
and there was a bloodstain twenty yards long
across both sides of the road.
“What was left of the deer was laid on the grass
like a sack of bones”.

Ten days later.
In the same kitchen he is gingerly fingering
row upon row of tiny pink pills.

“Everybody’s on them these days”
My mother says, trying to lighten the road ahead.

But we could all see what he could see.
Moving through the trees.
His mother heart failure 65.
His mother’s father heart attack 65.
Right now I prefer not to look too far ahead.
But I can feel movement deep in the forest of arteries and veins.
Something unseen and unexpected pushing out..
Toward the lights.

the north field

You lying exhausted in another room, me taping,
trying to drag some of the past with me.

Three stories up in West London

I think of old friends, forgotten journeys
and the cracked ceiling reminds me of ice
and cars swish beyond the stained curtains.

You say I never talk, never explain things
clam-up, freeze-up, a tight-lipped Englishman.

You should have tried talking to my father
and his step-father, stood in a field mid-winter.
Tried catching a word as snow blurred the hills
and kept the rooks clinging to the high trees.

Cold as winter cattle, boots white with frost
they'd say nothing, just stamp chilblained feet
and whistle the dog back to the track they knew
lay under six inches of fresh snow.

Their maps were in their heads.

Now I clear mine and stumble on the edge of a new path.

Forgive me my sullen silences, my outbursts
at years of missed chances, frustrations, laziness.

Tonight there is no spate water froze across meadows,
no fields buried under six foot drifts,
yet I can feel the words tugging at me
wanting to arc a white half-acre
unleashed.

england swings

Soho doorway, December '66
sleet melting on daisy-patterned
plastic raincoat, seeping to salt lines
up purple suede slip-ons
Her front teeth bite her bottom lip
as she shivers, flicks her fringe,
and waits for a Mini-Cooper S
to arrive in a spray of slush,
Boutique lights flash in chrome wheels
splattered with ice, laced with tinsel.

Saturday morning, December '86
she stands outside her mum's semi
as her hubby shifts furniture out.
Cascades of bills, snaps, cards
fall from a draw into the dustbin.
Then a photo of her at 17
surfaces from the layers of 20 years.
Bobbed hair, raincoat against chequers,
she is staring, unwed into space
as flecks of snow speck the black lid.

my very first telephone call

The new grey phone in the hall
That never rang
Until one day nervously
I had to answer

It was my uncle from Spain
His father had died that morning
Whilst he was on holiday

My first conversation was cut short
“Yes dead, your dad is dead”.

Silence and then a sob
Then his wife Sue saying

“We’re coming home”.

I could hear him sobbing against her.

Then nothing.

Line dead..no connection.

MY FATHER'S THINGS

the optical level

Gun metal grey-green, heavy in the palm

My father's optical level

The metal worn through use, a record

of my father's presence as is the smell

of leather case and faint aroma of tarmac

as if his hands sunburnt and grimy with tar

still waved at me on those frosty mornings

I helped him set levels somewhere below the downs.

A ritual since the age of 14 as I earned pocket money

holding the levelling rods, red and white striped

icy cold that stuck to my fingers as I held them straight

waiting for the hand raised, a signal that he had the reading.

Then another wave to move back up the slope and start again

tied together by the upside down image of cross hairs

rising and falling on my hand then the rod

like a bomb aimer looking for a target

One morning we are out early.
Steam rising from the power staton cooling towers.
Stood in early morning sun on a former airfield at Harwell.
The airfield the Dakotas lifted off from before dawn on D-Day.
Carrying the last memories of men destined to fall
caught in the cross hairs of German gunners.
The rattle of munitions cascading from a thousand guns
blurring the coastline and making the earth move.
Turning the world upside down.

Like the poor pilot spinning out of control
trying to bring things back to a level.

I stare through that old telescope and call to him.
Right, right..back a bit.
That's it we're level now.

Roll out the string and mark the foundations.
Knock in the pegs and start to build again.
A nation fit for heroes on a sunlit morning
when the smoke had cleared.

We heard birds singing.

my father's watch

A gold Limit Silhouette watch leather strap hardly worn
A dress watch for a man who never dressed always working
Most times he didn't carry a watch as it would be get damaged
or snagged whilst working..too dangerous...

A man who cheated death twice..first a burst duodenal ulcer
I remember him being taken in the ambulance
It was touch and go. The Radcliffe saved him..the surgeon
told him later he found carrots before cutting him to save him.
Convalescence in Didcot Hospital..now housing..long gone

Later a wall collapsed on him he was two feet away from death
Was catapulted out of the way just in time..battered and bruised
He joked about it later..even the Lotus Elan that smashed into him
Or the spinning car in the rainstorm that missed him and Uncle John

Neither made a dent but then his luck ran out at 70
A soreness in his stomach was scanned..revealed pancreatic cancer
Too advanced for surgery..he grew greyer and weaker..could no longer
Get into the garden..chemo making him vomit black bile
He died in the extension we built in that last year defying the odds

to the end..he died on a bed in that building...almost perfect
like that watch stopped at 9.05 but hardly used
He died at 7.10 a.m.
The time he left for work every morning rain or shine
Kept perfect time until the end.

Butlin's Pwhelli 1956

A small silver and pink enamel badge
showing a welsh woman in traditional dress
and the words Pwllheli 1956
all that remains of my father's holiday
as a 24-year-old farm labourer
travelling with mates by steam train
to North Wales .

Years later he spoke of it fondly
as a brief respite from rationing and post-war austerity
The camp was originally built by Butlin for the Admiralty
like so many other camps, Butlins was founded on war camps.
Some even housed prisoners-of-war; Pwllheli was training.
It was the second time he had strayed beyond the Thames Valley.
The world was opening up. My mother was three years away.

In the darkness below the stairs years later I found
a cracked copy of Rock Around the Clock, Bill Haley
Amongst his treasured 78s and his record player.
That and Doris Day and Frankie Laine were the soundtrack to
1956.

Across the land belts were being loosened, petticoats swirled
as the first post-war generation started to dance
beneath bikini clouds.

North Berks Premiere Division Medal 1956-57

Football was something I grew up with.
From the tins of dubbin to the boots caked in mud on the step.
My father played for Long Wittenham into his thirties.

Before TV the radio commentaries would be heard throughout the house.

My earliest memory was my father jumping up and down as England won the world cup in 1966. He rented a TV for it.

Years later we would both sit in the kitchen listening around a small transistor radio. Poland 1975 I remember especially. Always the chat was around how the Arsenal were doing (usually badly).

Then the moments of pure joy. Charlie George scoring at Wembley. Moments I shared with him.

Even when I living in Edinburgh the chat came back to footie. Gazza's goal in Euro 96 against the Scots. Laughter.

I have a small tin with his medals in.

A photograph of him at Reading's ground for the North Berks Cup Final 1956. They lost but it doesn't matter.

Images of him fit and happy. Before the decline.

The last match. Then the long walk down the tunnel.

Game over

Polaroid Supercolour Camera

My father became a self-employed builder late in life
He was proud of his truck with Belcher Construction written
on the side and the business card he had printed.

He began documenting his jobs both as a record and in case
he had to revisit or change something.
He bought a Polaroid camera and started shooting off images.

After he died we found a box full of polaroids.
He had worked with my Uncle John in later years
and I passed the photos to him keeping a few back.

He also travelled abroad for the first time in later years
to Naples to see my sister and to Florida with her children.
The passport photo shows him greyer and maybe the first glimpse
of the cancer that was to kill him can be seen around the eyes.

He spent his last years mostly in pain being scanned and probed
and recorded.
Images of him rather than by him as life snapped.

Held in the hand, waiting for the remission that never came
My mother was left staring at a blank bed,
A smaller van without a name on the side.

A shed full of tools turning to rust

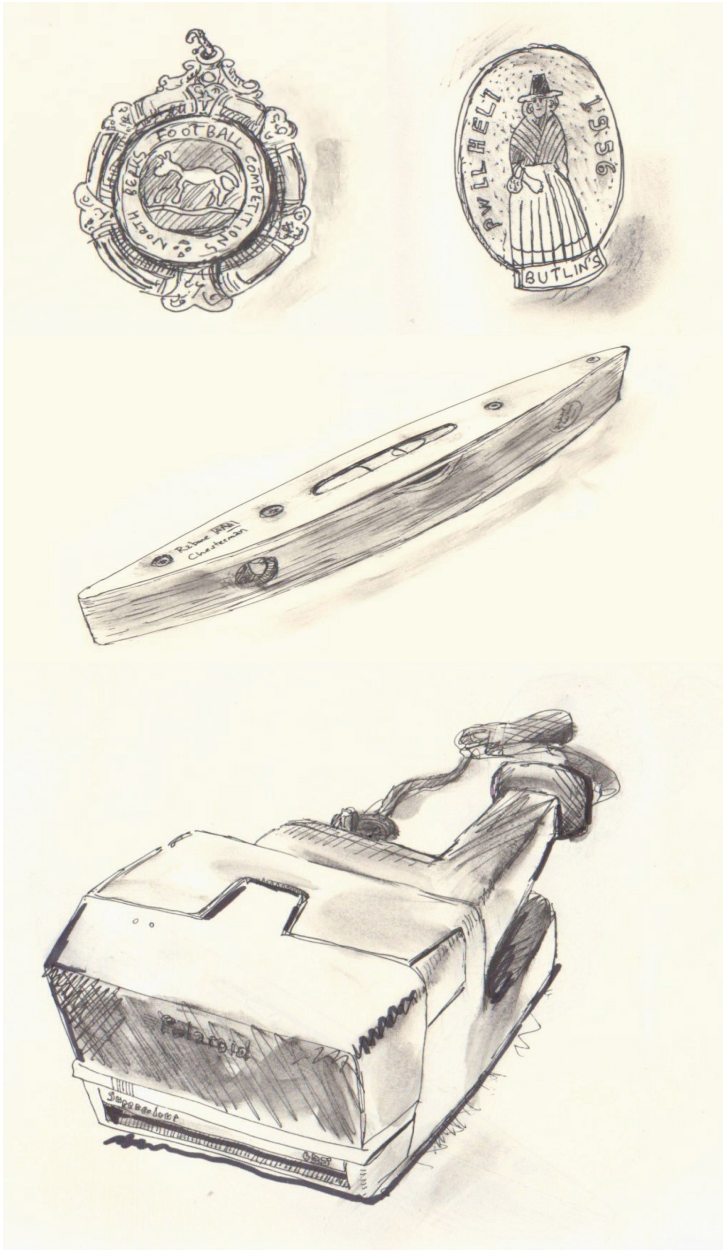
Rabone Chesterman Teak Level

A small hand held level for small jobs
I remember my father using it
It has the Rabone Chesterman logo on
which with three triangles signified Hockley Abbey
from the original Birmingham firm
that had existed since 1871.

Later it amalgamated with Sheffield firm Chesterman
the inventor of the automatic rewind tape measure
Rabone was an enthusiastic industrial moderniser
introducing steam machinery in the face of opposition
Their tools are robust and long-lasting
But like all things now swallowed up by Stanley tools.

This level is pre all that, pre offshore, downsize
and seven hundred levels of capitalist re-selling.
It is worn through use, the three spires dulled with age
But still capable in the right light of sparkling
a reminder of older ways,
the combination of church and provincial hard work
that laid the foundations

Before the bubble stopped shaking



fishing in fog

A winter Sunday, fog and frost
Two figures climbing a stile
Boots crunching crisp grass underfoot
Head toward the Thames at Clifton
My father not yet seventy, still working
And I back home for a day's fishing
Struggling with tackle and reels in the cold
Sit expecting nothing, no fish bite in this weather
Talk about things, my grandparents
The cost of renting, share a flask of tea
Steam rising across his face as he pours it
Lines taught in the brittle air, disappearing
Then slowly the sun starts to lift the fog
The opposite bank starts to appear
A moorhen skirts the bank, swans drift by
Beyond the fog a dog barks endlessly

For a few hours we hold on to hope
Stare back into the white eternal glare
Of mist along the river looking for a bite
Staring at futures unseen, but clearly there

Now and again on a misty morning
Crossing the Trent I see father and sons trudging
Through the mist and rain together, silent
Sharing thoughts, hopes, jokes, together

Their lives unravelling like lines in the air.

blurred fences

Wrestling with a young fir's stubborn trunk
On an exposed north-facing hillside

Two weeks before Christmas, sleet, wind biting,
The spires of Oxford blurring in the storm

My father's hands, hard, chapped, red-raw
Bend the tree over until the roots snap.

The red-faced farmer stands, biding his time
Then says 'Poet is he.. they're all gay or dead'

Silent we trudge back through rows of young firs
Past a tethered collie, collapsing tin sheds.

At the end of a gravel road worn to clay
We clamber inside my dad's builder's truck

In the cab, steamy with opened flasks
Radio Oxford blaring out the traffic report

He carefully shakes ice off his jacket
As I scrape frozen mud off my boots

Visiting for the day, not dressed for fields
My Levis are slaked with straw and muck.

He sets the windscreen wipers beating
And a ledge of ice builds up on the hood then melts.

Distances open up and close through low cloud
As cooling-tower steam collapses like a veil over our home-town

The Down-land swims like a saucer of cat's milk in the rain
As I try and grip a hot mug of tea with cold hands.

Still silent my father sips his tea and stares
through the pine trees and away from the farm.

I feel awkward, pick at the flakes of ice on my sleeve
As the motor turns and we lurch down the track.

He has ten years more hard labour to do.
Excavating then replacing soil across this county.

I have ten years of unfulfilled promises and high hopes to go.
Before I crash back into these muddy fields
and the land buries him.

buying time

I've been buying time since I was born
It is what the working class were made for
No trust funds, no foreign holidays
No gap year, no kindly Aunt's dowry

My father taught me to buy time
Any chance you get son take what you can
Don't be dishonest, keep your pride, do good work
But buy time, ten minutes here or an hour there

Time is the one thing they can't take back again
My parents had to buy me into an education
So that I didn't have to buy time at twenty
My mother cleaned council offices in the evening

Just so that I could get through foundation art college
She emptied bins, sometimes my sister and I beside her
Our little wage packets just enough to keep us all going
My father would be asleep, exhausted, when we got back in

We were all brought up to buy every moment of time
So much so that even when I was older
I still thought of every dead end, crazy occupation
As another means to buying time back later

Then I hit fifty and my parents dead or dying
Time ran out, I saw time being buried in front of me
But from their grave they handed me that precious thing
They had bought their council house in the 1980s

Now that council house was worth a whole lot of time
It gave me and my sister some valuable breathing space
Gave us both the very thing we never had much of
Time, simply time, the time I'm now buying off.

the rover man

He sat, firm and erect, on the park bench,
hands wrapped around his white stick
his milky eyes fixed on thirty years before
as we walked toward him.

He recognized my uncle immediately by voice
and smiled in our direction, gaze still fixed.
They'd worked together at the Oxford car plant
for almost twenty years.

My uncle blinking through the paint shop clouds
his gloves and goggles clogged with paint
whilst upstairs this man worked in admin.
below the ticking clock-tower.

He'd been enveloped in his milky world
since that day in 1943 when a german bomb
he was trying to defuse exploded
the flash burning out his sockets.

He had worked every day through strike
and shutdown, militants and shirkers, managers
and scabs. Had seen the business collapse
into a heap of mangled parts. Bust and boom.

Now the site is owned by BMW
and that clock-tower has collapsed into a heap of rubble,
that my uncle sighs as he drives past the
new industrial park landscaping and fountains.

An industry and a community gone in a flash.
The newsreels of the factory gates burn on the lens
as consultants ditch the site and reinvest
Money or bombs it is the same effect.

shaun belcher

Shaun Belcher was born Oxford, England in 1959 and brought up on a down-land farm before moving to a council estate in the small town of Didcot in 1966 just as England won the world cup..

He studied fine art at Hornsey College of Art, London from 1979–81 where he sat under a tree with Adrian Mitchell.

Began writing poetry in the mid 1980s and subsequently was published in a number of small magazines and a poem ‘The Ice Horses’ was used as the title of the Second Shore Poets Anthology in 1996.(Scottish Cultural Press).

He now lives in Nottingham, England after two years in Edinburgh studying folk culture and several years in the city of expiring dreams working as a minion at the University of Oxford.

He is currently enjoying retirement from 20 years of teaching and hopes to write something on a regular basis again.

He has been involved in various literary projects including delivering creative writing workshops in Nottingham prison for the ‘Inside Out’ project.

He supports Arsenal football club.

Favourite colours therefore red and green like his politics.

Dedicated to the people past and present of Didcot.

