



# Heavy metal

**ROCK STARS, EVEN** those of a certain age, are rarely noted for their ability to blend into the background. It isn't in their nature. But if you saw Bill Wyman pursuing his greatest passion in a muddy Suffolk field – and it's perfectly possible – the chances are that you wouldn't give the slight, down-dressed figure a second glance.

Since he bought his first metal detector in 1991, the ex-Rolling Stone has taken to what he calls 'land fishing' with the same brio and commitment that he brought to his bass guitar during 30 years playing with probably the greatest ever rock band. More than a decade after he quit the group, he continues to tour with his blues band, the Rhythm Kings, but these days he's as happy scouring the scrub as he is on stage.

Now, Bill has written a new book, *Treasure Islands: Britain's History Uncovered*, on the subject of 'land fishing' with his regular literary collaborator, Richard Havers. And although his music and business interests regularly take him away, and he has a choice of residences at his disposal, Suffolk – specifically Gedding Hall, near Bury St Edmunds – is pretty much home ground now.

The stately home aside, it seems a far cry from those rock 'n' roll years during which he generated his fair share of tabloid headlines. At 69, he has three daughters with his wife Suzanne, as well as a son from his first marriage in the 1960s, and he's always busy, writing books and keeping an eye on the Stones-themed restaurant he owns in Kensington (Sticky Fingers). >

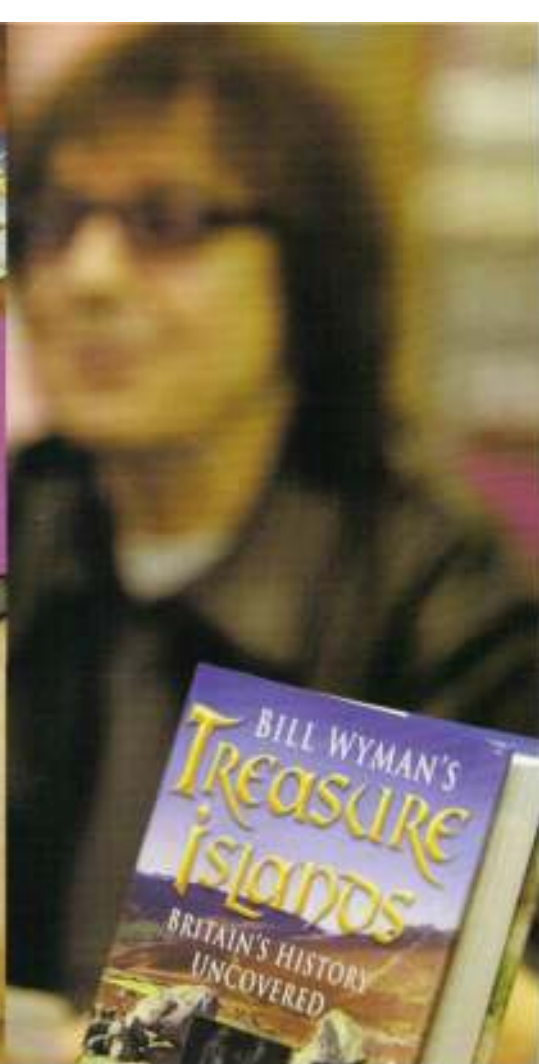


Ex-Rolling Stones guitarist Bill Wyman has swapped his guitar for a ... metal detector. He talks to Piers Ford about his new passion for 'land fishing'





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► But from his dryly humorous, rather world-weary demeanour, you quite believe that he'd be even happier pottering around the estate with his metal detector, perhaps showing one of his children the ropes.

"Suffolk is like home, now," he says. "When I play in Ipswich or do a Rhythm Kings gig in Norwich or Cambridge, I always say, 'I'm playing at home tonight'."

"I've already got a burial plot here – with my wife – in the local church. From the day I first came here [in 1968] until today, nothing within a five-mile radius of my house has changed. No roads have cut through, there are no horrible new buildings. I'm between three farms and it's exactly as it was. And that's what I love about it. Tell me somewhere else in England you could say the same thing."

The new book is the culmination of many years' research and practical experience. It's a trove of sites, stories and facts detailing centuries of discoveries, often accidental and occasionally spectacular, made by British treasure seekers. Bill's enthusiasm is palpable, rooted in a love of history that dates back to his poverty-stricken childhood with five siblings in Penge, South East London. Kids made their own amusements in those days, which makes a book celebrating a hobby that requires the

combination of an open and inquiring mind, sound ethics, and the desire for historical accuracy, rather poignant. Do-it-yourself history is big stuff in the media right now, but Bill insists the book's topicality is simply accidental.

"In the past, the only people who had the time to pursue this kind of hobby were usually vicars," he points out. "When we looked at the histories of the villages where these discoveries were made, it was always by the Reverend So-and-So because everybody else was working in the week! People ask me why so many old people do detecting. It's because they've got the time. Everybody else is at work."

As Bill says, there are masses of detecting clubs around the country. Many people go on weekend searches, sharing ideas and

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stories, and the scene is improving all the time with parents passing their passion on to their children. A stickler for accuracy, he is careful to point out the ethics of good detecting: always getting permission to search on private land; reporting finds to the Portable Antiquities Scheme; liaising with local museums and recording and labelling finds.

"It's becoming very acceptable, not like before when archaeology was thought of as stuffy and boring. People are starting to search back through their ancestors and work out family trees. And on television, Discovery and the History Channel and programmes like *Time Team* are also encouraging people. With this book, we've tried to make it available and visual enough for young people as well as anyone else who is interested in the subject; and people who are not interested in the subject might find it interesting too!"

Alas, when *Time Team* visited Gedding Hall, they didn't make any sensational discoveries. But Bill has spent many days on his own, uncovering Tudor walls, kitchen and piggery foundations, banks of oyster shells, the jawbones of wild boar, coins, buckles, potshards and even a silver thimble. The most touching item, however, was a tiny inch-high bone heart, decorated on both sides.



"Nobody knows what it means but it's really pretty," he says. "I was thrilled and sent it to the museum in Bury. They dated it to the mid-1500s when hearts became a motif for decoration. It was obviously man-made and had to belong to somebody important, have been dropped, and lost."

Bill's romantic theory is that it belonged to Elizabeth FitzRalph, a lady of the manor who lost her status when her husband was beheaded at the Tower of London, met and fell in love with the gentleman who was handed the vacant manor, married him and moved back into her old house. She lived on to be a well-respected benefactress, leaving her family arms on improvements to the local church.

"There is a spirit in the house that seems to watch over it," says Bill. "Anybody new who comes in, it seems to check them out. Not in a bad way. We think it's Elizabeth, a lady in black who stands in the doorway. The kids come down and ask who the woman was, watching them last night. We think the heart belonged to her. It gives it a little bit of magic. I had it set in silver, with a chain, for my wife for a Valentine's present and she wears it now."

Once he gets started, Bill's land fishing tales tumble forth thick and fast, a sense of wonderment making a fascinating contrast with his general gruffness. The other day, he says, he was out detecting with Richard ("I'm not a detectorist," points out his co-author. "The first time I went out with Bill I found a Dinky toy lorry. Unfortunately, not in its box...")

"We found a little lead token in a field in Rushbrook," continues Bill. "I wiped it off and underneath the mud was a beautiful church with a tower. I glanced up and on the rise was Rushbrook church, exactly as it was on the token. The museum had never seen one before, so now they're going through the books trying to find out more about it. Something like that has a feel about it. It was dropped 400 years ago and you're the first one to pick it up again. It sounds corny but every detector you ever speak to will tell you that. There's the remains of where it came from, who had it before. Even if it's just a coin or a buckle. And it's healthy, outside exercise, something interesting to do. Like going fishing: land fishing."

Among the book's many intriguing contents, there is a small item on grave goods. Although Christianity has always discouraged the custom of burying people

with their possessions, it has made a return in recent years. Frank Sinatra, apparently, has several significant items keeping him company in his coffin.

As Bill himself mentioned his own burial plot, it doesn't seem too impertinent to ask him about any grave goods he might be considering for himself. It turns out he hasn't given much thought to the idea.

"I mean, I've got hundreds of awards, for example, about 150 gold records," he says. "But I don't display them. And my books are all tucked away. A home is a home and I'm not one to show off. I'm proud of them, but I wouldn't want them in my grave."

Things associated with places, he feels strongly, should stay there, where they belong. Bill has been frustrated in his efforts to compile the history of Gedding Hall because previous owners have sold off or lost important documents. He's spent years tracking them down and buying them back.

How did an international rock star end up here in the first place? Virtually by accident. He'd been tempted as far away from south London – the preferred hunting ground – as Margareting, near Chelmsford. But the house proved unsuitable. The estate agent advised him to look at Gedding Hall, then owned by Geoff Allen, the Krays' godfather.

"I went in and there was a picture of them on the television, signed 'Love to Geoff from the boys – Ronnie, Reggie and Charlie,'" he recalls. "He's buried in the churchyard. His stone says, 'Godfather to all,' which is nearly as good as Spike Milligan's 'I told you I was ill'. The house was miles away from where I expected to be, and miles away from what I could afford! I had £1,000 in the bank. But I fell in love with it instantly and thought this would be the only chance of getting something like it, hocked my life away, took out insurances, borrowed, and got it. And I've never regretted it." □



*Treasure Island*, by Bill Wyman and Richard Havers, is published by Sutton Publishing, hardback, £25.



The Rolling Stones, from left, Keith Richards, Charlie Watts, Mick Jagger, Bill Wyman and Mick Taylor