

# Bill Hook's Scrap Yard

GILL BARRON remembers an accidental nature reserve, and its guardian.

A sharp-eyed 20th. century traveller, approaching the nondescript village of Ingleton in the Yorkshire Dales, might have glimpsed, over the top of a battered tin fence and a scraggly elder hedge, the curious sight of a car dangling in mid-air from a delapidated crane. The car was a Ford Pop, and had clearly hung there for decades. A profusion of buddleias sprouted through its cracked windscreen and missing doors, a green blob of rootless garden in the sky. And there, perched on the nose of the gaping bonnet — a sparrowhawk.

Bill Hook, the proprietor, an elegant old man with a fine moustache, curated his scrapyard kingdom with affection, having inherited it from his father and grandfather. To judge by the ossified spikes of horsedrawn farm implement poking up here and there around the densely-wooded perimeter, plus the vintage remains of small locomotives from the long-shut coal-pit railroad, the yard dated back at least a century. Substantial trees growing up through the A-frame towbars of crumpled steam-ploughs and primitive caravans gave further evidence of antiquity. And in and under, round and over all of it grew a riot of North Country wildflowers — the sky-blue cranesbill, the white surf of sweet cicely, ox-eye daisies, and down in the boggy bits, the brazen glitter of marsh marigolds.

To call in at Bill's yard in search of some arcane spare part was as much a pilgrimage as an adventure. First you had to find him, or at least his hut. Smoke rising from the stovepipe gave a clue to navigate by. Followed by a holler — if he was "at home" to customers he would appear at the window. If he approved your quest he would then climb through it (some hunk of cast-iron having been dumped inconveniently outside the door in ages past) and wave you on to follow him, in awestruck silence, down the narrow canyons between towering walls of dead vehicles. Like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, festoons of vines hung everywhere. On arriving at the right spot, Bill would pull these green curtains aside, and heave open the boot of some old banger — Morris Minor, Bullnose or Oxford — to reveal a nest of whatever it was you were looking for. A nest, or a treasure chest - brass axle cups for every dimension of wooden cart wheel ever made, king-pins, turntables, hob-plates for Queenie stoves, window-winders for Austin Sevens — he had them all. And all these sundry items were neatly stored and classified in his acre-wide, triple-decker filing-cabinet of ancient automobiles.

On the ramble back to the hut, he would suddenly dive into a mound of Old Man's Beard and, after some squawking and flapping, back out again, clutching an errant hen and a few eggs. He knew where everything was.

The last hurdle was the delicate business of paying him. "Nay lass" he'd say, "tha cash is ni use to me. Hast tha not got nowt else?" The day I swapped him a carton of duty-free Gauloises for a gigantic spanner, I knew I'd made a friend for life.

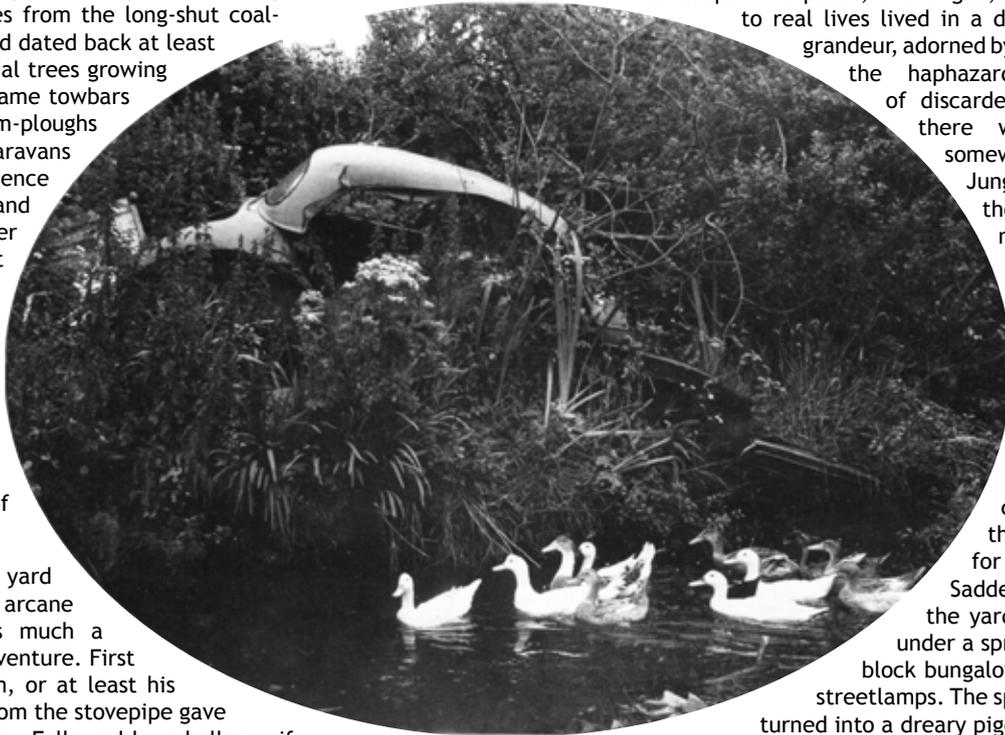
Bill was born in the early 1920s. Come the call-up for the Second World War, he decided not to go. He moved into a cave up in the Limestone, and stayed there till it was over. He was a good-looking chap, and village girls would come a-courting with whangs of illicit bacon to go with the rabbits he caught. Tea, tobacco, a twist of sugar — wants, and therefore survival, were simpler then. He never married. One had the feeling he never needed to. After the war he came down from the hills and carried on as before, a dealer in useful bits, a bridge between the farmers and the horse-dealer gypsies, equally at home in both worlds. At his funeral, a convoy of lorries covered in wreaths, and Fergie tractors, for once not covered in muck, blocked the A65.

After his death, a friend and I tried to persuade the National Trust to adopt Bill's patch, unchanged, as a monument to real lives lived in a different sort of grandeur, adorned by nature, amidst the haphazard architecture of discarded wealth. Yes, there was a Jaguar somewhere in Bill's Jungle; the cost of the materials that made up his stately estate would have originally cost a packet, just like Longleat. How sad, how snobbish, that the NT turned down the chance to save this wonderland for the nation. Sadder still that the yard is now buried under a sprawl of breeze-block bungalows, pavements, streetlamps. The sparrowhawk has turned into a dreary pigeon.

Had Bill lived longer, the story might have ended differently. There is more awareness now of the value to wildlife of such semi-abandoned places; post-industrial detritus, left to its own devices, soon evolves niches for a great variety of resilient little creatures. Witness the current endeavours of the Shropshire Wildlife Trust<sup>1</sup> who, backed by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, have taken on six hectares of truly filthy old junkyard, complete with 100,000 discarded tyres, lakes of sump oil, the works. They aim to get to the bottom of this grunge, under which lies peat bog, one of Europe's rarest and most valued habitats. The yard adjoins a National Nature Reserve, *Fenn's, Whixall and Bettisfield Moss*; in fact part of Furber's scrapyard is already an SSSI. Bill's yard would have qualified as SSSI many times over; asking the National Trust to protect it was the wrong choice. The Wildlife Trusts are much stronger these days, and daring: and that's a very good thing.

But what do the Shropshire WT plan to do with all those old tyres etcetera? If they transport them elsewhere, they just pollute another place. Bill Hook's yard, and other examples given by Marion Shoard in *Edgelands*, in this issue, show that nature is quite capable of doing its own remediation, and that the best answer may often be just to leave the dumped debris of our dirty, wasteful lives alone, so that nature can work its curing magic undisturbed.

1. <https://www.shropshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/scrapyardchallenge>



Martin Parr: Abandoned Morris Minors, Chapter 5 of *A Fair Day*