

Old Bill.

By Philip

'My mum said we should ask if we could ride our bikes on the field now the grass is cut and baled. Why are you sitting here when you have finished?'

Norman, the farmer, smiled as he looked across the astonishing beauty of the river catching the remnants of the setting sun. The sound of the river's dancing perpetual flow gave him much pleasure.

'Why am I still here? Good Question.... because I am building up strength to milk the cows and Shep likes a swim in the river. We both like the peace of the place - when we can get it. Simple. You can ride your bikes now I've finished.'

'What's that?' Lucy pointed towards a flash of blue which disappeared under the iron footbridge and down the river.

'A kingfisher.' answered Norman.

Tom, Lucy's twin brother, had arrived on his bike, stopping by Shep and allowing the border collie to sniff and lick his hand. 'Can you teach us the names of all the birds and creepy crawlies in and around the river?'

'I would, but I've got to milk mi cows and I only know kingfisher and heron anyway. You should ask Old Bill - he's always knocking around. He likes to stand on the iron bridge to keep an eye on things. He says he's the custodian of the river.'

'What's custodian?' Asked Tom.

'He just looks after the river, doesn't own it, but makes sure people don't chuck old bikes and rubbish into it. Ask Old Bill. I've got to go.'

Days passed into weeks and weeks into months. From the iron bridge Old Bill taught the twins about the fauna and flora of the river and its surroundings.

On May 15th a torrential rainstorm hit the Pennines and the level of the river rose to just below the nesting burrow where kingfishers were rearing their young. Tom had seen two fledglings leave and hoped there would be more before the river flooded the nest. Suddenly he jumped up and down, shouting with joy when he saw a seventh taking flight.

Norman, who had been fencing in the bottom field saw Tom fall into the river and then heard Lucy screaming as she ran home to raise the alarm. Shortly after came the sound of

sirens. Shep ran along the riverbank with Norman following. Suddenly the dog leapt up a steep bank into Hagg Wood high above the river and began to bark loudly.

'How did you get up here?' Norman asked Tom.

'Old Bill dragged me out of the river and pulled me to safety, then disappeared when Shep arrived.'

'Wet, bruised, cold but bloody lucky to be alive,' The paramedic said to Tom's mother. 'The last person I attended here, exactly five years ago to the day, was already dead. William Hinchcliffe, nice old man. Locally known as Old Bill, the custodian of the river.'

Lucy began to sob quietly.