

Bill Smith and The Quarrymen

taken from the book

The Fab One Hundred And Four

by 'Our Man In Liddypool' David Bedford

William Frederick Smith was born on 12th July 1940 at Sefton General Hospital, and as a child lived at 20 Oulton Road in Childwall. At age four he was enrolled at Mossfits Lane Primary School, the same school attended by Pete Shotton and John Lennon. Bill was three years older so was in the year above John at school. As a result he didn't know that John had even attended Mossfits. Bill sat the Eleven Plus exam, which he passed, enabling him to go to Quarry Bank. This would lead to his eventual meeting with John Lennon. He recalled; "As you know, when you passed the Eleven Plus, you got a bike or a watch. Well, my father just told me the exams were too easy anyway, and I got nothing!"

Although his first year started with promise, Bill's time in form 1R did not end well. A meeting was held between his father and the school during which Bill was given the option of either heading for the lowest class, 2C, or re-doing his first year with the hope of staying in the 'A' Stream, the top class. The decision was made to re-do his first year. This action meant that he would end up in the same year as John, though they wouldn't be in the same class. In their second year at Quarry Bank, Bill had achieved his ambition and progressed into 2A and John into

2B. However, it was during their third year at Quarry Bank that Smith finally teamed up with Lennon and Shotton, and the mischief escalated.

"I remember one occasion in class," Bill remembered with a smile, "when each boy took it in turn, with the teacher's back to the class, to let out a sharp whistle. The teacher would keep turning around, but couldn't catch who it was. Then, when the teacher turned around again, John shouted, 'ah, Shotton, he's caught you out now!' and everybody else started blaming Pete. The teacher marched Pete off to the headmaster, even though he was innocent!" That was one of John's typical practical jokes at Shotton's expense.

By early 1956, the skiffle craze had hit the UK, and groups sprang up all over the country. Much has been speculated about the beginning of The Quarrymen, and I asked Bill what he remembered; "We started the group as John, Pete, me and Eric, outside the Woodwork room in school. I can't remember ever being called The Blackjacks, but I do remember the discussion about naming the group. I was the one who suggested the name The Quarrymen, because of our school, but John didn't like the idea. However, the others supported my



suggestion, and we became The Quarrymen. I know this was during 1956, but I can't remember dates now."

Once the group had been started and named, they had to allocate instruments, with Bill appointed tea-chest bass player. Of course, this meant acquiring a tea-chest, and he knew the place to get one. "I pinched one from the Woodwork room! Well, it wasn't pinching as such, because Cliff Cooke, as well as teaching Woodwork, also taught Religious Education and Music, plus he was the leader of the school Scout Troop, the 4th Allerton. There were a few tea-chests in the room, so I took one of them." The Quarrymen were now formed and within a short time Rod Davis was added to the lineup. Bill doesn't remember many performances, just the occasional talent competition. "I remember that we decided to decorate the tea-chest bass. We painted it first, and then John painted cartoons on the sides of it. I kept it at my house, and took it with me whenever we were playing. My time with the group came to an end after we were playing in a talent contest, in West Derby, I think, and had to carry it on the bus. This involved placing it in the luggage compartment under the stairs on the bus, and I just felt that it was so much hassle. I didn't want to carry on. I thought that we were messing around, and my father was telling me not to waste my time, and concentrate on my education."

Bill kept the tea-chest bass in his house, but it wasn't to stay there for long. While Bill was not at home, Lennon and Shotton headed over to Oulton Road and stole it from his home. Pete Shotton remembered it well, and described the story to Len Garry for his book "John, Paul and Me, Before The Beatles". Pete and John concocted a letter for school so that they could bunk off to retrieve the tea-chest. They stated that Pete and his close relation John Lennon would have to be excused on Friday afternoon to attend the funeral of his fictional

Aunt Gertrude. It worked, and so the boys had the time off school to follow through with their plan. The two lads took the bus to Bill's house, yet weren't sure if the house was empty, but John had a plan. As Pete recalled, John told him; "What we'll do is that I'll knock on the door and ask if they have seen my lost cat called Ginger, just in case someone's in. His mum and dad don't know me anyway."

Thankfully for them, the house was empty. However, they had to find a way in. Pete found the kitchen window open, sneaked in and unlocked the kitchen door for John to come in. They searched around the house for the tea-chest, when they realised there was somebody coming up the path. It was a door-to-door salesman, who proceeded to knock. John plucked up the courage to answer the door, and was ready with a story when the salesman asked for his parents. "Nah, me mum's dead and my father's in the clink," he said in a manner that demanded pity. The salesman was launching a new drink product. He wanted them to try it and then conduct a survey. When asked how many brothers and sisters were there, John promptly replied, "I've got three sisters and four brothers, and me Uncle Herbert looks after us." The salesman left seven bottles of the drink, which John and Pete duly drank on the spot. Then the search for the tea-chest resumed, with the instrument eventually found in the garage. Lennon and Shotton headed to the bus and took the tea-chest home.

However, that wasn't the end of it. Bill wasn't to be outdone. "I decided I wanted it returned, so I went to Pete's house at 83 Vale Road and pinched it back!"

Bill's family moved to Woolton soon after. "Our family moved from our Childwall home to 298 Menlove Avenue, opposite John's home at Mendips. I kept the tea-chest bass in the attic of our house for years, though when my father was clearing out the house, he threw it away!" What could that be worth



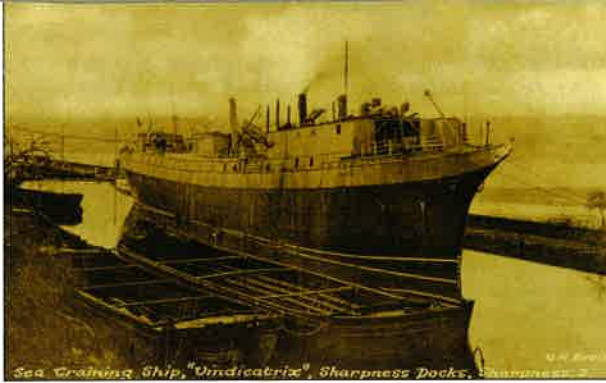
Bill Smith, Pete Shotton and John Lennon

today? Another priceless artifact gone forever! Although Mimi figured significantly in John's life, Bill only met her a couple of times, as she often wasn't in the house when John's friends were there. "I remember that John fancied playing a trick on

the medical students who were living at Mendips, so he asked me to rush in from the garden and start running the vacuum around, while the students were studying. I ran in through the French windows from the garden, did as he suggested, and the students didn't react at all!

"One of the strangest things we ever did was trying a séance in the front room of Mendips, with John, Pete, me and maybe a couple of the other lads. We all sat at a table, with the cards laid out, and a glass on which we placed our hands. We all admitted that at one time or another, they had deliberately moved the glass, but there were definitely times when none of us moved the glass. That was weird. I also remember taking some of my father's George Formby records down to John's mum's house in Blomfield Road, but I never got them back. Thankfully, they weren't missed!"

When the May 1957 Quarry Bank School photo was taken, Bill was pictured next to Pete Shotton and John, although Bill was initially next to Lennon. However, before the photograph was shot, Lennon, Shotton and Smith came up with a plan. "We decided we would stand our collars up, and wet our hair so that it looked greased back. As you can see, I am wearing a sports jacket with the collar turned up, and I'm not even wearing a school tie. I don't know how I got passed the school prefects, but I did. At the last minute, John and Pete decided to put their collars down, and adopt an Elvis look, leaving me



on my own to see the plan through."

As John was meeting Paul at St. Peter's Church in July '57, Bill was preparing for life after Quarry Bank. "When I was 16 I had the opportunity, through my membership in the

Air Training Corps in Speke, to take my glider pilot's license, but a combination of my father, and Headmaster Mr. Pobjoy put an end to this chance. The following year, when I left school, I could have joined the Royal Air Force, but instead opted for a life at sea. After initially working at Mapletons Nut Food Company Ltd. in Garston, I joined the National Sea Training School in Sharpness in Gloucestershire, aboard the TS Vindictrix. I was there for about six weeks of training." Bill's Seaman's Record Book shows that he attended from 16th September to 25th October 1957, achieving a Catering Certificate.

From there, he spent many years travelling the world and seeing many cities and countries. He even spent a short time in 1961 on board a Swedish vessel, the Justus Waller, before joining the Transatlantic liner Mauretania that sailed between New York and Naples. He left his life at sea in November 1963. In December '63 he and his new wife left Liverpool for South Africa, where he lived for nearly 40 years.



The last time Bill saw John was when he was on leave in January 1962. They took the bus into town and headed for the Storyville Jazz Club in Temple Street, where Bill took out a temporary membership, signed in by John. They shared a couple of pints that night, and soon Bill was back at sea, never to see his school friend again. Bill has now returned to his native Liverpool, though wisely spends the winter in South Africa.

