

Sun Hill supergrass

Our favourite tough-talking copper is back in *The Bill*. But there have been some dramatic changes to Billy Murray's life, both on screen and off...

When *The Bill*'s DS Don Beech was caged last year for murdering a colleague, fans thought they'd seen the last of their favourite hard man. Yet the crooked copper makes a sensational return this week, when he re-appears for six episodes as a fugitive set to become a supergrass.

Actor Billy Murray admits he didn't need much persuading when ITV1 bosses begged him to resurrect Beech for the police drama.

"I was flattered," he says. "I love *The Bill* so it's great to be here again."

The 62-year-old actor was hugely popular when he starred in the series between 1995 and 2000. But he asked to be written out blaming the stress of 25-hour filming bouts and has since been busy with film and charity work, and looking after his property portfolio.

He's also had his fair share of drama in his personal life. Last year, his eldest child, Jonathan, 28, collapsed at work and was rushed to Surrey's Royal Marsden Hospital, which specialises in cancer care, with stomach problems. The diagnosis was not good and his chances of recovery slim.

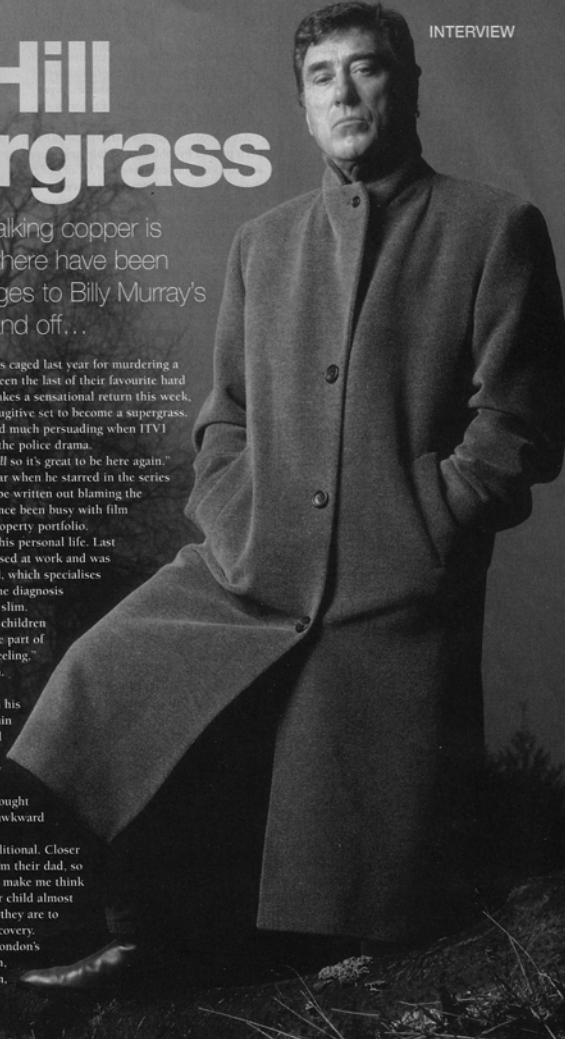
"As a parent, when you see one of your children with tubes coming out of every imaginable part of their body you can't begin to describe the feeling," says Billy, as we chat in his dressing room.

"I watched my brave son push a trolley full of medication attached to the tubes in his body around the hospital so he could regain his strength. I fed him soup and he stayed with me and my wife for three months until he got back to his normal self. Every moment I prayed that he would be OK."

When asked if Jonathan's illness had brought the father and son closer, there is an awkward pause and Billy looks visibly upset.

"Closer? I'm a father. My love is unconditional. Closer is for mates. My children have friends - I'm their dad, so there is no need to bring me closer. It did make me think how vulnerable life is. When you see your child almost slip away, you realise just how important they are to you." Thankfully, Jonathan made a full recovery.

The son of a builder, Billy grew up in London's East End and has four children - Jonathan, and Sarah, 30, from his first wife Maureen, who he was married to for four years. ►





Billy with his second wife, Elaine

and Jaime, 24, and 20-year-old Lizzie, with Elaine, his wife of 30 years, who works as a hypnotherapy counsellor.

Jonathan has launched some of the biggest clubs in London, Sarah manages a restaurant and Lizzie, who was once involved in a drugs scandal, works for a London media company.

But it is Jaime who looks set to eclipse Billy as the star of the family. She recently burst onto the screen in the hugely successful BBC drama *Hustle* (which has been

commissioned for a second series) as *femme fatale* Stacie Monroe. She has a movie coming out later this year and her dusky looks have been compared to Catherine Zeta Jones.

"I'm more likely

to go to Jaime for tips on acting than she is to ask me for tips," laughs Billy.

"I did everything in my power to stop her from becoming an actress, but she's fiercely independent. I agreed to support her at drama school as she'd have gone without my help.

"To this day, she still doesn't tell me anything. Dashing out the door one day, she announced, 'I'm on *The Bill* playing a lesbian prostitute.' I thought, 'Just what a father wants his daughter to do.' I had to chuckle though."

Billy has not missed an episode of *Hustle*. Yet, despite being proud of his children's success, he admits, "I'm not a very good dad. I don't really empathise with my children's problems. I expect my children to do what I say and respect me. If I'd been a policeman, I'd be an old-fashioned one who gave kids a clip 'round the ear and sent them on their way. I've had to adjust, or I'd have driven them away."

Billy has regularly been associated with criminals. The infamous Kray twins helped put Billy, who they met when he was a boxer, through drama school. "Being a gangster has become glamorous. Truth is, I was brought up in the East End and I've stayed loyal to my

background – and that includes friends who have become notorious in the crime world.

"In the same way, I have remained loyal to my hairdresser in the East End, who has been cutting my hair for 40 years."

Accusations of handling stolen goods have been printed by tabloids and Billy is not one to shy away from controversy. "As for dodgy deals, it's a claim that was never proved. I won't even justify the accusation, except to say that I can keep my head held high."

Billy has made a fortune investing in properties around London. All his wages from early productions went into property. As an actor, he is in the enviable position of being able to pick and choose parts.

"I've always had an eye for a deal," he explains. "I used to buy cars, do them up and sell them on. My mum worked two jobs so we would have a good Christmas."

Since his departure from *The Bill* he has made several films including *Essex Boys* and *Dog – The Movie*.

He is now about to work on a new movie with Edward Fox, but he won't say more.

Returning to Sun Hill has clearly been a joy for Billy. "I had a gap between films, so it was great

to be able to do it. It was like going back to his second family. The production unit is 10 times bigger these days, I went for a coffee and I had to ask for directions back to my dressing room!" And he's not the only old face to make a re-appearance...

"Linda Lusardi is back on the show as my girlfriend. She's great to work with and I get a bit of a snog. Elaine doesn't mind and Linda's old man's a mate of mine. But it can't be bad in the course of a day's work for a bloke to be able to say 'I snogged Linda Lusardi'. Just part of the job!" How can you call that work?"

Steven Smith

The Bill is on ITV1 on *Wednesdays* and *Thursdays* at 8pm.

Billy's daughter, Jaime, plays *femme fatale* Stacie Monroe in BBC1 drama *Hustle*

THE BEAT GOES ON...

Billy Murray has been lured back to *The Bill* with an explosive storyline, but why have other stars returned to Sun Hill?

Eric Richard played Sgt Bob Cryer for 17 years. He was accidentally shot by PC Dale Smith after being taken hostage at a school, and was put on invalidity leave.

Offer he couldn't refuse? Later returned for the memorial service of the officers who died in the station fire and again, last year, to help his niece.



In 2002 **Connie Hyde** joined as Sun Hill's psychopath Cathy Bradford, a PC who wanted to rise up the ranks at any cost – even murder. Last year she was found too mentally ill to stand trial and now resides in a secure unit.

Offer she couldn't refuse? Back in April after PC Polly Page confronted her about setting her up for the murder.



Ex-Brookside actor **Paul Usher** joined in 2001 as Des Taviner, an area car driver and womaniser. He caused the explosion that killed six of his colleagues, and faked his own death to avoid coming clean.

Offer he couldn't refuse? Returned for *The Bill*'s 20th anniversary in 2003, but died last month after an attack in a holding cell.

Jaye Griffiths joined as DI Sally Johnson in 1994, but, despite being ambitious, she left for a desk job after a bungled raid on a crack dealer's house.

Offer she couldn't refuse? Returned seven years later and is now working for a firm of solicitors, but only for a few episodes.



Christopher Ellison first appeared in 1988 as bad guy DCI **Frank Burnside**. He moved off to a new job in the Met in 1993.

Offer he couldn't refuse? Returned in 1998 and now puts in regular stints as Chief Inspector at Sun Hill.

