

ROCK SQUIRES

Charlotte Reather meets the musicians who have turned to cords of a different kind and enjoy playing on their estate as much as on-stage

HE lives in a house, a very big house in the country,” sang Blur in its 1995 number-one hit *Country House*. The song was a jibe at the band’s manager who had retired to the country to escape the pressures of the metropolis. Little did Blur’s floppy-haired bassist, Alex James, realise it was only a matter of time before he would follow suit. The man who once bragged he “spent more than a million pounds on cocaine” moved five years ago with his wife, Claire, from their apartment in Covent Garden to a 200-acre farm in Kingham, Oxfordshire.

Alex says, “I thought I was being daring when I bought the farm but it dawned on me that it was just another cliché out of the big book of rock clichés. It’s what everybody does. All the most famous rock stars are farmers – Sting, McCartney, Daltry.

NEEDING A BASE

“I think it might be to do with music being this intangible, mystical, incomprehensible thing. Living as a farmer is incredibly grounding. Country life is endlessly fascinating and absorbing – it makes sense. Making food is the opposite of music; it’s essential,” says Alex.

“Being in a band is the best bloody job in the world when you’re young. You think ‘how can it get better than this?’ And it can’t when you’re 23, but then Father Christmas is great when you’re five. It’s like that Chinese adage: ‘If you want to be happy for a day, drink a bottle of wine. If you want to be happy for a month, find yourself a woman. If you want to be happy for all your life, make yourself a garden.’ A farm is just a big garden. And you can make a lot of mess. If you want to dig a big hole, you can.

“The country would have driven me mad 10 years ago but now anything else would. Some people think going for a walk is the dulllest thing in world but there is nothing I’d rather do. When you’re in a working band you dash around different cities every day. There’s something centring about the countryside and it’s the best place to be married. Since moving out of London I’ve realised how sexually charged cities are.”



Blur’s hit *Country House* (cover, left) mocked rural life but its bassist Alex James (right and centre) was soon converted. Steve Winwood (inset) of The Spencer Davis Group and Traffic is a keen fieldsportsman





Ian Anderson, the flautist and front man of progressive rock band Jethro Tull says, “You need a base. When you’re on the road you’re going from hotel to hotel and then you’re on stage in front of thousands of people. Country life is an antidote to that. It gives you perspective.”

PITCH PERFECT

Ian’s first connection with the countryside was made when growing up on the fringes of Edinburgh. “I wasn’t good at mixing with football-type kids. I preferred solitude. I used to go off for walks on my own and trek around the woods and fields. I have childhood memories of needing to get away from the claustrophobia of the classroom and the city.”

At 61, Ian is showing no signs of slowing down in his rock-star life. Last year he performed 130 shows, this year he’ll notch up 120 globally. It’s unsurprising he’s used his indoor swimming pool only 10 times in the 12 years he’s been at his hall in Wiltshire. Surrounded by 360 acres of farmland and 100 acres of woodland, the estate is a vital retreat from the outside world for the Grammy-award winner. “Life in the country suits the loner personality. You can build a bubble.”

However, Kenney Jones, the drummer best known for his work in Small Faces, Faces and The Who, turned 180 acres of his Surrey estate into Hurtwood Park Polo Club in order to indulge his passion for polo and please the locals. “When we moved here 21 years ago I bought my manor house with 70 acres. Then I purchased some ➤

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“ It’s funny, as young musicians we tried to fight the establishment. But since the hunt ban and attack on country sports the way to be an anarchist is to take part in them, since the government’s against them ”

adjoining land and turned it into my first polo field – I’d just started playing and was hooked. Loads of local people came to watch us play, then they asked us to host a charity match and it snowballed from there. A few years later they said, ‘We need a clubhouse.’ I’ve got six polo pitches now and I built the clubhouse out of oaks that blew down in the 1987 storm.”

At the time of interview, Kenney is preparing for a concert at the club with his current band The Jones Gang for more than 1,000 people. But he gets a lot of support from locals. “I really care about the area. I disturb the neighbours once in a while, like with this rock concert, but they don’t mind,” he says.

FROM ROCK TO CHEESE

Despite being from London’s East End, Kenney has some fond childhood memories of the country. “Every year we used to go hop-picking in Kent for three months. And I’ve always loved horses. I used to go hunting in my teens and early twenties. I went out with the Essex, South Berkshire and Grafton packs. I owned a hunter and rented one, too. It was great fun. I was usually a bit drunk before I got on the horse – we’d have port and brandy either side! I

Steve Winwood and Eric Clapton at Highclere Rocks (above); Ian Anderson used to own the Strathaird estate on the Isle of Skye (below)

was forward-going and willing to try anything. I got into show-jumping, too. Nowadays polo’s the main way I enjoy the country and sport. I love fishing but rarely have time.”

Owning Hurtwood Park has enabled Kenney to turn a hobby into a viable business venture. This seems to be a trend with the rock squires. Alex is not only a farmer, but also an award-winning cheesemaker. “I won best goat’s cheese at the British Cheese Awards,” he says. “It’s called

Farleigh Wallop after a Hampshire village. My first cheese was called Little Wallop because it packs a punch. I Googled the word wallop and found this village that didn’t even have a picture on its website. I thought ‘Poor Farleigh Wallop, I’ll give you a cheese.’”

For years, Ian’s hobby outside music was shooting. After running a farm in the Chilterns, he set up a shoot with his neighbour. The entrepreneurial rocker then became a licensed firearms dealer buying Twenties and Thirties English guns from America and refurbishing and selling them as a sideline to his 50 million-record-selling rock career.

In 1977 Ian returned to his Scottish roots and purchased the Strathaird estate on the Isle of Skye. After a few pilot schemes for venison he turned his attention

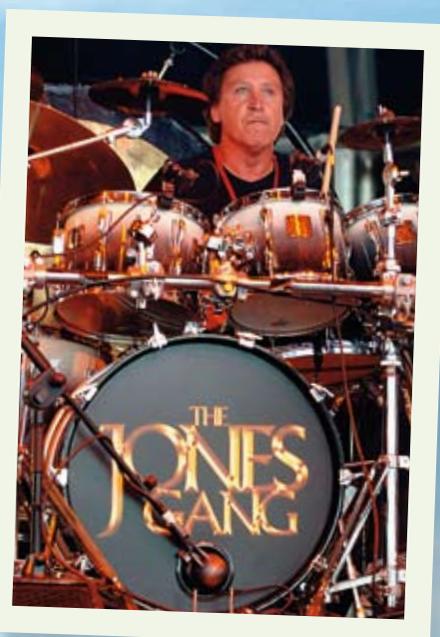


to salmon. “I was one of only a handful of privateers. Most multinationals were investing in salmon – Unilever, British Oxygen, Blue Circle, BP. It started out as a money-spinner but was followed by a lot of people going bust. No one gets rich long-term in farming. You take the rough with smooth. It’s possible to make a living if you work very hard and are prepared to take a risk.

“Being a landowner in Scotland is very different to England. There are complex social networks that you can trace back to feudal times. I owned the Strathaird estate for 18 years. Some people were unhappy when I left – they viewed it as a betrayal. But I didn’t want the on-going responsibility of owning a considerable chunk of the Inner Hebrides. I sold 15,200 acres to the John Muir Conservation Trust – I thought it would be difficult to vet a private individual and I wanted to make sure it passed into good hands.

I sold many of the crofts back to the crofters at a national transactional price so they legally owned their own homes.”

Steve Winwood, from The Spencer Davis Group and Traffic, is a staunch supporter of fieldsports. He lives on his 350-acre estate in Gloucestershire, which he bought in 1969, with his wife Eugenia and their four children. “We have a small family shoot. I used to run it commercially but now a local farmer takes the ground, puts some partridge and pheasant down and gives me three days. My 15-year-old son is very keen on shooting and conservation. We’re planting more trees and improving habitat, not just for game but for all wildlife. It took me a while to realise rural pursuits are an integral part of life in country. One reason why our landscape looks as it does is because of fieldsports.”



Kenney Jones (above) has taken diversification to the next level by using his polo fields (below) as a venue for his rock concerts

Even though Steve is a handy shot (he came 13th in Class C in the British Open at Northolt some years back) shooting is only part of his love of country pursuits. “In the Seventies I used to run with a pack of beagles and through that I discovered ferreting, coursing, stalking and so on.” You name it, Steve’s done it: stalking in Argyll, fighting wild geese in Texas and shooting on the Badminton estate and Mount Clwyd.

ANARCHISTS IN TWEED

“I used to go to the Hebrides and shoot grouse. I’ve been lucky enough to shoot them driven, in a butt, with double guns, walking-up and over pointers. I used to have a working pointer and the estate had some, too. It’s a wonderful, ancient way to hunt. I think the bird and dog almost hypnotise each other – I don’t know whether it’s scent or they see each other. While I was up there, Roger

Upton, who’s very important in the hawking world, was flying peregrine falcons after grouse with pointers. It’s very exciting to see how the falcon works with the dog.”

A relatively new sport for Steve is fishing. “I dabbled before but I’m going to take it up more seriously. Eric [Clapton] is always asking me down to the Test. He’s a very keen fisherman. He comes up shooting here and I shoot with him.” In 2007 Steve and Eric played together at the Country-side Alliance Highclere Rocks concert.

Steve says, “It’s funny, as young musicians we tried to go against the grain, fight the establishment. But since the hunt ban and attack on country sports the way to be an anarchist is to take part in them, since the government’s against them. In a way, fieldsports are the last refuge of the rebel.” ■

