

Woodcraft

Frank Dove was a peaceable man. He had lived in the increasingly dilapidated cottage for as long as anyone could remember, up a half-mile-long, potholed and muddy track off the A157, a couple of miles out of Louth. Even when you got there you might miss it as the cottage was virtually invisible, hidden in a hollow and surrounded by woodland.



Frank wasn't a recluse exactly. He had worked for years as a contractor; able, it was said, to handle any farm vehicle no matter the size. Sergeant Long knew him from the cricket club in Louth, although by the time he was starting to develop as a decent bat Frank was more usually the umpire, casting a magisterial eye over proceedings and never open to any accusation of doing the home side any favours. It was also said that Frank had been married once but his wife couldn't stand the isolation and had left for the bright lights of Grimsby. More recently, Frank had been a regular on Louth market, selling chainsaw sculptures from his own woodland from the back of his battered four-wheel drive.

Frank was devoted to the wood and, if engaged in conversation on the topic of native British deciduous trees, tended to outlast his questioner's interest relatively quickly, leaving them desperate to find a way to get away from his amiable but faintly fanatical discourse.

For the few people who had any reason to visit the cottage, its deterioration was clear. Moss and lichen had attached itself to roof, walls and window frames, as if trying to pull the structure down into the ground itself. If any visitor had been allowed to enter, they would have found the most Spartan of living accommodation though, like his workshop, meticulously clean and well-organised.

People assumed that Frank owned the cottage and the woods but it turned out this was not the case and it was actually part of some complicated family trust that meant Frank had only a life interest. Sergeant Long found this out when he called to check things out after a report of burglars targeting isolated farmhouses. Ostensibly, he had gone to discuss what was now called 'target hardening' but one look at the wet and crumbling woodwork of the cottage made any talk of fitting modern security locks a bit of a non-starter. Instead he had passed on the information he had and then he and Frank had passed an hour walking through the woods, talking about the dreadful state of English cricket and the threat to deciduous woodland. Frank had talked about the future and his worries about what would happen after he was gone. Apparently, the trustees were itching to get hold of the site, bulldoze the cottage, replace it with some huge Lego house with more bathrooms than bedrooms and build a few more where the woods were. Sergeant Long wasn't sure that planning permission was likely but Frank had rather less faith in the local authority.

Eventually, after various health scares even Frank had to concede that he couldn't stay any longer. Sergeant Long was sufficiently concerned to have someone on standby on the day he moved out, just in case. You never knew how people would react when it came to saying goodbye to everything they held dear. In fact, it all passed off peacefully. The social worker said that Frank had been busy planting trees right up to the last minute but he seemed resolved, somehow.

Even from the care home, Frank fought a rear-guard campaign. He managed to stave off any action on the cottage or the woodland and it was not until autumn two years after he moved out that he gave up the fight. Sergeant Long was one of the few people at the funeral.

It was a week or two later that Constable Pilkington brought a photograph to his attention. "Look at this, Sarge. The estate agent brought it in. Wondered what to do about it."

It was an aerial photograph of Frank's cottage and woodland, taken by a drone for the sales brochure. The neat green message formed by the evergreens was clearly distinguishable now that the deciduous trees had shed their leaves; the four letters of the admirably direct Anglo-Saxon expletive followed by the one letter; 'U'.

Sergeant Long considered for a moment. "Well, I suppose it could be construed as an obscene communication but in the circumstances I think we'll just let it pass, shall we?"

JP Melville