

Smallholder Sid

A Bizarre Case of Rural Crime - or not?

Smallholder Sid is sulking at the moment. He celebrated the relaxation of lockdown by going to France. The last we saw of him he was fuming on a French motorway and his car radiator was boiling over as indeed was he. While he waits for Sid to resurface Richard Barr tells a story that involves high crime, adventure and kale.

My wife was ashen. Still trembling she eventually was able to blurt out the awful truth.

“The greenhouse”, she gasped. “The greenhouse”, she repeated with panic in her voice, “has gone”.

She had ventured into our vegetable garden – the first time any living human had visited in more than a year – and found that the greenhouse had vanished.

Nothing left of it, no frame, no glass, no rusty garden paraphernalia, no abandoned flower pots, no dead, deserted plants. Nothing.

Bacton, where we live, has a very low crime rate, one of the lowest in Norfolk. This is partly because the streets are patrolled continuously by armed police. This is no reflection on the behaviour of the good people of Bacton. It has to do with a large commercial installation in the north of the village where most of the North Sea gas for the country arrives. Let no one comment that there is a lot of hot air in Bacton. It is considered a possible terrorist target, but (fortunately) there are few terrorists in these parts, so the armed police have little to do (though they are occasionally useful if one of the local dogs or cats goes missing). Nonetheless they are on patrol twenty four hours a day and this must be a real deterrent to burglars – even those who are hell bent on stealing greenhouses.

We do not have a good experience with greenhouses. There once was a traditional Victorian style greenhouse in the garden – built against a high wall. It had vines growing in it and pots, tressles, bewildering tools and probably a gardener called Simkins sitting in the corner smoking a pipe. Then due to damp and neglect some of the panes of glass started to fall out, threatening to bisect anyone standing underneath. The decision was eventually made to take it down to the brickwork in the hope that, at some distant point over the edge of future’s horizon, enough bounty would be accumulated to recreate it in its former glory, put back the vines and all the other necessities and restore Simkins to his rightful position (sitting on an old apple box with several hessian sacks to cushion his bottom). For the moment it is a forlorn skeleton, playing host to nothing more exotic than elder bushes.

After that greenhouse was dispatched we invested in an aluminium framed structure from Focus. That in itself might have been portentous because, of course, Focus is no longer (if you must know, it has been transformed in our town to Waitrose where all the trendies – ourselves included – pay for elegantly packaged vegetables that can be obtained at half the price from Lidl at the other end of town).

The new greenhouse was installed in an area of our land which is still, despite all appearances to the contrary, called “the vegetable garden”. A path was laid out down the middle of the plot. Our friends Jane and Kate helped us to create wigwams of bamboo canes, up which spiralled enthusiastic runner beans.



Herbs were planted in a chequerboard of antique quarry tiles. A bower (with a seat) was created at one end, with a good view of the greenhouse at the other. For a year or so the garden yielded produce, the greenhouse did what greenhouses do. The herbs burgeoned.

Then the weeds moved in – huge terrifying weeds that made Triffids look positively tame. Soon our forays into the vegetable garden became few and far between and – later – access became impossible without the use of a machete.

The struggle became unequal and nature reasserted itself. Years went by, until one spring day, my wife thought it was time to give it another go.

“I may be some time”, she warned as she set out with a day’s supply of food, anti malarial medication, ropes and formidable implements.

Many hours later she returned, with clothes torn, bite marks from hostile insects and close to exhaustion to break the traumatic news of the disappearance of the greenhouse.

I immediately scoured the reports we receive from the local constabulary to check whether thefts of greenhouses were rife in the county. The results were disappointing. Not a single greenhouse had been stolen over a wide area of Norfolk. The nearest “hit” was a report five years earlier when a spade and two trowels had been reported missing from a greenhouse in Trunch but, if the report was to be believed, the greenhouse remained.

I decided to don my pipe and deerstalker to investigate. In full safari garb I set out, expecting at the very least to find Dr Livingstone on my travels. I followed the swathe that had been cut by my wife but I kept going further till eventually there it was - down at heel but still standing. It was completely covered in foliage and cunningly disguised as a bush.

I raced back to the house to break the news - which was not greeted with great pleasure. While I was out searching, there had been a change of policy.

“I have decided”, she said, “to abandon the vegetable garden to nature”. From now onwards our vegetables will grow in a trough outside the back door.

All that happened five years ago. The weeds were never tamed and the greenhouse disappeared again. Then came along Covid-19 and our world – everyone’s world - changed completely. People on lockdown started to do things they had never done before, like crocheting, baking bread and learning how to oil paint. While part of the economy was in free fall, small other parts were seeing a surge in business the like of which they had never seen before.

Having studiously avoided any form of vegetable gardening in any one of my three score years and ten (and then some but who is counting) I announced to a passing couple of jackdaws that I was about to grow vegetables.

The jackdaws shook their heads in disbelief. Friends reminded me that successive new years resolutions had been to do less gardening (resolutions I had stuck to each year).

But to me it was a question of Veg in a Time of Coronavirus, so once again I ventured into the vegetable garden, and once again the greenhouse had vanished. 



But this time, spurred on by the depressing thought that as I was a person at risk, I had better get something done before the Coronavirus got me, I set about doing more gardening in a month than I had done in the whole of the my life so far.

The upshot is not perfect, but we are now beginning to harvest several different kinds of vegetables (including sweetcorn, kale, various kinds of beans, potatoes and leeks) and there is the greenhouse in full view, now with tomatoes growing in it.



I am sure Sid would have a lot to say about my horticultural skills

and perhaps he will be in a better frame of mind for the next issue but for now I must love you and leave you. There are tomatoes to water and weeds to slaughter. We gardeners never have any peace at this time of the year. ♦

For more silliness buy a copy of Richard's book *The Savage Poodle* (get it on Amazon or contact Richard on Richard.barr@paston.co.uk for details. Price now £7.99) or listen to him every month or so on the Chrissie Jackson mid-morning show on BBC Radio Norfolk (when he tries to be a little more sensible).

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