

County's last hermit who lived in homemade roadside shack

Everyone has a story, from the humblest to the richest in our society. Appearance is not necessarily an indication of a person's background, so I was interested to read the story of what the Mercury described 50 years ago as "the last hermit of Leicestershire".

He was known to the people of Congerstone simply as "Sailor" – and very few people knew his real name and story until after his death.

The story of the "hermit of Congerstone" started on August 19, 1919, when the man, who had been a tramp for many years, decided to build himself a tent from potato sacks and poles he had ripped from a hedge.

For 10 years, he lived in his tent pitched on a roadside verge about three-quarters of a mile from the village and beside the old Ashby canal.

Then, in 1929, the road outside his home was resurfaced and a lot of tar drums were left nearby.

He decided to cut up the drums, straighten the sheets of metal out and build himself a house.

His work was finished in one day and by nightfall, smoke was coming out of the milk churn he used as chimney, as he brewed his nettle tea..

For more than a quarter-or-a-century, this little metal shack was his home.

Sailor planted his own garden to give colour to the tiny black hut.

He was offered an almshouse in the village, but refused.

The hermit cut his own hair, repaired his own boots and mended his own clothes.

Finally, he qualified for an old age pension.

On his meagre income, Sailor supplemented his diet by cooking what would probably be termed today as an organic but unconventional diet – water hens and hedgehogs, together with herbs that grew around his shack. He also cooked sparrows, blackbirds and rooks.

Sailor lived out his alfresco life until he died on October 19, 1956, aged 81.

In a little leather purse he left a few papers and about £36 - £735 today – in cash to a Congerstone couple, Mr and Mrs A Beadman, who had befriended him. They added a little money of their own to ensure that he was not buried a pauper.

The whole village turned out for his funeral at Congerstone church and the money left over was used to erect a small headstone to commemorate his extraordinary life.

But before his death, after 37 years, Sailor finally revealed his secret to a select few in the village.

Sailor's real name was John Beauchamp.

Once, John confided, he was the sailor his nickname implied, but he was injured and crippled while working at the dockside at Cardiff.

John became a tramp doing casual work, before finally making his way to Congerstone, where he settled.

The villagers said that in his early days, John was tempestuous and hot-tempered, but in the end, he became a mellow old character, understood and loved by the villagers who still honoured his memory.

So much so, that years after his death, flowers were still laid once a week on his grave.

Source: Mr Leicester column, Leicester Mercury, Tuesday December 30th 2014, p.16.