



Frank Bruce Polemics in pine

Social commentary hewn from the trunks of salvaged Caledonian pines, the sculptures of the late Frank Bruce make for an intriguing stroll in the forest, as John Thorne explains.

Take a short detour off the A9 south of Inverness and you'll be rewarded with one of the more unusual forest sculpture trails in Scotland. The Frank Bruce Sculpture Trail, at Inshriach Forest near Feshiebridge, seven miles south of Aviemore, is home to around 20 large works in wood and stone, placed around a wooded trail and walled garden.

The sculptures are cared for by the Frank Bruce Sculpture Trust in partnership with Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS). The sculptures were moved from their original location near Banff to their new home in Inshriach Forest some years ago. For some of them it was a homecoming; several of the sculptures are carved from ancient Caledonian pines, at least one of them salvaged by Frank after having been felled to make way for a widened A9.

Asked why FCS had helped re-site the sculptures and place them in the

Above, left to right: Third World; Inner Man; The Walker. Opposite page, top and bottom: The Thinker; The Man's the Gowd. Photos: John Thorne, Paul and Jenny Wilson (used under a Creative Commons Attribution License).

forest, Forest District Manager David Jardine explained: "These strong and inspiring sculptures are carved from the ancient Caledonian pines of Inshriach Forest and it is fitting that after many years at Colleonard in Banff, they have come back to their spiritual home. Frank's art draws out from the wood some fascinating figures and their visual impact is quite stunning."

The trail itself is an accessible one laid out across an area of mixed woodland. Winding through the trees, the works appear around corners and behind walls, or reflected in a pool, leading you eventually to a purposefully overgrown and lightly-tended walled garden. You may notice Pharaoh the Falcon on guard against woodpeckers – the sculptures' greatest enemy – set amid the fruit trees and flowers that have survived from the garden's cultivated days.

The original intention of Frank Bruce and the Trustees was to allow the wooden sculptures to decay and return to the ground from whence they came, but with Frank's untimely death in 2007, the Trust has started

remedial work to preserve these precious works for some further years.

Frank Bruce was not your average artist. He rejected the glitterati and the art spotlight, never selling or seeking to gain from his works, and simply asked for donations to help him continue his craft. He was unsure just how good they were, but in later years was gratified by the artistic world's acceptance and praise for his works.

Richard Holloway, then Chair of the Scottish Arts Council, opened the trail in November 2007. He described Frank Bruce as the Dave Brubeck of sculpture; like the great jazz musician he was untrained and came by an unorthodox route to the arts, having worked most of his life in hard, manual jobs such as welding. He left school at 13, misunderstood as a dyslexic, but determined to educate and improve himself, and found expression through the labour of his hands. Born near Fraserburgh, he moved back to Aviemore to be closer to his family, and the works moved with him.

Frank created both the very small and the very big; 'The Walker' stands eight metres tall, and like all the works on the Trail can be touched and experienced, even walked under. Some are intensely personal; 'The Sailor' is a small, seemingly inconsequential work, easily wandered past, a simple sailor's face shouting or screaming from an un-hewn block. But this image meant something far deeper to Frank – it is a representation of his brother's last moments during World War II, envisioned as he is trapped deep within a battleship sinking fast, with no hope of escape.

Other works draw deeply on Scottish culture. 'The Man's the Gowd', inspired by Frank's love of Robert Burns' work, has a Lord and a working man staring across at each other, crowns of skulls above their heads, reminding them and us all that we all die, no matter how high or low we are.

Frank was also interested in our relationship with the developing world, and one work in particular, 'Third World', shows developed-world men blinded to the suffering and condition of the developing world. Another, 'The Patriots', shows how we as humans cause conflict and rely on patriots to create suffering and war.

An obituary in *The Scotsman* described some of Frank's inspiration: "Rodin's famous bronze, 'The Thinker', took a classical form reminiscent of the work of Michelangelo, whereby men were godlike in their perfection. Rodin's Thinker represented Dante contemplating the gates of hell. Bruce's Thinker depicts a more humble figure without limbs and locked statically into the wood. It has been cleverly sited at the edge of a small pond, so we are presented with the



echoing influence of previous artists and the physical reflection of the actual sculpture in the water."

Not what you were expecting in a forest in the Cairngorms National Park? That is part of the sculptures' appeal; they challenge us culturally and highlight our selfish economic outlook. They cause us to stop and think. You may not like them – some don't, perhaps expecting carvings more 'suitable' for a natural setting. But you will certainly have an opinion on the works, and as Frank had hoped, come away questioning something, be it your cultural identity within Scotland or your relationship with the wider world around.

Valerie Fairweather, a retired arts curator from Stirling University and Secretary of the Frank Bruce Sculpture Trust, explains her fascination for the sculptures: "Frank had a global world conscience. There's something quite fascinating about his work, and he was driven. If he'd been a writer he would have written polemics, but he was a visually creative man and turned to sculpture as his mode of expression." Frank sensed and released powerful forms from within the old dying Caledonian pines of the Inshriach area.

"This series of works depicts icons of patriotism and the tragedies of world poverty," Valerie continues. "This may sound like an odd thing to encounter in a forest



setting, but there is something deeply affecting about these works. The juxtaposition of the peace, serenity and hidden beauty of both medium and location against the violence and despair that characterise the themes creates an artistic tension that imbues the works – and the trail experience – with real power. The trail is a fascinating example of how taking the

arts out into communities and locations outwith cities and galleries can achieve a high impact and make a very positive impression with new audiences."

Richard Holloway described the works eloquently at the opening ceremony. He said the works "appear to grow out of the form of the materials from which they are taken. Artists look at the world and remake it in their art, helping those of us who don't see with the same depth and intensity to look harder and see more. Look at Frank's work and you see the beat and brutality of the natural world as well as its heart-breaking beauty....And that's why it's absolutely right that the setting for Frank's work is a first. Here it is brought back to its own home and it brings us back to look at it with new eyes."

The Frank Bruce Sculpture Trust is indebted to Forestry Commission Scotland for its support in paying for moving the works from Banff to Feshiebridge, and for its continuing support in the upkeep of the Trail. Entrance to the trail is free and there is disabled parking at the start. The trail itself is suitable for wheelchairs and buggies. For information about the Trust and its work, including how to support it and donate towards the preservation of the sculptures, see the website.

www.frank-bruce.org.uk

John Thorne is a Trustee of the Frank Bruce Sculpture Trust and works as Project Manager at Transition Heriot-Watt University.

"In Frank's work you see the beat and brutality of the natural world, as well as its heart-breaking beauty..."