

# FORVIE AND THE DEVILISH PRIEST

“No human habitation could be seen,” wrote an anonymous correspondent to the Aberdeen Magazine in 1832. They were describing the vast dunes of what is now Forvie National Nature Reserve, home to a myriad of wildlife. Yet the ghosts of Forvie’s past as a coastal village are to be found among the tall grasses and sandy soil. The walls of the chapel, once dedicated to St Adomnan, biographer of Columba, still remain in splendid isolation above the North Sea. But what caused the community to abandon their homes and place of worship?

Tales abound of a mighty storm which decimated the dunes and swamped the village; a Protestant preacher, Rev Masson, declared that Forvie’s inhabitants had been ignorant Papists punished by a reforming deity. By far the most frightening story is that which was discovered by a local wildlife ranger. A long-forgotten epic poem recites the fate of Forvie, once a thriving community from the Neolithic period to the 15th century.

The old priest had died, and the parishioners of Forvie were keen to meet his replacement. The new priest was a tall, youthful individual with a shorn head. Some speculated he had recently left a monastery. He surprised them by keeping himself to himself and only being seen at mass and confession. He did not visit the sick, he did not attend village festivities, he seemed to take his role very seriously, remaining aloof from the people.

But one by one, the villagers discovered all was not right with the new priest. As they entered the confessional, villagers found the priest laughing at their sins and telling them that their neighbours had done far worse. The one thing that the old priest had warned his congregation was to stop tale-bearing, as they would surely reap whatever dissention they sowed. Every secret, every loathsome sin and scandal that was poured out to the new priest was soon whispered abroad, causing old grudges and jealousies to be rekindled, sending the community into a frenzy of ill-temper.

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And then the girls started to go missing. The first was a young woman, who had just been about to marry her sweetheart. Her fiancé was devastated, especially when the rumours flew that she had left him for someone else. Then it was the baker's daughter, a kindly lassie who was still a scholar, but helped her aged father in his business. He refuted any suggestion that she had run away because she was with child. Then another, and another, and another until seven unmarried virgins had vanished into thin air. The priest would not speak out, he merely fuelled further rumours.



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A storm blew up, casting a bitter north wind down from the Arctic, causing the sand to billow around the village. The baker and his brother, the local blacksmith, had continued to search for their loved one; that night they walked along the beach, hoping to find any caves or hollows the storm may have uncovered. Reaching the land just below the chapel, the baker could see the gaping mouth of a cave which he had never noticed before. His brother held up a lantern and they went in, the waves whipping around their feet. To their surprise, the very back of the cave was lit by flaming torches which revealed a symbol painted on the granite walls, a pentagram, "The devil's work!" cried the blacksmith. Down below the evil mark was a stone altar, and on it, bound in chains, was the baker's daughter. Father and uncle screamed in horror and flung their arms around her body. This roused the poor child and she wept piteously. "Oh Faither, ye found me! Thank the angels in heaven, help me!" she cried.

“Aye, we shall! I’ll get some tools and free ye, dearie,” her uncle assured, running out and scrambling up the bank.

“What happened tae ye, ma wee bairn?” the baker asked.

“It wis the new priest! He’s nae a priest at aa, he’s the De’il incarnate! I wis walking by the chapel een nicht and he beckoned me in, asked me aa about masel, and wis I ever kent to ony man, which I said I wisna, I kept masel clean and awa fae hairm!” the girl began to explain.

“Then he gave me this hot milk and I felt affa sleepy. I must hae swooned, syne I woke up doon here. Then I saw the ither lassies, look! It’s affa!” She pointed to the dark corners and the baker held up the torch to reveal the emaciated, dead bodies of the other six missing girls. They looked as if they had been drained of everything that made them human.

“This is evil! We canna allow him tae continue, we maun get oor neighbours together!” the baker exclaimed.

Once the blacksmith had returned and broken the heavy chains imprisoning his niece, he and his brother carried her back to the forge. Word was sent by the blacksmith’s apprentice and soon all the adults of the village were crowding into the blacksmith’s abode. When they saw the baker’s daughter with her pale, drawn face and heard her awful testimony, they began to cry and scream in rage.

“We must stop this evil, he wisna richt, he spoilt the sanctity o the confessional, he’s turned us aa agin’ the ither! Oh, may the Lord forgive us for oor sinful wyes!” the shoemaker exclaimed.

“We’ll gaun to the chapel now, and demand he leave us!” another added.

“My freens, we maun be careful, if this chiel is the De’il, then we hae to protect oorsels. Lang syne, the auld folk believed that cauld iron protected fae evil and witchcraft, well, aa you menfolk, tak tools o iron fae my workshop and mak the sign o a cross wi them. Noo let us meet wi this vile beast and cast him oot o Forvie, then we start afresh, cleanse ourselves from oor wicked wyes!” the blacksmith ordered.

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The women stayed with the baker's daughter, attempting to comfort her, while the men walked resolutely to the chapel and surrounded it. They demanded the priest show himself, seeing all the candles and lanterns inside were lit. Both doors were locked, so they smashed their way in, but found the church empty and a freezing cold draught blowing up the aisle. The men found the harsh air was coming from an open trapdoor behind the altar. There were stairs which the blacksmith guessed led to the cave where his niece and the other girls had been held captive.



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Then there was a roar of triumph from outside. The men ran out to see the demonic priest standing atop a hill. "So, men of Forvie, you learned my true identity at last! Yet you were happy to listen to gossip and spread stories about your fellow villagers for many a day! You even believed ill of those poor virgins which have given me sustenance! Well, for your sins, you will all face destruction!" he howled in delight. He held his arms aloft and roared into the storm: "Let naught be found in Forvie's glebes, but thistle, bent and sand! Let not a life be spared!" The wind skirled like an uncanny monster, whipping up the sea, sending sand whirling like a thousand dervishes, blinding the men as they ran to try and seize their enemy.

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The storm raged all night and the next day. By the time it had passed by, Forvie was shrouded in sand. Not one house had escaped. Only the tip of the chapel roof was visible. The devil had got his due.

But, how did the sand really gobble up a whole village? The truth is sadly far more mundane than the actions of the devil. Meteorological records show that in August 1413 a combination of extreme tides and high winds blew the sands from the beach strand at Forvie inland, creating a hundred-foot high dune which smothered the village. For a millennium the dunes had been stable, but by the end of the 1400s, the sand had moved almost 1,500 feet inland, rendering the area completely inhospitable. Thus, the author of Forvie's fate was not the devil, but Nature at its fiercest.