

People Stay Off the Heath

by Mia Sundby

"Course, it used to all be part of some lord's estate," one man whose name I'd immediately forgotten had told me last night. His wooden bar stool had been creaking under his weight, and his polo shirt looked as though it had either seen too many washes over the years or not enough. "Couldn't afford to keep it after the Second World War, 'course, what with most of the men gone and the women having found other work. Not to mention..." Had it been Alan? Steve? Richard? "...and then of course, that's not including the land what's left of Heathend."

"Heathend?" I frowned, passing him the pint I'd bought him. "That's not on any of my maps."

"Bah --wouldn't show up on the old Goggling, would it?"

Opting not to correct him, I pulled out the local map I'd bought in the next village over --a charming little place with at least three National Trust buildings and a butterfly garden that claimed it had been a favourite of Queen Elizabeth I.

"Can you show me on here?" I asked, laying it out on the bar.

Having grown up with a man of the same generation as the gent sitting next to me -- Dave?-- I was sure he'd waste no time in leaning over and giving me a full tour of the surrounding area, riddled out in lines of red and blue and yellow and splotches of faded green. Instead, he shook his head.

"Nah, won't show up on there neither."

I furrowed my brows. "It's a pretty recent map. I think it's got a sticker on it somewhere that says it was printed this year..."

"Well there's your problem," said ...Martin? He looked positively smug as he said, "You'd need a map few hundred years older than this."

I sensed a Black Death story coming on and reached for my pint. "I thought most of the villages here had avoided the Plague way back when," I said. I'd only had time to visit one of the National Trust places, but in a village this remote most of the history was repeated. Even the butterfly garden had included a little paragraph on the Bubonic Plague. Ah, England!

Still, if my new gallery exhibition was going to be on the art of avoiding pandemics, I doubted it would go down well. On top of it being an incredibly unfashionable topic, I'd seen the effects of the Black Death on a documentary about outbreaks in modern-day Mongolia from eating marmots. It had put me off meat for a week.

Malcom? drew himself up, glanced around conspiratorially and said, "Bit of a local legend. Apparently there was a village here back in the 1200s, called Heathend."

"What happened to it?"

"It disappeared."

I blinked. "It... It what?"

My new friend looked over the rim of his pint as he gulped it down, all but beaming with anticipation.

I relented, my curiosity piqued. "What do you mean it disappeared? Did someone lose the records?"

He shook his head. "The church here's been keeping records of births, deaths, marriages. Plaque outside the church says we've got the oldest church archives for miles."

Whether or not that was true, I nodded along. Brian? carried on merrily, "we had monks and all back in the day, and since then everything's been kept as is. There's records and journals all about a village named Heathend, right?"

"Right?"

"And then there's journals that just detail all these deaths in Heathend, then nothing." A sour expression crossed Mike's face as he grumbled, "BBC were gunna do a programme on it. Never happened. You know what those big companies are like."

I made a noncommittal noise into my beer. Once I felt a correct amount of time had passed, I asked, "but how does a village just disappear?"

Mark had shrugged. "It's just a local legend, that's all. Probably all got wiped out by a fire and monks never wrote it down." He raised his pint to his lips again. "Nothing out that way now --but people stay off the heath."

"How come?"

"Ah, you know," He (it had to be Steven) hurriedly broke eye contact with me, staring intently into his porter as he grumbled, "bad land."