

The Beast.



Stay clear of Becketts Woods when the sun sinks, for legend has it that the Beast of Elmswick lurks in the inky depths. The much-discussed menace has haunted the town for nigh on forty years, and sends a shiver down the spine of the hardest traveller. With wild black coat and razor claws it has hunted and pursued those brazen enough to step off the beaten path. The early '90s saw an age of peace, but as the new millenium began, the Beast returned with energy anew and bloodlust

unabated.

So goes the story, anyway. Many have spotted the Beast, have even fled from the creature through the trees, and while no one has suffered physical harm, all report of something otherworldly dwelling in the murk. We all know that, rationally speaking, it's probably *not* a supernatural phenomenon. All the same, we respect the legend, the people of Elmswick do. After every attack, the Beast becomes the hot topic once again, and we take to the streets to discuss it with neighbours and passers-by alike. Perhaps it's all folly, but it's our folly.

At any rate, there's certainly something out there, some malignant presence prowling the undergrowth. Whether otherworldly or mundane, this rings true: only the brave and the foolhardy would set foot in Becketts Woods after nightfall.

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It later transpired that the culprit was closer to home than we imagined. Notorious local Tony Rolands, as a bored teenager in the '80s, had donned a handmade costume - sheepskin rug dyed black, coathangers bent into talons - and took to the woods for his own amusement, where he'd prowl, howl, and frighten fellow Elmswick residents. He hung up his garb as he approached his thirties; a decade later, though, he recounted the tale of his mischief to awed son Tim, who picked up the mantle and held down the post until his unmasking by a torch-wielding amateur sleuth.

It was a relief, in a sense, that the threat of mauling had rapidly decreased, but mostly we were miffed. Perhaps we should have figured it out - appearances of The Beast dipped when the Rolands family went on holiday, and spiked following father and son sessions at The Crown & Gasket. The wool had been pulled well and truly over our eyes.

Tony and Tim Rolands offered a full and frank apology, promising to amend their ways and take a lesson in maturity. Legal action was considered, but, unable to conclude the charges to which they'd answer, ultimately we dropped it.

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Normality returned to Elmswick, but before long, the peace grew tiresome. Yes, the risk of Beast attacks added a certain tension to our lives, but it also brought the people together. The town square was alive with chatter after each sighting, as we'd giddily swap theories with our neighbours. Now, they'd all regressed back to strangers.

So a meeting was organised with Tim Rolands. All was forgiven; what's more, we wanted him to pick up where he left off. Tim was flattered, but things had changed - he had changed. True to his word, he had reassessed his priorities. Had reunited with the mother of his child, retrained as an electrician, and calmed right down. He was putting together a deposit for a flat. In brief, he hadn't the time to spend three nights a week scaring folk in the woods.

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This was a tradition, though, and traditions are worth protecting. A casting call went out, and before long we had a new roster of Beasts, with shift patterns, holiday spreadsheets, a bonus scheme. This added an extra level of intrigue to the Beast, because (unless you had access to the rota) you had no idea which Beast you'd encounter of a foggy night. There was a Beast who gave an especially dramatic performance, and a Beast who exuded quiet menace. There was a Beast who scaled the treetops and pounced, and a Beast who got a bit too physical, and maybe wasn't a good fit for the position.

The case of the Beast of Elmswick had been solved, then, but there was still much to ponder. Would the Beasts ever unionise? Could the idea be franchised to neighbouring towns? Would the recent hiring of the inaugural female Beast affect the dynamic? The mystery rumbles on!