

TWISTED TALES

CHAPTER TEN: THE DEVIL'S FOOTPRINTS

“DAWLISH: MYSTERIOUS PRINTS. Since the recent snowstorms some animal has left marks on the snow that have driven a great many inhabitants from their propriety, and caused an uproar of commotion” - headline from *The Western Luminary*

On February 13th 1855, after a particularly cold night, Devonians from Torquay to Exmouth began reporting an eerie trail of footprints winding through the snowy landscape. Described as narrow, uniform cloven prints, they looked like the tracks of a hooved animal, yet the stride length and pattern indicated a two-legged, humanoid creature. Locals - and local newspapers - wasted no time in dubbing them “The Devil’s Footprints”.

The prints led through open countryside, towns and gardens, crossing rivers and walls as if obstacles posed no interruption. They ran through haystacks, over rooftops, and hopped twelve-foot fences, leaving only marks in the snow. A particularly enthusiastic witness said the tracks stretched for over a hundred miles in a straight line (though how they measured this remains a mystery itself). For Victorian England, ever-hungry for tales of the supernatural, this was a thrilling distraction. Soon *The Times* caught on, fuelling nationwide fascination with the “Great Devon Mystery”. Speculation over what could have made the enigmatic tracks was the talk of every club and dinner table. And while some were intrigued, others were genuinely frightened, convinced it was an ill omen or a warning of dark times ahead.

Attempts to explain the prints only deepened the enigma. If all the accounts were to be believed, no known animal or bird could possibly have managed all such feats in one night. One delightful hypothesis suggested an escaped kangaroo, though it would have to be a supernaturally athletic marsupial. Naturalists were stumped, suggesting hopping rodents or unusual badgers, yet none could account for the sheer scale and precision. My favourite is the idea that “*it must be some monkey which has escaped a travelling menagerie, with something on its feet*”.

More prosaic theories pointed to snow melt or frost patterns, or an elaborate hoax by very well-coordinated pranksters. Skeptics claim it as an example of mass hysteria: a few locals found some curious but natural animal marks and word spread, each new report joining together into a story more mysterious than the sum of its parts.

The curious case of the Devil’s Footprints remains one of England’s best-loved unsolved mysteries. So if you ever find yourself on the South West coast on a snowy February night, perhaps take a moment to wonder: did the Devil truly come to Devon?

