

A Real Scary Hallowe'en Story:

The Legend of Sawney Bean

By Charlie Weir

While it is true the Scots have excelled in many respects and inventions – see “How The Scots Invented the Modern World” – in at least one instance, if true, they will not see much to be proud of. The 16th Century Scotsman, Sawney Bean, is credited with being the most successful *cannibal* in history!

As per the legend, Alexander “Sawny” Bean was born, the son of an honest labourer in East Lothian in the mid-1500s. His childhood seems to have been unremarkable.

When it was time for him to learn a trade, the lazy youth rejected his father’s hard labour at ditch digging and hedge trimming and ran away with a similarly slothful – but superbly fertile – young woman of his acquaintance to try a life together, on the sly.

The two lovers began ambushing travelers by night – Sawney being clever enough to kill the victim to avoid their later testimony – to steal their possessions for later sale in neighboring towns. They made sure no victim of their attacks ever survived to serve as witness against them, save their last one....

This get-rich scheme failed due to the penury of the Scots. As most Scots who owned very little, and didn’t trust in banks, spent most of their wealth on their personal possessions – rings, dirks and swords, brooches and the like – and these were usually well-known as belonging to the individual and likely not easily re-sold; as the murderous couple soon found.

The deadly lassie soon ‘got great with child’ and Sawney began to plan more seriously for his family. At this time the two found a cave at seaside, at Bannane Head near modern Girvan and Ballantrae in South Ayrshire, as permanent residence and remained there for the next quarter century, routinely preying on passers-by on dark nights. Meanwhile Mrs. Bean proved very fertile indeed birthing 14 children in that cave.

The cave, whose entrance was submerged at high tide, ran for two hundred yards and opened into several branching chambers, leaving a lot of room for the ever-increasing family. Sawney, now quite adept at ambuscades, but making very little profit from it, decided to start using all the flesh they were acquiring for his hungry family. In short time the subterranean cave was divided into storage rooms for victims’ clothing and jewellery, quarters for the Bean clan, eventually numbering nearly 50, and rooms for butchering and storage of human limbs.



The Beans had more than even they could eat, so Sawney would throw extra limbs into the sea at high tide, and they would go adrift to reappear on Scottish and English beaches at low tide, terrifying their inhabitants, or assumed to be the result of shipwrecks.

By now the Beans were hunting as a family, and near the turn of the century consisted of eight sons, six daughters, eighteen grandsons and fourteen granddaughters, even the grandchildren fathered by Sawney.

The district, then called South Galloway, was fast becoming deserted in two ways due Sawney's nocturnal clan. First, the family was credited with killing and eating over 1000 persons, or as many as 1500. But more insidiously, local innkeepers were being hanged as being the last to see many of the victims – most likely to be the perpetrators by Scottish law – and, as a result, many travelers bypassed the area.

At last the Beans were discovered. A man and wife sharing a horse and on the way from a local fair and a little ahead of a larger group of travelers were ambushed by the Beans who promptly unhorsed the woman, and gutted her on the spot. Her husband successfully defended himself, the first ever to escape the Beans, and was soon joined by the following travelers as the Bean clan fled, dragging the newly slain woman off into the night.

A cry went up and soon King James VI of Scotland arrived, accompanied by 400 men and a pack of dogs, and searched for days in the vicinity before finally discovering the hidden cave at low tide.

When the baying dogs rushed into the soggy cave and a party followed them, they soon found rooms filled with clothing and valuables, limbs hanging everywhere, and the entire Bean clan cowering in the dark in the back of the cave like trapped beasts.

All the family members were interrogated by the King, then transported to the Toll Booth in Edinburgh. The King who had closely questioned them declared them all ignorant of right and wrong and beyond rehabilitation, and had them moved to the port of Leith. There they were all executed. Men were bled to death limbs lopped off, women and children were burned.

Apparently, King James made efforts to remove all records of the event, reportedly ashamed that his countrymen were involved in such a horror. Shortly after, in 1597, he published a learned treatise on Witchcraft called "Daemonologie" which is still available today.

It is assumed that his experiences with the Beans had great bearing on his lifelong obsession with witchcraft and the occult.

In 1603, upon the death of his cousin Elizabeth, he relocated to London to assume the crown as James I of England, Ireland and Scotland. While there he commissioned and oversaw the now familiar English "King James Bible".

He never saw Scotland again but once, briefly, 13 years later.