

The Lost Villagers of Craster by Isabel Butterfill

Have you ever been unsettled by the anguished cries of seagulls as you approach Dunstanburgh Castle on a foggy day? Villagers say that they tell of a long-ago tragedies.

It begins with the Craster family, in 1272. The local lords of Craster, the village below the castle, had each in turn been good and kind to the villagers. Reginald Craster was no exception. He was lenient towards those that could not pay their taxes, and cared not about the beauty of his bride, but the cleverness and kindness inside her.

Then tragedy struck. While still young, Lord Craster died one night under suspicious circumstances. His nephew took his place, a Craster by name, but not by heart. He was cruel, and the villagers had to toil hard for only his selfish purposes. Fishermen would be gone for days, trying to catch enough fish to please the lord. And anyone unable to pay their taxes would go without food until they paid up. As the new lord's reign lengthened, he became harsher, expecting impossible things from his villagers. Taxes increased, punishments became unendurable. Life was hard for the villagers of Craster.

One day, the nephew – for that was what the villagers called him, refusing to address him as their lord – was looking for a bride. He demanded that every house present him with their most beautiful maiden. At this there was an uproar. In protest to this abhorrent demand, the villagers formed a tight circle around their beautiful young women. A sudden wave of fury overcame the nephew, and he set his dogs on the villagers, chasing them up to Dunstanburgh Castle, then off the edge of the cliffs. That instant, a strong sea fret rolled in, cloaking the cliffs in impenetrable mist.

The villagers' bodies were never found. Legend has it that it that they turned into seagulls, perched on the cliffs below Dunstanburgh Castle. They are never able to venture far from their weather-beaten stone ledges. Their piercing shrieks mourn the lives lost centuries ago.