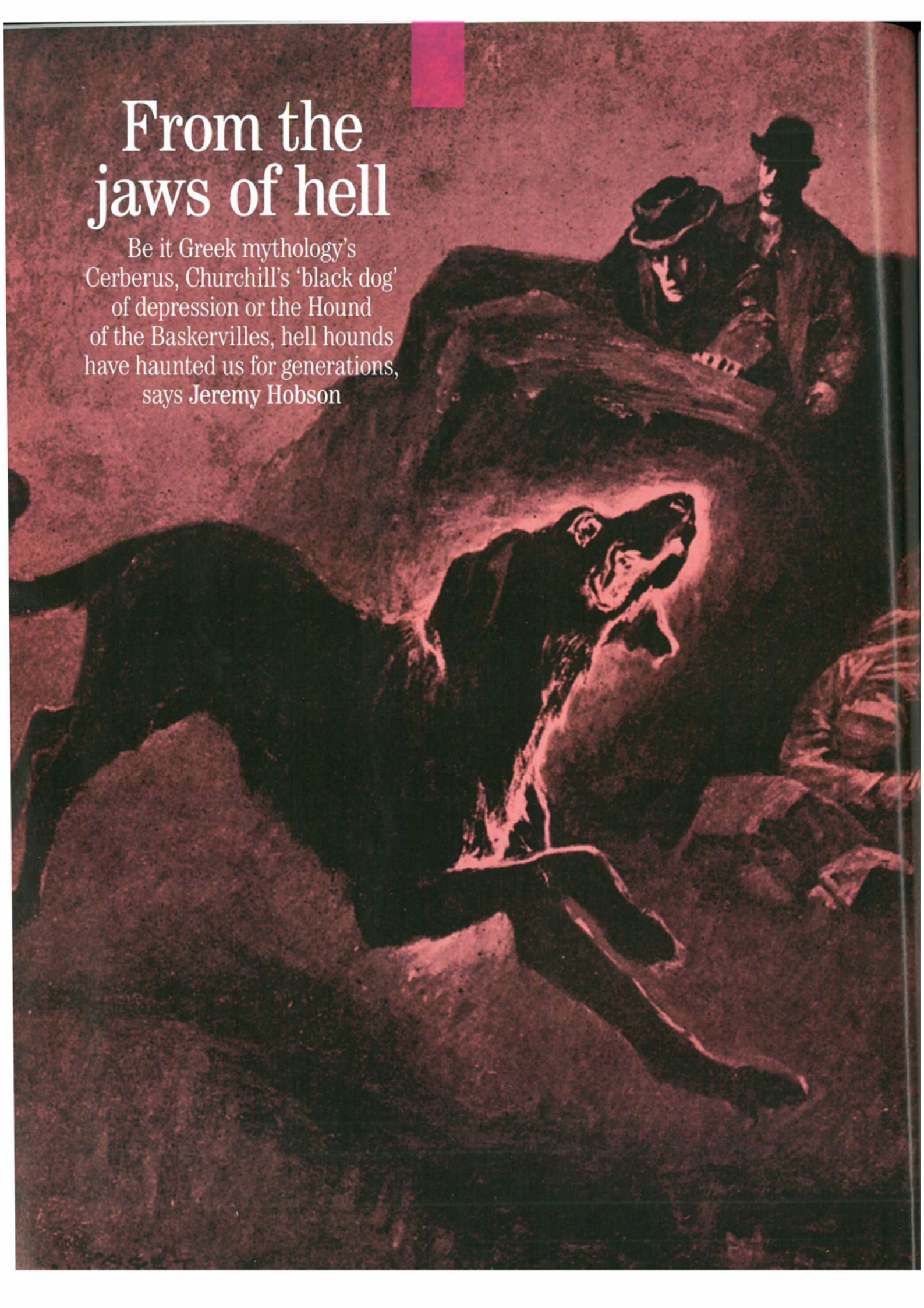


From the jaws of hell

Be it Greek mythology's Cerberus, Churchill's 'black dog' of depression or the Hound of the Baskervilles, hell hounds have haunted us for generations, says Jeremy Hobson



HAVE you ever, on an isolated country walk, had the sense that you are in the presence of spirits past? If you have a dog at your side, they might stop and stare at something only they can see, hackles raised, a low growl or confused whine escaping them. Easily explained away on a balmy summer's eve, such encounters take on a new significance in the gloaming of these ever-shortening days—could it be that canine instinct is picking up on the former presence of mysterious hounds, which have followed travellers of the past through these uninhabited places, perhaps aiding safe passage, perhaps foretelling impending doom?

“The hell hound killed two of the congregation, leaving scorch marks on the church door”

From which dark corners do such fancies originate? Fiction and folktale are a good place to start: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's great black Hound of the Baskervilles still looms large over Dartmoor and, according to local legend, hounds hunted by Dewey, the 'Black Huntsman', roam the vast moor in search of lost souls, earning a place in *A Handbook for Travellers in Devon and Cornwall* (1851): 'On stormy winter nights, the peasant has heard the whist [eerie] hounds sweeping through the rocky valley, with cry of dogs, winding of horns and hoofs thick-bleating on the hollow hill.'

Near Ditchling Beacon in West Sussex, there are similar stories of the 'Wild Hunt' and, in *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë wrote of the 'Gytrash' of the North Yorkshire moors, 'a lion-like creature with long hair and a huge head with strange pretercanine eyes', which 'haunted solitary ways, and sometimes came upon belated travellers'.

More recently, a large black dog was reported to have run out in front of two women motoring between Northallerton and Leeming Bar, North Yorkshire, in 2000. The driver braked hard, fully expecting a fatal outcome, and was understandably alarmed when the animal passed straight through the vehicle, unharmed. Such unexpected and unexplained appearances as this have long been considered possible portents of death and, coincidence or not, the first person whom the women told of their experience reportedly went on to commit suicide...

Would you have ventured onto Dartmoor as the Hound of the Baskervilles roamed?



Beware the Devil dog: in the 16th century, witches could call upon Satan's minion

Conversely, some tales tell of dogs protecting the deceased on their journey from this world to the next. In certain parts of the British Isles, tradition held that the first body buried in a new churchyard would keep the consecrated ground safe from the machinations of the Devil. A black dog would often be interred to assist in this duty, acting as the 'church grim' or guardian spirit. The idea might well predate Christianity: at Caldicot in Gwent, examination of a Bronze Age site seems to suggest that dogs were buried as ritual guardians. Several have also been discovered at a Romano-Celtic temple archaeology dig at Muntaham Court in West Sussex.

In 2014, the remains of a mastiff-sized dog were found in the ruins of Leiston Abbey in Suffolk. Tongue-in-cheek media hyperbole initially provoked by the *East Anglian Daily Times* suggested that the late beast could well have been 'Old



The hounds of hell are calling

• **Pliny refers to cross-breeding wolves with domestic animals in order to create fearless dogs of battle**

• Supernatural hounds were considered to be protectors of battling warriors by the Celts. The prefix 'Cu', commonly seen in the names of their heroes, means hound

• **According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the name 'Shuck' (as in Old Shuck) derives from the old English word *scucca*, meaning devil or fiend**

• Common locations for sightings of hell hounds are isolated byways, rural crossroads and graveyards, causing speculation that their appearance may be connected to the routes along which the dead were carried before burial

• **Tales of otherworldly canines on Dartmoor abound. In the 19th century, a traveller en route from Princetown to Plymouth became aware of a dog walking alongside him. When he tried to pat it on the head, his hand**

went through the apparition, which 'gazed at him with huge unblinking eyes and yawned its mouth wide, belching out sulphurous breath'

• In 1909, in Ardara on the Isle of Mull, a Dr MacDonald observed a phantom black dog not many hours before one of his patients, Murdock Gillian MacLaine, finally shuffled off their mortal coil

