

AVE 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?

## 6 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 Dewer, 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 Muntham Court in West Sussex.

In 2014, the remains of a mastiffsized 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

Shuck', a violent canine apparition once much feared as it roamed parts of the county. It's said that this particular hell hound horrifically attacked and killed two members of the congregation at a religious service near Bungay in 1577, leaving scorch marks on the church door as a reminder of its visit.

In his poem Lay of the Last Minstrel, Sir Walter Scott writes of 'the spectrehound of Man', a reference to the 'Moddey Dhoo', thought by some to be the dogged protector of sequestered gold at Peel Castle on the Isle of Man. Having heard rumours of hidden treasure, a soldier at the castle is said to have gone in search of a potentially easy fortune. In doing so, he had a close encounter with the Moddey Dhoo and, as a result, 'was made mad'.

The next time you think you spot something in the shadows, it is worth remembering that sightings of hell hounds aren't always what they seem. A ghostly story associated with Crackpot Hall in Swaledale, North Yorkshire, began when two well-respected local authors and historians of the 1930s wrote of dogs seen in the presence of

> a young girl, who was laughing and running in nearby meadows. The tale piqued local interest and stories of a 'waif-like ghost child' developed as a result.

Several years later, much intrigued, Newcastle-based writer David Almond discovered that these supposed otherworldly canines and their companion were actually nothing more mysterious than the daughter of the family who farmed the land, enjoying the outdoors alongside her pets.

## The hounds of hell are calling

- · Pliny refers to crossbreeding 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 Ardura 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