

# Black dogs and Hell hounds

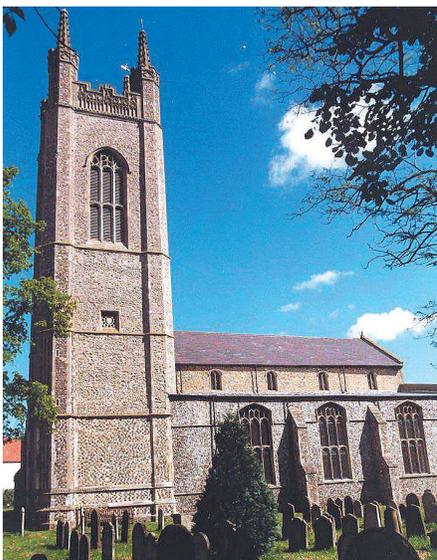
Maureen James takes a brief look at a dark and terrible rural phenomenon

*"A straunge and terrible Wunder wrought very late in the parish Church of Bongay, a Town of no great distance from the citie of Norwich, namely the fourth of this August in y[e] yeere of our Lord, 1577, in a great tempest of violent raine, lightning, and thunder, the like whereof hath been seldome seene. With the appearance of an horrible shaped thing, sensibly perceived of the people then and there assembled."*

THE above is a description of a storm that occurred over 400 years ago between nine and ten of the forenoon. Another chronicler also described this storm and its effect on the church of St Mary's, at Bungay, Suffolk, but he omitted the account of the "horrible shaped thing" which suddenly appeared and ran amok.

Yet another account, written at the time by a Cambridge scholar gave the creature the identity as a "black dog, or the divel (devil) in such a linessse" terrified the parishioners and attacked them tearing out the throats of its victims. It also damaged the church extensively and burnt one poor man alive before scratching open the church door with its paws and running out of the church and into the distance.

Marks, reputed to be from the claws can still be seen on the door today. Later that day, what appeared to be the same Black Dog, appeared inside the Holy Trinity Church at Blythburgh, ten miles away.



■ St Mary's Church, Bungay, Suffolk. Marks, reputed to be from the claws of "black dog" can still be seen on the church door today

Here it caused the same havoc as before and also killed three parishioners. Since that time there have been many appearances of Black Dogs in Suffolk, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Essex and the creature has become known as Black Shuck. It is alleged to inhabit churchyards, roads, coasts and fens. In Suffolk he sometimes has just one eye in the middle of his forehead.

Appearances of such Black Dogs or Hounds of Hell have been found since ancient times and in many places beyond East Anglia. They also have mythological roots such as the mythological giant three-headed dog Cerberus who guarded the entrance to Hades, or Garm the giant hound that guarded the gate of Hel in Norse myth.

In Staffordshire Black Dogs, known as Padfoots, are often found guarding graves such as at Swinscoe, on the road from Ashbourne to Leek, where a ghostly dog guards the burial sights of three Jacobites who were ambushed and killed. They were victims of the retreat of Bonnie Prince Charlie's army in 1745, as was the Jacobite buried at Bradnop which is guarded by a Black Dog.

Black Dogs have also appeared along quiet country paths and lanes at night to protect the virtuous from attack. Such a dog is the Shag-dog of Birstall, Leicestershire, whose mouth is said to glow in the dark. Similar dogs have been seen at Withington in Cheshire and Brancepeth Castle in County Durham.

Such protective Black Dogs have often been sited in Lincolnshire near settlements lying up streams and tributaries of the Humber. Here the appearance is of a dog that is blacker than the darkest night, cannot cross parish boundaries but can cross water.

Sometimes Black Dogs have appeared to come out of and return to the ground perhaps to a pit, as found in Thackergate, Lancs, or into a hill, as at Knaith in Lincs. They are also often found guarding prehistoric sites and in Ireland are known to guard "fairy forts."

In some places seeing a Black Dog would be seen as a bad omen, foretelling bad luck or

even death. In the Kidsgrove area of Staffordshire the Kidgrew Bugget would appear as a portent of a mining disaster. A piece of wasteland between Headingley Hill and Wreghorn, near Leeds, was haunted by a shaggy black dog with huge fiery eyes known as the Barguest.

It was believed that to see him would mean that a death would follow.

A similar apparition with similar repercussions was noted in Lancashire where the sight of a large, shaggy black dog with broad feet, drooping ears, and eyes "as large as saucers" meant a death would follow.

Such a dog was known as Skriker or Trash, the first name is believed to derive from the piercing shrieks which were

heard before the dog appeared and the latter referred to the splashing of its huge feet tramping through mud and puddles.

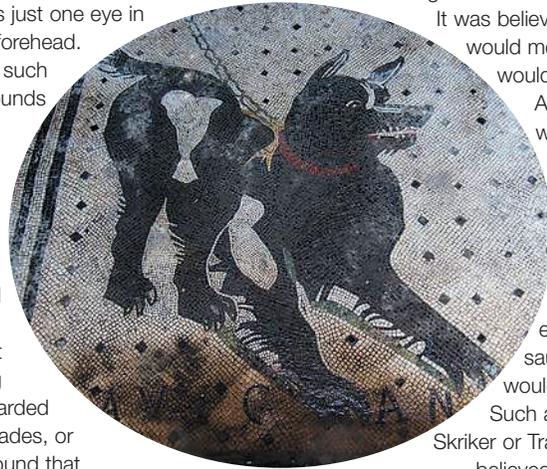
More recently the story of sightings of a Black Dog in the Westcountry inspired Conan Doyle to write "The Hound of the Baskervilles" in which "a great black beast, shaped like a hound, yet larger than any hound that ever mortal eyes has rested upon" appeared.

Today we have pet dogs or guard dogs for protection with signs on the gate saying "Beware of the dog".

This is nothing new, for at the entrance to one house in the Roman ruins of Pompeii there is a mosaic image of a black dog with the same warning written in Latin.

Today, there seemd to be less appearance of Black Dogs roaming the countryside, and more of big cats (an issue that was highlighted in Smallholder August 2007). So many cats have been seen that there is a website that documents and investigates the phenomenon ([bigcatsinbritain.org](http://bigcatsinbritain.org)) and in Cambridgeshire a police officer has been given the task of recording all such appearances in the county. This leads me to wonder – have the big cats taken the place of the black dogs? Did our ancestors mistake the appearance? Will we ever know? Does it really matter? ■

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■ A Black Dog Mosaic at Pompeii