

# SIR ARTHUR CONAN-DOYLE AND THE WRITING OF *THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES*

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Late one August afternoon a few years ago I crossed the southern shoulder of Royal Hill, south-east of Princetown on Dartmoor and descended its boggy slopes towards the ruins of Whiteworks Tin Mine. From this vantage point I could see the wild expanse of Fox Tor Mires stretched out before me and Dr Watson's words from Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* came to mind: *It would be a rare place for a gallop.* To which his companion, the entomologist Stapleton, replied, *You would naturally think so and the thought has cost several their lives before now....That is the great Grimpen Mire. A false step yonder means death to man or beast.....Even in dry seasons it is a danger to cross it, but after these autumn rains it is an awful place.* Being a dry summer I made it through Fox Tor Mires to the other side despite several false starts and a boot full of peaty water, thankful that despite having the guidance of a boldly marked bridleway on the Ordnance Survey map, some helpful fellow walkers had placed some navigation wands just as in the book *.....a small wand planted here and there showed where the path zigzagged from tuft to tuft of rushes among those green-scummed pits and foul quagmires which barred the way to the stranger.*

I was indeed having an enjoyable, if challenging, walk. But I was also involved in something that enthusiasts for Conan Doyle's most famous works, and their hero Sherlock Holmes, refer to as *The Game*. Its main objectives are to try to deduce and visit the locations which inspired those used in the stories, and to research the real people behind the book's characters and the stories that were drawn upon for the plot itself. To play *The Game* with regard to *The Hound of the Baskervilles* requires a reasonable knowledge of the text and of Dartmoor. So keen are some Holmesians that over 500 societies worldwide have been formed dedicated to *The Game*, substantial books written and extensive websites developed.

The writing of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* came about because of a meeting between Arthur Conan Doyle and Bertram Fletcher Robinson on board the SS *Briton* in 1900 when they were returning from the Boer War. Doyle had been serving as a doctor and Robinson was a special war correspondent for the *Daily Express*. They became firm friends and in late April 1901, when Doyle was recovering from a bout of the enteric fever he had contracted in South Africa, they travelled together to stay at the Royal Links Hotel in Cromer, Norfolk. Whilst there Robinson regaled Doyle with the hound legends of Dartmoor and they agreed to collaborate on a book. Doyle wrote to his mother from the hotel, *Fletcher Robinson came here with me and we are going to do a small book together "The Hound of the Baskervilles" – a real creeper.*

In 1882 Robinson's family had moved to Park Hill House, Ipplepen and during the period up to 1890, when he went up to Cambridge to read law, he undoubtedly acquired a good knowledge of the moorland legends. Late in May 1901 Doyle travelled to Devon to stay with Robinson, spending some days at Rowe's Duchy Hotel in Princetown, now the High Moorland Visitor Centre. During this time the two friends explored the moor seeking atmospheric locations and developing their story. It was probably at this time that Doyle

decided to introduce Sherlock Holmes as the book's pivotal character. In another letter to his mother he said *Robinson and I are exploring the moor over our Sherlock Holmes book.....We did 14 miles over the moor today and we are now pleasantly weary. It is a great place, very sad and wild, dotted with the dwellings of prehistoric man, strange monoliths, and huts and graves.*

Work on the story must have progressed well after Doyle returned to Undershaw, his house in Hindhead on the Surrey-Hampshire border, for the first episode appeared in *The Strand Magazine* in August 1901. The book was published by Newnes in March 1902, shrewd timing to entice readers to buy the book and learn of its dramatic ending before the final episode appeared in the magazine in April 1902.

*The Hound of the Baskervilles* is compulsive reading, an extraordinary *Gothick* story that pits supernatural mysteries against scientific reason, the latter being victorious. It is a story threaded through with barren moorland, stark tors, meandering streams, treacherous mires, swirling fog, ancient hut circles, abandoned tin mines, forbidding mansions and a brooding prison. Indeed, it is almost certain that Conan Doyle visited the Bronze Age enclosure of Grimspound which may have inspired the idea of the ancient hut that Holmes took shelter in, though the location is more likely to have been at Ryder's Rings near the Avon Valley.

Against this landscape move the characters of the novel, many suggested to Doyle's fertile mind by the characters he met or heard of whilst in Devon. The name of James Mortimer, Head Master of Ashburton Grammar School at the time, was given to the story's country doctor who first acquainted Holmes with the Baskerville legend. Selden, the fictional escaped prisoner who fell victim to the hound, was the name of a real prison warder at Dartmoor Prison.

The Baskerville name may have been inspired by one of the many Baskerville families then living on fringes of the moor. Specifically, Doyle may have adopted it from Robinson's father's carriage driver at Ipplepen, Henry 'Harry' Baskerville. A third possibility is that he took it from the main branch of the Baskerville family in Herefordshire which, at the end of the 19th century, held lands adjoining those of the family of Doyle's first wife Louise.

The earliest Baskerville to appear in the novel is the wild, profane, and godless Hugo, a 17th century ancestor whose terrible end is revealed to Holmes in a family manuscript. Hugo, with five or six companions, was said to have abducted a farmer's daughter and incarcerated her at his mansion, Baskerville Hall. She escaped and was pursued through the night by Hugo and his pack of hounds. His companions followed and in a remote part of the moor they found the girl dead and so too Hugo. Standing over him, *...and plucking at his throat, there stood a foul thing, a great, black beast, shaped like a hound, yet larger than any hound that ever mortal eye has rested upon. And even as they looked the thing tore the throat out of Hugo Baskerville...and... turned its blazing eyes and dripping jaws upon them...* Thus was the legend of the Baskerville hound born in the story, to be recalled after the mysterious death in 1889 – the year in which the novel is set – of Sir Charles Baskerville, for near his body, discovered in the grounds of Baskerville Hall, *...were the footprints of a gigantic hound!*

It is not clear how many hound legends Doyle heard whilst at Cromer and in Devon, but it is certain he would have learnt of the legend of Black Shuck, a spectral hound the size of a small calf with eyes of fire, which was said to terrorise the Cromer area including the yew alley of Cromer Hall which in the novel was reflected by the yew alley at Baskerville Hall. It is also likely that he would have heard about the Whisht Hounds, a pack of evil red-eyed

hounds which ran at night on Dartmoor with the Dewey or Devil, in pursuit of the souls of unbaptised babies. Doyle's hound was probably a composite creation of his own, that in turn seems to have led to some embroidery of the old legends after the successful publication of the novel.

Several variants of the legend had attached themselves to Richard Cabell III, an allegedly tyrannical 17th century landowner who lived at Brook Manor, Buckfastleigh including one which has him pursued to his death by a pack of black dogs. Though difficult to differentiate fact from legend and indeed one legend from another, it is quite possible that Cabell's unsavoury history inspired the character of Hugo Baskerville in Doyle's story. Cabell died in 1672 and lies in the family tomb located next to the ruins of Buckfastleigh Church.

As inspirational to Doyle as the legends and local characters were the topographical writings of the four 19thC literary giants of the Dartmoor scene Sabine Baring-Gould, Richard Hansford Worth, Samuel Rowe and William Crossing. He must also have read fictional works of contemporary authors the most important of which were Sabine Baring-Gould's *Guavas the Tinner* of 1896, Frederick Adye's *The Queen of the Moor* of 1885 and the anonymous short story *A Tale of Dartmoor Fog* written in 1893.

Baring-Gould's story was set in the area of Fox Tor Mires and involved a savage phosphorescent wolf which drove the villain to his death in the mire. Adye's tale concerns French prisoners escaping from Dartmoor Prison during the Napoleonic Wars and was also located around Fox Tor Mires. *A Tale of Dartmoor Fog* has an escaped prisoner and treacherous bogs! These three stories and many others by Eden Philpotts, RD Blackmore and the writing duo of LT Meade and Robert Eustace, have countless resonances with *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, in plot, location, character and even phraseology.

The greatest character in the book and the greatest influence on the story is undoubtedly Dartmoor itself. The reader has a first dramatic acquaintance with the moor as Dr Watson, Sir Henry Baskerville and Dr Mortimer see it from the London train. *Over the green squares of the fields and the low curve of a wood there rose in the distance a gray, melancholy hill, with a strange jagged summit, dim and vague in the distance, like some fantastic landscape in a dream.* They arrived at a wayside station that may have been Totnes or it could refer to Buckfastleigh on the Ashburton Branch. From there after boarding the wagonette that was to take them to Baskerville Hall, the travellers experienced the succession of landscapes that may be seen today by travelling up the old tinner's route from Ashburton to Holne and Hexworthy which follows the valley of the River Dart.

*The wagonette swung round into a side road, and we curved upward through deep lanes worn by centuries of wheels, high banks on either side, heavy with dripping moss and fleshy hart's-tongue ferns. Bronzing bracken and mottled bramble gleamed in the light of the sinking sun. Still steadily rising, we passed over a narrow granite bridge, and skirted a noisy stream which gushed swiftly down, foaming and roaring amid the gray boulders. Both road and stream wound up through a valley dense with scrub oak and fir.*

This was the route I had driven to reach Hexworthy, now a hamlet with a hotel and a few houses that may well have inspired the village of Grimpen in the novel. The travelling party would have turned off before the village to reach Baskerville Hall a mansion for which Hayford Hall is an ideally located model being situated on the very edge of the high moor and in the right relationship with Hexworthy as recorded in the story. Other candidates for Baskerville Hall have included Brook Manor, Fowlescombe and even – as a model – Cromer Hall near to the Royal Links Hotel. From Hexworthy a footpath heads towards Foxtor Mires,

the route taken by Dr Watson on his walk with Stapleton from Grimpen to Merripit House on the far side of Grimpen Mire. Nun's Cross Farm is located perfectly to be Stapleton's House and is but a short walk through the mire to the mine where Stapleton kept his hound.

I continued my walk along the southern edge of Foxtor Mires before negotiating the chaotic topography of the valleys where the tanners had streamed for their precious ores for centuries. As dusk descended Dartmoor began to take on its more threatening persona it was all too easy to recall a passage from the book...

*...there rose suddenly out of the vast gloom of the moor that strange cry which I had already heard upon the borders of the great Grimpen Mire. It came with the wind through the silence of the night, a long, deep mutter, then a rising howl, and then the sad moan in which it died away. Again and again it sounded, the whole air throbbing with it, strident, wild, and menacing. The baronet caught my sleeve and his face glimmered white through the darkness.*

*"My God, what's that, Watson?"*

*"They say it is the cry of the Hound of the Baskervilles."*