

Hound of the Baskervilles

The Lure of the Moor

We often think of the English countryside as a pleasant land of forest and pasture, curbed by neat hedgerows and orderly gardens. But at higher elevations a wilder landscape rears its head: the moor. Little thrives in any moor's windy, rainy climate, leaving a rolling expanse of infertile wetlands dominated by tenacious gorse and grasses. Its harsh, chaotic weather, so inhospitable to human life, has nonetheless proved fertile ground for the many writers who've set their stories on its gloomy plain. A native of nearby Dorchester, Thomas Hardy set *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and countless other novels on the wild, haunted moor that D.H. Lawrence called "the real stuff of tragedy." In Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, the violent, passionate Catherine and Heathcliff seem to echo the brutal moors that surround them. Dame Agatha Christie booked herself into the "large, dreary" Moorland Hotel to finish work on *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, while Dartmoor is the setting for *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931). The moor's atmospheric weather and desolate landscape lend an air of tragedy and mystery to all of these tales, as they do to *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. On Dartmoor's windswept plain, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle found the legendary roots and the creepy backdrop of his most famous story. He took many liberties, changing the names of geographic localities and altering distances to suit his story, but even today, Sherlock Holmes fans are known to set out across the moor in search of the real counterparts of the fictional locale where the story took place.

The Mythic Moor

Conan Doyle first heard of Dartmoor's "hounds of hell" in March 1901 while on a golfing holiday in Norfolk with his friend, the young journalist Bertram Fletcher Robinson; at the time in the employ of the *Daily Express*, Fletcher Robinson would later become the editor of *Vanity Fair*. Their game cut short by a storm, the two men retired to the sitting room of the Royal Links Hotel and began to talk, the conversation eventually turning to local myths. Fletcher Robinson first told Conan Doyle of the Black Shuck, a phantom dog as big as a calf, with eyes that bled fire, that was said to haunt the Norfolk countryside.

The myths of Dartmoor captured Conan Doyle's imagination. Fletcher Robinson went on to recount the tale of Richard Cabell, a 17th-century squire who'd suspected his wife of infidelity and attacked her in a jealous rage. When she fled across the moor with her faithful hound, Cabell gave chase and eventually killed her. Still by its mistress' side, the hound then turned on him and ripped out his throat before dying itself of the squire's knife wounds. The dog was said to haunt each new generation of the family.

But this spectral hound was not alone on the moor. Other legends told of howling black hounds unleashed on the moor upon Cabell's death in 1677; the Whist Hounds, a howling pack of gigantic, red-eyed dogs said to stalk the moors with the devil; and the Black Dog of Dartmoor, an enormous hound with flaming eyes that chased unsuspecting late-night travelers.

Within days of hearing these stories, Conan Doyle joined Fletcher Robinson at Park Hill House, his family home in the village of Ipplepen in remotest Dartmoor. In fact, some scholars believe that Fletcher Robinson acted not only as Conan Doyle's tour guide but also helped him write the tale; his contributions have never been substantiated. What is certain is that the two men hiked for miles over the empty moors with Robinson's coachman, one Harry Baskerville, as their guide. This young man is believed to be one of two inspirations for the novel's eponymous character, the other being a Baskerville family living on the Welsh border whom Conan Doyle had visited in 1897. The family had intermarried with a neighboring clan, the Vaughans, who owned a legendary huge, black dog.

Decamped from Park Hill to Princetown's Rowe Duchy Hotel, Conan Doyle began work on his novel, which did not at first feature Sherlock Holmes. As the story developed, though, Conan Doyle found himself in need of a larger-than-life character to solve the mystery. "Why should I invent such a character," he asked, "when

I already had one in the form of Sherlock Holmes?"

The Real Moor

For England, the turn of the 20th century was a time of great change. While London entered an age of electric light and the internal combustion engine, Dartmoor was more like the American Wild West -- bleak, inhospitable, and lawless. Dartmoor is a 20-by-30-mile tract of untamed wildness amid the Devonshire countryside. Watson's description of his inaugural drive into Dartmoor is rendered in such detail that it can easily serve as a road map for visitors today on the trail of Sherlock Holmes.

"Rolling pasture lands curved upward on either side of us, and old gabled houses peeped out from amid the thick green foliage," notes Watson in chapter six of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, "but behind the peaceful and sunlit countryside there rose ever, dark against the evening sky, the long, gloomy curve of the moor, broken by the jagged and sinister hills."

Watson's train arrives at the railhead Ashburton, from which point he embarks on the last leg of his journey by carriage, following the ancient tin miners' road along the River Dart. This route brings him past an isolated tract that a group of 18th-century gentry known as the Improvers tried, without success, to turn into farmland. Amid these "improved" fields lies Postbridge, the model for the fictitious village of Grimpen. Dartmoor has few such villages, however, as most natives live on scattered farms. To the north of Postbridge, you'll find Fox Tor Mire, the treacherous bog of sphagnum moss floating atop trapped groundwater that inspired Conan Doyle's the Great Grimpen Mire. While Conan Doyle describes Baskerville Hall as a 14th-century castle, in fact it was likely modeled on one of the Improvers' large manor houses. Other Holmes historians point to Brook Manor, home to doomed squire Richard Cabell, as the true Baskerville Hall.



DUE TO ITS HARSH WEATHER AND POOR SOIL, THE MOOR IS SPARSELY POPULATED.



GRIMSPOUND, A BRONZE AGE SETTLEMENT WHERE A NINE-FOOT-THICK STONE WALL ENCLOSES FOUR-ACRE SITE CONTAINING THE STONE REMAINS OF 24 CIRCULAR HUTS.

When Watson walks out across the moor, acting as Holmes's eyes and ears, he encounters the moor's many distinct features. Granite spires known as tors break the moor's grassy landscape. Exposed to the acidic water of bogs, the granite weakens and crumbles in spots while remaining strong in others. Over time, this process has carved Dartmoor's famous granite towers, spires, and cliffs. Watson's impressive view of the moor was likely based on that from the North Hessary Tor, just outside Princetown and close by the brooding Dartmoor Prison, from which the murderer Selden escapes. Originally built to hold prisoners from the Napoleonic wars, Dartmoor prison was closed for a long period but reopened when Australia and New Zealand refused to take more European convicts.

Upon closer examination of the tor, Watson discovers a well-preserved prehistoric hut, like the one in which he later finds Sherlock Holmes. Such relics are quite common in the real Dartmoor, which contains the largest collection of Stone Age sites in Europe. Holmes's circular hut is likely modeled on the ones found at the Bronze Age settlement of Grimspound, where a nine-foot-thick stone wall encloses four-acre site

containing the stone remains of 24 circular huts. Watson also describes standing stones, known as goyals, that are found all over Dartmoor, with the largest being the Grey Wethers, overlooking the East Dart above Postbridge. These haunting ruins reinforce the moor's eerie weather and create the perfect, ghostly atmosphere for story bound up in myth and legend. Whether or not the hound of the Baskervilles or its like ever existed, you can still feel it breathing down your neck!