



## Introduction

### Finding the Black Dog of Bungay

The Church appeared a mass of flame  
And while the storm did rage  
A Black and Fearful Monster came  
All eyes he did engage.  
All down the church in midst of fire  
The Hellish monster flew  
And passing onwards to the quire  
He many people slew.<sup>1</sup>

I would like to begin this book with a story of an encounter I had with a large dog during the process of writing. My family and I had visited a close friend's house and returned late in the evening about midnight. We busied ourselves putting the children to bed and I went out into the front yard of our home to feed our cat Treelo (named after a character in a children's television programme my daughter enjoyed) and bring him in for the night. Usually, I was unable to bring the cat in with a tap on his food tin, but not tonight, so I left him out and went to bed. Later that night we were awoken by a harsh screaming noise from a cat that sounded positively ghastly and rather unnerving at 2 a.m. I dressed myself and went outside into the cold foggy night thinking our cat was engaged in a fight with a stray. Strangely, while there was an awful caterwauling outside I couldn't at first see anything out of the ordinary. After a further investigation I found in the

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1 Taken from the reprint of Abraham Fleming's 1577 pamphlet *A Straunge and Terrible Wunder* published by T & H Rood in 1826. Ethel Mann Collection: Lowestoft Records Office.

next-door neighbour's yard a large black dog with its jaws fastened over our cat, proceeding to slowly crush him while he screamed. I quickly ran over to the neighbour's yard and tried to distract the dog and possibly free our cat. While the dog was very solid and muscular, it was only slightly over knee high. But in those circumstances, at that time of night, it appeared to me to be impossibly huge with an enormously wide jaw. An immensely muscular crocodile was perhaps the best way I could describe the appearance of the dog with its wide shoulders and huge triangular head. I was not able to distract the dog's attention and returned home to grab the nearest item which came to sight, a bucket of water. By the time I had returned the dog had killed the cat with a rather sickening, audible crunch and turned its attention to me. I backed off slowly keeping my eye on the dog at all times with my bucket of water at the ready, feeling very conscious of wearing only a tracksuit and pitifully armed with nothing more than a bucket. The dog followed me closely with a constant low growl and leapt at me with a low bark and a snap or two of its jaws whenever my eyes wavered to see where I was going. I managed to find my way back to my yard and shut the gate. The dog left shortly thereafter. The following morning I went next door to bury our cat and break the news to the children, only to find that the dog had broken into the next-door neighbour's yard and was still there from the night before. It was quite amazing to see how a dog which had seemed to be such an enormous and vicious brute the night before, was now a perfectly normal, mid-sized dark brown Bull Terrier cross with a wagging tail and seemingly friendly demeanour.

I begin with this story, not because I wanted a simple rational explanation for the story of the Black Dog of Bungay, but because it illustrates something of the nature of humanity's relationship with dogs in general. The event on my front lawn led to a great deal of personal reflection on the nature of human experiences and how these are represented, the broader mythic and cultural associations that shape these representations and experiences, and their relationship to folklore. I remember at the time inexplicably having the thought pop into my head that this dog was a night-time predator that roamed the streets of my home town of Ballarat (a regional centre in central Victoria, Australia) and I had the misfortune to come across it when the daytime world was sleeping. If I was of a more superstitious mind I could have easily read a great deal into that night's adventures. For all that dogs serve as companions, guardians and guides they are also profoundly dangerous predators with a high degree of unpredictability. As the old saying goes "There is a wolf inside every dog." When coupled with the seeming sixth sense that dogs have, their use of superior hearing and smell

and their fixation on death as carrion feeders, it is little wonder they have such a powerful role in most mythologies as guardians of the underworld, psychopomps, hell hounds and guides. In this sense, dogs are closely interwoven with human history, culture, folklore and mythology but there is a deep ambivalence in the kind of roles they play in these. It is in this context I want to look at the history of the mythology and folklore of the Black Dog of Bungay. In producing this book I have predominantly dealt with the post nineteenth century material in my own background as an anthropologist and historian, whereas Chris has contributed the chapters pertaining to 16th century Bungay and provided commentary and resources on much of the rest of the material in his capacity as the curator of the Bungay museum and author of numerous local history books, pamphlets and tracts.

## **Bungay**

Bungay itself is a small country town of approximately 5000 people on the border of Norfolk and Suffolk, approximately 20 miles west from the coast. Located on high ground bordered by the River Waveney and located on the edge of the marshlands, it has been the site of numerous settlements and fortifications since the Neolithic period. A large fortified settlement was established during the Roman occupation until the fifth century; the Roman well still exists and was the source of the town's water until the 1930s. During the sixth century Bungay was settled by invading Saxon tribes. It is during this period that the town received its name 'Bunincga-haye' or 'Land of the clan of Bonna'. This period was marked by extensive settlement and the establishment of many burial-mounds still located on the town common. During the Norman period the town served as the seat of power of the rebellious Bigod family who built Bungay Castle, the ruins of which lie behind The Fleece Inn. Behind the medieval Church of St. Mary's lie the ruins of the Benedictine Priory established by Gundreda, widow of Roger Bigod, closed in 1538 under the dissolution of the monasteries. The centre of town is marked by the Buttercross where regular markets have been held since the middle ages. The 1688 Great Fire of Bungay still scars many of the town's buildings and walls with traces of blackened ash. Bungay is very much the epitome of the rural English town with a long history manifested throughout the landscape, architecture and local culture.

The town itself has a peculiar and gothic claim to fame. On August 4, 1577, during a thunderstorm of 'darkness, rain, hail, thunder and lightning as was never seen the like' it is claimed the Church of St. Mary's was attacked by the apparition of a huge spectral hound.



*The 17th century Butter Cross in Bungay Market Place*

Abraham Fleming, writing from London a month after the incident, vividly describes the events in the following tract,

Immediately hereupon, there appeared in a most horrible similitude and likenesse to the congregation then and there present a dog as they might discern it, of a black colour; at the site whereof, together with the fearful flashes of fire which were then seene, moved such admiration in the minds of the assemblie, that they thought doomesday was already come. This black dog, or the divile in such a likenesse (God hee who knoweth all worketh all) running all along down the body of the church with great swiftnesse and incredible haste, among the people, in a visible fourm and shape, passed betweene two persons, as they were kneeling upon their knees, and occupied in prayer as it seemed, wrung the necks of them bothe at one instant clefe backward, in so much that even at a moment where they kneeled, they strangely died... There was at ye same time another wonder wrought; for the same black dog, still continuing and remaining in one and the self same shape, passing by another man of the congregation in the church, gave him such a gripe on the back, that therewith all he was presently drawen together and shrunk up, as it were a peece of lether scorched in a hot fire; or as the mouth of a purse or bag, drawen together with string. The man albeit hee was in so strange a taking, dyed not, but as it is thought is yet alive: whiche thing is mervelous

in the eyes of men, and offereth much matter of amasing the minde...

Then, according to Fleming, the hound fled to Blythburgh Holy Trinity Church, the cathedral of the marshes where,

...placing himself uppon a maine balke or beam, whereon sometime ye Rood did stand, sodainly he gave a swinge downe through ye church, and there also, as before, slew two men and a lad, and burned the hand of another person that was there among the rest of the company, of whom divers were blasted.

The spectral hound then fled the church, leaving great scorch marks on the door as it scrambled its way out. Intriguingly enough, whilst the storm and the deaths (attributed to lightning striking the tower) are mentioned in the Parish Registry, there is no mention of The Dog. Even a year later when funds for repairs were being discussed there is still no mention of the Black Dog or the story. However, today the story is entrenched in local folklore and is a central part of the town's civic and cultural identity. The town is also now a favourite destination for crypto-zoologists, folklorists and those interested in the paranormal. Furthermore, the tale of the Black Dog of Bungay is far from isolated, with the legend of Black Shuck the fey Dog of Norfolk a central part of the mythology of the Broads. This story is paralleled in other local English mythologies as far afield as Cornwall and Yorkshire.

In Bungay itself he is reputed to haunt the graveyard at St. Mary's, the ruins of Bungay Castle and the path of Bigods Way. Rider Haggard, writing in the late nineteenth century also noted the Black Dog of Bungay was believed to haunt an area near the neighbouring town of Ditchingham called Hollow Hill.<sup>2</sup> As Chris Reeve, co-author of this book notes in his earlier work *A Straunge and Terrible Wunder*, the Black Dog is very much alive in local culture. The legend has helped to shape the identity of Bungay residents and children and the story is taught in the local schools. Many people believe they have encountered him in their wanderings around the Waveney Valley. The town is rife with symbolism and imagery of the Black Dog, from the town weather-vane, coat of arms and the Black Dog Marathon to numerous sporting clubs and shops and commemorative items. The mythology of the Black Dog is very much a living part of town identity and culture. Chris Reeve has an anecdote that is worth using to illustrate this point.

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2 Haggard, R. *Farmer's Year: Being the Common Lore Book for 1898*. Longman Green & Co: New York, 1899, 26.

My niece, Charlotte, then aged 5 was taken to a flower festival in St. Mary's Church. One of the floral arrangements featured an image of the Black Dog, and as Charlotte was rather intrigued by it, her father narrated the story in some detail. That night she had a young friend to stay with her, and I had been asked to baby sit for them. Having tucked them up in bed and said goodnight, as I went downstairs I could hear Charlotte beginning to recount the story she had heard to her friend. Some time later, the sound of sobbing came from the room. On investigation, it became apparent that Charlotte had become so terrified while she was telling the story that she had burst into uncontrollable tears. I tried to comfort her, explaining that it had all happened hundreds of years ago and, in any case, 'it was only a story'. But she refused to be pacified, crying – 'But he's still alive – I saw him.'<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, on one of my own stays in Bungay visiting my parents, my father was minister of Emmanuel Church there at the time, my seven year old daughter had heard the story and after diligently searching the local mole-hills around St. Mary's had found a claw shaped stone which must have been the Black Dog's claw. This relieved her greatly as it meant that the Dog must be dead now as she had found its claws on a grave. However, she then thought there must have been more than one dog and its descendants could still be roaming around the town. After returning home to Australia she mentioned to me that her class-mates were not ready to deal with monsters being real, even if they lived far away in England, so she had refrained from discussing it in morning show-and-tell and had kept the claw secret. I relate these stories as a way of illustrating how rapidly stories enter the cultural framework of people and the vividness with which the folklore enters the imagination. The story continues to be a part of the public imagination in Bungay and as such becomes part of a common cultural tradition that is a central part of community spirit.

The purpose of this book is not to engage in a crypto-zoological or paranormal study of the Black Dog's attack on St. Mary's in 1577 but to look at the evolution of a local folklore in relation to the issues faced in a small, relatively isolated town over the centuries. From the Reformation to the English Civil War and to the Industrial Revolution, the town has experienced fire, civil unrest, religious turmoil, economic boom and bust, major demographic transformation and cultural change. As the town has

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3 Reeve, Chris. *A Strange and Terrible Wunder: The Story of the Black Dog of Bungay*. Peter Morrow and Co: Bungay, 1988. 2–3

been transformed through these events, so too has the culture and folklore of the community and this gives us great insight into the nature of local myths, community identity and culture.

It is in this respect that whilst there are numerous studies of Black Dog myths across the United Kingdom, and even globally, we have chosen to look at the story of the Black Dog of Bungay on its own as a case study of the evolution of local folklore. This decision was also made with an eye to a common critique of Black Dog studies. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, but briefly, there is a tendency of folklorists and mythologists to look at phenomena such as the Black Dog myths collectively in order to merge them together into one narrative of Black Dog mythology. This approach often glosses over important distinctions and differences between them and their specific local context and, whilst helpful in seeing the broader picture of mythology and archetypal representations of Black Dogs in folklore, it can also occlude as much as it reveals regarding the specific circumstance of an individual piece of folklore in its own communal and social context. Students of Black Dog myths and legends will undoubtedly see aspects which link to broader representations in folklore and mythology, as did Chris and I in producing this book; however, this study will focus specifically on the Black Dog of Bungay in its regional context in the Waveney Valley.

## The Origins of the Black Dog Mythology

Dogs as guardians of the underworld, psychopomps and agents of the spirit world have a long history in human mythology and this history is far broader than that of the British Isles. Myths of Dogs foretelling death, standing vigil over graves, guiding people through the underworld and as fearsome supernatural threats originate in cultures as diverse as Nigeria and the pre-Hispanic Aztec Empire.<sup>4</sup> In the British Isles there is a rich body of mythology surrounding Black Dogs dating back to the Celts, the Roman Conquest and the Saxons. It forms a richly textured underlay behind Black Dog legends in post-Reformation Britain. Most studies of Black Dog folklore begin with a discussion of Anubis, the Egyptian Jackal headed god of death and judgement who guided lost souls to the underworld. Similarly, the Greek Dog Cerberus, often depicted with three heads and guarding

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4 Ojade, J. O. 'Nigerian Cultural Attitudes to the Dog.' *Signifying Animals: Human Meaning in the Natural World*. Routledge: New York, 1990. 219; Burchell, S. *Phantom Black Dogs in Pre-Hispanic Mexico*. Heart of Albion Press: Loughborough, 2007. 1–8



the entrance to the underworld, is usually considered with its deep legacy in Saxon and later medieval classical studies. From this we can put forward the hypothesis that the Black Dog legend was brought to the British Isles by the Roman occupation. Conversely there existed an indigenous body of Black Dog mythology amongst the Celts, with the mythic figure of the Morrigan constructed as a goddess of death, war and carnage, appearing occasionally in the form of an enormous Black Hound or Raven. There are also the spectral hounds of the Cwn Annwn from Welsh mythology that guard the underworld and bring portent of death or disaster.

Clare Painting-Stubbs in her unpublished Masters thesis makes an argument for the folklore of the Black Dog of Bungay to have developed from the experience of the Viking conquests of East Anglia during the Sixth to Eighth centuries. She argues that from rather ambivalent representations of Black Dogs as psychopomps, guardians and guides of the underworld during the sixth to eighth centuries, Black Dogs became sinister figures of dread, actively seeking people out for misfortune and death. Investigating this change further she comes to the conclusion that the primary instigator of this change was the Viking invasion and colonization of much of the British Isles during this period. This is particularly represented by the areas most commonly associated with Black Dog folklore, East Anglia, Lincolnshire, Cornwall and Yorkshire. These are also the areas most heavily settled by Scandinavians and who suffered most heavily under Viking assaults.<sup>5</sup> In particular, she notes that there was a common cultural association of Viking assaults with the rapacious attack of wolves, as chronicled in the Annals of St. Bertin in the ninth century. Vikings were often labelled as dogs, as a form of abuse through the Old English term Hund, from which we derive the modern hound. Similarly, the term Wulf in Old English could mean literally a Wolf, but also a cruel person with *se awyrgda wulf* referring to the Devil. She also makes the argument that in Old English, Wulf and Dog were often used interchangeably; leading to a close association with the rapacious nature of Viking assaults and the death and destruction they wrought and the

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5 This theory is paralleled by arguments made independently by Peter Jennings. Painting-Stubbs, C. *Religion, Familiars and Abraham Fleming: An Attempt to Explain the Strange and Terrible Wonder of 1577*. Submitted 21 September 2001, in fulfilment of a Masters Degree at the University of Kent. 5–8. Similarly, Barbara Allen Woods argues that the evidence is simply too sparse to make this kind of direct association with any kind of certainty. Woods, B. A. *The Devil in Dog Form: A Partial Type Index of Devil Legends*. University of California Press: Los Angeles, 1957. 2-3.



folklore of Dogs in general. This pattern is exacerbated by the use of war-dogs by Viking raiders, much like their Celtic counterparts 600 years earlier, and the common usage of Wolf symbolism in the Norse pantheon.<sup>6</sup>

Another important source of Black Dog mythology is the reclaiming of classical motifs, and medieval Christian representations of Black Dogs as symbolic of the Devil and his agents. Barbara Woods, in her dissertation on Faust, argued that the imagery originated out of an already established oral folklore of Black Dogs associated with the underworld and the Devil, and that Black Dog folklore was a widespread and vital tradition upon which numerous Devil legends and tales were based.<sup>7</sup> Whilst refraining from making claims to direct linear antecedents to Germanic folklore, she does focus on two streams of mythological traditions shaping these legends: both the Germanic folkloric traditions that are the basis of her study and the classical motifs appropriated into medieval Christian mythology.

In Latin literature Black Dogs play a strong theme in medieval folklore, remedies, rituals and mythology. Actual dogs, especially black dogs, played a wide variety of roles in rituals designed to heal sickness and injury. They were also routinely associated with omens of death and served as guardians of temples.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the role of figures associated with Dogs and the underworld, like Cerberus and Hecate from classical studies, was well known by scholars of classical literature and would have also formed part of the background folklore of Black Dogs throughout the British Isles. Certainly a religious writer like Abraham Fleming would have been very familiar with both the popular folklore of his day and religious demonology, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

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- 6 Painting-Stubbs, C. *Religion, Familiars and Abraham Fleming*. 7–8. It is worth noting that this view is critiqued by Mike Burgess who argues that Wolves and Dogs are quite distinct in Germanic mythology, there is no historical evidence for Thor possessing a hound called Shukr and whilst Odin had a pair of Wolves follow him into battle, they are quite peripheral to his Ravens Huginn and Muninn. Similarly, he also argues that the claim that Black Dog sightings are more common in areas of Viking settlement does not hold up to scrutiny given that phantom Black Dogs appear in areas uncontaminated by Viking beliefs. [www.hiddenea.com/shuckland/mythconception2.htm](http://www.hiddenea.com/shuckland/mythconception2.htm) also see Dale-Green, P. *Dog*. Hart-Davis: London, 1966.
- 7 Woods, B. A. *The Devil in Dog Form*. 1; Woods, Barbara Allen. 'The Devil in Dog Form.' *Western Folklore*. Vol 13. No 4. Oct 1954. 229–235.
- 8 Burris, E. 'The Place of the Dog in Superstition as Revealed in Latin Literature.' *Classical Philology*. Vol 30. No 1. Jan 1935. 32–42.

Stories like that of Bungay were not unprecedented. In 856 it is recorded that

In August Teotogaundus, Bishop of Trier, with clerics and people was celebrating the office, when a very dreadful cloud, with thunderstorms and lightning, terrified the whole congregation in the church, and deadened the sound of bells ringing in the tower. The whole building was filled with such a dense darkness that one and another could hardly see or recognise his or her neighbour. On a sudden there was seen a dog of immense size (*canonimiae enormitas*) in a sudden opening of the floor or earth (*suito terrawe histu*) and it ran to and fro around the altar.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, John Stow records in 1538 that,

My Father told me that, at St. Michaels Church in the Cornhill ward, London, on the night of St. James, certain men were ringing the bells of St. Michaels in the loft when there arose a tempest of thunder and lightning, and a thing of an ugly shape and sight was seen to come in at the south window, and it lighted on the North. For fear whereof, all of the ringers fell down and lay as dead for a time, leaving the bells to ring of their own accord. When the ringers came to themselves, they found certain stones of the north window to be raised and scat as if they had been so much butter, printed with a lions claw; the same stones were fastened there again, when it repaired, and remain so to this day. I have seen them oft and have put a feather or a small stick into the hole where the claw had entered, three of four inches deep. At the same time, certain timber postes at Queen hith were scat and cleft from top to bottom. And the pulpit cross in Paul's churchyard was likewise scratched cleft and overturned. One of the ringers lived in my youth, whom I have oft heard to verify the same to be true and I have oft heard my father to report it.<sup>10</sup>

Whilst we have a wide variety of sources to support folklore surrounding Black Dogs which would have been both familiar to Fleming and to the people of Bungay, it is difficult to assert any singular source to the story of

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9 Certin, Fr. Historian living in 1160 wrote or compiled *Annales Francorum Regum* and was connected to the monastery of Sitheiu founded by St. Bertin 707AD at St. Omer (Pas de Calais) as recorded by Theo' Brown in the Theo' Brown Archives University of Exeter.

10 Stow, John writing of St. Michaels Cornhill c 1538. Recorded by Theo' Brown. Theo' Brown Archives University of Exeter.

the Black Dog, let alone a single origin or line of transmission to the present. It is even very difficult to show that there was a great deal of connection between the pamphlet written and published by Fleming in London and the people of Bungay themselves. As we will discuss in Chapter 3, there was a strong tendency in folklore studies to presume folklore, myths and legends of the rural parts of the British Isles represented isolated cultural fossils of a distant past. This approach assumed a culturally static unchanging countryside that represented a pure unadulterated authentic English culture uncorrupted by cosmopolitanism and industry. Similarly, folklore and ritual were often presented as pagan survivals of a primordial past which could be taken as powerful emotive links to a perceived uncontaminated Englishness.<sup>11</sup>

Even outside of romantic folklore studies there is a strong tendency to see the development of folklore as a linear progression of culture from the primordial past to the present. The Black Dog Institute into Depression Studies, for example, postulates that the use of the Black Dog as a euphemism of depression follows a linear cultural progress from prehistory through Roman and Greek culture to the Celts to the Black Dog of Bungay story and finally to Winston Churchill.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst the legacy of these ancient traditions certainly has a lasting impact on the mythology of Black Dogs and has certainly shaped the story of the Black Dog of Bungay, the transmission of folklore and mythology is far more complex than the legacy of pagan survivals would attest. A simple counterpoint to make to this theory is the presumption that if we are to claim Viking or Celtic origins for the tale, we would be presuming that experiences of hundreds of years ago would be of more significance than more recent cultural forms. Similarly, if we were to claim ancient origins we also have to deal with the fact that a sixteenth-century puritan in Bungay is unlikely to know what Anubis, Garm or even a Celt is. This is rendered more problematic by the fact that these symbols and images, far from being static culture fossils, are constantly in a state of transformation compounded by numerous discontinuities and retrospective reconstruction by various sectors of society throughout history in radically different social and cultural contexts.

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<sup>11</sup> These issues will be dealt with in detail in chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>12</sup> Hanley, Sue. 'The Black Dog Mystery' [www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/docs/Hanley.pdf](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/docs/Hanley.pdf)