



WILL HALICKS
Class of 2009
Peachtree City, GA

Will Halicks

In the semi-darkness of evening, I could hear my heartbeat above the splashing of the creek. The old stories said that people wandering at dusk through Troller's Gill, a limestone valley in rural Yorkshire, might run into a spectral dog with burning eyes. In the fading daylight, the threat seemed real enough. Even the smallest sounds seemed startling; the shadows were mystery incarnate. I didn't run into a phantom on that or any other evening, but I gave it my best shot. I think I still have the goosebumps to prove it.

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Bungay, Suffolk, UK

Whitby, North Yorkshire, UK

Exeter, Devon, UK

AFTER THE BLACK DOG

I spent my Burch Fellowship filming a documentary about black dog legends, one of Britain's most famous and enduring folktales. Some of the greatest political and literary minds in English history have been captivated by the story of ghostly dogs that haunt crossroads and churchyards. Winston Churchill coined the image as a metaphor for his bouts with depression. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle borrowed a Dartmoor version of the legend for his bestselling *Hound of the Baskervilles*, in which a criminal uses the story of a terrifying family curse to hoodwink a nobleman out of his fortune.

Each region of the United Kingdom has a different name for black dogs. Yorkshire has the Barguest, and the Isle of Man is home to the malevolent Mauthe Doo, a particularly nasty spirit said to haunt a castle in the town of Peel.

My journey took me all across the United Kingdom, from the windy coastal town of Whitby to the tiny village of Black Dog deep in the moors outside Exeter. Along the way, I interviewed English people from all walks of life – folklorists and storytellers who studied the black dog legends, as well as a few people who claimed to have seen a black dog up close. I spent days buried in Exeter University Library's special collections, looking over boxes of notes and manuscripts left behind by Theo Brown, a black dog scholar who devoted 50 years of her life to collecting and studying black dog legends. Each stop on the road led me closer to a comprehensive understanding of black dogs

and their place in English daily life – and, in turn, a broader appreciation for the way folktales become interwoven into the fabric of society as both creative forces and reflections of a culture.

I visited Bungay, a tiny town in the eastern part of England for whom the black dog legend has a special significance. Local tradition holds that a black dog (known as Black Shuck in that part of the country) appeared at the town church in 1577 and brought down a bolt of lightning, killing several parishioners and setting the place ablaze. Black Shuck has become a town symbol in Bungay. The local football team is called the Bungay Black Dogs.

Bungay has a Black Dog antique shop, and a black dog tops the lamppost in the middle of town. My travels made it clear that the legend hasn't died, especially in rural areas, and places like Bungay gave me a new understanding of the power of legends in shaping local identity.

Just as important, my Burch summer gave me an opportunity to hone audio and video recording skills that have become a great boon to me as I work toward a career in multimedia journalism. I gained valuable experience recording interviews with people in a variety of settings. (I recorded a discussion with Simon Sherwood, a psychologist at the University of Northampton who has studied black dog legends

nearly all his life, in the ruins of an old church a few miles outside the city.) Furthermore, I was able to interact with people who had a connection to a field of study I was passionate about, the kind of direct primary source work most undergraduate students can only dream about.

I will remember it as the summer I learned just how exciting scholarship can be – with a camera and a bit of daring, I got to watch my passions leap off the page and take shape before my eyes. I didn't come back with any great black dog sightings, as I hoped I would. (Although I do have plenty of spooky experiences traipsing around the misty countryside with my camera in tow, just in case.) But I returned with something much more valuable, something I couldn't have gotten from spending the summer at home: a new sense of confidence as a scholar and folklorist; valuable technical skills that still help me today; an appreciation for storytelling as a powerful expression of humankind's search for identity; and two months of memories, personal growth and adventure that will stay with me forever.

