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Up and down the length of the British Isles, county by county through the centuries, legends have materialized of giant black dogs, malevolent [hellhounds](#) that haunted crossroads, lonely lanes, sites of hangings and ruined churches. They were messengers of death — and sometimes the cause of it.

In 1577, a hellhound named Black Shuck reputedly burst into a church in Suffolk, bit the necks of two church-goers and bounded off into the night. Soon afterwards on a stormy night, Shuck is said to have rushed into Holy Trinity Church up the coast, killed a man and a boy and caused the steeple to collapse. Then, in a burst of lightning, he left scorch marks on the church door and was gone.

I laughed when I heard this. It reminded me of my own hellhound, [Cuchulain](#), our first Celtic hound. Half wolfhound and half deerhound, Cuchulain was a jet black force of nature, wickedly smart, jolly and devious. He'd have proudly been a hellhound and would have left scorch marks too if he knew how. He lived to make a statement. But Cuchulain had his dark side...

That he existed was a complete accident. A college friend had planned to breed deerhounds and wolfhounds — separately — but her plan went off the wheels when the deerhound male got to the wolfhound dame and gave my friend 14 monstrously-big puppies. Would I take one? I did and my life was changed forever.

Soon, Cuchulain was a dark, leggy giant, lean and short-haired, except for a flamboyant, cavalier mane. The sight of him startled people, not always in a *good* way. Black dogs have always been burdened with our cultural bias against them. Some people rushed up to meet my giant friend when I took him walking. Others quickly

sidled to the other side of the street to stay away. It turns out, that was probably a wise move.

My friend learned later that Cuchulain's father came from a line riddled with aggression. He never should have bred. My friend wisely got out of the breeding business, but there we were, my hellhound and me.

It started with a curled lip when I let one too many admirer march up and run their hands over Cuchulain without his permission. I've learned a lot since, but he quietly made his point — back off, bub.

He did not like veterinarians at all and, considering where they put that thermometer, it's understandable. But once at the vet's to get his shots, secured on the table by me, my six-foot-tall son and an equally burly vet tech, Cuchulain waited, suspiciously still until the vet came into the room. In a flash, we three were slung against the wall, the muzzle slapped the floor and Cuchulain icily eyed the guy coming at him with a needle. We were done. Cuchulain said so.

Cuchulain, who really should have been named Diablo, became more aversive in later life and his walks in public were soon curtailed. He was betrayed by genetics and rude fans. He never attacked a church crowd... as far as I know. Cuchulain is why we have our chain link fence is seven feet high.

There was excitement in England a couple of years back when [the skeleton of a huge hound](#) was dug up in the ruins of Leiston Abbey in Norfolk, 20 miles from the site of Shuck's famous rampage. Were these the bones of Black Shuck? The story was picked up on the internet where headlines read, "Bones of 7-foot-tall hellhound found."

There were problems with the story, however much fun it is to imagine that proof of a demon dog has been found. First, no dog is 7

feet tall. The tallest dog on record was a Great Dane named Zeus, who lived in Ostego, Michigan. He was 44 inches at the withers, which is how you measure dogs, from the bottom of the foot to the tip of the front shoulders.

No, these bones were seven feet *long*, quite impressive but not of supernatural stature. Coincidentally, Cuchulain was seven feet long. So are my two Irish wolfhounds, Oona and Oisin. There were wolfhounds in England in the 1500s. They were called Irish or European Greyhounds.

Then there's the matter of who found them. They were excavated in the courtyard of the ruined abbey by [DigVentures](#), which uses crowdfunding to finance its digs. The team has excavated several overlooked sites in the British Isles and helped popularize archaeology. It didn't hurt their cause that the media seized upon the notion that a devil dog had been unearthed. But, while the DigVenture catalogue of objects found in the Leiston Abbey lists pottery fragments, shards of leaded glass, wire, buttons and the odd knife blade, nowhere does it mention the bones of a seven-foot-tall demonic canine.

Cooler heads have speculated that since the bones were found in the courtyard of the abbey near the kitchen, they probably belonged to a pet, probably an Irish wolfhound who hung around the food, as wolfhounds have a habit of doing.

Like Black Shuck, my hellhound is gone now, too. Cuchulain, painfully thin, buffeted by the breeze, half-blind and greying, passed at the incredible age of 12. But the Celts believed dogs were guardians of the otherworld, that they helped the newly departed find their way in that undoubtedly strange place. So maybe when I shuffle off this mortal coil, I'll see him again, both of us young and able again. I'm not afraid of the diabolical old boy. I'll take cheese.

In the day, he'd have sold his mother for cheese. We were the best of friends, me, Cuchulain and the cheese in my pockets. I wonder if Black Shuck liked cheddar, too?