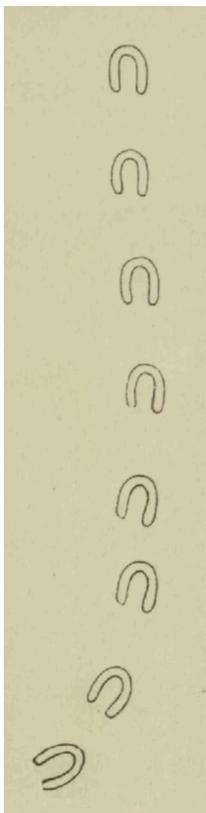


# The Devil's Hoofprints

by Gina Collia

Tonight marks the anniversary of strange events that took place here in Devonshire one hundred and sixty-eight years ago. On the night of 8 February 1855, during a particularly severe winter, there was heavy snowfall around Exeter and South Devon. The following morning, the inhabitants of several towns awoke to find in the snow, and in the most unaccountable of places, including 'on the tops of houses', a 'vast number of foot-tracks of a most strange and mysterious description'.<sup>1</sup> The culprit left its footmarks all over Teignmouth, Dawlish, Starcross, Exmouth, Littleham, Lypstone, Woodbury and Topsham. It entered 'gardens with walls 12 feet high' in Dawlish, apparently having jumped over the walls, and left prints all over the churchyard,<sup>2</sup> and hardly a garden in Lypstone was left untouched. Given the number of places visited, the culprit - if there was just one - must have travelled up to one hundred miles in a single night.<sup>3</sup> And, not content with its nighttime wanderings on the 8th, in the few days that followed it left its mark in Newton Abbot and, on St. Valentine's Eve, paid a visit to the church at Topsham, going right up 'to the very door of the vestibule'.<sup>4</sup>



The prints, which appeared to have been made by a biped, resembled those made by a donkey's shoe, measured up to four inches in length and up to two and three-quarter inches in width, and were 'generally eight inches in advance of each other',<sup>5</sup> alternating like the steps of a man.<sup>6</sup> The footprints travelled across open fields and through the woods at Luscombe, through enclosed gardens, over rooftops, high walls and haystacks, and beyond locked gates. They travelled up to the front doors of houses without leaving any sign of their subsequent retreat.<sup>7</sup> And each print 'removed the snow, wherever it appeared, clear, as if cut with

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<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, 16 February 1855.

<sup>2</sup> *The Western Luminary & Family Newspaper for Devon, Cornwall, Somerset & Dorset*, 13 February 1855.

<sup>3</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 24 February 1855.

<sup>4</sup> *Western Times*, 24 February 1855.

<sup>5</sup> *The Times*, 16 February 1855.

<sup>6</sup> *Woolmer's Exeter & Plymouth Gazette*, 17 February 1855.

<sup>7</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 24 February 1855.

a diamond or branded with a hot iron'.<sup>8</sup> As to the speed of the mysterious hoofmark-maker, in 1929 Rupert Gould concluded that, even if the overall distance travelled was reduced to forty miles, and if we allowed fourteen hours of darkness for that distance to be covered, for a single creature to make a 40-mile line of hoofmarks, with each mark being 8 inches apart, it would have had to travel at a pace of more than six steps per second from start to finish.<sup>9</sup>

So great was the excitement caused by the appearance of the hoofmarks that a party of Dawlish tradesmen, armed with guns and bludgeons, spent the best part of the day attempting to follow a set of tracks to locate and identify the culprit. The group searched from the local churchyard to Luscombe, then Dawlishwater and on to Oaklands (a distance of about five miles), returning home none the wiser for all their efforts.<sup>10</sup> Due to the strangeness of the hoofmarks, some of which were cloven, a number of locals concluded quite quickly that they were the work of 'no less person than His Satanic Majesty'.<sup>11</sup> Finding no possible natural explanation for the appearance of the marks, many locals would not go out after sunset, 'or go half a mile into lanes or byways, as they were convinced that this was the devil's walk and no other, and that it was wicked to trifle with such a manifest proof of the Great Enemy's immediate presence.'<sup>12</sup>

Others, upon reading the various newspaper reports, suggested several possible human or animal culprits, including badgers, rats, birds, donkeys, a monkey, Anglicans, the ghost of St. Wencelas and - from the Lymptone Church pulpit of the Rev. G. M. Musgrave - an escaped kangaroo.<sup>13</sup> One correspondent, W. W., suggested that a swan had been responsible for the strange marks. Apparently, on 13 February 1855, five days after the hoofmarks appeared in South Devon, an exhausted swan belonging to the domain of Prince Hohenlohe of



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<sup>8</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 24 February 1855.

<sup>9</sup> Gould, Rupert T. (1929), *Oddities: A Book of Unexplained Facts*. London, Geoffrey Bles. Gould felt that this proved no single creature could be responsible for all of the marks.

<sup>10</sup> *Woolmer's Exeter & Plymouth Gazette*, 17 February 1855.

<sup>11</sup> *Western Times*, 17 February.

<sup>12</sup> *Western Morning News*, 5 October 1928. Reminiscences in an interview with R. T. Gould about his book *Oddities*.

<sup>13</sup> Badgers: *Illustrated London News*, 3 March 1855. Rats and birds: *Illustrated London News*, 10 March 1855. Donkeys and Anglicans: *Devon & Cornwall Notes and Queries*, Vol. 12, 1922, pp. 265-7. A monkey: *The Western Luminary & Family Newspaper for Devon, Cornwall, Somerset & Dorset*, 13 February 1855. The ghost of St Wenceslas: *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 1 March 1855. A kangaroo: *The Times*, 16 February 1855.

Germany had appeared in St. Denis in France. Based on this, W. W. put forward the theory that the poor bird's exhaustion was due to it having 'travelled many miles by day and night' over to Devon and then across to France. The prints left in the snow, he concluded, which were decidedly not swan-feet-shaped, were made by the bird's footwear, which had been padded 'in the shape of donkey's hoofs' in order to 'prevent mischief' in its owner's garden.<sup>14</sup>

As interest in the strange hoofmarks spread far and wide, suggestions from beyond England's shores appeared in the press. One correspondent from Heidelberg suggested in a letter to the *Illustrated London News* that the Devonshire marks matched those that appeared each year around a hill on the borders of Galicia, in Russian Poland; those marks being 'universally attributed by the inhabitants to supernatural influence'.<sup>15</sup>

Though witnesses did remark on the similarity of the hoofmarks to those left by a donkey, it's hard to imagine how any member of the equine family could have climbed up onto rooftops or tall walls, and the same can be said of Anglicans and badgers. A solitary monkey, though capable of climbing up walls, could not have been responsible for so great a number of marks; it would have needed the help of friends, and there is no record of a single monkey having escaped from a travelling menagerie to carry out the deed, let alone a whole troupe of monkeys. Though there were two living in



<sup>15</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 17 March 1855.

Exmouth at the time, kangaroos do not leave single-file hoofmarks in the snow when they move about. In any case, The good Rev. Musgrave wrote to the *Illustrated London News* a short while after the event to explain that he had little faith in his own suggestion, having put it forward only to reassure his congregation that the Devil had not been wandering through their gardens at night. <sup>16</sup>

Though rats and birds do hop forward and are capable of leaving single-file imprints in snow, it would have been impossible for a solitary rat or bird to have produced so many prints alone, and it's hard to imagine either one banding together strategically with their comrades to produce so many hoofmarks in one night. Of course, not enough is known about the attributes and motivations of the ghost of St. Wencelas to determine whether or not he was responsible.

To this day, there is no solid explanation for the events of 8 February 1855 and the days that followed. We are as ignorant of the truth today as those Devonians who woke to discover the mysterious hoofmarks in 1855. So, tonight, on the anniversary of those strange events, in case we have heavy snowfall overnight, you might want to keep your camera handy.

#### Illustrations:

Page 1 - *Illustrated London News*, 24 February 1855. Drawing of the prints included with a letter from 'South Devon'.

Page 2 - *Illustrated London News*, 3 March 1855. Drawn by G. M. M. of Withecombe.

Page 3 - Edited version of an illustration by F.A. Lydon, taken from *Gems from the Poets*, published in 1860.

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<sup>16</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 3 March 1855