

# The demonic dog with a name that is all East Anglian

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The word *eschew* is not one that everybody uses, but most readers will know that it means 'to deliberately avoid something', as in "to eschew violence". *Eschew* is one of the many words which were borrowed into English in mediaeval times from Old French, where the word was *eschiver* "to shun, avoid, do without". The modern French word is *esquiver* – and the Italian equivalent is *schivare*, which may be the source of the etymologically puzzling word *skive*, as in "skiving off school".

*Eschiver*, though, was originally a word which arrived in France with the Frankish invaders who gave the country its name. The word came from ancient Germanic *skeukhwaz* meaning 'afraid'. So did modern German *scheuen* 'to fear; shrink from', *scheuchen* 'to scare off', and the adjective *scheu* 'timid' – which is also obviously the same as the English 'shy'. The Anglo-Saxon was *sceoh*.

There was also a related Anglo-Saxon word *sceucca* or *scucca*, which referred to a being that was to be feared: *sceucca* meant 'devil, demon', and was used in Old English to refer to Satan: "Da was se *sceucca him betwux*", literally 'then was the devil them between', so 'then the devil



■ Black Shuck is the mythical demon hound of East Anglia.

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was amongst them'. Unlike the adjective *sceoh*, which gives us 'shy', this Anglo-Saxon noun doesn't appear to have any obvious modern counterpart. But here in East Anglia it does. *Scucca* 'devil' is the source of our word *Shuck*, the name of the spectral dog who we know in these parts as *Old Shuck* or *Black Shuck*.

*Shuck* is the demon hound, the black ghost dog with glowing eyes who patrols our marshes and fens and, especially in coastal areas, our country lanes. His apparition is much to be feared because it signifies that some calamity is about to

happen, or perhaps has already happened at the spot where you see him. And "if you touch him he bites you to the bone – you will bear his mark to your dying day".

This tradition of a black spectral dog is found in many parts of northern Europe, but the name *Shuck* is all our own. The *English Dialect Dictionary* found it only in Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. The demon dog once killed two people in Bungay Church, leaving scorch marks on the door and causing the tower to collapse. It would seem to be a good idea, if you can, to eschew contact with *Shuck*.