

The Grim of St Mary's

Bungay, Suffolk — the Saturday before the storm of 4 August 1577.

BUNGAY, SUFFOLK, ENGLAND · 3-6 PLAYERS · ABOUT 4 HOURS ·
ELIZABETHAN (1577)

BUILT ON THE LEGEND OF: THE BLACK DOG OF BUNGAY (BLACK SHUCK), 4 AUGUST
1577

Game master's eyes only. Everything the players may see is in the separate Player Pack.

System-neutral. Difficulty is given in plain words (easy / hard / very hard) for you to map to the rules you play. The legend is real and cited; the adventure built on it is original fiction.

The legend as it is told

On Sunday the 4th of August 1577, while the people of Bungay were at morning prayer in St Mary's Church, a storm broke over the town so violent that the church went dark as night.

In the dark and the lightning, a black dog was seen running down the body of the church among the kneeling people. By the account printed that same year, it passed between two worshippers and wrung their necks where they knelt, and a third man it touched on the back was left shrunken 'like a piece of leather scorched in a hot fire' — yet he lived.

The same morning, a dozen miles away at Holy Trinity, Blythburgh, the dog was seen again: the steeple crashed through the roof, a man and a boy were killed, and the beast left by the north door. Marks on that door are still pointed out as its claw-burns.

East Anglia has long told of a great black hound that walks the lanes and causeways at night — Black Shuck. Bungay took the dog to heart: a black dog still rides the weathervane in the market place.

Where the legend comes from

Black Shuck — the East Anglian black dog; the 1577 Bungay and Blythburgh accounts

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Shuck

St Mary's Church, Bungay — the church where the dog appeared during the storm

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Mary%27s_Church,_Bungay

Bungay — the town, its castle and its black-dog emblem

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bungay>

Church grim — the folk belief in a guardian dog tied to a churchyard, which this adventure's fiction borrows

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_grim

Abraham Fleming, A Straunge and Terrible Wunder (1577) — the pamphlet printed that year which recorded the event

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Fleming

Content notes

- Death of named townsfolk is possible (off-screen by default)
- A mob accusing a woman of witchcraft
- Grave disturbance and animal bones
- Storms, darkness, fear in a church

Behind the screen

PREMISE

A tanner in debt dug up the north side of St Mary's churchyard looking for silver that rumour said lay under the old north door. He found the bones of the church's guardian dog — the grim — and its iron collar, and sold the collar. Unbound, the grim will come with tomorrow's storm to take the ones who broke its ground. The party has one day to find out why, and to decide who pays.

What is really going on

When the church was first raised, the builders buried a black dog by the north door so that its spirit would keep the churchyard: the church grim. The grim's collar — a band of black iron stamped with a cross — held it to that duty. On Thursday night Robert Hucke, a tanner owing money to half the town, dug beneath the threshold stone after a drunken tale of monks' silver. He found only bones and the collar. He sold the collar to Gil Stannard, a travelling tinker, for a shilling, and threw the bones in the river ditch.

The grim is not evil. Unbound, it does what a guardian does with trespassers. When the storm breaks at

Sunday prayer it will come for those who broke its ground — Huckle first, and anyone who shares his guilt. If the collar is returned and the bones laid back under the north door before the service, the grim will walk the church once, find its ground restored, and leave by the north door into the storm — to Blythburgh, where history remembers it. What happens in Bungay is up to the table.

The clue graph

The churchyard's north side was dug by night, under the old threshold stone

Routes: Kit Fenn saw a lantern there Thursday night / The broken earth and a moved stone carved with a hound (search the churchyard) / The curate's note to the churchwardens (Handout 2)

Leads to: Scene 1 !' who dug it

A tanner dug it

Routes: A fleshing knife left in the earth (Handout 2 mentions it; the tannery is short one) / Agnes Tolly saw Huckle on the causeway with a spade / Huckle's hands are raw and he smells of river mud; he breaks under pressure

Leads to: Confronting Robert Huckle

Something iron was taken from the grave

Routes: The ballad sheet: 'iron about his neck' (Handout 1) / Joan Wetherby knows the old church-grim lore / Huckle confesses to 'a bit of old iron'

Leads to: Scene 2 !' the collar

The tinker Gil Stannard has the collar and is on the Blythburgh road

Routes: Agnes ferried a tinker across at dawn who boasted of 'church iron' / Huckle admits the sale / Townsfolk at market saw Stannard's cart leave south

Leads to: Scene 2 !' the road

The bones must be laid back under the north door before prayer

Routes: Joan Wetherby's advice / Curate Brame finds a founders' note in the parish chest / Kit dreams the dog lying across the doorway

Leads to: Scene 3 !' the rite

Pacing for one evening

0:00 Hook and the mob at the market cross

0:40 Churchyard, Kit, the curate's note; first suspicion of Huckle

1:30 Confront Huckle; learn about the collar and the tinker

2:00 The ferry, the causeway and Gil Stannard

3:00 Night: finding the bones; the storm gathers

3:20 Morning prayer and the grim

3:50 Aftermath and what the town will say

Market Day, Bad Ground

READ ALOUD

The market smells of fish, wet wool and thunder. Somebody has chalked a crude dog on the church wall, and a knot of men with sticks stands under it. At the centre, a grey-haired woman holds a basket of little knotted cords and does not look away.

Saturday noon. A crowd by the market cross is working itself up against Joan Wetherby, a cunning woman who sells charms 'against the dog'. Kit Fenn, the bell-boy, is shouting that it was not her. Curate Nicholas Brame hovers, useless. Above it all, the sky over the marshes goes yellow-grey.

If they...

Defuse the mob (talk, bribe with ale, invoke the curate) — The crowd scatters grumbling; Joan owes the party and shares what she knows about church grims. Hard to do if the party insults the town.

Stand aside and let it happen — Joan is hauled to the cage by the market cross. She can still be visited later, but she is frightened and says less. Kit hates the party.

Go straight to the churchyard — They find the dug ground and the moved hound-stone themselves, but the crowd remembers strangers poking round the church.

Clues here

- The north side was dug by night
- A fleshing knife in the earth
- Kit's lantern sighting

DIFFICULTY

Calming the mob is hard; very hard if the party is armed and aggressive, easy if they bring Kit or the curate onside first.

The Tinker's Road

READ ALOUD

The causeway is a raised grey spine across the marsh. Reeds hiss on both sides. Far off, a cart lantern swings under a gibbet post, and every time the thunder mutters, a dog barks somewhere that is not quite behind you.

Gil Stannard left at dawn with the collar in his cart. Agnes Tolly can take the party across the Waveney and knows the causeway. By late afternoon the wind is rising and the marsh is full of noises. Stannard has camped by a gibbet at the crossroads, and he has already noticed the collar hums in his hands when thunder comes.

If they...

Buy the collar — Stannard wants three shillings or something shiny; he is glad to be rid of it. Easy.

Scare it out of him with the truth — Hard; succeeds instantly if they tell him who the iron belongs to. He flees, leaving the cart.

Take it by force or theft — Works, but Stannard runs back to Bungay and tells the town the strangers are thieves — trouble in Scene 3.

Clues here

- The collar is stamped with a cross and warm to touch
- Stannard heard Hucke threw 'the rest' in the river ditch

DIFFICULTY

Crossing the causeway after dusk is hard (something follows; not a fight unless the party makes one). Finding the bones in the ditch by lantern light is hard, easy with Kit's help.

Morning Prayer

READ ALOUD

The light goes out of the windows all at once. Rain like thrown gravel. In the flash, every face in the church turns towards the north door — and in the dark after it, you hear claws on stone, coming down the aisle.

The storm breaks as the congregation kneels. The party must lay the bones and the collar beneath the north door, and keep the church from panicking, before the grim comes. Hucke is in the pews, grey with fear. Brame will begin the service no matter what — unless someone stops him.

If they...

Lay bones and collar under the threshold before the grim arrives — The grim circles the church once, sniffs at Hucke, and leaves by the north door into the storm. Nobody here dies.

Offer Hucke's confession at the altar — The grim takes Hucke only (off-screen in the dark). The chronicle's toll is paid by the guilty.

Fight it — Very hard; iron and holy things drive it back but do not end it. It takes two before it leaves — the record holds.

Clues here

- The grim stops at whoever touched its bones

DIFFICULTY

Getting the rite done while the church panics is hard; very hard if Stannard has turned the town against the party.

The ending

The grim comes at the height of the storm whatever happens. What it does depends on whether its ground is restored and who is guilty. Afterwards, the town will tell its own version — which may not match what the party saw.

If the collar and bones were restored in time: The dog passes through and leaves by the north door; the party learns later that Blythburgh was not so lucky. Bungay tells of a miracle.

If only the collar was restored: The grim takes Hucke and one other who helped him or sheltered him. The record's 'two dead at prayer' stands.

If nothing was restored: Two die at prayer and a third is left scorched and shrunken; the party are blamed as strangers who brought it.

When the table goes sideways

The party bypasses the mob fight: Joan comes to them later, at dusk, having been let go; she trades the grim lore for their protection.

The party misses a key clue (who dug the ground): Hucke panics on his own on Saturday night and tries to flee on Agnes's ferry; Agnes brings him to the party.

The party splits up: Split along the two jobs: road party fetches the collar, town party finds the bones and handles the curate. Cut between them every 10 minutes.

They try to leave Bungay before the storm: The ferry won't cross in the wind and the causeway floods. The dog is seen watching the road.

Difficulty for any system

Easy: Anyone competent succeeds; roll only if failure is interesting.

Hard: A trained or well-equipped character usually succeeds; others need help.

Very hard: Only with a clever plan, the right tools or a great deal of luck.

Map these to your system's usual easy / hard / very hard difficulties. The grim has no stat block: treat it as a force of the storm that can be driven back, never killed.

The cast

Kit Fenn BELL-BOY, 12

Barefoot, rope-burned hands, a cap too big for him

Wants: To be believed

Secret: He has fed scraps to 'the church dog' for a year and thinks it is his friend

Voice: Fast, indignant, swears by the bells

Knows: The lantern Thursday night; where the dog lies

Joan Wetherby CUNNING WOMAN

Grey plait, market basket of knotted cords

Wants: To be left alone and not burned

Secret: Her grandmother told her the builders buried a dog by the north door

Voice: Low and dry; answers questions with questions

Knows: Church-grim lore; the rite of laying bones back

Nicholas Brame CURATE

Young, ink on his cuffs, a cold he can't shake

Wants: For nothing to happen until the vicar returns

Secret: He found the dug ground on Friday and wrote it up, but told no one

Voice: Apologetic, quotes scripture when nervous

Knows: The note to the churchwardens (Handout 2); the parish chest

Robert Huckle TANNER IN DEBT

Raw red hands, river mud on his boots, smells of the tan-pits

Wants: To pay what he owes and forget Thursday

Secret: He dug the grave and sold the collar; he threw the bones in the ditch

Voice: Loud denial that cracks into whispering

Knows: Everything — if pushed

Agnes Tolly FERRYWOMAN ON THE WAVENEY

Broad shoulders, oilskin, a dog of her own that won't go near the church

Wants: Fair fares and a dry week

Secret: She saw Huckle on the causeway Thursday night with a spade and said nothing, because he owes her too

Voice: Few words, river sayings

Knows: Huckle's night walk; the tinker crossing at dawn

Gil Stannard TRAVELLING TINKER

Cart hung with pans; a laugh too big for his face

Wants: A profit and a road away from the storm

Secret: The collar burns him when it thunders and he is scared stiff of it

Voice: Salesman's patter, quick to bargain

Knows: Where the bones went; he has the collar

Club Night kit

Sequel hook: The Door at Blythburgh

A dozen miles away the same storm brought down Blythburgh's steeple, and the dog left marks on the north door that are still there. A week later a Blythburgh churchwarden arrives asking for the people who 'spoke to the dog' at Bungay: something is still scratching at their north door at night.

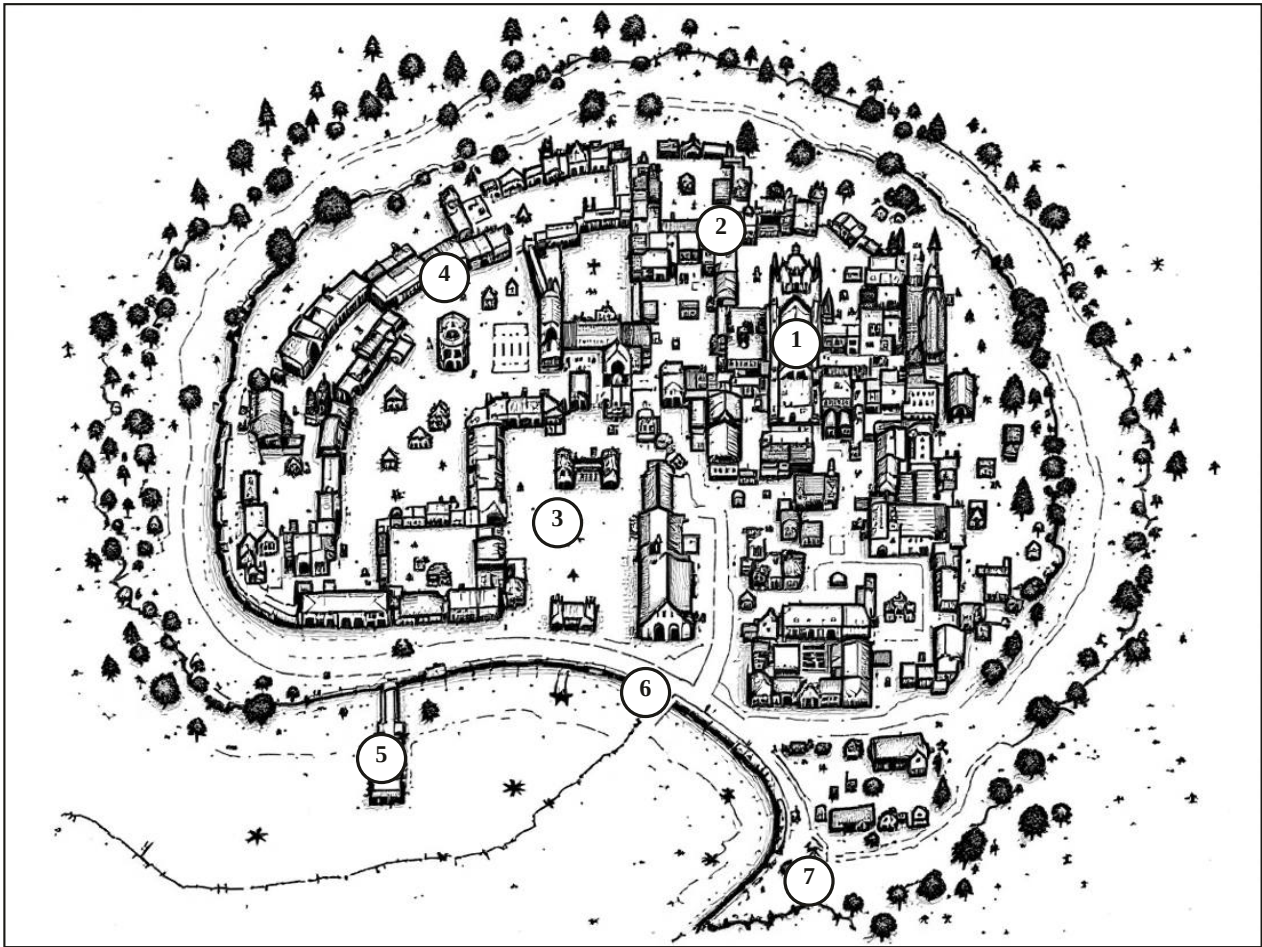
Handouts — when to use them

Handout 1, A True Warning to the Folk of Waveney: Give it in Scene 1 (a ballad-seller at market) or found nailed to the church gate. It points to the collar ('iron about his neck') and the north door.

Handout 2, To the Churchwardens of St Mary's: Brame's note, found in his lodging or handed over if the party wins his trust. Points to the north door, the hound-stone and a tanner.

Bungay in the river's loop

Town, churchyard, market and the roads out, drawn for play.



SCHEMATIC — NOT TO SCALE, NOT A SURVEY

- 1. St Mary's Church** Scene 3. The north door is on the far side from the market.
- 2. The north door & hound-stone** Dug ground under the threshold stone; the fleshing knife. Where the bones and collar must go.
- 3. The market cross** Scene 1 mob; Joan may end up in the cage.
- 4. The castle ruins** Hucke hides here Saturday night if spooked.
- 5. The ferry landing** Agnes, and the tinker's dawn crossing.
- 6. The river ditch** Where Hucke threw the bones.
- 7. The causeway to Blythburgh** Scene 2: Stannard camps at the gibbet crossroads beyond the edge of the map.

A True Warning to the Folk of Waveney

Come hark, good folk of Bungay town, and mark what I do sing,
Of one that walks the causeway down when thunder's on the wing.
His coat is black as tanner's pit, his eyes are coals of red,
And iron about his neck is knit to keep him to his bed.

He keeps the ground where fathers lie, he keeps the northern door;
Let no man dig that ground, say I, or he'll keep it no more.
For loose him once, and storm will bring him prowling up the nave —
And he will know, when bells do ring, who robbed him of his grave.

Printed for the ballad-sellers of the Waveney fairs. Price one halfpenny.

To the Churchwardens of St Mary's

Friday. — Masters, I must set down that this morning I found the ground broke on the north side, hard by the old door, and the stone with the hound upon it pulled half aside, as if by some fellow seeking under it. There was a great hole and nothing in it but black water. In the earth I found a knife of the kind the tanners use for scraping hides, which I have kept. I pray you, say nothing of this to the town until the vicar's return, for folk are foolish about that door already. — N. B., curate.