

DESPATCHES FROM THE MOOR:
NEWSPAPERS AND *THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES*

by PETER CALAMAI

Some formidable difficulties exist in connection with the three contemporary newspaper accounts that appear in Dr. Watson's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

The first problem is the lack of any other record of the existence of a newspaper called the *Devon County Chronicle*. This is the supposed newspaper from which an account of the inquest into the death of Sir Charles Baskerville is read aloud by Dr. James Mortimer in his first meeting with Sherlock Holmes at 221B Baker Street.

Next there is the absence of any editorial about free trade in *The Times* of 30 September 1889. Sherlock Holmes is quoted as reading a section of such an editorial (referred to in Britain as a leading article, or leader) to demonstrate how the threatening note to Sir Henry Baskerville had been assembled by cutting out words from the article. Nor is there a *Times* leader dealing with free trade on the publication day before or after the date indicated in *The Hound*.

Third, we are faced with the impossibility of Laura Lyons reading "in the paper next morning" about the death of Sir Charles late on the night of 4 June.

DEVON COUNTY CHRONICLE

According to the records at the Colindale branch of the British Library, which specializes in newspapers, the only newspaper ever bearing these exact words in its nameplate was *Besley's Exeter News and Devon County Chronicle*, which existed under this title for the first four months of 1827. The paper then continued publication as the *Devonshire Chronicle and Evening News* until it expired in March 1853, more than 35 years before the events in *The Hound*.

Other publications bearing at least two of these words in their titles came and went during the hothouse period of newspaper growth in the mid to late Victorian era. Most published once a week, although a few managed twice. These included: 1. the *South Molton Gazette, Devon and Somerset Chronicle and West of England Advertiser*, published from July 1872 to November 1944 when it was incorporated in the *Tiverton Gazette*; 2. the *Devon County Standard*, published from 1877 to April 1898 and continued until 1911 as the *Torquay Observer and District News*; 3. the *Barnstaple Times and Bideford and North Devon Chronicle*, published from July 1869 to December 1908; and 4. the *Crediton Chronicle and North Devon Gazette*, published from July 1881 to October 1891 and continued

through various name changes to *The Mid-Devon Gazette*, which was still being produced in Crediton as recently as 2000. You can see how this name might have been mashed into the *Devon County Chronicle* by Dr. Watson. Unfortunately the *Chronicle and Gazette* published on Saturdays, which fits neither of the two dates given for the putative clipping—14 May was a Tuesday in 1889 and 14 June was a Friday. More follows below about these dual dates. There is also the difficulty that this paper, like the *Barnstable Times*, is a North Devon publication, and our action takes place in South Devon. The first two weeklies are from South Devon, but Dr. Watson would have had to completely mistake the name for the first to work. As for the *Devon County Standard*, it too published on Saturdays.

One solution to this difficulty is to adopt the attitude of Owen Dudley Edwards, general editor of the Oxford edition of the Canon, and argue that all the newspaper accounts reprinted in the stories are pastiche or even parody. Finally, we can consider the possibility that Watson accurately quoted the account from a newspaper clipping but deliberately concealed the paper's name. In the Canon, Dr. Watson is known to have camouflaged the names of communities, buildings, streets, prominent personalities and even entire countries.

In these circumstances, then, the best candidate for the camouflaged *Devon County Chronicle* is one of the localized editions of the *Western Guardian*. Further details of this newspaper are provided below.

Even resolving the question of which newspaper leaves open a classic issue of canonical dates. The original *Hound* in the *Strand* magazine says Sir Charles died on 4 May and gives the publication date for the inquest article as 14 May. In the book and subsequent republications both dates are transposed to June.

It has been suggested that the dates were altered by the literary agent Arthur Conan Doyle acting as editor, when he realized that Watson's May date left too long a gap for Henry Baskerville to be located and travel to London by the end of September. There are other reasons, however, to suggest that the initial month was incorrect, another manifestation of Dr. Watson's all-too-fallible memory and note taking. Sir Charles announces his intention to travel to London the next day, which would have been 5 May, a Sunday, when trains were few and slow. 5 June was a Wednesday, a much more sensible day for a long rail journey.¹ Also, 14 May is a Tuesday, which would be a most unusual publication day for a weekly newspaper like the *Devon County Chronicle* because advertisers preferred the latter part of the week (which is when the *Western Guardian* and many other weeklies did publish). 14 June is a Friday, a popular publication day for weeklies, including editions of the *Western Guardian*.

TIMES LEADER ON FREE TRADE

“Have you yesterday’s *Times*, Watson?” asks Holmes after Sir Henry Baskerville produces the note warning him to stay away from the moor. He then reads an extract from a leading article on the subject of free trade, to the bafflement initially of all present. Holmes then demonstrates that the warning note was composed of words clipped from that very *Times* article, except for “moor.” (Presumably “as” was common enough to be found in another sentence.) All quite elementary, Holmes explains to an admiring Dr. Mortimer, because of the distinctive typography (“the leaded bourgeois type”) of a *Times* leader.

This demonstration of typographical acumen occurred Tuesday, 1 October. “Yesterday’s *Times*” must have been that of Monday, 30 September. The leading articles² that day were:

The Gladstonian Policy—analysis of the results from a by-election at Sleaford in Lincoln

The International Congress at Washington—a precursor to the Pan-American Congress

Strikes and Corners—labor strife

The County Council—local government.

None of these leaders so much as mention free trade, much less contain the extract read by Holmes and reproduced verbatim (?) by Watson.³ Perhaps Watson was mistaken and Holmes actually asked for Tuesday’s *Times*, which would be even fresher in his mind. But no, the editorial topics on 1 October were British economics, Serbia, the Anglican church, and Ireland. Nor are the leaders from Saturday, 28 September any more promising—the Sleaford election, Archdeacon Farrar on brotherhoods, a royal commission on town markets, and the educational children’s tale *Sandford and Merton*.

Several commentators have previously raised doubts about the very existence of this supposed leader. In their introductions and notes to “Scandal in Bohemia” and *Hound of the Baskervilles* respectively in the Oxford University Press Canon, Owen Dudley Edwards and W.W. Robson dismiss this (and other newspaper extracts) as pastiche or parody. The phrase “it stands to reason” is certainly below the level of argumentation normally found in *Times*’ leaders during this period.

Drawing on British economic history, Gavin Brend says that an article on free trade as early as 1889 “would surely be right out of the question.”⁴ Brend is on shaky ground historically. As early as 1888, in a speech to the London

Chamber of Commerce, Joseph Chamberlain was speaking of the importance of the Empire for Britain's survival and as its forming "natural markets for our trade." This was the core of Chamberlain's policy of Imperial Preference, which was anathema to free traders. When later crystallized, Chamberlain's views caused deep divisions in the Tory party that led to its rout in the 1906 election. So it is not inconceivable that some serious London newspaper might have been moved to take up the subject in September 1889. (For additional evidence about free trade being a live issue in 1889, see the relevant footnotes in the *Oxford Hound* and in Klinger's forthcoming *Annotated Hound*.)

Yet six months' worth of leading articles as recorded in *Palmer's Index to The Times* from 1 July to 31 December 1889 contain none indexed under free trade and only one, on 16 July, about "Trade, state of." Even Holmes with his well-known fear of discarding papers was unlikely to have a two-month-old newspaper lying around.

So perhaps it was a leader in another newspaper entirely and Watson simply misremembered. However, the evidence of the Canon suggests strongly that the *Times* was the paper that commanded the most time from Holmes, while the *Telegraph* did the same for Watson. In addition to his dubious display of typographical prowess in *Hound of the Baskervilles*,⁵ Holmes is twice described as reading the *Times* ("Engineer's Thumb," "Missing Three-quarter"), and once comments that he has noted an advertisement in the paper every day ("Blue Carbuncle"). Against Holmes's four citations, there are none for Watson, who is never associated with reading the *Times* or being familiar with its contents.

For Watson the paper of choice is the *Daily Telegraph*. Three times there is direct evidence of his reading it (*A Study in Scarlet*, "Silver Blaze," "Second Stain") and once highly suggestive evidence (the paper is on his knee in "Norwood Builder"). Holmes is described reading the *Telegraph* directly only once ("Copper Beeches") but also identified clippings of the agony column by the print style and paper quality ("Bruce-Partington Plans"). And since he and Watson shared the same railway carriage on the way to King's Pyland in "Silver Blaze," it seems likely that he also read the *Telegraph* account of the disappearance of Silver Blaze.

No matter, say the word "newspaper" and Watson thinks first of the *Daily Telegraph*. Unfortunately this elegant thesis is slain by the ugly fact that no leader about free trade appeared in the *Telegraph* over those three days either.

Still, absence of proof of existence is not proof of the absence of existence. The free trade editorial of the 30 September 1889 *Times* may, like the elusive Higgs boson of particle physics, simply be undiscoverable with our present searching abilities. For instance, the leader on free trade could have been what's

known as a “space holder”—an editorial written to meet first-edition deadlines when editors know they will have a late-breaking news event demanding editorial comment in later editions. In this instance, a free-trade leader could well have yielded to a late editorial about the Washington conference, with the time difference. Since the British Library’s newspaper collection at Colindale preserves only the final editions of most newspapers as a matter of policy, it would have no copy there of the free-trade editorial. However, there is a good chance the early edition was received by Beryl Stapleton’s hotel (as well as the final edition). And who can doubt that Holmes instructed the nearby news agent that he was to get *every* edition of certain papers, such as *The Times* and *The Star*.

Something similarly frustrating happened once before. For decades, Sherlockians have pestered the offices of the *Journal de Genève* for reproductions of the issue of 6 May 1891 only to fail to find the account of Holmes’s death that Dr. Watson writes is recorded there (“Final Problem”). Yet a translation of that very news item appeared in the Spring 2000 issue of *Canadian Holmes*⁶ and, presumably, it will not be too long before the original surfaces.

THE PAPER NEXT MORNING

Laura Lyons says that she did not write Sir Charles to say she had no need for the money because she saw the news about his death “in the paper next morning,” which would have been Wednesday, 5 June. However, Barrymore did not discover the body in the Yew Alley until around midnight. Several hours more would have elapsed before the police came and word could possibly have reached any reporter. That would have been far too late to be included in any West Country newspaper that Lyons could have read the next morning, particularly the region’s most prominent dailies, the *Western Morning News*⁷ and the *Western Daily Mercury*, both published in Plymouth.

News of Sir Charles’s death could have been published by an afternoon newspaper. Reporters would likely have been tipped off by a well-rewarded sergeant while doing their rounds on the morning of 5 June and had time for at least a “stop press” item. Two papers are the leading candidates to have printed that news and to also have been read by Lyons in Newton Abbot.

The first is the *Western Guardian*, a paper published once or twice weekly in numerous localized editions around the West Country. In 1889 the Totnes edition of the *Western Guardian* came out on Wednesdays and Thursdays, according to that year’s edition of the *U.K. Press Directory*.⁸ It likely began its print run well before noon.

The second candidate is *The Star*, the largest circulation daily in Britain, which was published in London and gave extensive coverage to the doings of

Sherlock Holmes. It was classed as an afternoon paper, but the early edition was for sale on the streets in London around 10 a.m., and would be available in the main centers of the West Country the same day. If the *Star's* correspondent in Plymouth was on the ball, a telegraphed “stop press” item about Sir Charles could have made that first edition.

This afternoon-newspaper explanation fits if Laura Lyons simply was mistaken about the time of day when she read the newspaper account. It also fits if Dr. Watson, being most familiar with morning newspapers in London, interpolated the “morning” word when Lyons said “in the paper the next day.” The most likely newspaper for someone trying to keep up with business opportunities would be the *Guardian*.

NOTES

1. According to the 1887 *Bradshaw's Guide* (reprint, David & Charles, 1968), the sole Sunday train to Paddington from Newton Abbot took 10½ hours, leaving at 8:24 a.m. and arriving at 7:05 p.m. During the week, however, there was a daily express that made the same journey in a mere five hours, leaving Newton Abbot at a more civilized 9:44 a.m. and reaching Paddington at 2:45. This express was limited to first- and second-class coaches. A wealthy man in his 50s would certainly choose to save five hours and travel in more comfort.
2. From the 1840s to the 1880s, leading articles of *The Times* had regularly carried—as well as commentary on political developments—the news reporting about the development itself whenever the information came from the editor's own confidential sources. On 24 April 1880, for example, readers discovered in the leading article the exclusive information that Gladstone was to be Prime Minister. By 1885, however, a political correspondent had been appointed and the leaders were limited to comment on news presented elsewhere. A list of the day's contents was added immediately atop the leaders in February 1887.
3. We can dismiss the melange of the real *Times* with an obviously pasted-in leading article on free trade that appears in Simon Goodenough's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (London: Webb & Bower, 1984), an often-inspired dossier of artifacts and Watson's accounts for Holmes.
4. Brend, Gavin. *My Dear Holmes*. London: George Allen, 1951, p. 102.
5. “Leaded bourgeois type” specifies only the size of the type (“bourgeois”) and the fact that a thin lead spacer was inserted between lines. Holmes fails to specify the type font, the most important identifying characteristic.

6. See “Sherlock Holmes Missing in Swiss Alps” in Peter Calamai, “A Peek in Mrs. Hudson’s Scrapbook,” *Canadian Holmes*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Lady Day (Spring) 2000, pp. 4–30, especially 28–30.
7. For an excellent history of the WMN, see Margaret Sutton, “A History of the *Western Morning News*,” *The Hound*, Vol. 3. Hampshire: Sherlock Publications, 1994.
8. By 1892, there were nine such editions, including a Wednesday Ashburton version. The original proprietors were two brothers, T. and A. Mortimer, who became quite well off from the venture. The *Western Guardian* continued publishing in some form until December 1967. There is no evidence that the Mortimer brothers and Dr. James Mortimer were related.