THE DEVIL'S HOOF PRINTS

DEVON 1855

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The Devil's Hoof-Marks

Contents

Sources

- ancient-origins.net
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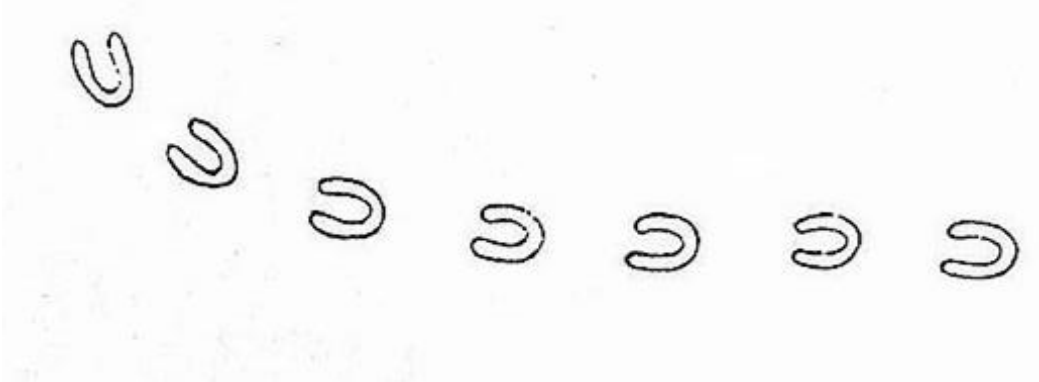
- David Castleton Blog
- Exmouth Local History Group
- Mysteries of the Unexplained (Reader's Digest)
- peter-moore.co.uk
- Wikipedia

The Tracks

The dawn of Friday, February 9, 1855, brought an unusual silence to the towns and villages across the Exe Estuary in east and south Devon. A night of particularly heavy snowfall had blanketed the landscape in a pristine white, but as residents began to emerge from their homes, this tranquillity was shattered by a perplexing discovery. Etched into the fresh, undisturbed snow was a series of prints, unlike anything seen before.



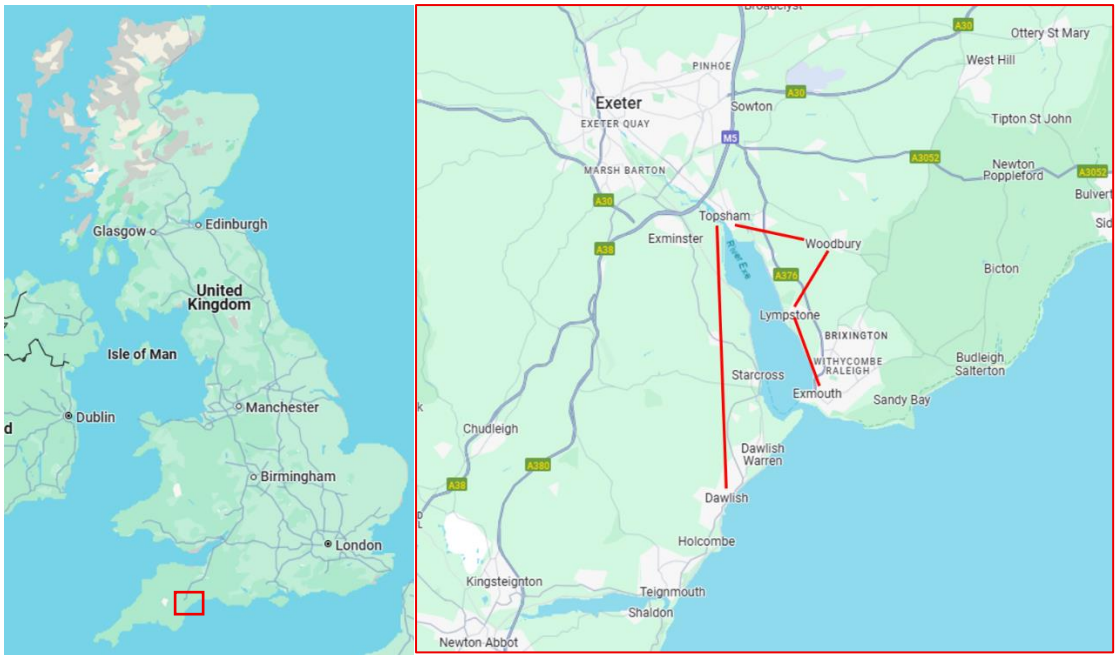
An illustration of the prints from The Illustrated London News, 1855

These marks were consistently described as being approximately 4 inches (10 cm) long and 3 inches (7.6 cm) wide. Their shape varied slightly in individual reports, but most resembled either a distinct donkey's hoof or a cloven print. What was particularly striking was their arrangement: they appeared in a single, unwavering line, with an almost precise spacing of between 8 and 16 inches (20 to 41 cm) from one print to the next. The prints were not mere surface indentations; they were often pressed deep into the snow, frequently reaching the ground beneath, suggesting a significant force or weight.

While the dominant description of the prints was that of a small hoof, similar to a donkey or a pony, or cloven like a cow's, variations were reported. Some accounts noted a distinct central indentation or a slightly elongated, elliptical shape. Others described a perfectly circular depression. These subtle differences, though minor, contributed to the confusion and speculation, as no single known animal track perfectly matched every reported characteristic across the vast expanse of the affected area.

The most baffling characteristic of these tracks was the inexplicable paths they traversed. The prints were observed leading directly over obstacles such as high garden walls and fences, with no accumulation of snow disturbed on either side of the barrier. Similarly, they continued straight over dense, thorny hedges and substantial woodpiles, leaving no discernible break or sign of passage through them.

More remarkably, the single line of prints ascended and descended the roofs of numerous houses and outbuildings, leaving clear impressions on the snow-covered thatch or slate, without any evidence of entry or exit points at ground level. Reports also detailed the prints appearing to cross bodies of water, including the River Exe, as if the originating entity had walked across the surface. In some instances, tracks were even reported to lead up to and exit narrow drainpipes, with openings as small as 4 inches in diameter, a physical impossibility for any known creature of size.



The geographical spread of this phenomenon was extensive, encompassing numerous communities across Devon. Tracks were reported in and around towns and villages such as Exmouth, Lympstone, Woodbury, Topsham, Dawlish, and Teignmouth. The cumulative distance of the reported tracks was estimated to range between 40 and 100 miles (60 and 160 km), indicating a widespread and concurrent event across a significant portion of the county.

The details of these observations are meticulously recorded in contemporary newspaper accounts, notably The Illustrated London News, and preserved in the extensive correspondence of local figures, such as the Reverend H.T. Ellacombe of Clyst St George, who diligently documented reports from his parishioners and the wider community.

Public Reaction and Panic

The discovery of the inexplicable hoof-like prints on the morning of February 9, 1855, swiftly moved from local curiosity to widespread alarm across the affected areas of Devon. The sheer number of prints, their bizarre paths over and through obstacles, and their resemblance to a cloven hoof, immediately ignited deep-seated fears and religious interpretations among the populace.

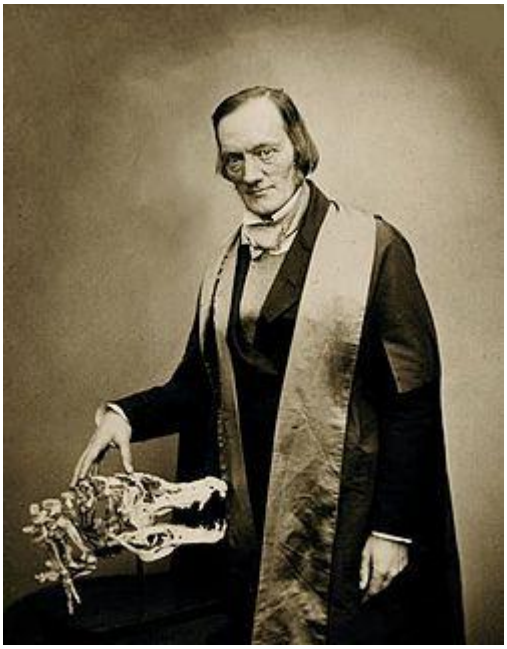
A significant portion of the local population, particularly the less educated, became convinced that the tracks were the work of Satan himself. This belief stemmed directly from the prints' cloven appearance, a characteristic long associated with the Devil in Christian folklore. This conviction led to a palpable atmosphere of fear and distress. Reports indicate that some residents were genuinely afraid to leave their homes after sunset, believing "His Satanic Majesty" was roaming the countryside in search of sinners. The incident was serious enough that it was "descanted on from the pulpit," with some clergymen addressing the phenomenon in their sermons, inadvertently or intentionally fuelling the supernatural fears.

The attribution of the Devon hoof-marks to the Devil taps into a long history of similar fears and legends. Throughout various cultures and time periods, unexplained phenomena – from unusual weather patterns to strange natural markings – have been linked to malevolent supernatural entities, often personified as a 'Devil' or demon. These incidents frequently reflect societal anxieties and a lack of scientific understanding of complex events.

In several communities, the alarm translated into direct action. Many townspeople, particularly in places like Dawlish, armed themselves with guns and bludgeons and set out in groups to track down the responsible entity. These initial attempts to follow the prints, often for miles, proved fruitless, only serving to deepen the mystery as the tracks continued to defy logical explanation.

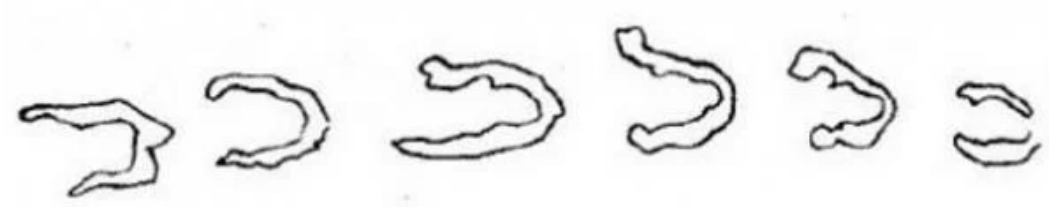
While fear was prevalent, reactions were not uniformly superstitious. Journalists, naturalists, and some more educated clergymen quickly sought rational explanations, viewing the widespread panic as "an excitement worthy of the dark ages." Newspapers like *The Times* and *The Illustrated London News*, while reporting the sensation, also published letters and opinions from those seeking a scientific or mundane cause for the tracks, indicating a division in public and intellectual thought. Some accounts also suggest a degree of scepticism or even humorous attempts to explain the events, though these were often overshadowed by the prevailing anxiety.

The Search for an Explanation



The widespread panic and scientific curiosity ignited by the Devil's Hoof-marks quickly prompted attempts at rational explanation. Naturalists, scientists, and even some clergy sought to demystify the phenomenon, proposing theories based on the limited scientific understanding and observations of the era.

One of the most prominent early figures to weigh in was **Sir Richard Owen**, a renowned comparative anatomist and superintendent of the natural history departments of the British Museum. Owen, known for coining the term 'dinosaur,' suggested that the prints were likely those of a badger. He posited that badgers, being 'plantigrade quadrupeds' (walking with the soles of their feet on the ground), could leave unusual prints, especially when their hind feet landed precisely in the impressions made by their front feet, creating a deceptive single-file appearance. However, this theory struggled to account for the prints' vast geographical spread and their improbable traversal of rooftops and walls.



Images of the devil's hoofprints sent in sent in a letter by Reverend G.M. Musgrave from Exmouth

Another intriguing, albeit speculative, theory came from the Reverend G.M. Musgrave, who proposed an escaped kangaroo as the culprit. His reasoning stemmed from the kangaroo's bipedal hopping gait, which could potentially leave a series of single prints. An incident involving an escaped kangaroo from a private menagerie near Exeter years prior was cited, suggesting such an occurrence was not entirely unprecedented. While this theory offered a potential explanation for the single-file nature, the sheer scale of the prints, their consistent appearance across diverse and often inaccessible terrains, and the extreme weather conditions of that night made it highly improbable that a single animal could have been responsible for all the reported marks.

The mid-19th century was a period of immense scientific advancement, yet also one where many natural phenomena remained unexplained. While disciplines like geology, biology, and meteorology were rapidly developing, the tools and understanding available were still limited compared to modern times. This era often saw a fascinating blend of rigorous observation and speculative theory, particularly when confronted with events that defied immediate explanation. The Devil's Hoof-marks case perfectly illustrates this, as some of the brightest minds of the day grappled with a puzzle that seemed to transcend conventional natural laws.

Other, more mundane, suggestions were put forward. Some locals speculated about donkeys or ponies whose hooves might have been unusually shaped by snow or ice, or whose gait might have been altered by the deep snow. However, this failed to explain the prints appearing on roofs or high walls. Theories involving birds, particularly large ones whose tracks could resemble cloven marks in certain conditions, were also considered, though the continuous, heavy nature of the prints challenged this idea.

Even meteorological phenomena were considered. Some hypothesised that unusual patterns of freezing and thawing snow, or perhaps wind vortexes interacting with existing minor irregularities, could have created such precise and extensive marks. However, no convincing evidence or repeatable conditions could demonstrate how natural processes alone could produce prints of such uniform appearance and impossible trajectory over vast distances. Despite the earnest efforts of these early investigators, each proposed natural explanation struggled to account for the full, perplexing range of observations.

Enduring Mystery

Despite the initial fervent attempts to explain the Devil's Hoof-marks in 1855, no definitive solution was established. The phenomenon largely faded from public discourse, only to resurface periodically, continually captivating those interested in unexplained events. Over time, new researchers and evolving scientific understanding led to a reconsideration of the evidence and the proposal of alternative theories.

A significant modern contribution to the study of the Devil's Hoof-marks comes from researcher Mike Dash. His meticulous work involved compiling and analysing nearly all available contemporary accounts, including newspaper reports, private letters, and sketches. Dash's comprehensive review highlighted the inconsistencies and variations in eyewitness testimonies, while also underscoring the extraordinary nature of the more credible reports. His research helped to solidify the event's place as a genuine historical mystery, rather than mere local folklore.

Later theories have sought to provide more plausible natural explanations, often focusing on specific environmental conditions or animal behaviours not fully appreciated in 1855. One prominent hypothesis suggests that the tracks could have been made by small hopping rodents, such as wood mice or rats. In deep, fresh snow, when these animals leap, their hind limbs often land in alignment with or slightly ahead of their front paws, and the impressions made can be surprisingly large and distorted, sometimes resembling a single, cloven print. Their ability to access confined spaces and traverse varied terrain, including potentially over low structures, lends some weight to this theory for at least some of the prints.

Other considerations include unusual atmospheric or meteorological conditions. It has been speculated that unique patterns of freezing rain, melting and refreezing snow, or even peculiar wind patterns could have distorted existing animal prints or created novel marks. However, definitively replicating such effects to match the reported scale and precision of the 1855 event has proven challenging. More speculative, recent suggestions, occasionally surfacing in popular media, have even included escaped 'big cats' (such as pumas), with proponents arguing their paws could leave distorted prints in specific snow conditions, and their agility might account for some difficult traversals. However, there is no historical evidence of such animals being present in Devon in 1855.

It is also generally accepted that hoaxes likely played a role in some of the reported tracks. The initial panic and widespread media attention could have inspired individuals to create their own 'devil prints' for amusement or mischief. However, the sheer geographical extent, consistent reporting, and eyewitness credibility of the core events make it highly improbable that all reported tracks were the result of human fabrication. The mystery of the Devil's Hoof-marks persists precisely because no single, comprehensive explanation has ever fully accounted for every attested detail of that unusual winter night.

A Footprint in Folklore

The event of February 9, 1855, in Devon, remains one of history's most compelling and perplexing anomalies. What began as a local curiosity in the snow quickly escalated into a widespread phenomenon, leaving behind a trail of physical prints and profound societal impact. The central facts are clear: a single, unbroken line of distinct, hoof-like marks appeared across dozens of miles of snow-covered landscape, seemingly defying logic by traversing walls, hedges, and rooftops, and even crossing waterways and entering narrow pipes.

The immediate reaction was one of widespread panic, with many attributing the tracks to supernatural forces, specifically the Devil. This fear led to sermons from pulpits and attempts by armed locals to track the mysterious entity. While early scientific inquiries from figures like Sir Richard Owen proposed explanations involving badgers or even kangaroos, these theories ultimately failed to account for the extraordinary scale and physical impossibilities of the tracks.

Over time, more contemporary analyses, supported by detailed compilation of historical reports, have explored theories ranging from hopping rodents to specific meteorological conditions, or even acknowledging the likelihood of some hoaxes. Yet, even with modern understanding, no single, definitive explanation has managed to encompass every peculiar detail of the Devon phenomenon. The Devil's Hoof-marks therefore endures as a captivating example of an unexplained historical event, a testament to nature's capacity for the bizarre, and a fascinating insight into human reaction when faced with the utterly mysterious. It remains a unique footnote in British folklore and an intriguing puzzle that continues to spark curiosity almost two centuries later.