Dracula – The Birth of a Legend:

The Folkloric Inspiration Behind the Famous Book

"The houses of the old town – the side away from us – are all red-roofed, and seem piled up one over the other anyhow, like the pictures we see of Nuremberg." (Stoker, Dracula, p. 69) – Whitby as described by Mina Murray; and as it is today (pictured above)

Prior to Stoker's visit to Whitby in the summer of 1890, it is generally thought that his intention was to situate his novel in Styria, the setting for that other famous vampire

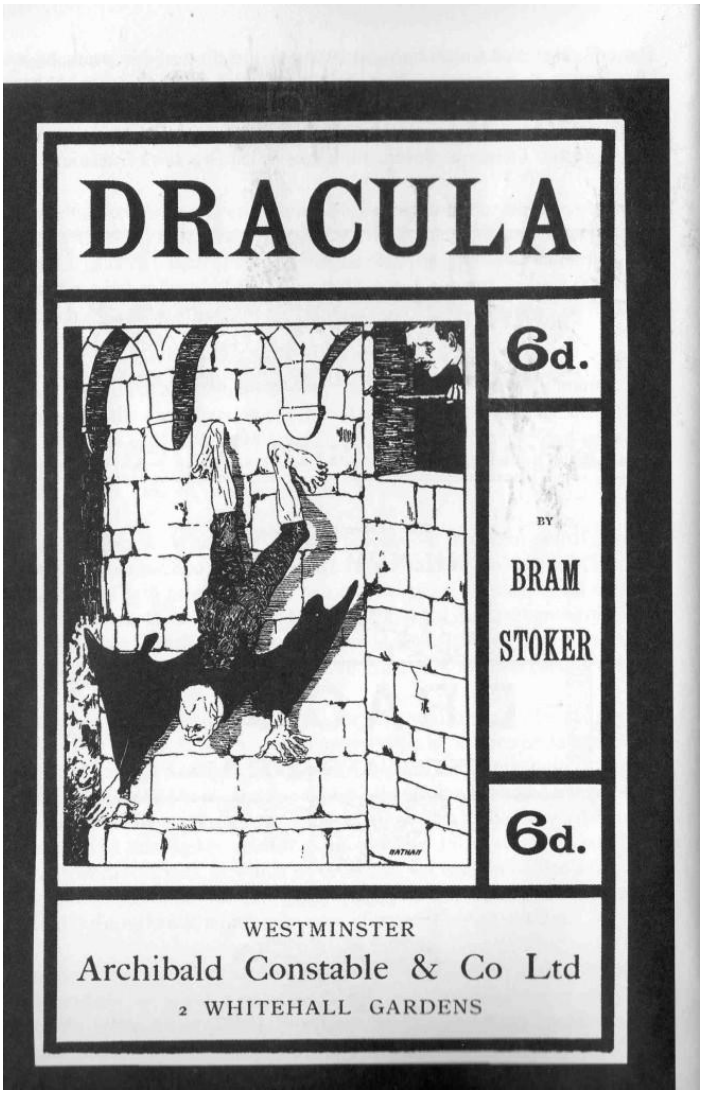
novella, *Carmilla*, by Sheridan le Fanu. We know this from his working notes, but also from an episode Stoker edited out of his novel, but which was later published posthumously by his wife, Florence. *Dracula's Guest* features an intrepid traveller, not unlike Jonathan Harker, who whilst out exploring stumbles across a mysterious cemetery. The largest tomb commemorates:

COUNTESS DOLINGEN OF
GRATZ
IN STYRIA
SOUGHT AND FOUND DEATH
1801

As the traveller notes: "On top of the tomb, seemingly driven through the solid marble - for the structure was composed of a few vast blocks of stone – was a great iron spike or stake. On going to the back I saw, graven in great Russian letters: "The dead travel fast."[1]

[1]Stoker, Bram, "Dracula's Guest" in *Dracula's Guest and Other Stories*, (London: A Public Domain Book, Kindle Edition, 2012)

The iron spike is fixed there to hold the vampire in place; but it was Stoker's own travels and his experiences in Whitby which would shape the novel *Dracula*. A visit to the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society Library during his summer holiday in 1890 provided him with the inspiration to change his vampire's heritage from Styrian to Transylvanian.



The cover of the first paperback edition of Dracula. 1901

During his researches in the library, Stoker happened across an obscure book - the snappily titled: *An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia with various Political Observations Relating to Them;* by William

Wilkinson. As Chapman notes: "In the pages of Wilkinson's *Account* Stoker found a wealth of information relating to the Carpathian area" [such as the following]:

> *Dracula in the Wallachian language means Devil. The Wallachians were, at that time, as they are at present, used to give this as a surname to any person who rendered himself conspicuous by courage, cruel actions or cunning.*[2]

The recondite tome provided Stoker with the name for his vampire, in addition to many other useful facts concerning the area of his provenance.

Yet why would Dracula choose Whitby as the first location to set foot upon when he arrives on English shores? There are many other ports he could have more

[2] Chapman, Paul M., *Birth of a Legend: Count Dracula, Bram Stoker and Whitby* (York: G H Smith & Son, 2007), p. 44

conveniently travelled to; not least London which his ship sails past on its journey northwards. As Chapman observes: "Count Dracula's given reason is that he has engaged the services of more than one English solicitor, in disparate locations, in order that his affairs will not be known in their entirety to any one single law firm"[3]; and there's something to be said for this. Whitby is certainly isolated enough for the Count's taste. Anyone who has tried to either drive or travel by train to Whitby will know that it is not the easiest location to reach.

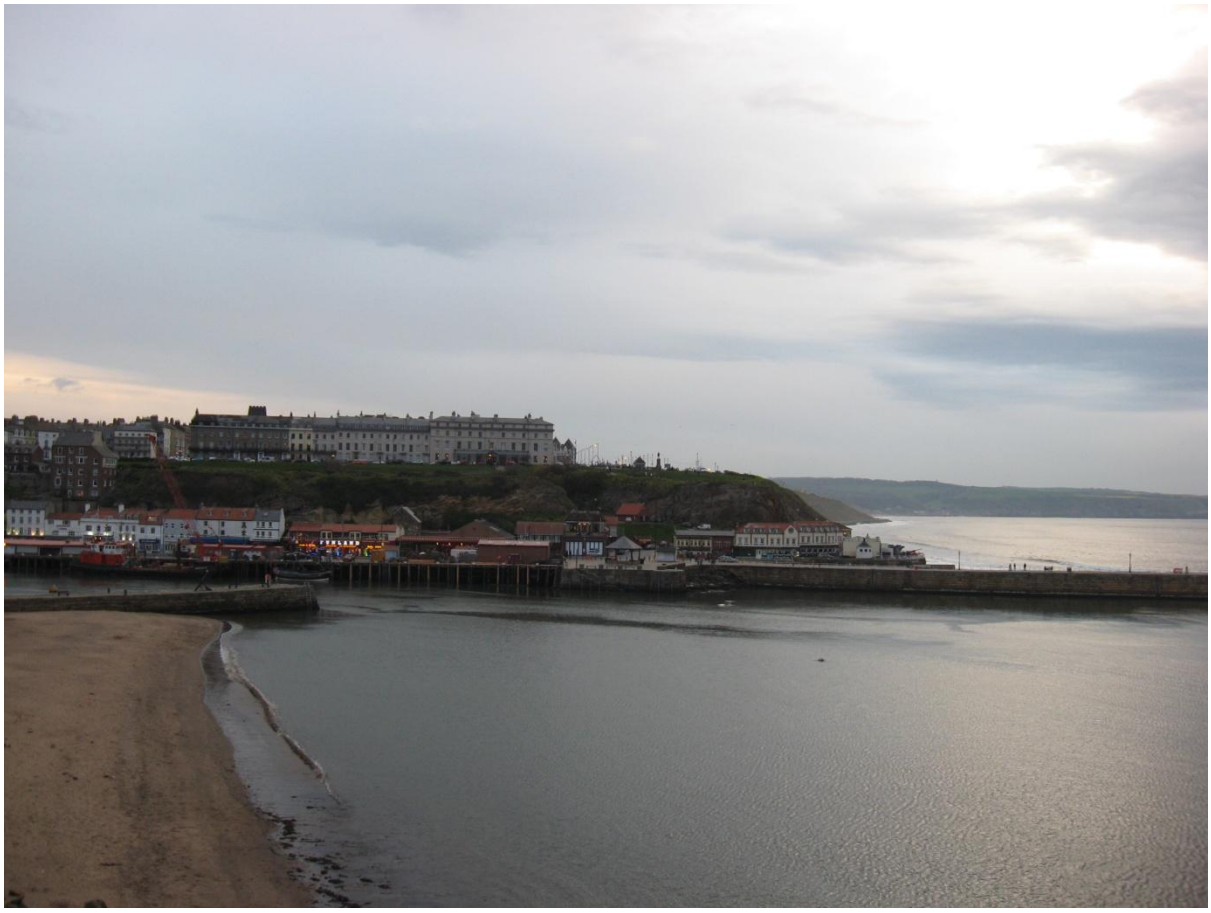
Whitby is surrounded by the bleak North Yorkshire Moors and then cut off by the sea – it is not the easiest location to reach.

[3] Chapman, p. 26

Chapman provides a further reason for Dracula's settlement in Whitby:

> The real reason for Whitby's presence in the novel is, of course, that Bram Stoker quite obviously fell in love with the town and knew that he had to utilise it as a location in at least one of his stories. It's mixture of modern tourism and traditional maritime industry, the marked physical difference between its two sides; the development to be found along the West cliff contrasting with the antiquity of the east side, and, brooding over all, the Gothic entity of the abbey, lent it an appropriate air for the opening encounter between a more ancient Europe, in the person of a centuries-old vampire, and the representatives of the world's then leading commercial and colonial nation.[4]

[4] Chapman, p. 26



Whitby Town – a mixture of old meets new – this is a view of the West Cliff with its amusement arcades and "Dracula Experience"

If one is utilising the argument that the town's appeal lies in its encapsulation of both the ancient and the modern, then it seems apparent that the many traditional folktales associated with Whitby would appeal to Stoker. Indeed, within his novel it is possible to trace the echoes of many myths and legends local to the town. Consider, for example, the form in which Dracula opts to come ashore; that of a large black dog. The myth of the

spectral black dog, the “barguest”, also known as the “pad-pad” and the “gytrash” is a traditional Yorkshire legend. Reputed to stalk the streets and moorland fells after dark, those who hear its howling are destined to die soon, if the folktale is to be believed. Whitby, itself, has its own resident Barguest, in legend. The fiercesome black hound is said to haunt “Haggerlythe”, now known as “Henrietta Street”, which sits in the shadow of the 199 steps leading up to the ruined Abbey and St. Mary’s Church.

Henrietta Street, Whitby, site of the reputed haunting of the Barguest, a spectral black dog

The spectral hound with its "immense eyes, large as saucers and bright as fire"[5], is a recurring motif in many tales set in the town, from very contemporary writings, such as W. M. Hollins's *Whitby*[6] from 2013, spanning right back to Walter Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel*:

> His blood did freeze, his brain did burn,
> T'was feared his mind would ne'er return;
> For he was speechless, ghastly, wan,
> For him of whom the story ran,
> Who spoke the spectre-hound in Man.[7]

It is to Walter Scott we must look to discover the influence of a further Whitby folktale on Stoker's narrative. Within the novel, Mina Murray introduces Whitby by referring to the town's mysterious heritage. She informs:

> Right over the town is the ruin of Whitby Abbey, which was sacked by the Danes, and which is the scene of part of

[5] Parkinson, Thomas, *Yorkshire Legends and Traditions* (London: Elliot Stock, 1882), p. 127
[6] Hollins, W. M, *Whitby* (Woodinville: Joseph Donahue LLC, 2013)
[7] Cited in Parkinson, p. 129

> 'Marmion', where the girl was built up in the wall. It is a most noble ruin of immense size, and full of beautiful and romantic bits; [...] there is a legend that a white lady is seen in one of the windows.[8]

In fact, it is Lindisfarne Abbey (just a little further up the coast) in which the unfortunate Constance is "built up in the wall" in Scott's *Marmion*; but there *is* a legend of an unlucky nun (also named "Constance") who was bricked up alive within Whitby Abbey walls. However, there is some difference of opinion as to identity of the "white lady" who is said to be seen in the windows of the ruined Abbey after dark. Some assert it is the spectre of St. Hilda; others that it is the nun, Constance.

Lindisfarne Abbey

[8] Stoker, *Dracula*, p. 69

Gaskin, in his 1909 poem "The Old Seaport of Whitby" asserts it is the spectre of St. Hilda, permitting her to explain her ghostly presence for herself:

> Likewise the abbey now you see
>
> I made, that you might think of me
>
> Also a window there I plac'd
>
> That you might see me as undress'd
>
> In morning gown and nightrail, there…[9]

Model of Whitby Abbey, prior to the collapse of the central tower, featured in Pannet Park Museum, Whitby

[9] Cited in McDermott, Paul, *The Whitby Ghost Book – Hauntings, Legends & Superstitions* (Slough, Berkshire: Kindle Direct Publishing, 2007), p. 33

The lady in her nightrail, haunting the darkened streets, is echoed in Stoker's own text, in the form of Lucy in her "snowy white" nightgown, on her nocturnal ramblings:

> For a moment or two I could see nothing, as the shadow of a cloud obscured St. Mary's Church and all around it. Then as the cloud passed I could see the ruins of the Abbey coming into view; and as the edge of a narrow band of light as sharp as a sword-cut moved along, the church and the churchyard became gradually visible. Whatever my expectation was, it was not disappointed, for there, on our favourite seat, the silver light of the moon struck a half-reclining figure, snowy white.[10]

Royal Crescent, where Mina stays with Lucy in Whitby; and from where she sets out to find Lucy after Mina realises she has walked in her sleep.

[10] Stoker, *Dracula*, p. 99

There are further parallels between Scott's *Marmion* and Stoker's novel which transcend the influence of Whitby's folklore. Consider the following from Scott's epic poem:

> Danger, long travel, want, or woe,
> Soon change the form that best we know –
> For deadly fear can time outgo,
> And blanch at once the hair;[11]

and compare this with the point in the text when Jonathan Harker receives one final shock in the form of the realisation that his beloved Mina has been infected by the vampire:

> As she was telling her terrible story, the eastern sky began to quicken, and everything became more and more clear, Harker was still and quiet; but over his face, as the awful narrative went on, came a grey

[11] Scott, Walter, *Marmion* (London: A Public Domain Book, Kindle Edition, 2012), XXVIII, Canto the First

look which deepened in the morning light, till when the first red streak of the coming dawn shot up, the flesh stood darkly out against the whitening hair.[12]

Keanu Reeves in Bram Stoker's Dracula (1992), his hair whitened.

These days, Stoker's novel has inspired a folklore all of its own. In an article in the *Whitby Gazette* of 27th October 2006, as part of the biannual "Goth weekend", writer Billy Yull brought to Whitby Bram Stoker's original writing desk. Yull told reporters that the desk had "brought him misfortune after misfortune" and:

[12] Stoker, *Dracula*, p. 269

since receiving the desk friends and family have experienced a strange phenomenon. "For some unknown reason, our bedroom which does not house the desk, will fill up with the strong odour of the wild garlic flower."[13]

It is an unlikely story; a tale which one suspects Mr. Swales of Stoker's *Dracula* would describe thus:

'It be all fool-talk, lock, stock and barrel; that's what it be an' nowt else. These bans an' wafts an' boh-ghosts an barguests and bogles an' all anent them is only fit to set bairns an' dizzy women a-belderin'. They be nowt but air-blebs![14]

Val Derbyshire

[13] Fredman, Alex, "Mysterious Dracula Desk Comes to Town" in *Whitby Gazette*, 27th October 2006, p. 17
[14] Stoker, *Dracula*, p. 71