

The Earth Hound—a Living Banffshire Belief

In 1950, the *People's Journal* of 24 June contained a paragraph about 'yird pigs' or 'earth huns'. They were said to be 'really rats and . . . only found in graveyards' (*PJ*, 24 June 1950). Further investigation turned up a reference by the Reverend Walter Gregor in 1881, the oldest one so far identified. He spoke of 'a mysterious dreaded sort of animal, called the "yird swine" . . . believed to live in graveyards, burrowing among the dead bodies and devouring them' (Gregor 1881, 130).

More information came from the archives of the Department of Natural History of the National Museums of Scotland. A letter written by A. Smith, Rayne School, Wattle, Aberdeenshire, dated 11 December 1917, to James Ritchie in Edinburgh, relates how the father of one Archibald, Gardener at Warhill, 'remembered quite well his father turning up one (an "earth hund") in its nest when ploughing in the haughs of Deveron about 50 years ago. He (the father) tried to kill it with his foot, but it bit and cut his boot, and he killed it with a "swingle-tree" and brought it home. It was brown in colour somewhat like a rat, but had a long head like a dog's—(hound's), and a tail bushier than a rat's, but he could not say how bushy. Their nests were from time to time turned up by the plough, but the animals themselves were very rarely seen, reputed to frequent churchyards. This was in the immediate neighbourhood of a churchyard which was eventually disused owing to the firm belief that it was infested with earth-hunds. They invariably lived in the immediate neighbourhood of water, and their nests were in haughs.

'Archibald saw this one himself, has quite a distinct recollection of it, and says all the neighbours were interested to see it, and all agreed it was an earth-hund from its appearance, though it did not transpire whether any of them were acquainted with the animal before. . . . He describes it as being something between a rat and a weasel, and about the size of a ferret, head very like that of a dog, and I think he said the tail was not very long. At a casual glance it would be mistaken for a rat, but was quite unlike on close examination.'

There is also a note by the same writer, with the same date, but posted on the following day. It reads as follows:

'Had occasion unexpectedly to visit Mastrick on W.S. business about 10 p.m. tonight. Did not see the old man, who was presumably in bed. Asked about the supposed earth hund, with undernoted result.

It was not this season but 2 years or so ago it was killed.

It was turned up by the plough (by Jas. McIntosh, I think).

It ran along the furrow some distance before it was killed.

His recollection was that it was about the size of a rat. Asked about colour, he thought it was like a dark rat. It had feet like a mole, and a tail about half as long as a rat's.

Head was long and nostrils very prominent, suggesting a pig's. Head somewhat like that of a guinea-pig.

It had noticeable white "tusks", whatever that might mean—(probably incisors).

Other members of the family added the latter details.

Some reference, vague, was made to some large heap or heaps occurring on the farm credited by their father to earth-hunds.

Mastrick is about 10 minutes' walk from here, and curiously enough is close to the churchyard. . . .'

Even today, there seems to be a belief in these creatures. In April 1990, when A.F. visited a friend in Keith, that sprawling three-part Banffshire town, conversation turned to the earth hound. 'They're atween a rat an a rabbit,' he said. 'They live in graveyards. They howk doon an cleek intae the coffins. . . . Aye, I'll tak ye tae far they are.' We drove through Fife Keith, along the Dufftown road and then by side roads, rising through forestry plantations and bare hillside through the Haugh of Glass and then a couple of miles on to the Hill of Dumeath, stopping on its shoulder just before Beldorney Castle.

Below us was Walla Kirkyard. Instead of a road to it, there was only a wide fenced-off strip of field, giving access down a steepish slope in dry conditions, but surely not in ice or snow. The kirkyard stood on the edge of the River Deveron, alone, remote from any church.

We walked amongst the stones. The oldest dated to 1741. There were new graves in an extension against the old wall. My friend looked intently around the stones where someone had cleared weeds and bared the earth, searching for scrapes and scratch marks, but Walla Kirkyard revealed none of its mysteries. No earth hound appeared, no reeking burrows were seen.

It is part of the North-east sense of humour that a grim topic can be pursued in all apparent seriousness, and this A.F.'s friend did. If he did not in his heart believe in earth hounds, at least he never dropped his mask.

REFERENCE

GREGOR, REV. WALTER

1881

Notes on the Folk-lore of North East Scotland. London.

ALEXANDER FENTON AND DAVID HEPPELL