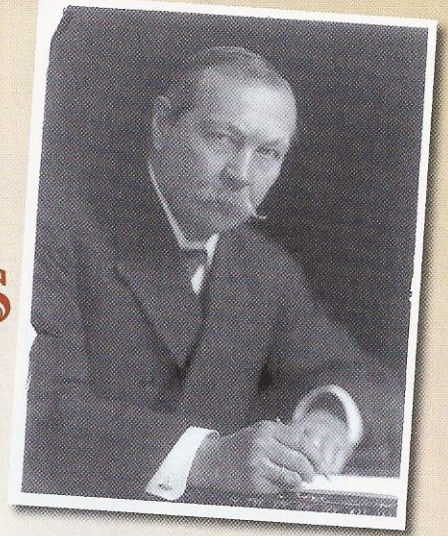


The real Sherlock Holmes

The inspiration for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's world-famous creation Sherlock Holmes came not from an archetypal English gent, but from a Scottish surgeon with powers of observation which seemed almost supernatural, writes Crispin Andrews



Arthur Conan Doyle created a very English character who was based on a real-life Scottish lecturer

Sherlock Holmes is about as English as you can get. Even Robert Downey Junior, who this Christmas once again, swaps the trademark deerstalker for a fedora, and dresses like he's been pulled through a hedge backwards, seems for an hour and a half, at least, a little less American than usual. In BBC's modern-day *Sherlock*, Benedict Cumberbatch is a typical, if somewhat eccentric, English gentleman. In the Holmesian world, England is everywhere. Its crowded cities, its green and pleasant lands, even its dark, unforgiving moors.

Sherlock Holmes then, would be synonymous with Englishness, if not for one thing: the world's most famous fictional detective was created by a Scotsman, who based him on another Scotsman.

Joseph Bell was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's boss at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. Sherlock Holmes's creator worked there as Bell's clerk. Bell, Queen Victoria's personal physician when she visited Scotland, had real powers of observation and deduction. During lectures at Edinburgh University, where Doyle was a student, Bell would often

pick out a stranger and work out their occupation by observing small facts about the person's appearance.

Sherlock Holmes would famously call the logical connection between observation and deduction: 'elementary'. What seemed like a super power, beyond the comprehension of ordinary mortals, would, when explained, appear absurdly simple.

So in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Watson is aghast when Holmes works out that Doctor Mortimer owns a spaniel from one glance at his walking stick. Until that is, Holmes points out that the location of the bite marks on the stick correspond to the height of a medium sized dog.

Bell was the same, emphasising the importance of close observation when making a diagnosis. He once tricked his students into tasting a potent and bitter-tasting drug, by saying he would taste it first. Bell dipped his finger into the liquid, but the students didn't notice that he placed a different finger into his mouth. They followed what they thought he'd done, and got a nasty taste for not observing closely enough.

Doyle listened to, but could not himself, emulate Bell. He, like Doctor Watson, who Doyle loosely based on himself, lacked the sharpness of mind and depth of knowledge to spot the relevant information, or make the connection with what had happened. Holmes would often say of Watson: 'You have seen everything but observed nothing.'

Just as fictional Scotland Yard often called upon Holmes, so too were the real police interested in Bell's scientific approach. This was a time when forensics were not widely used in criminal investigation, and Bell's skills, they believed, would be equally effective in the field investigating crime, as they were in the laboratory, uncovering cause of death.

In 2000, the BBC dramatised Bell's police role, with former Sherlock Holmes actor Ian Richardson, playing the good doctor in *Murder Rooms: the*

Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes.

A young Doyle often accompanied Bell on these fictional adventures, but the real Bell, without Doyle, did work with the police on some notable cases in the late nineteenth century.

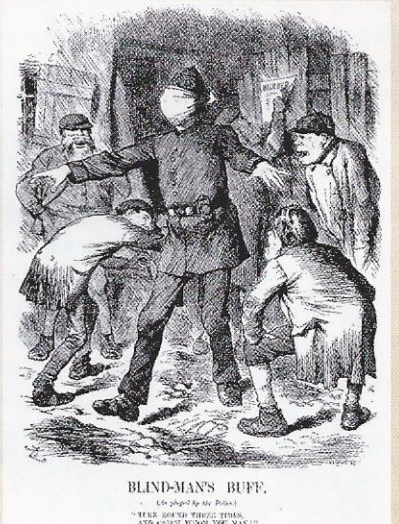
According to American writer Irving Wallace, Bell helped with the 1893 Ardlamont murder. Cecil Hambrough was killed by a gunshot wound on his family estate in Argyll, and Alfred Monson, his tutor, who had been with Hambrough at the time, was arrested for murder. Hambrough had recently taken out life insurance policies from which Monson's wife benefitted. Despite Bell's intervention, Monson was acquitted.

It's rumoured that Bell also helped Scotland Yard during the 1888 Jack the Ripper murders.

The infamous affair had baffled England's best detectives for months. But apparently, and although it was never officially disclosed, seven days after Bell handed the police the name of his suspect, the Ripper murders stopped. ❀



Joseph Bell's acute powers of observation made their way into works such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles*



A *Punch* cartoon from 1888 mocking the police for their inability to find Jack the Ripper, a case on which the police eventually consulted Joseph Bell