

If you go down to the woods today

Chanctonbury Ring is reputedly one of the most haunted places in England. Lonely Planet writer

Oliver Smith braced himself and paid an overnight visit to see what all the fuss is about

A place I'd always wanted to go, Chanctonbury Ring is an Iron Age hill fort on the South Downs, about six miles north of Worthing. It is a rather modest hill, with slender beech trees soaring on a summit where two Roman temples once stood. By day, it commands a fine prospect over the patchwork fields of southern England. It is popular with picnickers and dog walkers.

But that isn't the reason I wanted to go. By night, when the picnickers have departed, it is lavishly, seethingly haunted. Local folklore tells that the Devil himself can be found patrolling the ring. I've heard stories about campers hearing screams in the trees above. Paranormal message boards yield rumours of various ghosts, UFOs, fairies and pagan sacrifice. It is the Roswell of the Home Counties – a place so infested with the supernatural that every time an alien spaceship lowers its landing gear, it crushes a resident pixie. And it seems anyone who spends the night there comes back with a tale to tell.

A direct train runs from outside the Lonely Planet office in London – an opportunity too good to miss.

Armed with a Pot Noodle and a sleeping bag,

I caught a 5pm service, smug to be setting off on a ghost-hunting adventure among homebound commuters. I stomped uphill from Lancing, following chalky ridgeways north through a late-afternoon Arcadia, coloured golden by the slanting sun. Faraway boats pattered across a silvery sea to France, and fields of young wheat swayed in the offshore breeze. I passed through woodland basking in dappled light. These were the wholesome, English woods of Ratty and Mole. No harm could come to me here. I sat on a log, and had a chuckle about the paranormal investigators' reports on Chanctonbury Ring, picturing them shoving Geiger counters into badger's dens in the small hours.

Two hours later night had fallen, and suddenly their paranormal investigations didn't seem so silly. Spiny trees lurched out of the gloom as I arrived at the woods of Chanctonbury Ring. The hill was an island of darkness, rising over lamplit Sussex villages below. Each snap of a branch recalled a creepy infrared photo I had seen on an internet message board. I unpacked my sleeping bag and, for a while consoled myself with sounds of

civilisation: boy racers revving along the A283, planes landing at Gatwick. And then darkness became total, and the only sounds were the hoots of owls, the scuffling of badgers and the nervous thump of my own heartbeat.

And that's when it began. BOOM.

The still of the night was interrupted. The ground seemed to quake beneath me. Was I imagining it? I thought to myself that I could be watching *Newsnight* at home, rather than quivering with fear, volunteering for *The Blair Witch Project*.

And again. BOOM. The ground trembled once more. My blood turned cold. I sat still as a stone, preparing myself for imminent alien abduction. Sure enough, bright lights beamed out of a nearby field a few minutes later. I hauled myself out of my sleeping bag to welcome them to Earth. The alien spacecraft looked very similar to an ambulance, and they had written BOMB DISPOSAL on the side. Two aliens disguised as a soldier and a Sussex police officer jumped out to open a five-bar gate.

Instantly relieved, I affected the technique required for conversations with the army, folding

my arms and straightening my back (which is roughly the same technique used when asking about drill bits in B&Q).

'Was there a, errr, bomb in that field?' I asked, as casually as I could for a bomb-related enquiry. I wondered if they had been doing controlled explosions. The soldier was unimpressed.

'It wasn't a bomb. It was a mine.'

'A German mine from World War II?'

By this point the soldier had performed his own disposal operation on the conversation. He smiled weakly, and jumped back in the van. I walked back to my sleeping bag, pondering whether a Nazi bomb was greater cause for concern than hypothetical extra-terrestrials. I fell into a deep sleep under the canopy of a beech tree, waking only when the first beams of sunrise were gathering over the distant Kentish Weald.

I packed my rucksack and said farewell to Chanctonbury Ring, returning to the office with no tales of ghosts, devils, aliens or fairies. But then again, it wasn't my fault. The explosions had probably scared them all off.