

Waymarker

Following the track from Bellringers Hollow the walker feels certain of his planned route. For him the forest is a familiar place, a benign presence. Next week he will be leading a walk for a local rambling group and this 'recce' is to ensure the paths chosen are clearly defined and free of obstruction. It is possible, he knows, for leaders to lose groups in the forest, but he is confident in his task having walked these woods for more than half a lifetime.

He moves deeper into the forest. Suddenly it seems remote and alien. The old trees stretch away on all sides. He knows that not far away are broad rides, green and safe. Yet here are no paths, no horizons, no directions anywhere. His constant companions, map and compass, seem to have little meaning at this moment. Nearby in the ancient camp enclosure and time stands still as it has for over two thousand years. Immediately he senses the mixture of fear and reverence earlier inhabitants must have felt in this environment.

To his side a shadowy figure emerges from the camp's earthworks, its shape blending so well with the sylvan enclave he is unsure of its reality. An arm rises and a spectral finger indicates a direction away from the camp. He looks that way and glancing back, more in wonder than fear, the figure fades and time moves on. He now sees a faint almost forgotten track snaking alongside a narrow brook. Following this for some while he reaches a familiar ride, slicing through the forest.

The walker is now sure of the route to take for the coming week's ramble. Whether he will tell the group of today's woodland encounter, he does not yet know.

John Juchau