

THE BRANSCOMBE PROJECT

HISTORY SNIPS

KATE SUMMERSCALE talking about the Branscombe episode in her book: 'The Haunting of Alma Fielding'.

I first visited Branscombe in the winter of 2016 to try to find out what became of Alma Fielding, a Croydon housewife who reported a poltergeist in her home in February 1938. For four months of that year, Alma had been the subject of a supernatural investigation by the Hungarian ghost hunter Nandor Fodor, but she had afterwards returned to obscurity. I learnt from one of Alma's grandsons that she and her husband, Leslie, had moved to Branscombe in 1940. When they died in the 1970s they were buried in the village churchyard.

On my visits to Branscombe over the next three years, I spoke to villagers who remembered the Fieldings and to local historians who helped me sketch out their lives in Devon.

The Fieldings left Croydon soon after the outbreak of the Second World War. Alma was slowly recovering from the poltergeist episode and the ensuing investigation, which had brought her close to a nervous breakdown. Les leased a flat piece of land halfway down the cliff at Branscombe, near a spot that the family had visited for a camping holiday the previous summer. He arranged for a self-assembly bungalow to be delivered to the clifftop, then lowered to the plat on ropes. He and his 18-year-old son Don laid the foundations in the spring of 1940. They camouflaged the building's roof with paint as protection against enemy bombers.

Les and Don joined the Home Guard. Les took charge of the nightly patrol along the clifftop and of the machine-gun emplacement above the beach. He and his son put in twelve-hour shifts at a secret munitions works in the back of a hair-lotion factory in the village square, while Alma volunteered as a nurse with the St John Ambulance brigade, tending convalescent soldiers in Sidmouth.

Les described the years after the war as the happiest of his life. He and Alma lived simply on their plat. They used a hand pump to draw water from a spring, planted peach and apple trees on the rich green turf in front of the bungalow, and a vine at the entrance. For fuel, Les bought Calor gas cylinders in the village and carted them through the cliff pass in a wheelbarrow purchased with John Player's cigarette coupons.

Some villagers wondered what the Fieldings were doing there, tucked away on the far side of the cliff. Were they on the run? Were they hiding from something? Were they spies? There was an air of mystery about them. I learnt that Alma occasionally held seances in the village. At one sitting, the table thumped excitedly and knives and forks leapt in the air. At another, pennies rained down from the ceiling. At a third, the son of one of the cliff farmers heard jingling and spirit voices, and felt a great heaviness in his legs and upon his shoulders.

The psychical investigator Nandor Fodor remained fascinated by Alma. Though he had discovered in 1938 that she was faking some of her phenomena, he believed that others were genuine supernatural happenings, generated by traumatic events in her childhood. And even in Branscombe, where she and Les found a measure of peace, Alma could still make others feel her disturbance and unease.

Kate Summerscale's 'The Haunting of Alma Fielding' is published by Bloomsbury Circus