

Britain's Spookiest trail runs

Picturesque coastal trails, the legend of Dracula and countless ghouls! Whitby is one hell of a place to grab your headtorch and get ready to run for your life

Words Claire Maxted Photos Tom Bailey



A violent storm whips up around Whitby; a sailing ship crashes into the harbour. Its captain is found dead, having lashed himself to the wheel holding a crucifix. A terrifying, huge, black dog leaps off and disappears. Dracula is here! It wasn't hard to imagine this gruesome scene from Bram Stoker's novel as we ran along the cliff top path towards the ancient town that inspired his most famous story. Waves lashed the rocks below, sea salt delicately flavoured every breath and the sun bled meekly behind bulging grey clouds.

On this path curving high above the sea, long shadows lurked around every corner and took on strange, possibly monstrous shapes. Luckily, Jono Urban and Lucy Jackson from Loftus and Whitby AC were made of sterner stuff. No ghosts, ghouls or even Count D himself would affect our night run along the Cleveland Way National Trail, into Whitby. Or would they?

We set off from Hawsker, a few miles

to the south-east of Whitby before sunset, headtorches already on our heads so we didn't have to hunt for them once it got dark. We headed north-east on the footpath to the sea, picking up the Cleveland Way National Trail at Maw Wyke Hole and enjoying views of the swell in the fading light, imagining Dracula's ship looming on the horizon.

Sandy bays gave way to dark, rocky outcrops as we ran to the eerily beautiful ruins of Whitby Abbey, which formed the backdrop for Dracula's British adventure (pre-stake to the heart). Ever-weakening rays of sun slid through the glass-less windows, soon to be replaced by silvery moonlight. Then there was a howl.

Was it the wind? Or could it have been the ghost of a young nun, allegedly walled up alive in the Abbey as punishment for breaking her vow of celibacy? Her ghost has been seen running through the abbey in a desperate attempt to flee her fate. Running through the abbey ourselves, every shadow took on a more sinister

meaning. The pace sped up, but we were only headed towards an even spookier place – St Mary's Church graveyard.

As we ran down to the church, perched high above Whitby on East Cliff, streetlights twinkled below in the fading light. Time to turn on the headtorches so as not to trip over a gravestone, or even worse, the cliff edge. Waves and weather are slowly eating the graveyard; human bones have been found at the base of the cliffs. We aimed not to add to this build-up as we ran past tombs, flashing torchlight over potential trip hazards.

Of the carved words we could make out, many read 'in memory of' rather than 'here lies' because many of Whitby's men perished at sea, never to be seen again. Stoker also used names on the headstones for Dracula's unfortunate victims... It's not a place for anyone faint-hearted to be hanging →





around, however bright your headtorch.

On cold clear nights, not unlike this one, you may hear the pounding of hooves galloping towards the church. A horse and carriage seem to come straight for you, ghostly driver whipping them to go faster in panic. Faint apparitions stop the coach at the church entrance, the horses rear up and poof! They're gone.

Without even waiting to hear so much as a whinny in the distance, we hot-footed it down the 199 steps to Whitby town, headtorch light bouncing off the grey stone and highlighting benches in the walls. Good for a rest on the way up, or during a hill session perhaps? Nope – originally these were coffin-resting spots for the pall-bearers on their arduous journey up to the graveyard.

We turned right at the bottom to see the lighthouse at East Pier. A nice easy, flat run along the harbour, soon with sea on both sides, and another lighthouse on West Pier across the water, which holds a terrible history. All the ghosts in Whitby so far seem to be running or galloping,

and our third apparition is no less active.

On a stormy night you might see the ghost of a brave lighthouse keeper running along West Pier. He noticed the light had gone out during a ferocious storm and rushed up the slippery steps to turn it back on. However, on the way back down he didn't notice the rain had made the steps treacherous.

He slipped, smacking his head and cracking every bone on the stairs as he fell. His courageous action saved countless ships, but his ghost repeats its frantic journey. Convinced we could see his hurried shadow in the long beams of our headlamps as we ran into town, it was time to perk ourselves up with a mid-run pub snack at the Golden Lion. A pub with an equally haunting tale.

Running along the cobbled streets of this ancient coastal town, it's easy to imagine Whitby in the days of old. The malty lure of warm taverns, smells of the sea, fresh and not so fresh fish (and people), horses, manure... It was here that the Oyster Man plied his trade. Back

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then, oysters were a common food for poor folk, not the delicacy they have for some reason become (oyster-flavoured energy gel anyone? Thought not).

One Oyster Man went from pub to pub shouting "Oysters alive-ho!" But in the Golden Lion things turned ugly. Insults were thrown, his basket was thrown into the fire and he was headed the same way. Terrified for his life, the Oyster Man pulled out his small oyster opening blade and stabbed his assailant, accidentally piercing the man's heart. He was acquitted but never got over the guilt and died within a year. You might hear his plaintive cry on quiet nights. Or it might be an exhausted trail runner enjoying a little too much beer. Who knows?

Tearing ourselves away from the warm glow of the pub, it was time to head along the disused railway line for two miles back to Hawksker, trying to scare each other the whole way. We certainly found out that with a good headtorch, you can run just as fast as in the daylight. Always good for a PB. **TR**

Whitby's cobbled streets and abbey trails provide a testing - and haunting - night-time run

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GLAMIS CASTLE, SCOTLAND

Take your chances with 20 ghosts that haunt the castle and grounds, and feel the chill run down your spine as you learn about the ancient curses, banshees and vampires on one of their Halloween tours. Or sign up for their 10k race or Christmas 5k Reindeer Run if this doesn't bother you...



SHUTTERSTOCK

TROLLERS GILL, YORKSHIRE DALES

Off the beaten track, make sure you keep quiet when running up this deep limestone gorge in Appletreewick or you'll wake the huge rock-hurling trolls. And never visit at midnight - a terrifying barguest (a giant hell-hound) haunts here, fatally mutilating all who cross his path, including an inquisitive local man back in 1881.



SHUTTERSTOCK

PENDLE HILL, LANCASHIRE

This 557m high wedge of green and brown grass is famous for its links to the Pendle Witch Trials of 1612 where 11 women were tried and all but one hung. There's also a Bronze Age burial site at the summit which adds to the spook factor.



JON SPARKS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO*

THE SKIRRID MOUNTAIN INN, MID-WALES

Enjoy a run up The Skirrid in the Black Mountains and admire the views from the Iron Age Fort at its 486m summit before paying a visit to Wales' most haunted pub in Llanfihangel. It has a bloody history as a courthouse and execution venue, with the original hanging beam still in place.



SHUTTERSTOCK

BODMIN MOOR & TINTAGEL, CORNWALL

Run for your life when darkness falls on this remote moorland, lest the black, panther-like beast mistake you for a sheep and pounce! Best run in the direction of the cliff-top ruin Tintagel, 15 miles to the north-west. Here the legendary King Arthur lives on as a Cornish chough, while Merlin's ghost swirls around the caves below.



KEVIN BRITLAND/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO*