Talk given to the Richard Jefferies Society, April 7th, 1975 by JE Little

UFFINGTON WHITE HORSE & WAYLAND SMITHY

The recent cleaning of the White Horse by the Department of the Environment leads one to suppose that officialdom accepts the present form of the Horse and that no attempt, in the foreseeable future, is being made to carry out an excavation of the site. If we are to accept the present shape of the Horse, as that which has existed for more than 2000 years and not give any thought to the changes that could have occured, for instance:- The effect of weathering and repeated scourings, then the accepted method of dating hill figures by their apparent cultural style is unreliable and must therefore be re-examined.

Recent photographs taken of the Horse from near by Dragon Hill, revealed undulations surrounding the Horse which gave rise to a theory that the present Horse may have been otherwise, than what it is now. The question is, how to assess the extent of these changes? when and how they occurred?

Francis Wise, a leading authority of the day on hill figures, wrote in his letter to Dr. Mead in the year 1738, 'The rains occasion the turf on the upper verge of his body, for want of continuity to crumble, and fall off into the white trench'.

Morris Marples, writing in 'White Horses & other Hill Figures', suggests the 'Horse would have been better placed twenty or thirty yards lower down the hill, since it is not seen at its best advantage at ground level.'

If we accept the natural erosion of the Horse, caused by soil movement over the known centuries of its existence, then we must likewise acknowledge the changes that have taken place both in its shape and upward movement, a phenomena put forward by many of the early observers and travellers in the Vale of the White Horse.

The original constructors of the Horse must have placed themselves in such a position so as to see clearly the full outline and detail of the figure. If it were placed, as suggested by Morris Marples, then the general conception is the Horse would have been a conventional one rather than the outline we see today. In other words, its present shape could well have been the result of an uphill movement created by erosion over the centuries, together with the effect of bad scouring.

The first definite description of the Horse is given by Francis Wise in his letter to Dr. Mead in 1738 as follows;-

> "After this manner our Horse is formed, on the side of an high and steep hill, facing the North West. His dimensions are extended over an acre of ground, or there abouts, his head, neck, body and tail consist of one white line, as does also each of his four legs. This is done by cutting a trench into the chalk, of about two or three feet deep, and then about ten feet broad. The chalk of the trench being of a brighter colour, than the turf which surrounds it, the rays of the afternoon's Sun darting upon it make the whole figure visible for ten or a dozen, nay fifteen miles, if I am rightly informed".

Wise goes on to say,

> "The Horse at first view is enough to raise the admiration of every curious spectator, being designed in so masterlike a manner, that it may defy the painters skill".

The curious fact about this whole monograph, is that Wise gives us a very good description which fits the present day style of the Horse, yet in the engraving that accompanied the letter, he shows a conventional horse. - What was his purpose in doing this? - was it out of mere bravado? - or was it a deliberate attempt to deceive the reader? - However, whatever the reason may have been, Wise was made well aware of the fact, for, two years later he was attacked in a pamphlet by the Rev. William Asplin, Vicar of Banbury, under the pseudonym of Philalethes Rusticus by the title of "The Impertinence and Impostures of Modern Antiquaries Displayed or A Refutation of the Rev. Mr. Wise's Letter to Dr. Mead, concerning the White Horse and other Antiquities of Berks, in a Familiar Letter to a Friend'.
The Rev. William Asplin, in his attack on the letter by Wise, starts by extolling his wisdom and learning, and goes on to say:-

> "one who has been long conversant in these studies, I might very well presume I should meet at least, throughout the whole performance, with the Traces of a mature and correct Judgement. As he was a Divine, and that of a distinguished class, how could I doubt of his sincere and sacred Regard for truth and Justice?"

Now comes the attack:-

> "To enter into a regular Detail of Criticism upon the whole Performance, would be endless; since there is scarce a paragraph throughout, but is liable to many and just Exceptions. What I chiefly propose therefore, is to shew you that our Antiquarian is utterly wrong in his main Point, and that there is no shadow of Reason to conclude the Sign of the White Horse on White Horse Hill, is a monument of the West Saxons: But that it is a notorious Imposition upon the Publick; a meer Reverie of Fiction of our Authors Brain, void of all Foundation in Truth or Probability."

The Vicar of Banbury visited the site of the Horse and made a few pithy comments about its condition, in particular to those scourers of the Horse who were more concerned in getting their reward for work done - rather than ensuring the Horse was cleanly cut and properly scoured.
Prancis Wise made no answer to the attack on him by Asplin, but there appeared in 1741 a pamphlet by the Rev. George North entitled 'an Answer to a Scandalous Libel entitled The Impertinence and Imposture of Modern Antiquaries displayed or a Refutation of the Reverend Mr. Rise's letter to Dr. Mead concerning the White Horse and other antiquities in Berkshire'.
Reviewing the pamphlet, North felt sorry for Wise and became his ally. He starts by saying:-

"Although I neither know Mr. Wise nor am I known to him yet I cannot, without some Degree of Resentment, see him so scurrilized, for giving his opinion in the most unexceptional and agreeable manner, concerning a remarkable and disputable Work of Antiquity".

The effect of this unknown supporter of Wise had the result of restoring confidence in himself, thus enabling him to publish a second pamphlet in 1742 entitled 'Further Observations on the White Horse and other Antiquities in Berkshire with an account of Whiteleaf-Cross in Buckinghamshire to which is added The Red Horse in Warwickshire.

The second pamphlet contributes very little to that of his first one on the White Horse, except, he mentions in his chapter on the Whiteleaf Cross that:-

"In one respect the Cross may seem to have the advantage of the Horse, in that it is visible at a greater distance, for I suppose it may be seen from the White Horse Hill itself, there being nothing, that I could observe to obstruct the prospect".

Wise does not say whether he witnessed the Cross himself from White Horse Hill. I doubt very much whether it can be seen, the distance being far too great.

Apart from the Wise theory of the Horse, what other witnesses and documentation of the Horse do we have? There is an account of the Horse in the catalogue of the Wonders of Britain, published round about 1100 A.D. Here the White Horse is listed as the fifth wonder and Stonehenge the second, so at this early date the Horse was classified with the pre-historic monuments of the day.

The Vale of the White Horse is referred to in the *Abingdon Chronicle* in the eleventh century - which confirms the existence of a Horse.

John Aubrey, the famous Wiltshire Antiquarian, was the first to associate the White Horse with the Saxons - for writing in the seventeenth century he states:-

"The White Horse was made by Hengist on whose standard a White Horse is emblazoned".

This statement by Aubrey set the seal on all future theories, - that the Horse was of Saxon origin. Francis Wise attributes it to Alfred's great victory over the Danes at Ashdown in 871. Thomas Hughes subscribed to this view in his book *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, but later changed his mind, for when addressing the Newbury Field Club in 1871 he expressed doubts as to the site of the battle of Ashdown and was inclined to think the Horse had been there from a much earlier period.

Morris Marples, comments in his book, that Wise like Aubrey, was intent to establish unidentifiable ancient monuments and associate them with great historic figures of the past. Stonehenge to the Druids why not the White Horse to Alfred? and so it went on, until even today two schools of thought exist over the figure.

W.S. Thorns, in a letter to the Society of Antiquaries in 1846, suggests the Horse might commemorate the conversion of the Saxons to Christianity. The White Horse being an emblem of purity, symbolic of the Christian faith.

G.K. Chesterton wrote a Ballad of the White Horse. - However, this must not be taken as a serious contribution to the many theories so far advanced, it more or less popularized the King Alfred school of thought and it suited Chesterton's brand of medieval wit.

So far - I have talked only on the association of the Horse with the Saxons and King Alfred. We must now consider the views of the 20th Century archaeologists and other notable authorities on Hill figures.

First we must look at the Horse as it is now - as having existed more or less in size and shape for over 2000 years.

Professor Piggott likens the horse to those illustrated on coins of the period, and puts its date at Early Iron Age. He also comments on the stylised drawings of horses of that period as seen on rock engravings in Sweden and more recently those discovered in Norway. We have much evidence in this country to support this view. The Reading Museum has a fine example of a Celtic horse in its Silchester Collection and the Devizes Museum has a bucket, found in Marlborough, decorated with horses of the Celtic period.

There are other scholars who attribute the work of the Horse to the Belgae tribe, who immigrated from Europe into Britain, and to have introduced this particular brand of artistry, developed from the classical sources of their home.

The rock drawings mentioned earlier have a more definite affirmative to the Uffington Horse and one which is more likely to fit in with modern day thought. On the other hand, we do have this Dragon Hill nearby, an artificial mound, conical in shape, with a flat top and the legend 'That here St. George slew the Dragon and where it's blood spilt out, the grass never grows'.

Why not a Dragon in place of a Horse? it would fit in very conveniently. Mr. Guy Underwood, in his book 'Pattern of the Past', suggests by his technique of geodetic lines that the Horse could well have been a Dragon. If we are to accept the Horse in its present primitive design, what was its purpose? its association with the battle of Ashdown and Alfred is so slender now as to be completely ruled out. However, we do have the Iron Age Camp, known as Uffington Castle, just above the Horse. The tribes that used or built the fort could well have constructed the Horse as their tribal emblem. The festivities that took place after the scouring operations were always held within the compass of the Castle. Thomas Hughes gives us an eye witness account of the 1857 Scouring in his book *Scouring of the White Horse*. No doubt during the tenancy of the tribe, this ritual of scouring was an annual affair.

To conclude my talk on the Uffington White Horse, and having heard the theories and opinions put forward by the many observers of the Horse, I will now give you my own views.

If we look carefully at the geography of the area of the White Horse, we will see that it is the centre of a very complex ancient trackway system. Just to the north of the Horse we have the Icknield Way and to the south the

Great Ridgeway. This Great Ridgeway provides an easy form of communication between Uffington Castle, Liddington Castle and Barbury Castle to the west and extending south past Heytesbury right down to Axminster and Lyme Regis passing Cerne Abbas where there is another interesting hill figure, the Cerne Abbas Giant, which again is surrounded by earthworks of the Iron Age period and whose history is as mystifying as that of the Uffington White Horse.

It is interesting to suppose that here we have the settlements of different tribes, one in the north known as the Aterbates, whose tribal emblem could well have been the White Horse and the other in the South known as the Durotriges, whose emblem likewise could have been the Cerne Giant. For a thousand years, from 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. Britain was dominated by an almost continuous invasion of Celtic immigrants from Europe. The early settlers (Iron Age A) 500 B.C. came mainly from the Rhineland and settled in the southern and eastern parts of the country. The second wave of immigrants arrived about 300 B.C. (Iron Age B) and were more of a warlike nature from Northern France and Brittany. The third wave of Celtic people arrived after 100 B.C. (Iron Age C) known as the Belgie Tribes, they were constantly on the move, having been uprooted from their homes by the Romans during their conquest of Gaul and followed by their invasion of Britain, The Belgie Tribes finally found sanctuary in the west country.

During the period of rest from Roman domination 55 B.C. to 43 A.D. the Celts remained fairly quiet apart from a few inter-tribal wars and it is during this period that Hill Forts such as Ufffington Castle, Liddington Castle, Barbury Castle and Maiden Castle appeared. The White Morse was cut into the hillside as the symbol of an early form of Heraldry, just as totem poles are used in many African Villages, - as a ready means of tribal identification - .

Each wave of immigrants brought with them their own distinctive type of culture and much evidence of this can be found at the various sites of antiquity that have been excavated throughout Britain.

Finally ladies and gentlemen, I leave you with this thought.

Dragon Hill, a supposed artificial mound with a flat top, may well have formed a platform, from which a high tower could have been constructed for the architect to survey the construction of the Horse from afar. - Thus enabling the detailed outline to be correct in every way.....

WAYLAND'S SMITHY

Wayland's Smithy lies about one mile West of White Horse Hill. It is a chambered long barrow situated within an oval of beech trees and one of the most famous megalithic monuments in Southern Britain.

Before the excavation the site appeared as a long low mound, flattened by cultivation and erosion. At the South end were the ruined remains of a cruciform burial -chamber constructed of large sarsen stones in front of which was a line of four large fallen stones which formed the facade of the barrow similar in appearance to the West Kennet long barrow.

Partial excavation of the barrow in 1919-20 by Sir Charles Peers and Mr. Reginald Smith revealed a few buried kerb stones on the East and West side of the mound. Moreover the discovery of a buried ditch on the West side, and of upright sarsens buried in the middle of the mound, led the excavators to suggest that the monument was perhaps of two periods of construction. The account which they published was thereafter generally accepted, though in his restorated plan of 1958 Mr. L.V. Grinsell anticipated some of the discoveries of the 1962-63 excavation by Piggot & Atkinson. However the conclusions reached in 1920 formed the starting point of the 1962-63 excavation. The result of which revealed the existence of two barrows. The first barrow proved to be the smallest unchambered long barrow hitherto discovered in Britain with a maximum length and breadth of 54 feet and 27 feet respectively, and a maximum surviving height of 3 feet. The original height was estimated to be at least 6 feet.

The mound consisted of a cairn of sarsen boulders averaging one foot in diameter capped by chalk rubble derived from the ditches.

The whole mound was surrounded by a complex mortuary structure. A pavement of sarsens 16 feet long and 5 feet wide laid on the chalk from which the turf had previously been removed, was flanked and partially overlapped by two banks of small sarsen boulders, standing to a height of two feet.

On the pavement and overlapping the banks of the sarsen stones at their base, were the skeletal remains of fourteen individuals. One a young adult had been laid separately, crouched on the left side, at the North end. The central part of the pavement was occupied by a dense and confused mass of human bones, while the rest of the area to the South was unoccupied. This mass of human remains in the central area, made up a child of about nine years of age and three to four adults. It would appear that the bodies had come apart before or during their final deposit into two portions separated at the waist, on the other hand they could have been disturbed at a later date to make room for more.

The only grave goods consisted of three well made leaf-shaped arrowheads of flint, the points of which had been broken off and discarded before burial.

The second barrow on the site consisted of the remains of a trapezoid mound 180 feet long tapering in width to 48 feet at the Southern end to twenty feet at the Northern. Its lower part was composed of chalk and rubble.

The sides and back of the barrow had been delimited by a continuous kerb of sarsen slabs set against the margins of the mound. The whole

mound being surrounded by a ditch. During the progress of time and with the assistance of stone robbers the lateral thrust of the mound displaced a number of the sarsens in the ditch area where they became entrenched and buried by the silting up of the ditch.

At the South end the mound terminated in a straight facade, originally of six very large sarsens rising to a height of ten feet on either side of the entrance to the chamber. Two of these stones are missing. The height of the chamber was six feet at the crossing and four and a half feet in the trancepts.

The previous excavators recorded the presence in the chamber already much disturbed, of the disordered bones of perhaps eight skeletons including that of a child. The chamber was mainly filled with chalk rubble and yielded up nothing in the way of grave goods apart from a few Primary Neolithic pottery all featureless.

Immediately before the building of barrow two, the site had evidently been cleared of vegetation by fire and many patches of charcoal were found in the ditch silt of barrow one. A sample taken from a branch or small trunk some four feet long gave a radiocarbon date of 2820 + or - 130 B.C.

It has been suggested that the interval of time between the construction of barrow two to be about 50 years.

Finally both Piggot and Atkinson express an opinion that there may be a connection between Wayland Smithy and Uffington Castle, a mile or so to the East.

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