Provincial Grand Lodge of Wiltshire

Notes from a Preceptor's Handbook

A Preceptor:

(OED) 1440 A.D. from Latin *praeceptor*

one who instructs, a teacher, a tutor, a mentor

"A horse, a horse and they are all white"

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The White Horses of Wessex

Editors note: Whilst not a Masonic topic, I fell Michael Lee's original work on the mysterious and mystical White Horses of Wiltshire (and the surrounding area) warranted publication, and rightly deserved its place in the Preceptors Handbook. I trust, after reading this short piece, you will wholeheartedly agree.

Origins

It seems a perfectly fair question to ask just why the Wiltshire Provincial Grand Lodge and Grand Chapter decided to select a white horse rather than say the bustard or cathedral spire or even Stonehenge as the most suitable symbol for the Wiltshire Provincial banner.

Most continents, most societies can provide examples of the strange, the mysterious, that have teased and perplexed countless generations. One might include, for example, stone circles, ancient dolmens and burial chambers, ley lines, flying saucers and - today - crop circles. There is however one small area of the world that has been (and continues to be) a natural focal point *for all of these* examples on an almost extravagant scale. This is the region in the south west of the British Isles known as Wessex. To our list of curiosities we can add yet one more category dating from Neolithic times: those large and mysterious figures dominating our hillsides, carved in the chalk and often stretching in length or height to several hundred feet. I refer of course to the Wiltshire White Horses.

Although chalk deposits are to be found world-wide all but four global white horses are in England and, of the twenty-four horses ever recorded here, all bar four are to be found within the central southern counties. Thirteen of these – over 50% - are located within just one county, that of Wiltshire. Wiltshire's association with the symbol of the horse has been even more extensive during the past three thousand years. During the occupation by the Celts a special cult was devoted to this animal and so it is not surprising that horses also appeared in Bronze and Iron Age jewelry and coins uncovered in our county.

If the county of Wiltshire is to be identified with just one symbol then the simple white horse can have few rivals.

Location

So where were all these horses?   They can be grouped loosely into three categories – those of the early Bronze or Iron Age, those of the C18 and C19, and a much more recent group of C20 commemorative carvings designed to repeat or match them.

May we first briefly list the locations starting with our newest arrivals:

C20

Devizes This was cut in (2000) to mark the Millennium on Roundway Hill about a mile away from an earlier horse.

New Pewsey (1937) is sited on Pewsey Hill close to the first.

C19

Broad Town (1863) is three miles south of Wootton Basset on the Marlborough road.

Ham Hill (c.1860) is near Inkpen Beacon, five miles south of Hungerford. (Sadly it is no longer easily visible with grass reclaiming much of the site.)

Devizes (1845) was carved on Roundway Hill below Oliver's Camp by apprentice shoemakers in 1845 and was known locally, appropriately enough, as Snobs Horse.

Hackpen Hill (1838) is near Broad Hinton, close to the Marlborough/ Winterbourne Bassett Ridgeway on the Marlborough Downs.

Alton Barnes (1812) is situated at the junction of the old Wansdyke, Ridgeway and Tan Hill Ways.

Marlborough 1804) is located on Granham Hill, above the village of Preshute.

C18

Old Pewsey (c.1785) is on Pewsey Hill one mile south of the new on the road to Everleigh.

Cherill (1780) is situated on the Down just off the A4, located close to the earthwork of Oldbury Castle.

Early

Rockley (c. unknown) has traces on Rockley Down close to the minor road from Marlborough to Wootton Bassett.

Tan Hill (c. unknown) a chalk sculpture in the parish of All Cannings

Pre-historic

Westbury or **Bratton (**pre-C17) is north east of Westbury below the Iron Age hill fort of Bratton Camp. It is probably the oldest white horse within Wiltshire and certainly the most outstanding.

Uffington (Oxon) (Bronze Age, possibly between 1400BC and 800BC) following a boundary change is now in Oxfordshire but from its close proximity has always been grouped with the Wiltshire chalk carvings.

Description

Most 'white horses' have a story to tell. Selecting just one or two at random we can begin with the history of Uffington.

The **Uffington** White Horse has been recorded on White Horse Hill close by Uffington Castle for over 900 years. Claimed by the counties of Berkshire and Oxfordshire it remains close to the Wiltshire county border. As the most famous of all chalk horses it was considered in the C14 to be the second wonder of the world; the first of course was Stonehenge. It has the classical Celtic shape of an elongated body with its legs dismembered stretching fore and aft suggesting movement. Nearby is a deep combe called the Manger and not far away is a cave known as Wayland's Smithy where the miraculous shoeing of such horses reputedly took place.

Its origins are obscure. The general design is of the Iron Age (similar to the symbol on Iron Age coins) but archaeological digs suggest that an earlier design had been cut on the site over 3000 years ago in the Bronze Age. It was possibly developed further by the invading Belgae tribes in C1 ACE, before the Roman occupation. The original concept may have been a dragon - there are teeth marks around its mouth - and the flat area at the bottom of the hill is still known as Dragon's Hill where George reputedly slayed the beast. The current horse was possibly carved around 500 AD under the orders of Hengist, the Saxon chieftain whose standard bore a white horse as a symbol. It was reputedly reworked in 871 AD to commemorate King Alfred's victory over the Danes at the battle of Ashdown. By the C12 it had temporarily acquired an accompanying foal. Through the C19 it was dug out regularly with the outline trenches refilled with fresh chalk.

Alton Barnes. This was first carved in 1812 under the direction of Robert Pile, a local farmer of Manor Farm. The size is 180 by 165 feet. A journey-man painter (Baptised as John Thorne but known as Jack the Painter) offered Pile a preliminary sketch, subcontracting the actual digging to John Harvey of Stanton St Bernard, and was given an advance of £20 by Pile. Mr Thorne then disappeared quite smartly. Incensed, Robert Pile had the contractor pursued appropriately enough by posse on horse back. Thorne was caught and tried and then summarily hanged by orders of the local magistrate. It just wasn't his day as he discovered the magistrate presiding to be a certain Robert Pile. (The military have a phrase:'Let justice be done, Sergeant, march the guilty villain in! ')

Bratton/Westbury (1778) is probably the oldest white horse within Wiltshire and is certainly outstanding. The earliest record of a horse was as a totem for the Iron Age hill fort at Bratton Camp. This was then dog-like in shape with long body and short legs, cloaked in a saddle blanket with crescent designs and completed by a long tail and another organ curving upwards. In explanation the crescent moon was the traditional Celtic symbol of fertility. (You need to watch these chaps from Westbury.)

The Iron Age horse was probably replaced by a later one ordered to celebrate King Alfred's victory over the Danes at Ethandum (Eddington) in 878. The present shape was cut by Mr Geoffrey Gee (his initials seem most apt!) who was Steward to Lord Abingdon in 1778. He reversed the direction of the previous horse which had apparently stood

on site since before 1066. To make the figure more suitable for observation by modest Victorian ladies and children the unfortunate horse also received a major sex change. (One understands that Dane-Geld then meant something completely different.) The horse was edged in stone in 1873.

Cherhill (1780) This was located near to a hill fort at Oldbury Castle. It was re-cut in 1780 under the orders of a Dr Alsop of Calne – known perhaps understandably as the 'mad doctor' - who shouted his instructions to the cutting team by megaphone from the bottom of the hill. The eyes of the horse were 4 ft. across and were originally made from the bottoms of glass bottles. These however were apparently removed by energetic swains, believing them to be magic love charms, as quickly as fresh bottles could be emptied. For a man to lose his bottle when proposing marriage perhaps then took on a new significance.

Marlborough (1804) There is a horse placed on the Preshute path above the Kennet. It is 62 feet long but somewhat skinny and austere. Many, knowledgeable in these matters, have likened it to a giraffe but this merely emphasises the difficulties when designing and pegging out chalk figures viewed from afar. It was first cut in 1804 by William Canning, one of the pupils of Mr Greasley's School, who lived in the Manor House, Ogbourne St George. With turf-cutting given as a sports afternoon option, one understands that the boys were able to procrastinate for many, many sunny afternoons well away from Mr Greasley's eagle eye.

Pewsey (1785) has also possessed two horses. The earlier was re-cut in 1785 again by Robert Pile, our hanging magistrate, but it has long remained invisible from a distance. Like the great design at Weymouth it originally carried a rider. The current horse was carved in 1937 by an apparently underemployed Pewsey fire brigade under the direction of its designer Mr George Marples. This commemorated the coronation of King George VI and the year of carving is incorporated into the design.

The **Rockley Down** horse near Marlborough was uncovered briefly when the downland was ploughed into arable in 1948. It would have been 120 feet long and so seemingly hard to miss. While of very great antiquity surprisingly none of the local historians had been aware of it from parish or county records.

Construction

The earliest figures were cut by making trenches some two feet deep into the pure chalk probably using antlers. Owing to natural weathering the chalk trenching would need to be freshened or re-cored every six to seven years.

While the basic excavation would have been demanding even the re-scouring was still tedious. Typically between 150 and 200 tons of fresh chalk are required to resurface a large figure. This had to be carried up the hill from a distant or hidden pit – the overall effect is quickly spoiled if one excavates too closely to the site of the horse. This was not a task to be undertaken lightly. In some cases a team of enthusiasts might volunteer but, where the site was judged socially important, complete communities could often become involved.

Work Songs

An inevitable consequence of routine work became the work song. One such at Uffington was:

> 'The owl white horse want setting to rights
>
> and the squire has promised good cheer
>
> zo we'll gee un a scrape to kip un in shape
>
> and her'l last ver many a year.'

Another song, at Marlborough, was later adopted by Preshute School:

> Ah now we'll cry, thank God, my lads,
>
> The Kennet's running still;
>
> And see, the old White Horse still pads
>
> Up here on Granham Hill.'

Social importance

The local hill figure could be of great importance to local communities in maintaining a link with their forefathers and its renovation became an occasion of great communal rejoicing, with attendant feasting and drinking for which in any age an excuse was rarely necessary.

Shall we compare two such events. Sadly the first or old white horse at Devizes had been badly neglected and was overgrown. To commemorate Elizabeth II's accession to the throne in 1954 Peter Greed, a pupil of Devizes Grammar School, drew up plans to re-create it. Assessing the cost and labour involved the Council placed it firmly in the pending tray and there it remained until 1998 when, with the year 2000 rapidly approaching, they chose to resurrect it on Roundway Down as their Millennium project. Local government may work slowly but it does get there in the end. Work started in August 1999 involving 200 people but, with the clock ticking, was then accelerated by some heavy earth moving machinery. A month later Devizes possessed a new horse.

Predictably within eight years the border was barely visible. The Millennium Committee being impecunious the Probation Service came to the rescue – the staff willingly, the ex-prisoners perhaps a little less so - and their Community Service Group now makes a monthly visit to groom the horse and keep it in fine fettle.

To commemorate the horse's 10th Anniversary on 10th October 2009 250 people assembled from across the county. There was a Tuck Truck where refreshments could be obtained, several hundred chocolate brownies had been baked in family kitchens and a PA system provided suitable music. It also had a secondary role. This was to assemble the 250 into the figures of one and zero (an appropriate ten) for an airborne photograph. Anyone with experience of marshaling troops or school children or Masonic Provincial Officers into a procession can understand this took most of the afternoon - despite the brownie bribes.

Let us roll back the years to 1790. There is a very graphic account of another great gathering for the seven yearly re-scouring of the Uffington white horse. A Fair rejoicing in a name of the 'Pastime' offered several interpretations! It was held at the very top of the hill with as many as 30,000 people present. (Remember the total population of Salisbury district in 1790 would have been about 7,000.) Payment of the scourers for both labour and refreshment throughout this time would be that of the unfortunate Lord of the Manor. However 'noblesse would undoubtedly have obliged'.

The fair had booths and side shows and a circus (Wombwell's - the Bertram Mills of the C18.) Trying to climb up Uffington's grassy slopes on foot on a dry day can be difficult enough. It is perhaps unsurprising then that the cart carrying the elephant had even greater difficulty in reaching the top. Prizes were given for downhill races, apparently breaking records, legs and necks with an admirable impartiality. The winners were also required by nimble foot-work to avoid the cheese-rolling events held simultaneously down the same course. For the more sedentary men prizes were awarded for guerneying through a horse collar. For the ladies there was a 'smoke-athon' when they tried to establish who could smoke the most ounces of baccy in a one hour period, giving rise perhaps to the term 'green horn'. Situated above the horse, alongside the double row of stalls and drinking booths, was the Lord of the Manor's marquee for the nobility. Nearby was a stage for the inevitable concerts of tightrope walkers, trapeze artists, skittles and country dancing. It becomes hard to believe that any work was ever done but surprisingly a well groomed horse always emerged.

Few of the horses we can see around the county today are in their original condition. While many were redeveloped by Georgian and Victorian gentry, almost in the style of a folly, many others *can* trace an ancestry that goes back to the days of Stonehenge and Avebury.

It seems fitting that, both as Freemasons and Men of Wiltshire, we continue to remember them.