



Westbury or Bratton White Horse

White Horses of Wiltshire

The county of Wiltshire, England with its downs, sweet and fragrant with thyme and thicket, is rich in that unique form of turf memorial - the 'White Horse.' The county, in fact, boasts some five White Horses, sculptured on the downy turf, and which, from the brilliant whiteness of the chalk soil in which they are shaped, are conspicuous landmarks for many miles around. The 'sire' of this stud of 'snow-white coursers stretching o'er the green' is a magnificently proportioned charger, cut on Bratton Down, two-and-a-half miles to the east of Westbury. The original horse (says a writer in London 'Live Stock Journal') which was said to have resembled the cart-breed, is believed to have been cut by the Saxon army, to the order of their leader, 'Alfred the Great, in order to commemorate the great victory gained over the Danes in the year 878. This battle was fought near the village of Ethandun, or Edington, as it is now called, which, at this period, extended to the foot of the down on which the White Horse is cut.

It should be explained that when the great battle was fought the White Horse was the Saxon standard, although five years later the Saxons, who had not long been converted to Christianity, changed the device on their banner to the Christian emblem of the Cross. Unfortunately, of the original Westbury horse little is known, beyond the fact that it existed - none of its dimensions were recorded, nor have any of the drawings of the figure been preserved. Towards the close of the eighteenth century the old horse was so neglected that it became nearly obliterated, whereupon, in the year 1778, a local gentleman, bearing the appropriate name of Gee, had fashioned the present figure.

The following were the principal dimensions of the horse:-

Extreme length, from head to tail, both included, 175 ft.; height from feet to shoulder, 107 ft.; circumference of eye, 25 ft. By taking the train from Westbury, over the through route to Stert Junction and Woodborough, and then alighting at the latter station, one sees on the line of downs to the north the trotting horse of Pewsey, which gives its name to the adjoining vale. The figure, which is situated two and a half miles from Woodborough Station, dates from the year 1812, and originated with a farmer named Pile. Tradition relates that the latter employed a journeyman painter to design and cut out the horse for £20. The painter drew his money when he had completed the first portion of the contract, and then left his employer to finish the work. It measures 180 ft. by 167 ft., and covers an area of 700 square yards.

The White Horse next in importance to that at Westbury, however, is to be found in the very centre of the county, within the confines of a hamlet, named Cherhill, and situated on the chalk downs, a quarter of a mile to the south of the Bath coach road. This horse owes its existence to a Dr. Allsop,

of Calne, who, in the year 1780, strove to emulate Mr. Gee's achievement at Westbury. The doctor first roughly marked out the outlines of his figure with small stakes, bearing white flags, and then, standing on a hill some distance off, when he was able to judge proportions accurately directed, by means of a speaking trumpet, the removal of the stakes, until the correct result was obtained.

Owing to its commanding position - the hill on which it is cut is the highest land between London and Bath - the Cherhill White Horse is visible on clear days for a distance of thirty miles. The dimensions of the figure are as follows:-

Length, 127 ft.; height, 142 ft.; size of barrel, 78 ft. by 41 ft.; diameter of inner circle of eye, 4 ft.- the latter was once filled with old glass bottles, which glistened in the sun. Upon the downs east of Winterbourne Bassett, and at a point on the right hand side of the road leading from Wootton Bassett to Marlborough is another trotting-horse, but going a little faster than its Pewsey contemporary. It was cut in 1835 by Mr. Eatwell, parish clerk to the village of Broad Hinton, within whose confines it is situated. It is estimated to cover an area of 90 square yards.

On the right-hand side of the Bath high road, entering Marlborough from the west, is a small white horse in a mutilated and over-grown condition. This horse, the third in order of seniority, was originally cut in the year 1804 by the pupils of a school kept by a Mr. Gresley, in Marlborough, at that time. The schoolboys regularly scoured the horse until 1830, Mr. Gresley died and his school was broken up. The figure then became overgrown with weeds. In 1873, however, a gentleman residing in the town, who as a boy had been one of the original makers of the horse, undertook to have it repaired; but it has now again lapsed into a very neglected condition. It measures only 62 ft. in length and 47 ft. in height.

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