

**Uffington White Horse and Its Landscape:
Investigations at White Horse Hill, Uffington,
1989–95, and Tower Hill, Ashbury, 1993–4**

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Preface

The White Horse of Uffington is an icon of the English landscape. Its sinuous and abstract form has graced postcards, posters and book plates beyond number. The Horse appears as the logo of local businesses and the All Party Parliamentary Archaeology Group in Westminster. Historians since the 17th century have speculated about its origin. There is clear evidence from medieval documents that it is ancient. But how ancient? Was it carved by the Ancient British, the pagan Anglo-Saxons or by Alfred to commemorate his local victory over the Danes?

The White Horse has been claimed by Whigs and Tories, Muscular Christians and neo-pagans. The ancient county of Berkshire has bemoaned its loss, a loss which presaged Berkshire's own disappearance.

In 1979 the Right Honourable David Astor donated a substantial area of land around the White Horse to the National Trust. Up to this point, as I have written elsewhere 'the Horse was hobbled within a green pasture'. Thanks to David Astor it was set free from its fetters of barbed wire, ploughed furrows and eroded gullies.

The National Trust and English Heritage (then still the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments) turned their collective minds to the new opportunities for better management and presentation. A small group from the Oxford Archaeological Unit spent a weekend surveying the White Horse and examining it in detail. The most memorable moment for me was to emerge from a tent, just after dawn on a Sunday morning, to see the hill bathed in sunlight and a sea of mist filling the Vale immediately below us.

The survey did not add a great deal to what we already knew, and that was very little! As an icon the White Horse had been subjected to endless speculation but little scientific investigation. The National Trust and the Inspectorate were sceptical about our suggestions that excavation could be informative.

The breakthrough came with the discovery of an ancient Ministry of Works files in the bowels of a London office. To our amazement they contained evidence of an excavation into the 'head' of the White Horse. The photographs and sections showed clearly that the Horse was not scoured into natural chalk but consisted of a trench about a metre deep, with stratified layers within it. There was no name attached to this excavation. The style of drawing resembled that of Professor Peter Grimes who, during World War II, had worked on Ministry of Defence sites such as the henge monument of Devil's Quoits, just across the valley at Stanton Harcourt. Professor Grimes had died a short time before this discovery, but his records confirmed that he had undertaken restoration work on the White Horse, after it had been hidden from the Luftwaffe. Surprisingly, he never seems to have told anyone about his small excavation and its big implications.

Even Stuart Piggott, his contemporary and doyen of archaeological horse studies, knew nothing of it.

For us it provided the justification for a White Horse project. Not only could we provide information to help with the management and presentation of the Hill but perhaps even establish the pedigree of the White Horse itself.

In the 1970s and 1980s the Oxford Archaeological Unit was excavating massive areas in advance of gravel extraction in the Thames Valley. The White Horse project would be different: brain surgery rather than an autopsy. The hill was a protected landscape scheduled, in Guardianship, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, belonging to the National Trust. There was no need for rescue archaeology. So our project design focused on a non-destructive survey, geophysics, and aerial photography. The only intrusions into the ground would be small-scale and very specifically targeted to answer specific questions. We particularly wanted to understand the biography of the Horse and its landscape. How different generations had viewed, used and lived in this landscape. How they had been influenced by the existence of the White Horse, just as we were as late 20th-century archaeologists.

The White Horse was our initial target but soon the project rippled outwards. Oxford University developed a fieldwork training programme which moved onto the nearby hillforts of Segsbury and Alfred's Castle. The Ridgeway and Wessex hillforts became a focus for Royal Commission for Historic Monuments (now English Heritage) surveys. The discovery of a spectacular late Bronze Age hoard at Tower Hill provided an opportunity to broaden the project further. The initial delays to the White Horse excavation proved to be a godsend. In the meantime the Research Laboratory for Art and Archaeology in Oxford had developed and refined its Optically Stimulated Luminescence dating technique. This was to provide the most significant breakthrough, allowing us to date the silt layer in the belly of the Horse to between the earlier and later first millennium BC.

It was a pleasure to work on White Horse Hill: because it is one of the most beautiful landscapes in Britain, always changing, windblasted, baking, befogged and sometimes idyllic; because of the enthusiasm of colleagues in Oxford, at the National Trust and English Heritage; and because of the involvement of so many local people, for whom the White Horse is almost a personality in their lives.

This report adds a new chapter to the history of White Horse Hill. For future generations there will be new questions and new approaches.

David Miles
24 April 2002

Summary

White Horse Hill comprises a complex of prehistoric and later monuments. These include the Uffington 'Castle' hillfort which dominates the local topography, the Ridgeway track, a number of burial mounds and also the mysterious White Horse, carved into the chalk of the hillside and visible from a considerable distance. These archaeological monuments are set in a dramatic landscape with defined natural features such as Dragon Hill and the adjacent dry valley of the Manger.

The nature and date of construction of the White Horse has been the subject of considerable debate, as has its use and possible meaning in past society, although many questions remain unresolved. A number of excavations and investigations were completed at the White Horse and associated sites between 1989 and 1995 to address certain significant problems surrounding the White Horse and its context through time. A full, illustrated account of this archaeological, artefactual and documentary research is presented here.

These investigations demonstrate for the first time that the White Horse was originally prehistoric in date. The fact that it has been reworked repetitively since its construction indicates a remarkable continuity in its use and significance over the past several thousand years. The creation of the White Horse may be contemporaneous with, or even earlier than, the construction and first phase of use of the hillfort.

These investigations also revealed that the hillfort did originally have another entrance, which appears to have been deliberately blocked during the early Iron Age. The hillfort underwent various additional transformations during its lifetime, reflecting changes in use and meaning. Investigations showed that a number of burials were made in and around the hill from Neolithic to Roman times, further stressing the conceptual significance of this location.

Nearby at Tower Hill, a rare and remarkable Bronze Age hoard was discovered comprising 92 separate bronze pieces, including 22 complete socketed axes and numerous broken and unfinished metal objects. The discovery of this hoard in a small settlement, which was occupied for a short period during the Bronze Age-Iron Age transition, enhances our understanding of the nature and processes of deposition of prestige artefacts at this interface.

Together these sites provide a new insight into the fascinating landscape of the White Horse – a landscape that is best appreciated through movement and visibility across it. This study enables us to look openly at the changing roles of the various monuments associated with the White Horse and their physical setting, particularly during the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, but also within the longer-term history of this part of the Berkshire Downs.

Résumé – White Horse Hill

White Horse Hill consiste en un ensemble de monuments de date préhistorique et postérieure. Ces derniers incluent le camp fortifié de hauteur d'Uffington qui domine la topographie locale, un chemin de faîte ou *Ridgeway*, un certain nombre de tertres funéraires ainsi que le mystérieux 'Cheval Blanc', taillé dans la craie à flanc de coteau et visible depuis une distance considérable. Ces monuments archéologiques se découpent dans un paysage dramatique aux reliefs naturels dégagés, tels que la colline du Dragon et la vallée sèche adjacente de *Manger*.

La nature et la date de construction du Cheval Blanc ont fait l'objet d'un important débat, de même que son usage et sa signification possible au sein des sociétés du passé quoique de nombreuses questions restent en suspens. Un certain nombre de fouilles et de recherches ont été accomplies au Cheval Blanc et sites associés, entre 1989 et 1995, afin d'adresser

certain problèmes significatifs entourant le Cheval Blanc et son contexte au cours du temps. Un compte-rendu complet et illustré des recherches archéologiques, artefactuelles et documentaires est présenté ici.

Ces recherches démontrent, pour la première fois, que le Cheval Blanc était à l'origine de date préhistorique. Le fait qu'il fut retravaillé de manière répétitive depuis sa construction indique une continuité remarquable quant à son utilisation et sa signification à travers les plusieurs milliers d'années écoulées. La création du Cheval Blanc est peut-être contemporaine, ou même antérieure, à la construction et la première phase d'utilisation du camp fortifié de hauteur.

Ces recherches ont également révélé que le camp fortifié avait à l'origine une autre entrée, qui semble avoir été délibérément bloquée au cours du début de l'âge du Fer. Le camp fortifié subit des transformations supplémentaires diverses au cours de sa durée.

de vie, reflétant ainsi des modifications de son utilisation et sa signification.

Des études ont montré qu'un certain nombre de sépultures furent réalisées sur et autour du coteau depuis le Néolithique jusqu'aux temps romains, soulignant davantage la signification conceptuelle de cette localisation.

A proximité de là, à Tower Hill, un trésor rare et remarquable, datant de l'âge du Bronze, fut découvert. Il se composait de 92 pièces distinctes de Bronze, y compris 22 haches complètes à douille et de nombreux objets métalliques fragmentés et incomplets. La découverte de ce trésor, dans un site d'habitation de petite dimension qui fut occupé pour une période de courte durée au cours de la transition

entre l'âge du Bronze et l'âge du Fer, nous permet d'accroître notre compréhension de ces artefacts de prestige ainsi que des procédés de déposition au cours de cette période transitoire.

Ces sites, considérés conjointement, fournissent une vision renouvelée du paysage fascinant du Cheval Blanc – un paysage qui s'apprécie à sa juste valeur au travers des déplacements et de la visibilité d'un bout à l'autre de celui-ci. Cette étude nous permet d'examiner ouvertement les rôles variables des divers monuments associés au Cheval Blanc ainsi que leur cadre physique, en particulier durant la fin de l'âge du Bronze et le début de l'âge du Fer, mais également dans le long terme historique de cette partie des collines herbeuses du Berkshire.

Zusammenfassung

Der White Horse Hill ist ein Komplex aus prähistorischen und späteren Monumenten. Dazu gehören zder die Umgebung dominierende Ringwall »Uffington Castle«, der »Ridgeway«, eine Reihe von Grabhügeln und ein mysteriöses, in den Kreidehang gekerbtes weißes Pferd, das von weither sichtbar ist. Diese archäologischen Monumente sind in eine dramatische Landschaft mit klaren natürlichen Merkmalen wie dem Dragon Hill und dem angrenzenden Manger-Trockental eingebettet.

Art und Datum der Erschaffung des weißen Pferdes sind heftig debattiert worden, ebenso wie seine Verwendung und wahrscheinliche Bedeutung für frühere Gesellschaften. Dennoch bleiben viele Fragen offen. Zwischen 1989 und 1995 fanden am weißen Pferd und den umliegenden Stätten mehrere Grabungen und Untersuchungen statt, um bestimmte wichtige Fragen im Zusammenhang mit der Figur und ihrem Kontext in verschiedenen Epochen zu beantworten. Der vorliegende Bericht enthält eine vollständige, illustrierte Dokumentation der archäologischen, fund- und urkundenbezogenen Forschungen.

Unsere Untersuchung konnte erstmals nachweisen, dass der Ursprung des weißen Pferdes prähistorischen Datums ist. Die Tatsache, dass es seit seiner Konstruktion mehrfach nachbearbeitet wurde, deutet auf eine erstaunliche Kontinuität in seiner Verwendung und Bedeutung über die vergangenen Jahrtausende hin. Das weiße Pferd entstand möglicherweise zeitgleich oder früher als der Ringwall und dessen erste Nutzungsphase.

Unsere Untersuchung zeigt auch, dass der Ringwall ursprünglich einen anderen Eingang besaß, der

offenbar in der frühen Eisenzeit bewusst versperrt wurde. Der Ringwall erfuhr während der Dauer seines Gebrauchs mehrere zusätzliche Veränderungen, die auf Wandlungen in seiner Verwendung und Bedeutung hinweisen. Wie die Untersuchungen zeigen, wurden zwischen dem Neolithikum und der Römerzeit auf und um den Hügel mehrere Bestattungen vorgenommen, was die konzeptionelle Bedeutung des Ortes unterstreicht.

Am nicht weit entfernten Tower Hill wurde ein Hort aus der Bronzezeit entdeckt, der 92 separate Bronzestücke, darunter 22 vollständige Äxte mit Schaftlöchern und zahlreiche zerbrochene und unfertige Metallobjekte enthielt. Die Entdeckung dieses Hortes in einer kleinen Siedlungsanlage, die während des Übergangs von der Bronzezeit zur Eisenzeit nur kurze Zeit bewohnt war, trägt zur Vermehrung unserer Kenntnisse zur Art und zu den Vorgängen bei der Einlagerung prestigeträchtiger Artefakte in dieser Übergangsperiode bei.

Zusammen genommen bieten diese Stätten einen neuen Einblick in die faszinierende Landschaft des White Horse Hill – eine Landschaft, die sich am besten beurteilen lässt, wenn man sich durch sie hindurch bewegt und sie aus unterschiedlichen Blickwinkeln wahrnimmt. Die Studie ermöglicht uns, die sich wandelnden Rollen der verschiedenen mit dem weißen Pferd assoziierten Monumente und ihrer physischen Lage, besonders während der späten Bronze- und der frühen Eisenzeit, aber auch innerhalb der längerfristigen Geschichte dieses Teils der Berkshire Downs offen zu betrachten.

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Introduction to the CD-ROM

The CD-ROM is split into four main sections:

- A digital version of the printed book
- Supporting tables
- 360° photographs of the White Horse Hill and its environs today
- A picture gallery

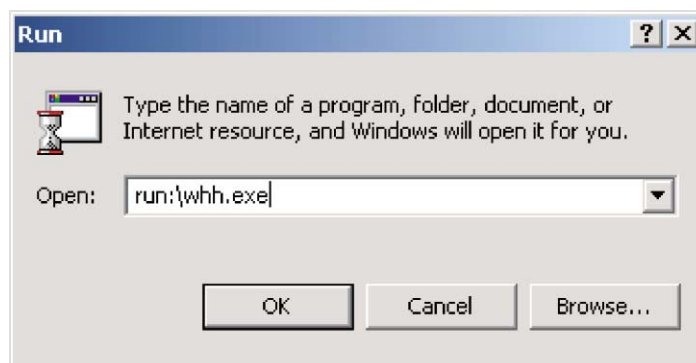
The CD-ROM provides a digital version of the book and the supporting tables many of which derive from the specialist reports. There is also an interactive section showing 360° photographs of the White Horse Hill and its environs today. It is hoped that this section places White Horse Hill in its wider landscape context. Finally there is a picture gallery derived from the printed book.

INSTRUCTIONS

Insert CD into drive, it should automatically run, if it does not press the start button and select the run option.



A dialog appears. Type in the name of your CD-Rom drive, which will probably be D: followed by \whh.exe. So for example type D:\whh.exe and click OK.



TECHNICAL DETAILS OF THE CD-ROM

The CD was written using Html, Flash and Java to allow for cross-platform compatibility, as well as allowing the user to extract the data to a multitude of programs. All programs needed to run the bulk of the CD are available to be installed from the CD.

Minimum Specification: – Pentium 200mhz, 32mb Ram 100mb of hard drive space. Windows 95 and Internet explorer 5.0.

Preferred Specification: – Pentium 400mhz, 64mb Ram 100mb of hard drive space. Windows 95 and Microsoft Internet explorer 5.0.