

## **Exploring Wiltshire**

When we came to Wiltshire in 1986 we instinctively did what we did whenever we landed somewhere new – we explored the land around us.

An early project was to see and photograph the White Horses for which Wiltshire was famous. We gathered what information was available in books, pamphlets and newspapers then spent several weeks going round them all and conjecturing why they were cut. There is plenty of evidence of their age and how they were cut. One historian has even invented a name for this art of hill carving. He has called it “leucippotomy”.

There are several prerequisites for leucippotomy in Wiltshire. The first of course is a chalk soil with a turf top surface, the second that it must be on a hillside to be seen and the third that it must be maintained properly (weeds grow through the white figure and fresh chalk is required when soil accumulates on the figure). And of course when there are temporary hiccups like a war turf has to be used to prevent enemy aircraft pilots from using the figures to chart a course. (During the 1939–45 War the seven Wiltshire white horses were turfed over.)

With the aid of an Ordnance Survey map we charted a course round the white horses, found them all, and took photographic slides of them. In addition we visited other hill carvings in the country such as the Regimental badges on Fovant Down. And we could not resist going south to see the Cerne Abbas giant and into Oxfordshire to see the most ancient white horse at Uffington and into Sussex to see the Long Man of Wilmington.

We took our photographs, planned our route and thereafter bored our every visitor with a tour of the White Horses. We discovered the ages as follows:

Uffington	1400–600 BC
Westbury	1778
Cherhill	1780
Marlborough	1804
Alton Barnes	1812
Hackpen Hill	1838
Broad Town	1863
Pewsey	1937 Cut by local firemen to mark the coronation of George VI near the site of an earlier Horse cut in 1785.
Devizes	2000 Millennium project near Roundway Thicket replacing old 1845 Horse.

It is of interest that all Horses face left except the Devizes Millennium Horse which faces right. Why are the Horses there? I share the view of one famous historian. Each one is near an ancient hill fort and the Horse was a location point which people on foot could see from far away and use to get them home to safety in the hill fort. Or were they just a pictorial whim of the land owners?!!

There is written evidence at Cambridge University that in the Middle Ages the wise men of the world thought the British Isles were relatively barren of artistic interest. On mainland Britain the only recorded works of art (i.e. manmade wonders of the world at that time) were the stones of Stonehenge and the Uffington White Horse; and in Ireland only the Giant’s Causeway qualified. The art form of the Giants Causeway was formed by nature (or did a giant put the stones there?). Dorothy and I had visited Stonehenge before we moved to Wiltshire in 1986, but we decided that

*Exploring Wiltshire (1986 on)*

one of our exploratory projects should be revisiting Stonehenge and exploring other parts of Wiltshire where Sarsen stones had defied the weather for centuries and even had their own interesting histories. So we did our own homework, took our Ordnance Survey maps, sandwiches, wildflower books, sketching equipment, etc. and went by car wherever we thought such Sarsen stones were decorating the landscape.

We visited Stonehenge several times, and the much larger stone circle at Avebury. The pub at Avebury was a convenient place for lunch (and whilst there we were entertained by Morris dancers). Near Beckhampton Corner is Silbury Hill, a manmade mound. (How many scores of men must have been used to throw up this earth castle and what was its purpose?) There have been several exploratory digs there but to no avail. Near there is the village of West Kennet which has a field chock-a-block full of Sarsen stones almost as if they had been discarded by someone sculpturing the stones for Stonehenge and Avebury and leaving the off-cuts in one place. Nearby some of the stones have been used, probably in Stone Age times at the same time as Stonehenge was being built, to make the famous West Kennet Long Barrow, a stone burial chamber which can be visited on foot nowadays. It was of particular interest to Dorothy and me because it has a covering of earth and grass in which we found several species of orchid and several other flowers.

In the village of Lockeridge we came across an area called Lockeridge Dene which has several dozen Sarsen stones. At night they look like a flock of sleeping sheep (and are therefore known as 'grey wethers'). Not far away several large stones mark the track to Windmill Hill – an old hill fort where many Stone Age relics have been unearthed. Several stones are likewise gathered and used to decorate areas like The Grove at Pewsey, and there is a solitary one at Woodborough called the Hangman's Stone. Legend has it that a shepherd taking a flock of sheep to market tied one loosely to this rock, put his head on the warm sheep, fell asleep and was found in the morning hanged by the tether.

Several churches which were built in Saxon times have large Sarsens in their foundations. St Mary's Church at Alton Barnes and St John's at Pewsey are good visible examples which we found. Sarsens have been used as memorial stones. The best example we found was the memorial stone on Burbery Down to Richard Jeffries the Swindon poet who wrote from the ghastly trenches of the First World War.