



1857

The Kilburn White Horse

The White Horse carved into the steep hillside above the village of Kilburn is the largest hill figure in Britain, and the only one in Yorkshire. It measures 97m long and 67m high and is visible from many miles away.

It was created in the 1850s thanks to a local man, Thomas Taylor, who had seen other horses cut into hillsides in other parts of the country. His friend John Hodgson was the Kilburn village school-master, and he and his pupils laid out the outline of the Horse by driving stakes into the ground. Then, volunteers from the village cleared the site to expose the greyish sandstone rock. Unlike the hill figures further south which are naturally white because they are carved into chalk, the Kilburn carving had to be whitened by using 6 tons of limestone chippings - which all had to be transported up the hill. When it was finished, in November 1857, the event was celebrated with a huge party at which 100 gallons of beer were consumed and two bullocks were roasted!



The slope where the Horse is carved is very steep, and the figure needs frequent renewing. Local families originally paid for its upkeep, but during and after the First World War there was a shortage of men to do the work. Rain and melting snow caused substantial damage, and it fell into disrepair.

In 1925 the Yorkshire Evening Post started a campaign to renovate it, and money was raised. This paid for weeding to be carried out yearly and making it white again by using more limestone. At the outbreak of the Second World War the Horse was hidden with camouflage netting because it was such an obvious landmark. It was uncovered and re-whitened in 1946. Local craftsman Robert Thompson (also known as 'Mouseman' Thompson because of the wooden mice he carved on the furniture he made) was responsible for renovating it, along with men from his workshop in Kilburn.

In 1955 another restoration fund was set up, and since 1973 the Horse has been looked after by the Kilburn White Horse Association. Every five years, volunteers from the Association spray the limestone chippings with white paint. They need climbing ropes and harnesses to keep them in place while they are working because the slope is so steep!

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What is the largest hill figure in Britain and where is it?

The Kilburn White Horse.

2. How big is it?

It measures 97m long and 67m high.

3. Who worked on it and helped create it?

Thomas Taylor, John Hodgson, the school master and the pupils of the school.

4. What type of rock was originally exposed?

Greyish sandstone rock.

5. Why did 6 tons of limestone have to be transported up the hill?

Because the horse figure needed to be whitened and the chalk that occurs naturally in the south where other hill figures are carved does not occur in this area.

6. What was drunk and eaten in celebration of the figure's completion in 1857?

100 gallons of beer and two roast bullocks.

7. When and why did the horse fall into disrepair?

It fell into disrepair during and after the First World War because there was a shortage of men to maintain it.

8. When was a campaign started to renovate it?

1925

9. Why do you think an obvious landmark like the White Horse needed to be camouflaged in the Second World War?

Because if it wasn't German bombers would see it easily and know where they were, which would help them bomb important places in Britain.

10. Who was responsible for renovating it in 1946?

Robert 'Mouseman' Thompson and men from his workshop in Kilburn.

11. Who has been looking after the White Horse since 1973?

The Kilburn White Horse Association.

12. What do they do to keep it looking nice and how do they do this?

They spray the limestone chippings with white paint every five years. They need ropes and climbing harnesses to keep them in place because the slope is so steep.

Find out more:

- Walk to the White Horse from the National Park Visitor Centre at Sutton Bank, <http://www.northyorkmoors.org.uk/visiting/enjoy-outdoors/walking/our-walks/walking-routes/white-horse-walk>
- British hill-figures: <http://www.hows.org.uk/personal/hillfigs/mainwh.htm> (click on 'Current Figures')