



The Kilburn White Horse

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The White Horse carved into the steep south-west facing slope of Roulston Scar, just above the village of Kilburn, in the North York Moors National Park, is the largest hill figure in the country and the only one in Yorkshire. Its dimensions are 97m long and 67m high, covering just over an acre of ground, and it is visible from many miles away.

The huge Horse was the idea of a local man, Thomas Taylor, a native of Kilburn, who in his travels around the country had seen other such horses cut into hillsides in Wiltshire and elsewhere. He wrote to his friend John Hodgson, the Kilburn village school-master, suggesting its siting, with a drawing by the artist Harrison Weir of an outline of the proposed carving. John Hodgson, who was also a land surveyor, took up this suggestion and set about surveying the area. Some of his pupils helped to lay out the outline of the Horse by driving stakes into the ground, and then volunteers from the village cleared the site to expose the greyish sandstone rock. Unlike the hill figures further south which were carved into chalk and thus naturally white, the Kilburn carving had to be whitened by using 6 tons of limestone chippings. It was finished in November 1857 – an event celebrated by the villagers with a huge party at which 100 gallons of beer were reportedly consumed and two bullocks were roasted.

The Horse is visible over a large area, but the slope is very steep and the underlying rock is unstable. This makes the figure vulnerable to erosion, and it needs frequent renewing. It was originally paid for by Thomas Taylor but there was no endowment for its upkeep, and maintenance had to be funded by public donations. The Bolton family, who kept the Foresters Arms in Kilburn, collected donations from patrons of the pub for its upkeep, while the Kirk family who were tenants of the land upon which the Horse was carved also had a responsibility.

After some passage of time public interest in the Horse waned, which meant that full responsibility for its maintenance had to be taken by the Kirks and the Boltons. The money raised was used to pay men to hoe and whiten the figure. However, especially during and after the First World War there was a shortage of men to do the work, while rain and melting snow caused substantial damage, and it fell into disrepair.

In 1925 the Yorkshire Evening Post started a campaign to renovate the Horse. The sum of £137 and 19 shillings was raised and it was decided to set up a team of trustees, consisting of the Revd. H. Hawkins, the vicar of Kilburn; George Bolton, a descendant of the original Bolton family; and Robert Thompson, a young man who just started making furniture in the

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village. They set about organising the restoration of the figure. The Post kept reporting on their progress and funds kept coming in, which paid for weeding to be carried out yearly and an occasional re-liming.

At the outbreak of the Second World War the military ordered that the Horse be hidden with camouflage netting until the war ended. It was uncovered and whitened in 1946, but an unprecedented storm almost destroyed it. That it survived is largely due to Robert Thompson and men from his workshops who were sent to weed and whiten it, “four men a full day in Spring and a full day in Summer to hoe and weed the ground at a cost of £1 per man per day, and every third year the Horse to be re-limed”.

In 1955 another restoration fund was set up, and in

1973 the Kilburn White Horse Association came into being as a registered Charity. This looks after the Horse today in conjunction with local farmers. Every five years volunteers from the Association spray the limestone chippings with white paint – needing climbing ropes and harnesses to keep them in place, such is the steep gradient of the slope! Its future seems secure, although it is hoped that a more durable material will be produced to cover the Horse that will solve the problem of maintaining its whiteness.

For over 40 years the Forestry Commission had leased the escarpment and in 1955 it obtained outright ownership. A branch of the Forestry Commission - Forest Enterprise - now manages the area where the Horse is located and ensures that its setting is sensitively maintained.



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’)



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