



Location: 'White Horse' Hill (SU 301 866) is in Oxfordshire (historically Berkshire), 2.5 km south of the village of Uffington. The hill forms a part of the scarp of the Berkshire Downs and overlooks the Vale of White Horse.

Main period: Bronze Age–Iron Age

Access & ownership: The site is managed by the National Trust on behalf of English Heritage and is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Whitehorse Hill is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest. It is signposted from the A420 Swindon to Oxford road, and lies next to the B4507 between Ashbury and Wantage. Parking is available but is subject to a charge for non-members (see National Trust website for details). There is also a small viewing point below the Horse on Dragon Hill road, with parking for six blue badge holders only.

Uffington Hill is a site of enduring significance. This complex of prehistoric remains (Fig. 1) is set in the striking natural landscape of the chalk downlands, and includes an Iron Age hillfort (Uffington Castle) and the well-known figure of the White Horse. Other features include a Neolithic long barrow and a Bronze Age round barrow, reused in the Roman and Saxon periods respectively. An enclosure and ring ditch lie to the SW of the hillfort and linear ditches across the landscape are thought to represent Bronze Age land divisions.



Fig. 1. The White Horse Hill landscape from the air. Google Earth

One of Britain's oldest known routes, the prehistoric Ridgeway, is deflected around the southern side of the hillfort that was probably deliberately sited to control movement along it. To the east the trackway links to the Icknield Way that leads north-east into East Anglia; to the west it passes close to Avebury before heading south across Salisbury Plain. Just a 2 km SW along the Ridgeway is Waylands Smithy, a well-preserved Neolithic burial chamber.

Geological forces have created dramatic local topography. Uffington Castle is set on the summit of the hill, 262 m above sea level. This is the highest point in Oxfordshire, providing extended views over six counties. The White Horse lies a little below, on a steep WNW-facing slope. It can be seen from a great distance galloping across the head of the escarpment. The steep-sided, dry valley below the chalk figure is known as the 'Manger'; legend tells that the white horse grazes there on one night each year, always returning to the hill before dawn. The rippled sides of the valley, known as the 'Giant's Stair', are geological in origin. Another legend attaches to Dragon Hill, a natural chalk hill, the top of which is flattened—possibly artificially. This is supposedly where St. George slew his dragon, its blood poisoning the ground and leaving a white scar.

A number of the monuments on White Horse Hill were investigated in the late 19th century by local antiquarian Edwin Martin-Atkins and more recently by a team from Oxford Archaeology who undertook extensive surveys and excavations between 1989 and 1995 (Miles *et al.* 2003).



Fig. 2. The ditch and banks of Uffington Castle. By Andrew Lewis [CC BY-SA 2.0]

Uffington Castle was first established in the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age. It was laid out at the end of an existing linear ditch, and on the line of The Ridgeway. An area of around 32 ha is enclosed by a single, well-preserved ditch with a large inner bank and a lower, outer, counterscarp bank (Fig. 2). Excavation has shown that the inner bank was built as a timber-laced rampart probably in the 8th century BC. The entrance is at the W end; a second entrance to the E was blocked a few centuries after it was constructed. Excavation of the W entrance suggested a massive, wooden, tunnel-like structure with inner and outer gates.

Excavation indicated that the hillfort was not permanently occupied. Isolated postholes were found inside the enclosure but there was no evidence of buildings, although finds of pottery, loom weights and animal bone suggest some activity. Large numbers of artefacts in the upper fills of the ditch, indicate significant activity during the Roman period. In the early 4th century AD the ramparts were remodelled to provide more entrances and a shrine was added.

The world-famous **Uffington White Horse** (Fig. 3) is a highly stylised figure, 110m long. It was originally formed from deep trenches filled with crushed, white chalk. It is the only such depiction of a horse dating from the prehistoric period in Britain and was once believed to have been of Iron Age (800 BC–AD 100) origin based on the similarity of the horse to comparable figures in Celtic art and on coins. In the 1990s a new technique, optical stimulated luminescence, was used to date the horse. The method is able to determine, with a large error factor, how long material has been hidden from sunlight. Soil samples from between the lower layers of chalk were found to have been buried since 1400–600 BC. This suggests the horse could have been created in the later Bronze Age or early Iron Age.



Fig. 3 The White Horse: a Bronze Age creation. United States Geology Survey

The Uffington White Horse is by far the oldest of such figures in Britain. Due to its size, the creators of the horse would be unable to check its form by standing back from it. They may have employed some sort of scaled measurement to be sure that the figure was correctly proportioned. It has been called a 'horse' since at least the 11th century. Medieval transcripts from Abingdon Abbey, compiled from 1072 to 1084, refer to '*mons albi equi*' (White Horse Hill).

The original purpose of the horse is unknown. It may have marked the land of a local tribe—perhaps those who built the hillfort—or it may have had a religious significance, intended to be seen from above by the god or goddess. As the horse appears to be travelling from east to west - the sun's track - it is also argued

that it may be 'sun-horse' as depicted in many cosmologies from the period (Pollard *in press*). The historical novel 'Sun Horse, Moon Horse' by Rosemary Sutcliff (1978) provides a fascinating speculation on the creation of the Uffington horse.

The Uffington horse was a direct influence on much later hill figures in England, including the Kilburn White Horse (1858) in Yorkshire and the Folkestone White Horse (2003) in Kent. It has also inspired lookalikes around the world with examples in Mexico, Australia, and the USA. Until the late 19th century the horse was scoured every seven years as part of a local fair held on the hill. Without regular cleaning the figure quickly becomes obscured. Today, National Trust volunteers help re-chalk the figure twice a year. It has endured through such regular care for over 3000 years, and continues to inspire new generations.

References and further information

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- White Horse Hill by the National Trust: www.nationaltrust.org.uk/white-horse-hill
- White Horse Hill by English Heritage: www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/uffington-castle-white-horse-and-dragon-hill/

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