

Broad Town White Horse

Garry Gibbons
November 2025

Chronological Development
1900-2025



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Produced as part of the
**Broad Town White Horse Project:
Heritage Protection and Sustainability
through Community Action**

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This figure was cut from the surrounding turf in 1864
by Mr. W. Simmonds, the occupier of Littleton Farm.



Broad Town White Horse.

POST CARD.

THIS SPACE MAY BE USED FOR PRINTED
OR WRITTEN MATTER

ONLY THE ADDRESS TO BE
WRITTEN HERE



Photo. & Pub. by E. Wilkinson & Co., Trowbridge.

Dear Jim
So glad you arrived
safely had a good journey
Write to morrow & let me
know about trains. Had a
lovely walk this morning bright
sunshine but bitter wind.
Can't sleep it is a long
quite well sends a big kiss.
I hope to hear of Cousin Kelly's death
I hope you will get on all right
Much love
J. C.

J. C. Carle.
3. Riverside
The Beeches
Cirencester
Glos.

I Background

1.1 This report forms part of a range of activities undertaken within the Broad Town White Horse Project, funded by the North Wessex Downs Landscape Trust. The project aims to better understand this poorly researched hill figure by completing a range of tasks intended to provide the basis of future investigations by the community and, where necessary, to work in tandem with heritage professionals.

1.2 Broad Town's chalk horse is a dynamic landscape monument whose location high on a prominent, isolated escarpment is subject to the effects of the weather, mainly in the form of erosion, and other natural hazards (burrowing animals, grass encroachment, etc) which together contrive to reduce the hill figure in size and to shift its overall shape. And yet, the chalk horse persists thanks to the care and maintenance of the local community who weed, scrape and, at times, replenish the chalk (more recently, lime) in order to ensure its continued visibility. In the past, those carrying out the work may not have done so armed with sufficient knowledge to ensure the hill figure's structural integrity, the continuance of its 'true' shape, or to guarantee certain of its cut features. Predominantly using visual sources, this analysis aims to identify and record significant changes to the hill figure over a 125 year period (c1900-2025).

1.3 First recorded in the nineteenth century (Plenderleath 1874; 28), the dominant creation story attached to Broad Town's white horse recalls William Simmonds (1818-1901) cutting the hill figure in 1864 whilst at Littletown Farm close by the foot of an escarpment marking the boundary between the clay vale and lower chalk Downland. This and other accounts of the hill figure's genesis are discussed by Marples (1949: 98-100).

1.4 This assessment of Broad Town's horse is intended to dovetail with other reports generated by the project in order to assist in answering questions that have arisen as a consequence of other research activities. For example, our topographic surveys detected a possible horizontal extension to the hill figure's rear leg, a feature which this visual analysis has confirmed and dated. This assessment has also added depth to our understanding of the major restoration works undertaken in the early 1990s. It is, however, important to acknowledge this assessment, like other works undertaken within the project, is simply laying a foundation on which further work must be developed.

2 Assessment of the Broad Town White Horse

2.1 This report brings together a range of images from various sources. They are reproduced at various levels of resolution and represent the hill figure from various vantage points. Close to vertical aerial photographs provide a reasonable degree of certainty when comparing different cut features of the hill figure, whilst images taken from an oblique angle, often from ground level, can be more difficult to assess due to the effects of foreshortening; overall, each image demands a degree of subjective decision making.

2.2 The images used below range in date from the turn of the twentieth century through to the present day. The first 30 years of the last century are only covered by two sources, an oblique photograph reproduced on a postcard (early 1900s) and a field survey (late 1930s). Post-war, the images are separated by some 15-20 years, although there are a few instances where that spread of years is a lot shorter. The images assessed in this report are summarised as follows:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Viewpoint</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Source</i>
early 1900s	Oblique; photograph	Good	Postcard
late 1930s	Perpendicular; survey	Good	Book
1947	Vertical; aerial photograph	Good	NMR
1968	Vertical; aerial photograph	Poor	NMR
1973	Vertical; aerial photograph	Poor	NMR
1989	Oblique; photograph	Poor	G Gibbons
1992	Oblique; aerial photograph	Good	P Lawler
2010	Oblique; aerial photograph	Good	BTWHRG
2025	Vertical; aerial photograph	Good	D Horne

2.3 The assessment of each image has been undertaken chronologically, mainly comparing cut features of the hill figure against its preceding counterpart. Where possible, the hill figure's micro-earthworks are noted. Each image is assessed in context of the circumstances of the period, specifically who was associated with the hill figure's maintenance, be that at the local or national level.

2.4 The assessment of images carried out in Section 3 has highlighted a number of anomalies and inconsistencies relating to each cut feature of the Broad Town white horse, which can be summarised as follows:

2.4.1 Eye

Although the postcard (early 1900s) doesn't show an eye, which may be obscured due to the low camera angle, the Marples' survey (late 1930s) and all other subsequent images clearly do show an eye.

2.4.2 Ear

Certainly one ear, possibly two, are represented in the postcard (early 1900s). Both Marples' survey (late 1930s) and aerial photograph EAW004160 (1947) show a single ear which, by the late 1960s/early 1970s, may have disappeared.

2.4.3 Tail

A fan-shaped tail cut at an angle is shown in the postcard (early 1900s), which continues with small adjustments through to 2010 when the tail is curved and its end rounded, much as it appears today.

2.4.4 Neck and Back

From 1947 (OS73071) the top edge of the hill figure defining the neck and body are creeping downhill, resulting in the narrowing of those features.

2.4.5 Rump

Marples' survey (late 1930s) shows a rounded rump. By 1947 the rump has straightened, before returning to a rounded form (1960s) and finally straightening from 1992 to the present day.

2.4.6 Leg: Outer Front

The postcard image (early 1900s) and Marples' survey (late 1930s) both show a leg shaped by a single bend at the knee. By 1947 (OS73071) a further bend at the fetlock has extended the leg, which persists with some variation through to 2010 after which the leg is a single smooth curve.

2.4.7 Leg: Inner Front

The postcard image (early 1900s) and Marples' survey (late 1930s) show a leg pointing vertically downhill. By 1947 (OS73071) a bend has developed at the fetlock, shaping it under the body, which persists with some variations to the present day.

2.4.8 Leg: Inner Rear

The postcard image (early 1900s) shows a leg pointing vertically downslope which, by the late 1930s, has acquired an angle at the knee, shaping the leg under the body, which persists with some variations to the present day.

2.4.9 Leg: Outer Rear

The postcard image (early 1900s) indicates a bent leg kicking out at the rear, the lower half angled downhill. From 1947 (OS73071) the leg has a distinctive, extended kick at the fetlock out to the rear, which is evident through to 1989 when the 'kick' starts to point downhill.

3 Chronological Development

3.1 20th century

3.1.1 Tomkins & Barrett postcard, c1900

Possibly the earliest photograph of the Broad Town horse, this Tomkins & Barrett's postcard (Fig 1) features a seemingly well-tended horse overlooking Littletown Farm. Whoever designed the hill figure, clearly intended capturing equine motion -- front and rear outer legs outstretched and tail flowing horizontally behind, this horse runs unimpeded along a clear, green scarp. Although photographed from ground level, resulting in a degree of distortion due to the effects of foreshortening, almost all cut features of the horse can be



Fig 1 : Littleton Farm and the Broad Town chalk horse (Postcard, c1900. Published by Tomkins & Barrett, Swindon).

distinguished with little or no evidence of growth across the body; the hill figure appears to be freshly weeded and/or chalked. The horse is full bodied, the legs substantial, a stout neck supports a head which seems to feature two ears. No eye is evident.

3.1.2 Although it's not possible to identify the exact date of this postcard, franked examples typically appear dated c1908 or earlier, therefore it might be taken with a degree of certainty the photograph featured on this postcard represents the horse as it was in the early twentieth century. Quite who was responsible for the hill figure's upkeep at the turn of the century is unknown, however, the newly established scouts' movement which was sweeping the country was certainly responsible for its upkeep in the summer of 1910 (Fig 2).

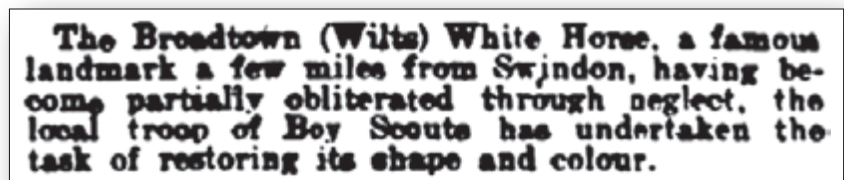


Fig 2: Press cutting. *Boston Guardian*, 16 July 1910.

3.1.3 Marples' survey, late-1930s

The hill figure's inner rear leg and confirmation of a single ear are the two most notable features captured in this survey (Marples 1949; 99). At the time of the survey each of the lower section of each leg were poorly defined, but a bend at the knee of the inner rear leg had been established despite its other 'pair' -- the front inner leg -- remaining vertical. The survey also highlights an imbalance between the two sets of legs; the two front legs are substantially thinner than those at the rear. There's a suggestion that the neck and body are starting to thin, possibly due to downhill creep along the upper edges of the horse.

3.1.4 A few years prior to his death in 1939, Morris Marples' father, George, assisted by his chauffer, J.W. Street, carried out all the hill figure surveys featured in the book, *'White Horses and Other Hill*

Figures', published by Morris 10 years after his father's death. The unit of length employed in the surveys is the traditional measure of a rod (aka perch or rod), equivalent to 16.5 feet/5.5 yards (503cm).

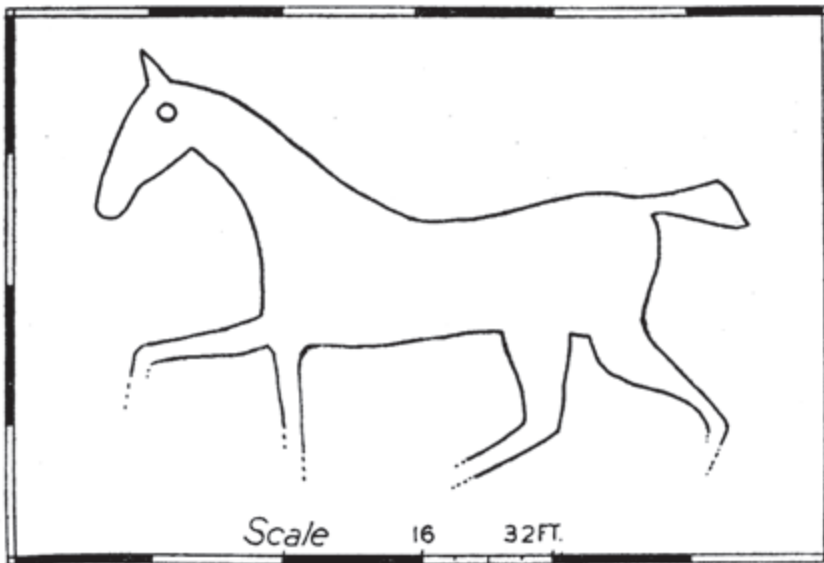


Fig 3. Marples' survey, late-1930s. (Marples 1949:99)



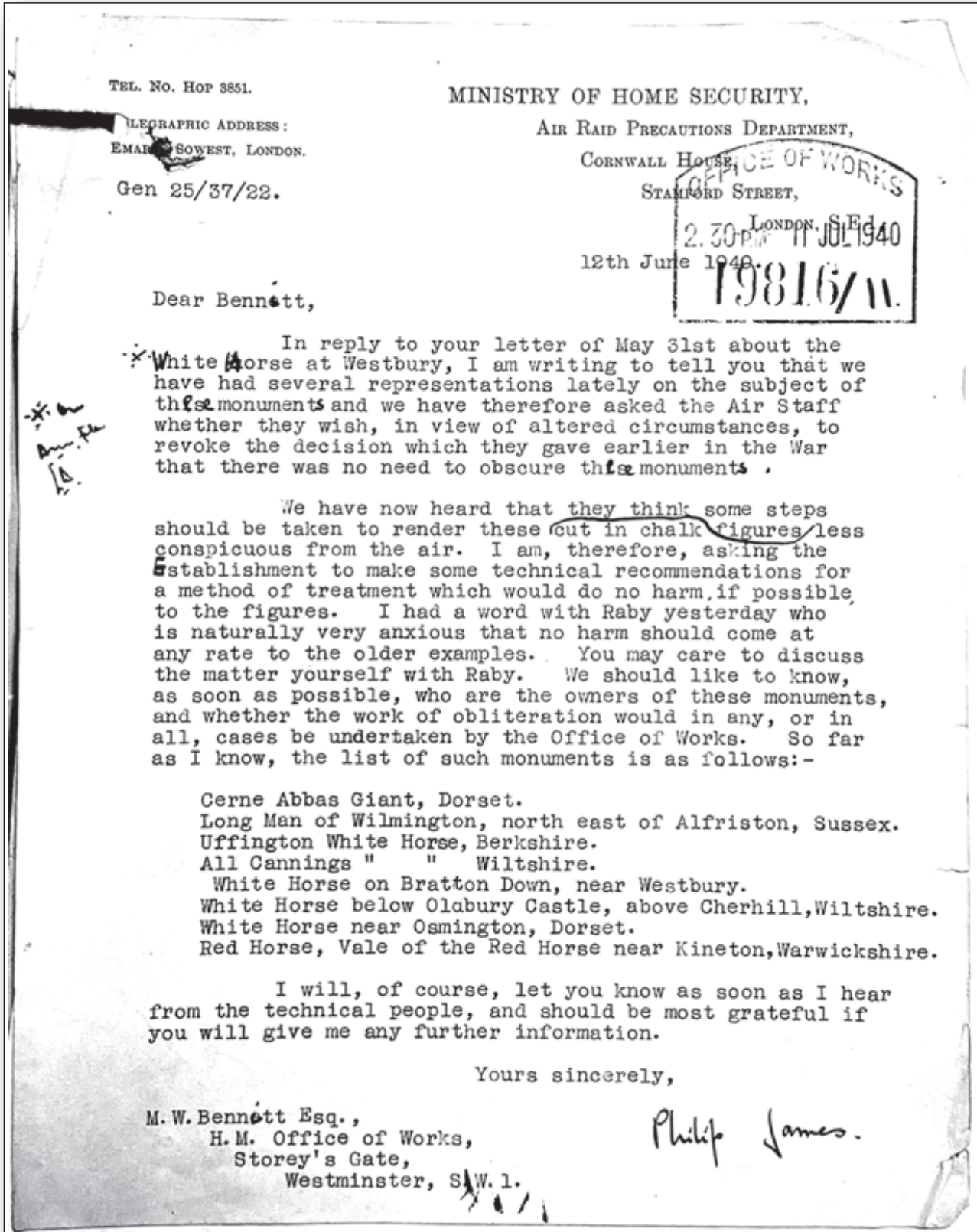
Fig 4. Aerial photograph (EAW004160), 10 April 1947. (Photograph courtesy of Historic England)

3.1.5 Aerial photograph (EAW004160), 10 April 1947

Post-war, the horse has changed in character. Both neck and body have continued thinning, evidently as the top edges of the hill figure continue their downward creep leaving the original line as a shadow on the slope above the head, neck, body and tail. The eye appears to have shifted position down slope as the head changes shape. It's also possible to make out an ear but this too must have changed its position relative to the shifting head. Overall, the legs are much shorter than might be expected, the two front legs are similar to those recorded in the Marples' survey, the inner rear leg has now straightened, and the outer rear leg has changed completely, kicking out almost horizontally behind the body.

3.1.6 At the outbreak of WW2 it was considered unnecessary by the Air Staff to cover hill figures but by the summer of 1940, following concerns raised by Westbury Urban District Council, this decision was reviewed and agreement reached that chalk hill figures across the country should be camouflaged. Initially, site visits were arranged for scheduled monuments and those thought to be ancient, however, a more extensive list, including Wiltshire's horses, was compiled and agreed for action (Fig 5).

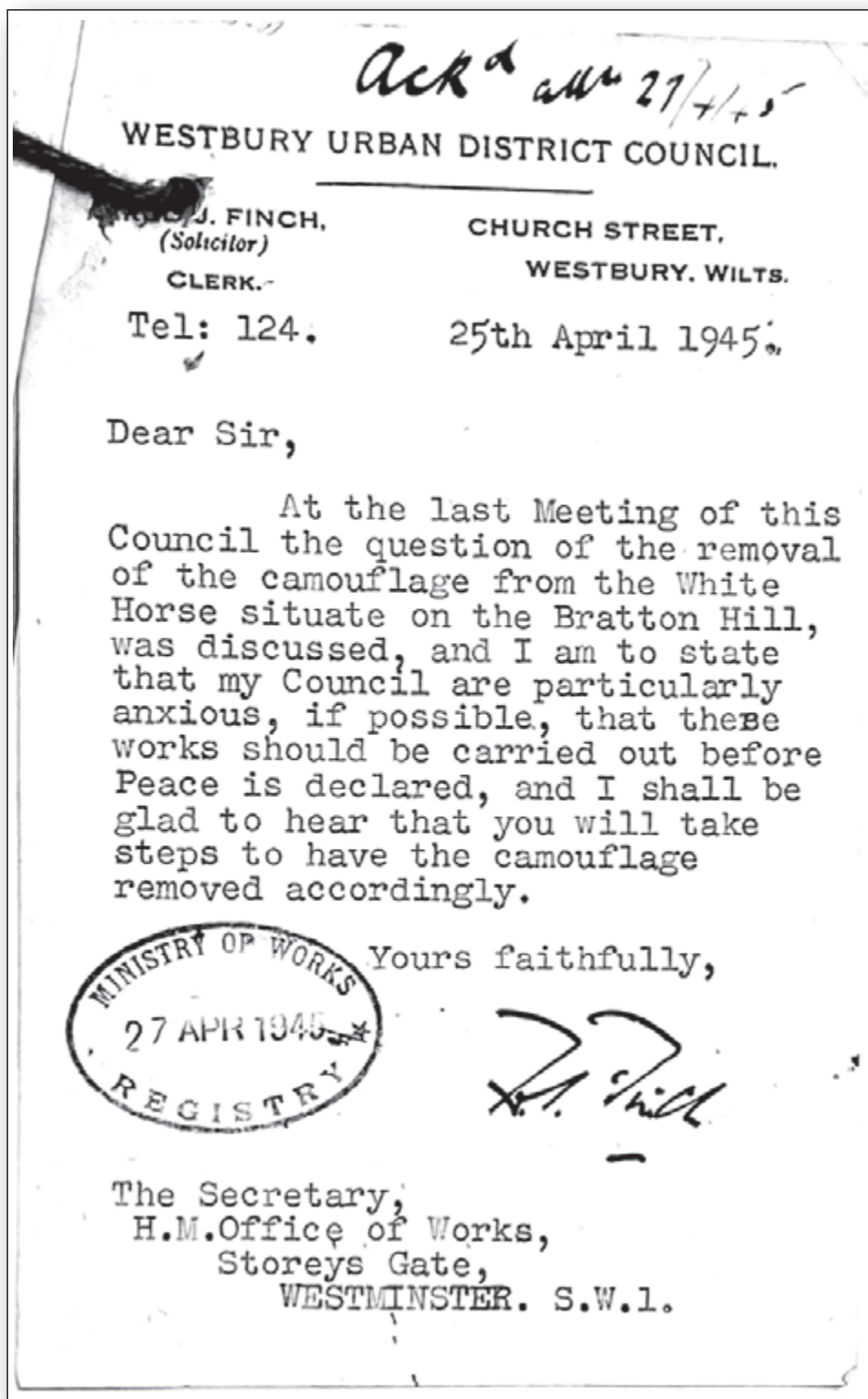
Fig 5. Letter from Philip James, Camouflage Branch, Ministry of Home Security, to MW Bennet, Office of Works, London, 12 June 1940. (Reproduced by kind permission of the National Archive)



Methods to cover the hill figures, aimed at minimising damage to the monuments, were eventually settled on, and local contractors employed to undertake the works.

3.1.7 At the end of the war it was Westbury again leading the way to reinstate the country's hill figures (Fig 6). Questions around who would be responsible for uncovering the monuments and restoring them to their pre-war condition were finally resolved, agreeing that costs would be covered at the public's expense, but it would be the end of 1945 before local contractors were commissioned to restore the hill figures.

Fig 6. Letter from F J Finch, Clerk, Westbury Urban District Council, to Ministry of Works, 25 April 1945. (Reproduced by kind permission of the National Archive)



3.1.8 Aerial photograph (OS68234), 1 July 1968

Unfortunately the quality of this image suffers the effects of a low resolution scan and a chalk horse that is, in patches, overgrown. The neck, body and tail may appear to have regained their depth but the tell-tale bright white line along the upper edges of the horse indicate this is, in fact, the bright face of a 'chalk cliff' rather than constituting part of the body (Fig 8). For those cut features that can clearly be identified, the horse is broadly similar to the 1947 image, other than the rump which is now rounded, the legs appear to be thicker, and the head more substantial. Neither the eye nor the ear is visible due to growth on the surface of the horse.

Fig 7. Aerial photograph (OS68234), 1 July 1968. (Photograph courtesy of Historic England)



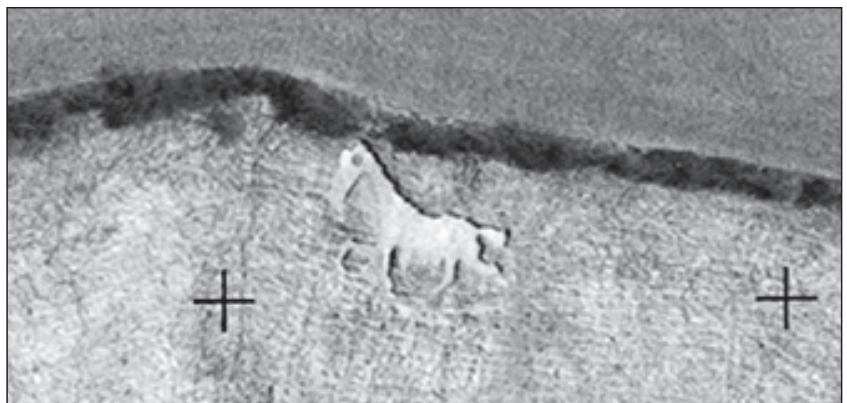
Fig 8. An example of the 'chalk cliff' to the upper edge of the horse (1989).

3.1.9 Aerial photograph (OS73071), 10 April 1973

The quality of image suffers again due to a low resolution scan. A shift in the sun's position clearly shows the hill figure's negative earthworks as dark shadows, especially the 'chalk cliff' face. An eye is visible due to the improved upkeep of the horse although it's unclear if an ear is present. One notable change seems to have the head extending further down slope than it had previously.

3.1.10 It's assumed maintenance work on the horse around this time was irregular as in 1975 the horse was reported as 'almost effaced' (Pevsner 1975; 148).

Fig 9. Aerial photograph (OS73071), 10 April 1973. (Photograph courtesy of Historic England)



3.1.11 Broad Town chalk horse, August 1989

Taken at an oblique angle, this image is difficult to accurately compare with the two previous aerial photographs due to the effects of foreshortening. Clearly, the horse requires maintenance, however an eye is clearly evident and the legs appear to be consistent with the shape of those over the past 30 years, save for the outer rear leg which now sees the lower part of the leg turning down the hill rather than kicking out.



Fig 10. Broad Town chalk horse, August 1989. (Photograph courtesy of G Gibbons)

3.1.12 Following a letter (c1984) sent to the Broad Town Parish Council from local school girl Alison Shapland complaining about the poor state of the chalk horse, substantial restoration work took place later that same year led by Jeff Clewley (Parish Councillor) and Tony Parker (Chair, Parish Council) (Fig 11) -- their work defined the horse and rediscovered the legs (Bob Clark, *pers comm*).

3.1.13 Tony Parker later wrote:

'It (the horse) needs a bit more attention now, but I have decided it is now a job for a younger man.'

(letter from Tony Parker to Pattie Lawler, July 1989).

3.1.14 By 1990 it was decided an 'official' body should be established to ensure the hill figure's survival. The following year maintenance was carried out on the horse and, a year later again, the new preservation society was finally set up under John Wray and Jim Brierley (Bob Clark, *pers comm*).

3.1.15 Aerial photograph, Spring 1992

This photograph was taken by a Broad Town resident who had been offered a trip in a helicopter owned by another local resident. A photographic print was sourced by Tony Parker and sent to USA-based researcher, Pattie Lawler, in 1992.



Fig 11. Aerial photograph, Spring 1992.



Fig 12. Restoration works about to start, the hill figure's chalk surface covered in growth. Metal stakes and a roll of chicken wire lay on the horse, ready to instal.

3.1.16 The horse has undergone substantial structural work, its outline is well defined, its chalk surface shows little sign of growth, and its lower edges are now, for the first time, supported by metal stakes, in places standing almost a meter above the chalk surface. Groups of stakes associated with different cut features of the horse were connected by chicken wire, presumably to provide structural support (Fig 11). The negative earthworks, cast in shadow, are all sharply defined. Compared to the horse as photographed in 1989, its overall shape appears to have changed little, save for a slightly shorter tail.

3.1.17 The work required to restore the horse at this time was substantial, carried out by a team of volunteers over several weekends (Fig 12). The shape was restored, stakes and chicken wire installed, a large quantity of chalk deposited across the horse, and a layer of lime completed the work (Bob Clark, pers comm).

3.2 21st century

3.2.1 Aerial photograph, April 2010

The horse photographed immediately following restoration work. For almost twenty years since the largescale restoration, the hill figure's outline seems to have survived with only minor modifications; the tail possibly being the only exception and the eye growing in size. None of the metal stakes are clearly visible, save a few at the end of the tail. Lighting conditions make negative earthworks to the upper edges of the horse difficult to distinguish.



Fig 13. Aerial photograph, April 2010 (Photograph courtesy of BTWHRG)

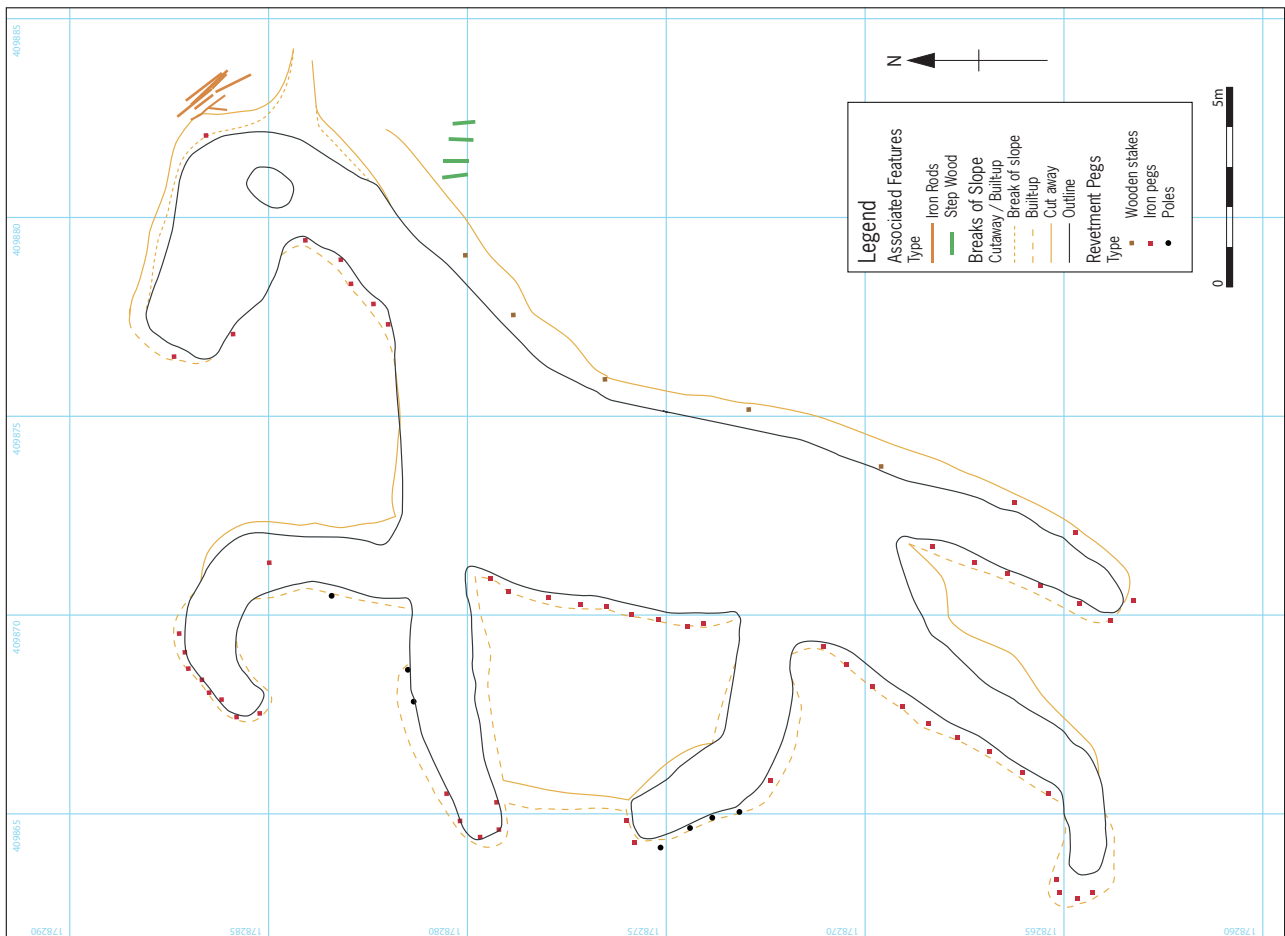


Fig 14. Survey recording location of 69 in situ wood and metal stakes, and cache of surplus metal stakes.



Fig 15. Drone photograph, May 2025, with restoration group.

3.2.3 Drone photograph, May 2025

Following grass strimming of the site and re-liming of the horse, this drone photograph was taken during photogrammetric survey work of the hill figure and hillside. Since 2010 the upper edges of the neck, back and tail appear to have crept gradually downhill, resulting in a narrowing of the neck and body. The eye has been reduced.

3.2.4 A topographic survey undertaken in 2025 recorded all (or most) of the metal stakes remaining in situ, and discovered a cache of metal stakes, which may have been surplus to requirements, scattered on the hillside close to the hill figure's head (Fig 14).

4 Discussion

4.1 As indicated at the outset of this report, there is no definitive account surrounding the cutting of Broad Town's chalk horse. Whilst William Simmonds is the leading candidate to be credited with the endeavour, no record currently exists to support the claim, nor is there a confirmed date when the horse was cut; hearsay and rumour is the hard currency of Wiltshire's older chalk horses. However, with this very much in mind, one piece of material evidence has passed down to the present day through descendants of William Simmonds -- a 'plan' of a horse laid out on a grid, each full square here calculated as one rod, ie. 16.5 feet or 5.5 yards (Fig 16). However, the 'Simmonds' horse, compared with the 1930s Marples' survey at the same scale, displays little similarity in outline or in size (Fig 17).



Fig 16. The 'Simmonds' horse. Undated. (Reproduced with kind courtesy of Richard Hacker)

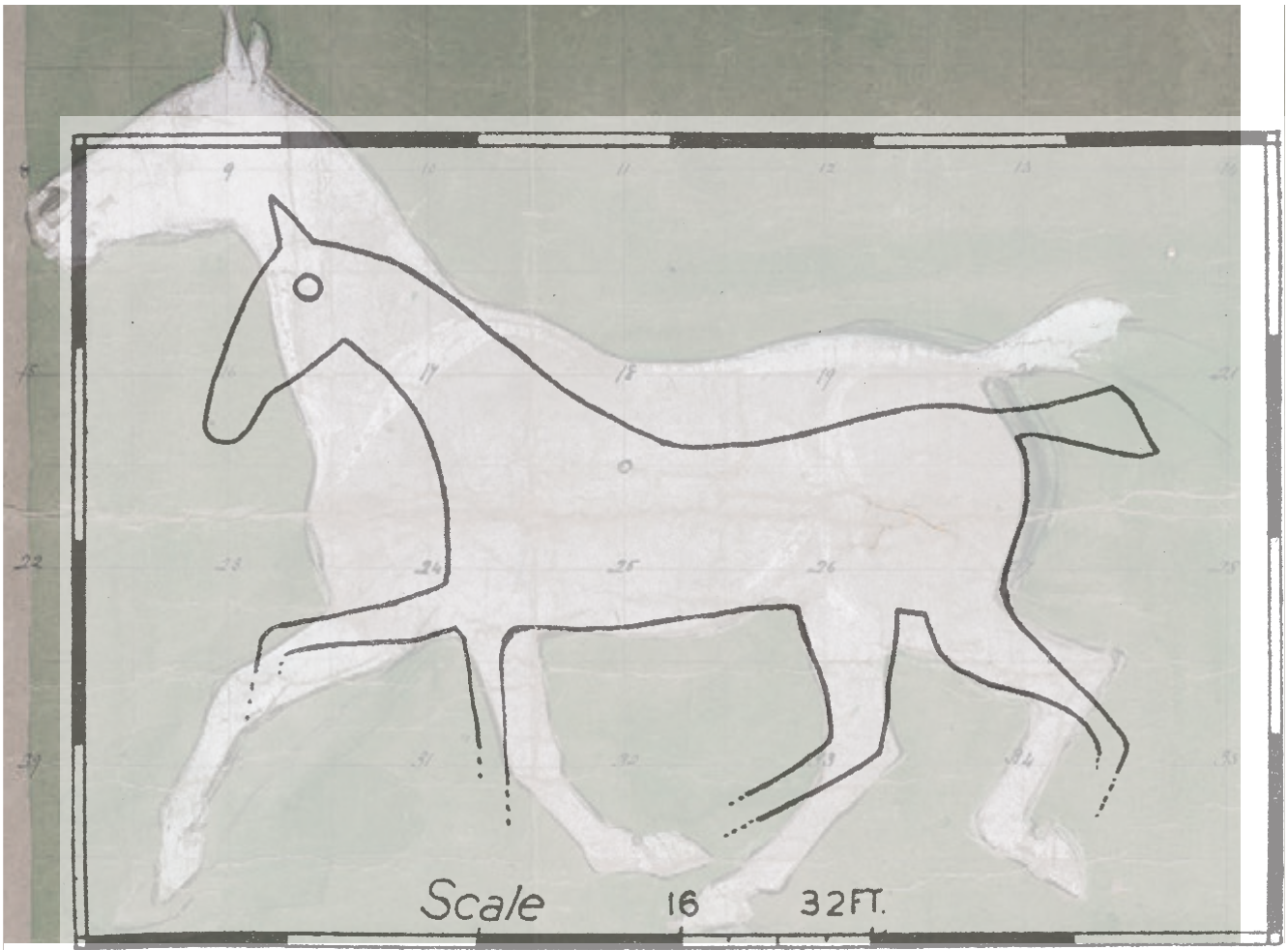


Fig 17. 'Simmonds' horse compared to Marples' survey (late 1930s).

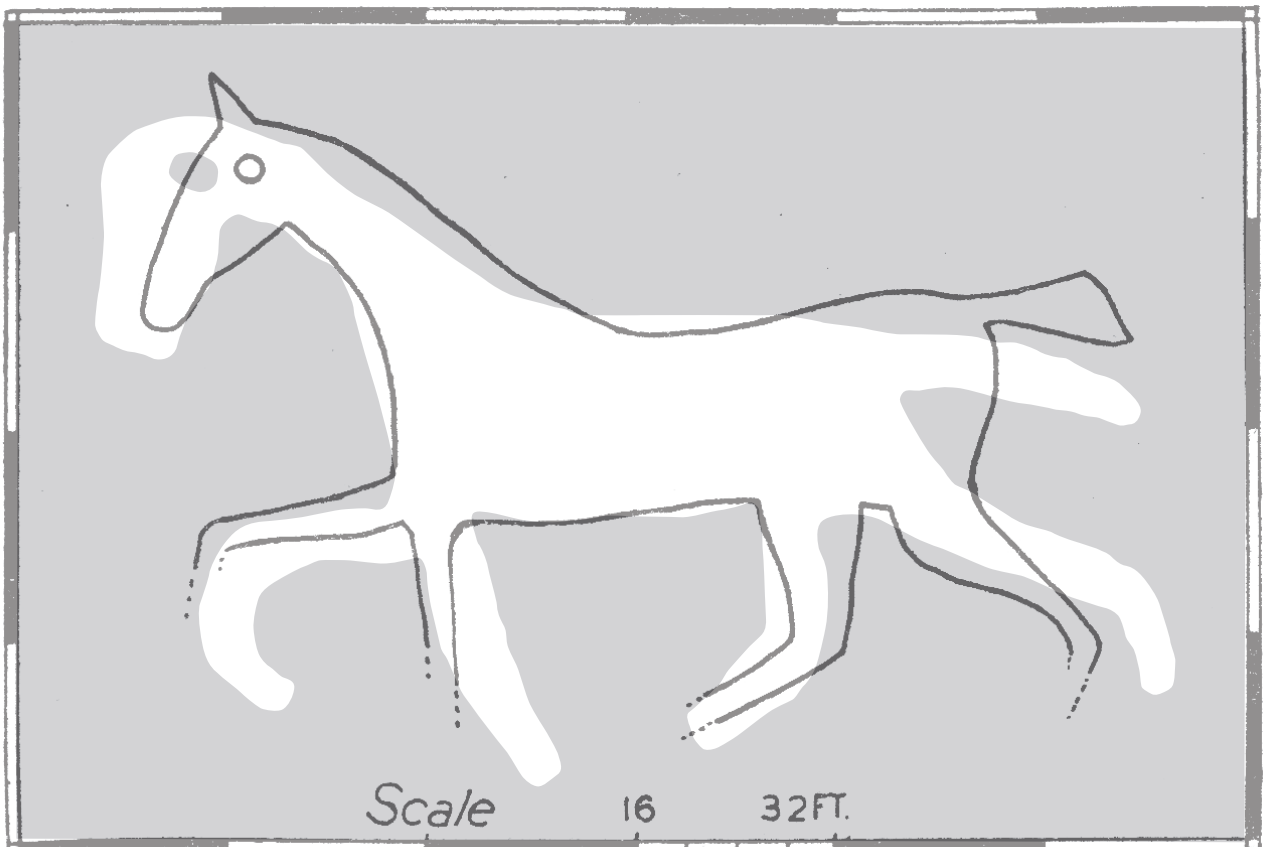


Fig 18. Marples' survey (late 1930s) compared to the 2025 survey.

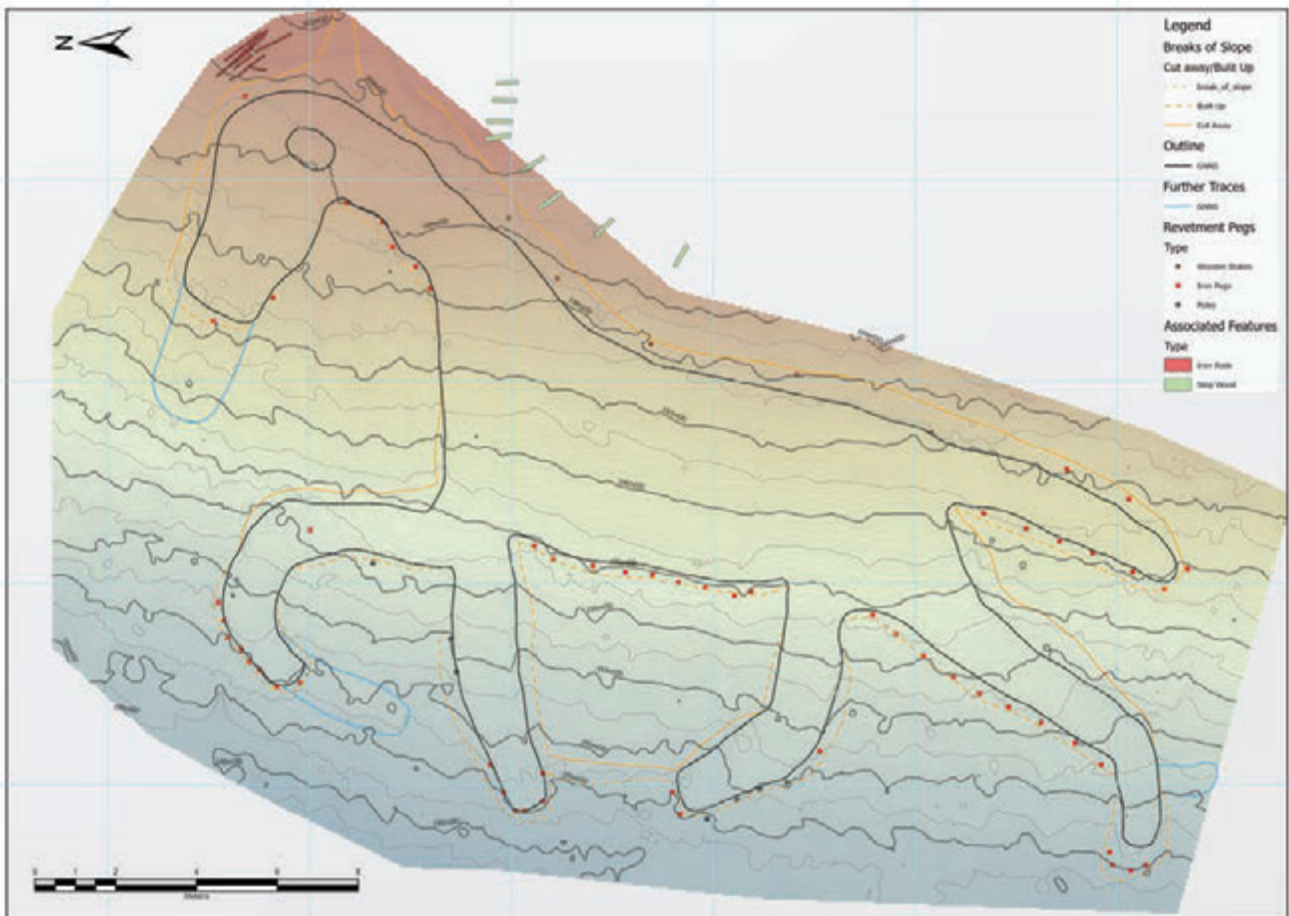
4.2 Perhaps we're on more certain ground comparing Marples' survey to the 2025 survey results (Fig 18)? Or is the distinction between these two outlines just as marked as that between 'Simmonds' and 'Marples'? It is, nevertheless, clear the Broad Town horse has survived thanks to the efforts of the local community, although there have clearly been periods when the horse had been neglected and difficult to distinguish (as described by Pevsner in 1975). Typically alert to interactions between hill figures, communities, and the wider environment, Edwards (2024;136) neatly summarises periods of attention and neglect:

'Now you see it – now you don't. Beckoning those travelling the landscape; a form of hide-and-seek is inherent in the creation of hill figures. This game is compounded as the seasons lay siege, so nature's attempts to reclaim turf monuments demands an annual strategy.'

Deep seated reasons lie at the heart of hide and seek -- stop/start action, a muddle of memory/memory loss, shifts between communal stability/volatility, any one of which is liable to create unintended conditions that determine the long-/short-term future of a hill figure.

4.3 Change is inevitable, and it is the echoes of change which must be preserved and recorded; the physical biographical history of a hill figure is largely written into the slope on which it was constructed. At Broad Town the small anomalies and discrepancies of the hill figure's cut features identified in the visual analysis can be found embedded in the earthworks, as partially revealed by this project's topographic surveys (Fig 19). All the signs of past iterations are encapsulated in

Fig 19. GNNS topographic survey, with contour lines and interpretation. Anomalies indicated in blue.



the natural/unnatural bumps and troughs of the scarp's slope – elongated head, former leg positions, former ear, etc...

4.4 This assessment has utilised a range of images and, in so doing, initiates the process of charting the development of a hill figure that is poorly understood due, in part, to the relatively low availability of photographic records of the horse or lack of column inches written about it. Aerial photographs held by the National Monument Record used in this analysis have largely suffered poor resolution quality; a situation that could be improved were the NMR to relax its imaging policy when scanning negatives – especially for paying clients. Nevertheless, this report aims to provide a foundation from which further work can emerge.

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