

Cerne Abbas Giant

The **Cerne Abbas Giant** is a hill figure near the village of Cerne Abbas in Dorset, England. 55 metres (180 ft) high, it depicts a standing nude male figure with a prominent erection and wielding a large club in its right hand. Like many other hill figures it is outlined by shallow trenches cut in the turf and backfilled with chalk rubble. The figure is listed as a scheduled monument of England and the site is owned by the National Trust.

The origin and age of the figure are unclear. It is often thought of as an ancient construction, though the earliest mention of it dates to the late 17th century. Early antiquarians associated it, on little evidence, with a Saxon deity, while other scholars sought to identify it with a Celtic British figure of the Greek Hercules or some syncretisation of the two. There is archaeological evidence that parts of the drawing have been lost over time. The lack of earlier descriptions, along with information given to an 18th-century historian by the steward of the manor at the time, leads some modern scholars to conclude that it probably dates from the 17th century, and perhaps originated as political satire.

Regardless of its age, the Cerne Abbas Giant has become an important part of local culture and folklore, which often associates it with fertility. It is one of England's best known hill figures and is a visitor attraction in the region.



Cerne Abbas Giant chalk figure below the rectangular "Tendle" earthworks

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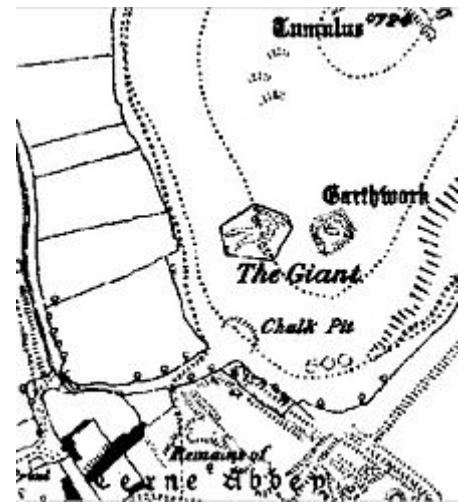
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Description

The Giant is located just outside the small village of Cerne Abbas in Dorset, about 48 kilometres (30 mi) west of Bournemouth and 26 kilometres (16 mi) north of Weymouth. The figure depicts a naked man and is of colossal dimensions, being about 55 metres (180 ft) high and 51 metres (167 ft) wide. It is cut into the steep west-facing side of a hill known as Giant Hill^[2] or Trendle Hill.^{[3][4]} Atop the hill is another landmark, the Iron Age earthwork known as the "Trendle" or "Frying Pan".^[5] The figure's outline is formed by trenches cut into the turf about 0.6 metres (2 ft 0 in) deep, and filled with crushed chalk.^[2] In his right hand the giant holds a knobbed club 37 metres (121 ft) in length,^[6] and adding 11 metres (36 ft) to the total height of the figure.^[7] A line across the waist has been suggested to represent a belt.^[8] Writing in 1901 in the *Proceedings* of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, Henry Colley March noted that: "The Cerne Giant presents five characteristics: (1) It is petrographic ... It is, therefore, a rock carving ... (2) It is colossal ... (3) It is nude. ... (4) It is ithyphallic ... (5) The Giant is clavigerous. It bears a weapon in its right hand."^[9]



Cerne Abbas Giant on 1891
Ordnance Survey map (1:10,560)^[1]

A 1996 study found that some features have changed over time, concluding that the figure originally held a cloak in its left arm and stood over a disembodied head.^[10] The former presence of a cloak was corroborated in 2008 when a team of archaeologists using special equipment determined that part of the carving had been allowed to be obliterated. The cloak might have been a depiction of an animal skin, giving credence to the theory that the giant was a depiction of a hunter, or alternatively, Hercules with the skin of the Nemean lion over his arm.^[11] In 1993, the National Trust gave the Giant a "nose job" after years of erosion had worn it away.^{[12][13]}

The Giant has been described as "renowned for its manhood",^[14] "markedly phallic",^[7] "sexually explicit",^[15] and "ithyphallic".^[16] The Giant sports an erection, including its testicles, some 11 metres (36 feet) long, and nearly the length of its head.^[17] It has been called "Britain's most famous phallus";^[18] one commentator noted that postcards of the Giant were the only indecent photographs that could be sent through the English Post Office.^[19] However, this feature may also have changed over time. From a review of historical depictions of the figure, it has been identified that the Giant's current large erection is, in fact, the result of merging a circle representing his navel with a smaller penis during a 1908 re-cut: the navel still appears on a late 1890s picture postcard.^[20]

The carving is most commonly known as the Cerne Abbas Giant.^{[21][22][23][24]} The National Trust and others call it the "Cerne Giant",^{[21][25]} while English Heritage and Dorset County Council call it simply "The Giant".^{[2][26]} The carving has also been referred to as the "Old Man",^[27] and more recently it has been referred to as the "Rude Man" of Cerne.^{[28][29]}

Although the best view of the Giant is from the air, most tourist guides recommend a ground view from the "Giant's View" lay-by and car park off the A352.^{[30][31]} This area was developed in 1979 in a joint project between the Dorset County Planning Department, the National Trust, Nature Conservancy Council (now called English Nature), the Dorset Naturalists Trusts, the Department of the Environment, and local land-owners. The information panel there was devised by the National Trust and Dorset County Council.^[32]

History

Early accounts

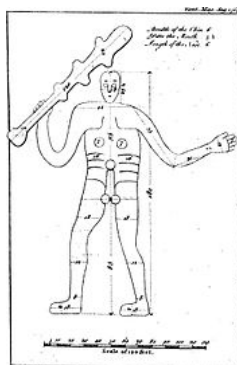
Like several other chalk figures carved into the English countryside, the Cerne Abbas Giant is often thought of as an ancient creation. However, as with many of the other figures, its history cannot be traced back further than the late 17th century, making an origin during the Celtic, Roman or even Early Medieval periods difficult to demonstrate. Medieval sources refer to the hill on which the giant is located as Trendle Hill – possibly in reference to the nearby landmark known as the Trendle.^{[3][5]} Joseph Bettey noted that none of the earlier sources for the area, including a detailed 1617 land survey, refer to the giant, suggesting that it might not have been there at the time.^[33] In contrast, the Uffington White Horse has been shown to be 3,000 years old, and there are references to it across the ages.^[34]

The earliest known written reference to the giant is a 4 November 1694 entry in the Churchwardens' Accounts from St Mary's Church in Cerne Abbas, which reads "for repairing ye Giant, 3 shillings".^{[35][36]} In 1734, The Bishop of Bristol noted and inquired about the giant during a Canonical visitation to Cerne Abbas. The bishop's account, as well as subsequent observations such as those of William Stukeley, were discussed at meetings of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1764.^{[37][38]} Additionally, in 1738 the antiquarian Francis Wise mentioned the giant in a letter^[39]

Beginning in 1763 descriptions of the giant appeared in contemporary magazines. The earliest known survey was published in the *Royal Magazine* in September 1763. Derivative versions subsequently appeared in the October 1763 *St James Chronicle*, the July 1764 *Gentleman's Magazine*^{[37][40]} and the 1764 edition of *The Annual Register*.^{[37][41] [42][43] [44]} In 1774, the antiquarian John Hutchins reviewed various previous accounts in his book *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*: in it, he wrote that the carving had only been done in the previous century.^[37]

The earliest known drawing of the Giant appears in the August 1764 issue of *Gentleman's Magazine*.^[40] A map referred to as the "1768 Survey Map of Cerne Abbas by Benjamin Pryce" is held at the Dorset History Centre.^[45] However, a record at the National Archives notes that "the cartouche refers to Lord Rivers by that title which he did not acquire until 1776. Numbers on the map appear to correspond with the survey of 1798".^[46] By the Victorian period (after 1837) the penis was removed from academic and tourist depictions, in line with the prevailing views on modesty at the time.

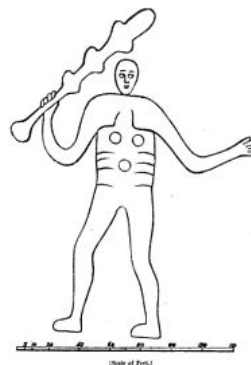
Cerne Abbas Giant at different dates



1764, first known drawing from the *Gentleman's Magazine* with measurements, including the height of 180 feet (55 m)^[40]



1764 sketch, perhaps dated to 1763, sent to the Society of Antiquaries of London^[47]



1842 drawing by the antiquary and editor John Sydenham^[48]



1892 drawing by the author and antiquarian, William Plenderleath^[49]

Interpretation

A number of studies of the giant have been undertaken. In 1896 the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society noted the consensus of members that the giant was "of very great antiquity".^[50] Modern histories of the Cerne Giant have been published by Bettey 1981, Legg 1990, and Darvill et al. 1999.^[51]

There are three main theories concerning the age of the Giant, and whom he might represent.^[52]

1. The first argues that the Giant was created in the 17th century, perhaps by Lord Holles, who held the Cerne Abbas estate by right of his second wife Jane, and perhaps as a parody of Oliver Cromwell.^[53]
2. The second idea is that the Giant is a creation of the Romano-British culture because the Giant resembles the Roman god Hercules, who was based on the Greek god Heracles.
3. The third idea is that the Giant is of Celtic origin, because it is stylistically similar to a Celtic god on a skillet handle found at Hod Hill, Dorset, and dated to around AD 10 to AD 51.

A Saxon origin was also suggested by early antiquarians, who associated the figure with a Saxon god whose name contained some variant of the element *Hel-*.^[54] This god is attested in several medieval and early modern texts, and was associated with the Cerne Abbas Giant by an editor of a 1789 edition of William Camden's *Britannia* and by William Stukeley, who indicated that locals referred to the giant as "Helis".^[55] A Saxon origin is unlikely, but Stukeley was also the first to hypothesize that the figure was Hercules, a suggestion that has found more support.^{[55][56]} Some 19th-century sources describe the giant as having "between his legs, three rude letters, scarcely legible, and over them in modern figures, 748", (*rude* meaning "roughly cut") and being the representation of Cenric, the son of Cuthred, King of Wessex.^{[57][58]}

Proponents of a 17th-century origin suggest that the giant was carved around the time of the English Civil War by servants of the Lord of the Manor, Denzil Holles, and was intended as a parody of Oliver Cromwell.^[59] This theory is supported by the 1774 account given by the antiquarian John Hutchins, who also noted in a letter of 1751 that the steward of the manor had told him that the figure "was a modern thing, cut out in Lord Hollis' time".^{[33][5]} Cromwell was sometimes mockingly referred to as "England's Hercules" by his enemies. While Holles, the MP for Dorchester and a leader of the Presbyterian faction in Parliament, had been a key Parliamentarian supporter during the First English Civil War, he grew to personally despise Cromwell and attempted to have him impeached in 1644.^[60] The fact that there is no medieval documentary evidence of the figure supports this date of origin, and the possibility that the giant parodies Cromwell as Hercules is further strengthened by the 1996 discovery of the cloak, as Hercules was often depicted with a cloak made from the Nemean Lion's skin.^[55] Under this interpretation, the club has been suggested to hint at Cromwell's military rule, and the phallus to mock his Puritanism.^[61]

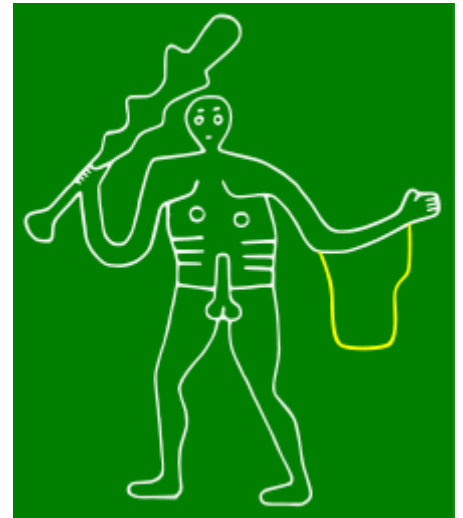
Modern history

In 1920, the giant and the 4,000 square metres (0.99 acres) site where he stands was donated to the National Trust by its then land-owners, Alexander and George Pitt-Rivers.^[62] and it is now listed as a Scheduled Monument.^[2] During World War II the giant was camouflaged with brushwood by the Home Guard in order to prevent use as a landmark for enemy aircraft.^{[63][64]}

According to the National Trust, the grass is trimmed regularly and the giant is fully re-chalked every 25 years.^[65] Traditionally, the National Trust has relied on sheep from surrounding farms to graze the site.^[66] However, in 2008 a lack of sheep, coupled with a wet spring causing extra plant growth, forced a re-chalking of the giant,^[67] with 17 tonnes of new chalk being poured in and tamped down by hand.^[68] In 2006, the National Trust carried out the first wildlife survey of the Cerne Abbas Giant, identifying wild flowers including the green-winged orchid, clustered bellflower and autumn gentian, which are uncommon in England.^[69]

In 1921 Walter Long of Gillingham, Dorset objected to the giant's nudity and conducted a campaign to either convert it to a simple nude, or to cover its supposed obscenity with a leaf.^[15] Long's protest gained some support, including that of two bishops,^{[18][19]} and eventually reached the Home Office.^[19] The Home Office considered the protest to be in humour, though the chief constable responded to say the office could not act against a protected scheduled monument.^[19]

Archaeology



Layout of the giant with the obliterated line (in yellow) reconstructed



Lord Holles, a portrait from the 1640s. Holles, the Cerne Abbas landowner, has been suggested as the person who ordered the giant to be cut in mockery of his political adversary Cromwell.

A 1617 land survey of Cerne Abbas makes no mention of the Giant, suggesting that it may not have been there at the time or was perhaps overgrown.^[33] The first published survey appeared in the September 1763 issue of *Royal Magazine*, reprinted in the October 1763 issue of *St James Chronicle*, and also in the August 1764 edition of *Gentleman's Magazine* together with the first drawing that included measurements.^[37]

Egyptologist and archaeology pioneer Sir Flinders Petrie^[70] surveyed the Giant, probably during the First World War, and published his results in a Royal Anthropological Institute paper in 1926.^{[74][72]} Petrie says that he made 220 measurements, and records slight grooves across the neck, and from the shoulders down to the armpits. He also notes a row of pits suggesting the place of the spine. He concludes that the Giant is very different from the Long Man of Wilmington, and that minor grooves may have been added from having been repeatedly cleaned.^[72]

In 1764, William Stukeley was one of the first people to suggest that the Giant resembles Hercules (Heracles).^[38] In 1938, British archaeologist Stuart Piggott agreed, and like Hercules, should also be carrying a lion-skin.^{[73][74]} In 1979, a resistivity survey was carried out, and together with drill samples, confirmed the presence of the lion-skin.^[75] Another resistivity survey in 1995 also found evidence of a cloak and changes to the length of the phallus, but did not find evidence (as rumoured) of a severed head, horns, or symbols between the feet.^[76]



Roman god Hercules holding a club and the Nemean lion-skin fur

Earthworks

North-east of the head of the Giant is an escarpment called Trendle Hill, on which are some earthworks now called The Trendle or Frying Pan.^[77] It is a scheduled monument in its own right.^[78] Antiquarian John Hutchins wrote in 1872 that "These remains are of very interesting character, and of considerable extent. They consist of circular and other earthworks, lines of defensive ramparts, an avenue, shallow excavations, and other indications of a British settlement."^[79]

Unlike the Giant, the earthworks belong to Lord Digby, rather than the National Trust. Its purpose is unknown, though it is thought to be the site of maypole dancing.^[77] It has been considered to be Roman,^[77] or perhaps an Iron-Age burial mound containing the tomb of the person represented by the Giant.^{[80][81]}

Folklore

Whatever its origin, the giant has become an important part of the culture and folklore of Dorset. Some folk stories indicate that the image is an outline of the corpse of a real giant.^[55] One story says the giant came from Denmark leading an invasion of the coast, and was beheaded by the people of Cerne Abbas while he slept on the hillside.^[82]

Other folklore, first recorded in the Victorian era, associates the figure with fertility.^[55] In the past locals would erect a maypole on the earthwork, around which childless couples would dance to promote fertility.^[43] According to folk belief, a woman who sleeps on the figure will be blessed with fecundity, and infertility may be cured through sexual intercourse on top of the figure, especially the phallus.^[55]

In 1808, Dorset poet William Holloway published his poem "The Giant of Trendle Hill",^[4] in which the Giant is killed by the locals by piercing its heart.

In popular culture

In modern times the giant has been used for several publicity stunts and as an advertisement. For example, Ann Bryn-Evans of the Pagan Federation recalls that the Giant has been used to promote "...condoms, jeans and bicycles."^[83]

In 1998, pranksters made a pair of jeans out of plastic mesh with a 21-metre (69 ft) inside leg, and fitted them to the giant^[84] to publicise American Jeans manufacturer Big Smith.^[85] In 2002, the BLAC advertising agency^[86] on behalf of "... the Family Planning Association (FPA) as part of its mission to promote condom-wearing [...] donned balaclavas and spent Sunday night rolling the enormous latex sheet down the Giant's member."^[87]



Homer Simpson as promotion for *The Simpsons Movie*

As a publicity stunt for the opening of *The Simpsons Movie* on 16 July 2007, a giant Homer Simpson brandishing a doughnut was outlined in water-based biodegradable paint to the left of the Cerne Abbas giant. This act displeased local neopagans, who pledged to perform rain magic to wash the figure away.^{[88][89]}

An August 2007 report, in the *Dorset Echo* said that a man claiming to be the "Purple Phantom" had painted the Giant's penis purple. It was reported that the man was from Fathers 4 Justice but the group said that they did not know who it was.^[90]

The Cerne Abbas Giant has appeared in several films and TV programmes, including the title sequence of the 1986 British historical drama film *Comrades*,^[91] a 1996 episode of the *Erotic Tales* series "The Insatiable Mrs Kirsch", directed by Ken Russell (featuring a replica of the Giant), in 1997, the series 6 finale "Sofa" of the comedy series *Men Behaving Badly*, and the 2000 film *Maybe Baby* directed by Ben Elton.^{[92][93]}

In 2012, pupils and members of the local community recreated the Olympic torch on the Giant, to mark the passing of the official torch in the run-up to the 2012 London Olympics.^{[94][95]}

In November 2013, the National Trust supported Movember, which raises awareness of prostate and testicular cancer. It authorised the temporary placement of a huge grass moustache on the giant. The moustache was 12 metres (39 ft) wide and 3 metres (10 ft) deep according to the designer^[96] but both the National Trust and the BBC reported it as being 1 by 27 metres (36 by 89 ft).^{[97][98]}

Representations

In 1980, Devon artist Kenneth Evans-Loud planned to produce a companion 70-metre (230 ft) female figure on the opposite hill, featuring Marilyn Monroe in her iconic pose from the film *The Seven Year Itch* where her dress is blown by a subway grating.^{[99][100]}

In 1989, Turner Prize winning artist Grayson Perry designed a set of motorbike leathers inspired by the Cerne Abbas Giant.^{[101][102][103]} In 1994, girls from Roedean School painted an 24-metre (79 ft) replica of the Giant on their playing field, the day before sports day.^[104]

In 2003, pranksters created their own 23-metre (75 ft) version of the Giant on a hill in English Bicknor, but "wearing wellies, an ear of corn hanging from its mouth and a tankard of ale in its hand".^[105] In 2005, the makers of Lynx deodorant created a 9.300 square metres (100.10 sq ft) advert on a field near Gatwick, featuring a copy of the Giant wearing underpants, frolicking with two scantily-clad women.^[106] In 2006, artist Peter John Hardwick produced a painting "The Two Dancers with the Cerne Abbas Giant, with Apologies to Picasso" that is on display at Poole Hospital NHS Foundation Trust.^[107] In 2009, the Giant was given a red nose, to publicize the BBC's Comic Relief charity event.^[108] In 2011, English animators The Brothers McLeod produced a 15-second cartoon giving their take on what the Giant does when no one is watching.^[109]

In 2015, the giant was used as a character in an online comic book published by Eco Comics; the giant's character appeared in various adventures accompanying a character based on St George, though his erect penis was removed from the artwork as many "outlets, particularly in the US, refuse any form of nudity in comic books".^[110]

The giant's image has been reproduced on various souvenirs and local food produce labels, including for a range of beers made by the Cerne Abbas Brewery. In 2016, the BBC reported that the beer company's logo had been censored in the Houses of Parliament.^[111]

Gallery



Aerial view



Aerial view



Aerial view



The Giant's Renovation in 2008
phallus

See also

- Long Man of Wilmington

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