

Our Dorset Icon – the Cerne Giant

By Mike Allen

The Cerne Giant stands 55m high proudly naked on the hillside, outlined in chalk with a knobly club aloft in right hand, left arm outstretched towards the village and displaying his manhood for all to see (7m long)! He is surrounded by history and prehistory; Bronze Age barrows (burial mounds) surmount many of the surrounding hill tops, an undated square enclosure sits on the hilltop above him, and the former Benedictine Abbey lies on the edge of the village of Cerne itself. The Giant, or rude man of Dorset has stood on this hillside overlooking the Cerne valley at Cerne Abbas for ... well for how long? How old *is* he ... one of the first questions any visitor, archaeologist or historian asks. Although his age is known to have been debated for well over 300 years, until recently even archaeologists and historians did not know. His date was even the subject of public debate in the Cerne Abbas village hall televised for a BBC TV programme *Points West* in 1996 and a book in 1999. Was he prehistoric, Roman, medieval or a post medieval 17th century Giant ... after all the first record we have is for scouring (cleaning) him in 1694. In 2020 the National Trust, who have owned the Giant since the Pitt Rivers family gave it to them in 1920, embarked on archaeological investigations to scientifically date him for the centennial anniversary of their ownership (July 2020). In March 2020 a small band of archaeologists clinically and scientifically excavated four small test pits through deposits accumulating against the outline of the each of the Giants feet and elbows.



Aerial photograph of the Giant with the Trendle on the hilltop above his head.
© National Trust/Ray Gaffney

Excavation of the chalk outline

The Giant is a Scheduled Ancient Monument; any investigation on site required prior consent from the Secretary of State via their officers, Historic England. Our excavations showed the chalk outline was 40-50cm wide as we expected, but up to 60-70cm deep! Initially it looked

as though a trench had been excavated and filled with layers of fine chalk rubble and chalk paste. But to the trained archaeologists, or geoarchaeologists, it was clear that soil had eroded downslope coming to rest against the downslope portions of the outline. Each time he was regularly cleaned, scoured and re-chalked, more chalk was added, increasing the thickness and depth of the fine chalk rubble of the outline.

The chalk infill had a few coarse layers as scouring is performed intermittently, perhaps every decade or so. Soil, moss, weeds, grasses, roots and germinating seeds infiltrate and contaminate the chalk rubble of the outline promoting vegetation to grow through and over the Giant. From time to time all or much of the soiled fine chalk rubble is taken out, removed from site, and replenished with up to 45 tonnes of new fresh chalk rubble. There have been numerous scouring events since at least 1694; those in 1956 and 1979 were an almost industrial event conducted by a contractor, but since then in 1983, 1995, 2008 and 2019 it was largely undertaken by a team of National Trust volunteers.

But underneath the stack of chalk rubble, underneath the white-chalked Giant we see today, was a broad shallow trench of another, earlier Giant. There were at least two Giants.



The excavations in 2020 with archaeologist recording and sampling.
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Dating the Giant

Other famous hill figures such the Uffington white horse (Oxfordshire) was dated as prehistoric (late Bronze Age/Iron Age: 1380-550 BC), and the Long Man of Wilmington in Sussex (AD 1540-1710) by a scientific method of optically stimulated luminescence (OSL); a scientific technique with measures the last time quartz (sand) grains in the soil saw light – ie, when they became buried.

The first record of the Giant, however is a church warden's account of 1694, the first known illustration 1763, and first measured plan 1764, and the last measured plan, until our new, plan was 1926. He's therefore at least a couple of hundred years old. Unsurprisingly there were no archaeological finds from our excavations to date the Giant. Apart from the undated square hilltop earthwork above his head there were few other archaeological sites in the immediate vicinity; no settlement to generate finds which might be scattered across the wider landscape. However, other hill figures of the Uffington white horse (Oxfordshire) and Long Man of Wilmington (Sussex) had been dated by OSL. By this method we were able to date buried soil and sediments associated with the Giant. Four OSL dates gave us two dates for the first Giant dating to the 10th century: he was Saxon, a date very few antiquarians, archaeologists or historians had predicted. Two further 13th century dates indicate the second Giant had been well-established by the medieval period.

How many Giants?

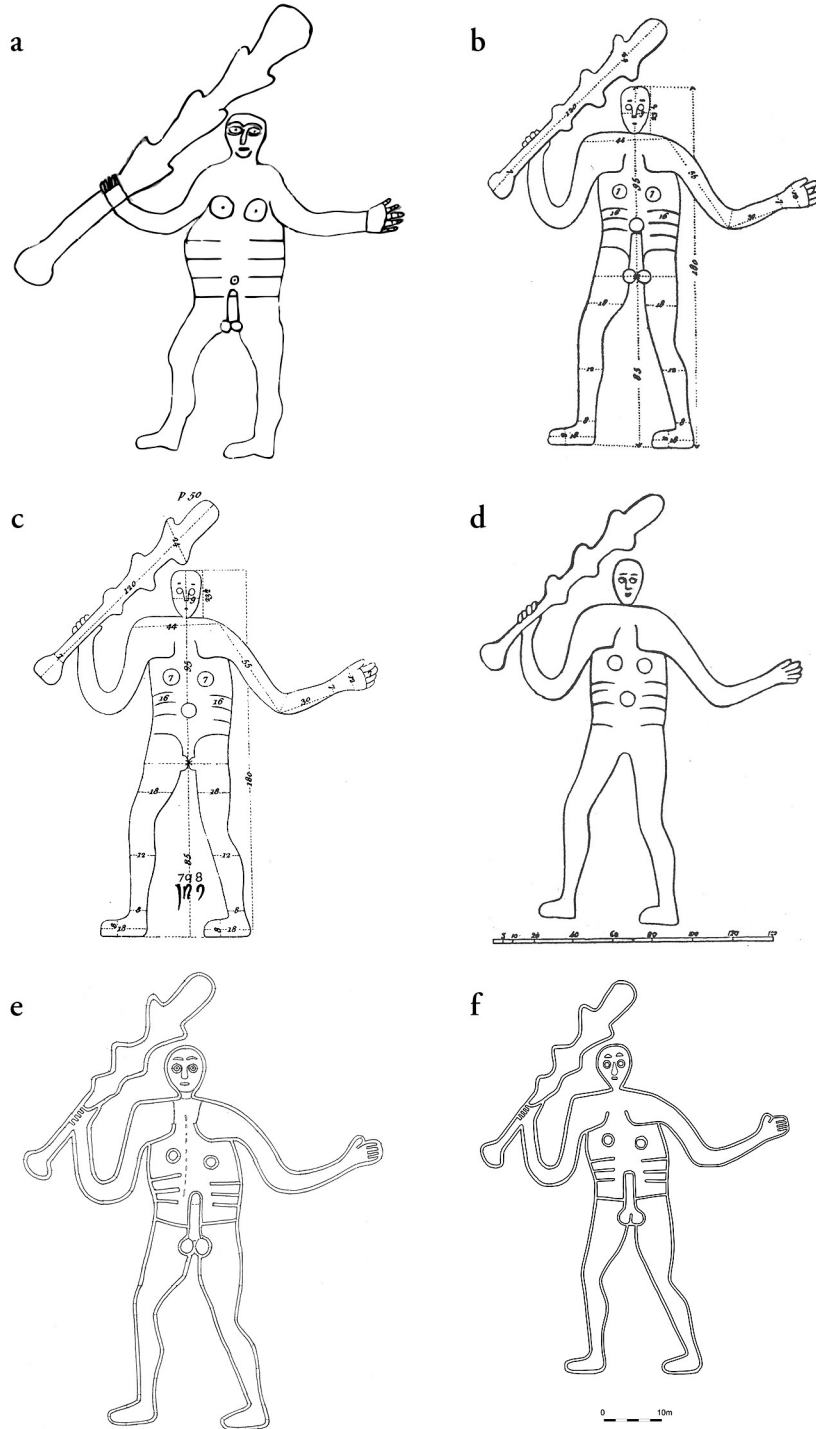
I have mentioned two Giants! The careful analysis of the National Trusts excavation results showed a soil-filled trench below the current chalk-filled outline. An original 10th century Giant was a marked by a shallow open trench. Later his outline was refined so before the 13th century it was the narrower 40-50cm wide outline we are familiar with today. However, he wasn't as he looks today. In 1774 Rev. John Hutchins records the Giant as being outlined by two-foot deep trenches, a comment made subsequently by others. Even in 1939 Eric Ravilious painted him with a brown trenched outline, unlike the white figures of Uffington, Westbury and the Long Man of Wilmington that he also painted the same year. So for most of his time on the hillside he was defined by deep open trenches, not as a chalk infilled outline. The white, chalk-infilled hill figure may be a mid-20th century manifestation. And this last manifestation is the third Giant!

Who was the Giant?

There have been many suggestions for the Giant's identity; they included biblical giants, warriors, Romano-Celtic gods (Mars, Sucellos, Nodens) and Helis/Helith, Hercules, a sheep-gobbling giant, ridiculing the vociferous Lord Denzil Holles (1599-1680), MP for Dorchester, civil war leader and a man who engendered 'fierce loyalties and hatreds', and, rather more fatuously, Cromwell, and even the Dorset Ooser; a mysterious folk culture beast.

Our Saxon date could rule out many including the Roman god Hercules. This has been a popular suggestion for his identity – wielding a club with a lion skin draped over his left arm ... possibly even with the spoils of war; an enemy's severed head dangling by its hair from his left hand and seen as a slight low mound below his left hand today. How does the club-wielding giant, stand up to our new date, archaeological analysis, and geophysical surveys?

The lion skin or cloak which seems key to the interpretation of the figure as Hercules does not seem to be present. However geophysical survey as long ago as 1979, but not published until now, clearly showed a 'shadow' below the outstretched arm ... was this the missing lion skin? Other geophysical surveys between 1989 and 1995 tended to confirm this, but recognised folds as if it were a cloth cloak rather than a lion skin. Our new ground penetrating radar (GPR) survey in December 2023 however, suggests, this area is different, but we no longer think it's a lion skin or cloak, nor related to the original figure; details are given in the new book; *A date with the Two Cerne Giants*.



The main illustrations of the Giant 17th to 20th century;
a) Society of Antiquaries minute book 1763; b) *Gentleman's Magazine* 1694;
c) Hutchins 1774, d) Sydenham 1842; e) Petrie 1926; and f) National Trust 2020

So if he's not Hercules, who is he? Several have suggested St Eadwold who became the main medieval saint of Cerne abbey. Eadwold was hermit living in the Cerne valley, who legend says, one day a miracle occurred and his staff sprouted and grew leaves and branches, hearing

the sound of water he ran down the hill to the spring and to the sanctuary of the abbey, and there the Cerne Abbey was re-founded. So is the knobbly club really Eadwold's sprouting staff, and the water he heard the spring or well of St Augustine's in Cerne Abbas? Possibly we should really see the Giant as that of monks' portraying St Eadwold; with his arm outstretched not sporting a draped lion skin, but pointing the way for travellers towards the safe haven of the abbey just round the corner and out of sight. He stands proudly and authoritatively surveying the green rolling downland of Dorset as a fine figure of a man, politely showing the way to the refuge and safe harbour of the abbey.

Why did he disappear for 600 Years?

Having dated the Giant, a key question was if he is 10th century, why then are there no records of him from then until 1694? Estate owners, cartographers, local and famous nationally renowned antiquarians (Leland, Norden, Aubrey, Stukeley, Colt Hoare, Coker) who knew the area, and would have passed along the Dorchester to Sherborne road, can't have been blind to an image as striking as our Giant. Where did he go? Well the answer came from the study of tiny smashed snail shell fragments just ½mm in size and sieved out of soil samples from the Giant and picked out on a fine-haired sable paint brush under a microscope. As some populations of snails live in woodland, and some in leaf litter, and others in long damp grass. On the whole different populations live in short grazed grass than in trampled un-shady open dry grassland or bare soil in tilled fields. Painstakingly laborious analysis showed our Giant was built in short sheep-grazed and trampled downland ... but soon after, grazing pressure was reduced, and the hillside grew over with long damp grass and so he was hidden from view.

So our research now shows a new Giant, or the Giant in a new light for the 21st century and this is explored in a new book. You can find out more about the Giant and our new research here:

A date with the two Cerne Giants, edited by Michael J. Allen will be published in August 2024. Pre-publication offer here [A Date with the Two Cerne Giants – Windgather Press](#)

Conference on the Cerne Giant (announcing many new discoveries found in post-excavation) and other Wessex hill figures at Dorset Museum (Dorchester) on Saturday 28th September 2024, see [Cerne Giant and other Wessex Hill Figures - Dorset Museum](#)

Mike Allen is an archaeologist (geoarchaeologist and environmental archaeologist, visiting research fellow at Bournemouth University) who specialises in prehistory and the changing land-use and human environment. He has spent 50 years working on the chalklands of southern England from Kent to Dorset including Stonehenge, Avebury, Cranborne Chase and the Dorchester Environs. Perhaps most well-known for the study of land snail shells (he is Vice President of the Conchological Society of Great Britain & Ireland) to look at past environments, here he has worked both the Cerne Giant project from fieldwork to publication, and leading the publication programme.

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