

THE WOOLBURY HORSE AND CROSS

By DAVID E. JOHNSTON

ABSTRACT

In 1805 James Wigmore was killed by a supposed highwayman near Stockbridge. The even was commemorated by a wayside cross. The victim's horse was also commemorated by the outline of a white horse cut into the nearby hillside. This paper reviews the evidence for the two monuments (both generally thought to be lost) and describes the restoration of the horse in 2000

INTRODUCTION

The traveller from Winchester to Stockbridge passes Stockbridge Down and an arch of trees that span the road. These trees were planted in the nineteenth century to commemorate a tragic event.

The story goes that in October 1805 a traveller named James Wigmore was set upon by a highwayman at the spot known as Robber's Roost. Shots were fired and James Wigmore fell dead by the wayside. According to the victim's obituary notice 'the perpetrator of this horrid act' was never discovered. The spot where the victim died was commemorated by a cross of flints known variously as Wigmore's Cross and the Memorial Cross. This monument was last seen in 1944. Highwayman, traveller and monument have all since disappeared without trace.

Not so, however, in the case of the horse who was also shot and wounded. The frightened animal galloped bravely up the hillside as far as the earthwork known as Woolbury Ring, before he too fell dead. The horse is commemorated by a monument of his own, the Woolbury White Horse, marking the spot on the ramparts where he is said to have died. A useful hand-

written compilation (anonymous and undated) is Stockbridge and its Down in the Hampshire Record Office (20M61/PZ24). I owe this information to Mr M G Collis.

A totally independent story, derived from two separate sources (Stockbridge and its Down, and D King *pers comm.*) seems to give us the sequel to this story. We learn that a robber was being transferred from Stockbridge to Winchester Gaol by horse and cart when he escaped, at 'The Robber's Roost', and disappeared. He was never recaptured. Eventually, however, some people took the law into their own hands. The murderer was hunted down by an armed posse, cornered near Sandydown Farm, and shot. James Wigmore was avenged.

The narrative has been pieced together from many sources. The standard source is Marple (1949, 135–6, p135 fig 24), but Bergamar (1997, 30), and Newman (1997, 199) also contain relevant details. The Horse is first mentioned in Notes and Queries vol 8 ser 2 1 859, 40 and first recorded (with a tiny drawing) in the Tithe Award for 1842 (HCRO Kings Somborne) (Fig. 1). A useful handwritten compilation (anonymous and undated) is Stockbridge and its Down (HRO 20M61/PZ24).

So much for the story: the reality seems to have been rather different. The inquest was reported in two local newspapers, the Hampshire Chronicle and the Salisbury and Winchester Journal. The second is the fuller account (Hampshire Chronicle 28/10/1805; Salisbury and Winchester Journal 28/10/1805)

Mr James Wigmore, a senior, respected farmer at East Knoyle, in this county, was found murdered on

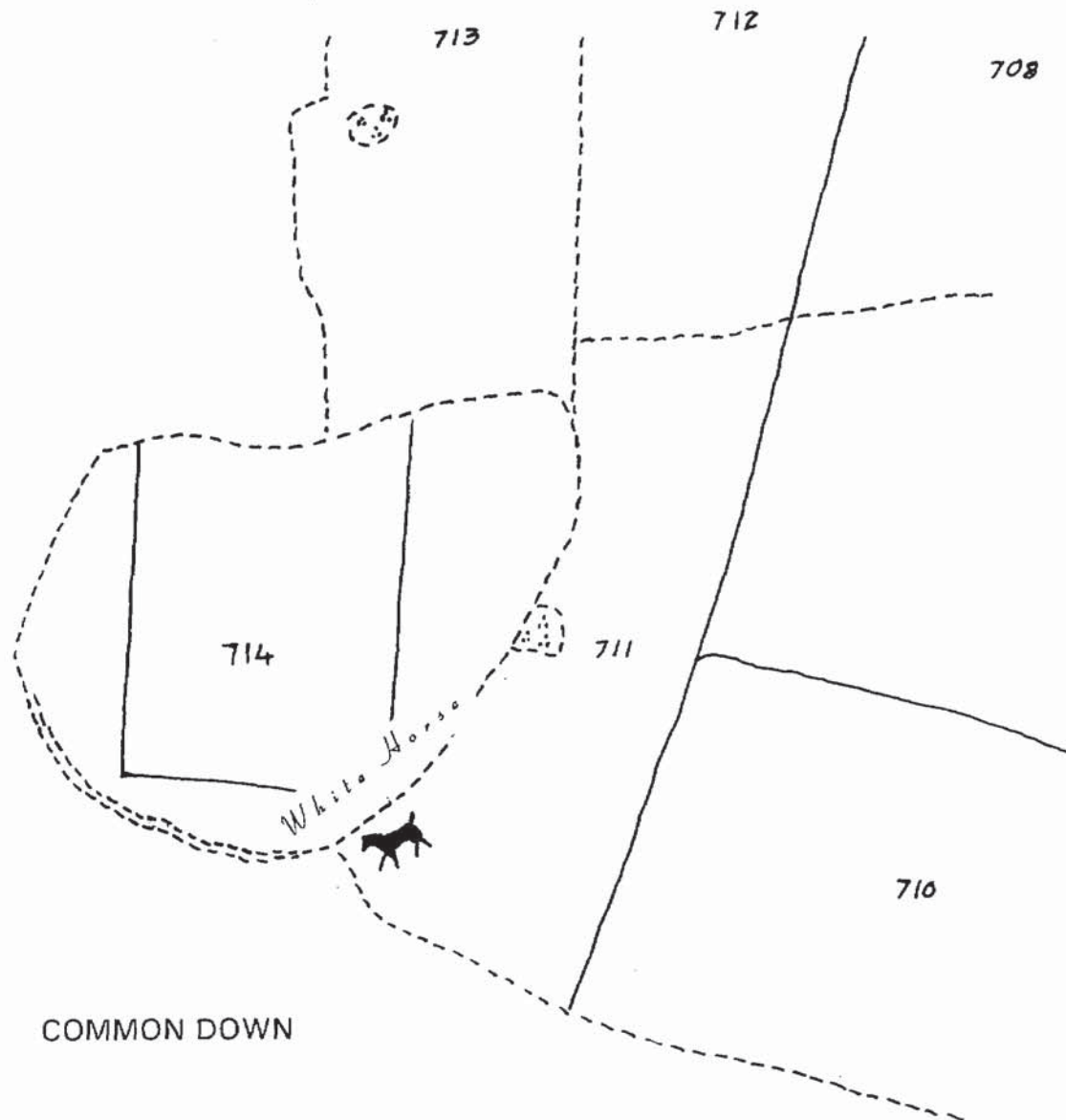


Fig. 1 The first known representation of the Woolbury horse. Traced from the Tithe Map of 1842 (King's Somborne)

Thursday morning last (Oct 24), on the road between Stockbridge and Winchester about a mile and a half from the former place. He had been to Winchester with a load of cheeses, for the Fair, and was returning on

horseback on Wednesday evening (Oct 23) when it is supposed he was stopped by footpads, and that on his refusing to deliver his money, they fired at him, a ball having passed through his body, which, from its

direction, was evidently fired by some person on foot. The body had lain some hours in the road, and was quite cold and stiff when discovered by a shepherd early in the morning. His horse was at a little distance in a field. The body was removed to Stockbridge, where an inquest was taken by the Coroner. Verdict: Wilful murder by some person unknown. On Saturday the body was returned to Knoyle, and buried there.

Mr Wigmore has left a widow and nine children to lament his fate. There is yet no clue to discover the perpetrators of this deed. They did not effect their purpose of robbery, as Mr Wigmore's property was all on him.

The idea of a single 'Highwayman' seems to be a romantic embellishment and 'a pair of footpads' may be a better description of the assailants. One at least carried a loaded gun, so highway robbery was clearly the intention. In the event, it seems, they took fright and disappeared without stopping to catch the horse, remove the panniers or steal the money. In that sense it was a bungled robbery. The behaviour of the horse, moreover, remains a mystery. One report does not mention it at all. The other seems to imply that it was found alive at the foot of the hill. However, the text does not say whether it was found alive or dead, and 'at a little distance' might even support the traditional story of the horse's flight. True or not, folklore has taken over and has now sanctioned the more romantic version. It has even inspired a modern ballad first used in the Meridian Television series (Ridge Riders), Ser. 7, prog. 2 (2001).

The Cheese Fair had always been held in Winchester on 24 October, in accordance with a Charter granted by Elizabeth I (Carpenter Turner 1980, 192). Clearly important enough to justify a 2–3 day visit in 1805, the Cheese Fair later dwindled and was transferred to Salisbury in 1851 (Hampshire Chronicle 22/08/1851). James Wigmore was not merely a cheeseman but owned his own farm at East Knoyle. He was 50 years old when he died and his grave in the churchyard is, sadly, unmarked. His brother William took over the farm and assumed the guardianship of the nine children aged between eight and 23. The most poignant aspect of this tragic story is the fate of Jemima, the widow. James Wigmore's great grandson, writing to the Rector of East Knoyle 85 years later recorded

that Jemima 'lost her reason on hearing of her husband's murder'. She died almost exactly two years later (Claydon 2002, 83–4).

THE TWO MONUMENTS

The site (SU 38163518) of the White Horse has never been in doubt. The exact position of the Memorial Cross has never been recorded. The pair of overarching trees by the roadside, which one account (Andover Advertiser 17/10/1986) says were deliberately planted, can still be recognised at SU 388345.

The Cross has been variously known as Wigmore's Cross (Stockbridge and its Down, 3) and The Memorial Cross (Hampshire Chronicle 28/10/1805). We have two accounts of where it used to be which are difficult to reconcile. The first is that of an elderly correspondent to the Andover Advertiser in 1986. She says 'The actual spot where the cross was built was on the brow of Winchester Road Hill opposite to where the old war-time hospital was situated in the copse where there is now a car park' (Andover Advertiser 19/09/1986). The hospital has now disappeared, and the current car park has changed its shape more than once in recent years. The other source is that of the Ordnance Survey Field Investigations (Hampshire Chronicle 28/10/1805) who say it was 'a cross of flints in the turf a few yards west of the beginning of Stockbridge Down as you come from Winchester and c. 3 yards west of the main road ... this was last seen in 1944'. The same investigators revisited both monuments in 1956 and again in 1968 when 'no trace of the cross of flints was found'. As for the appearance of Wigmore's Cross, it is tempting to think of it as one of the turf-cut crosses elsewhere described by Marple and Bergamar; the prosaic reality is more likely to be something more ephemeral – a careful arrangement of flints at the roadside.

The Horse was described by Marple (1949, 135–6) and it is clear that it was fairly degraded by his day. 'It is a very crude little animal, angular and shapeless, having only two stumpy legs and defective in details: it is without eye, nostril, or even ears, and has a strange, tapering tail projecting behind. The method of construction is not

of the usual kind, hence these crudities. Rough flints, some 6 to 9 inches in diameter, only lightly embedded in the surface of the ground, fill in the outline of the horse, which is in no sense cut into the turf. For the tail there are twelve such flints, like separate vertebrae, stuck into the ground. Such a figure would very quickly get distorted – half an hour's work would suffice to turn it into something else – so it is surprising that it has maintained its existence'.

Much of what Marple wrote is still true some fifty years later. The setting, however, has changed severely; the bare rampart of the prehistoric earthwork visible in the early photographs had been planted with firs by 1949 and is now impenetrable mixed woodland. When the horse was rediscovered by the author in 1995 the site was merely a woodland glade, invisible from any distance amid the surrounding jungle.

The horse itself has changed its shape over the years as a result of attempts to maintain it. It has, at various times, had two, three and four legs, and there has been at least one attempt to 'improve' it. With the aid of aerial photographs (taken to record Woolbury Ring rather than the horse which tends to be little more than a dot) we can now trace an evolution through time (Fig. 2).

1. The first representation of the horse is on the Tithe Award map of 1842 (see above). It shows a tiny figure labelled 'White Horse'. As with all comparable hill figures, the figure faces to the left and is – as far as can be judged – of the Cherhill type (Marple 1949, 116). It is doubtless very schematised.
2. In 1924 our horse received what is arguably the first aerial photograph of any white horse to be published – in the pioneer volume *Wessex from the Air* (Crawford & Keiller 1928, 134–6). Disappointingly, the aerial photograph was taken to illustrate the Celtic field system, and the site is in the very corner of the image. The original plate has been examined, but it reveals no more than we knew from plate xxv and the brief reference in the text. The air photograph confirms that the horse was facing to the left and had four straight legs so close together that the legs seem to merge.
3. A snapshot of 1936 (now lost) accompanied the reminiscences mentioned above (Andover Advertiser 19/09/1986). It was apparently printed from the reverse, of the negative and is shown the right way round. The horse has four legs and the tail is very short. The tail of the original might well have been docked; all the White Horses in the Wessex group have tails of this kind. Most importantly the legs are so close together that they almost merge. It is easy to see how such a weakly drawn figure could have lost its individual legs. The photograph is so early that the slope is bare, with no fence posts.
4. 1949 is the publication date of Marple's measured drawing and photograph. But these may well be taken from his father's archive and therefore both could be much earlier. Whatever the date might be, the record is clear: four legs were now reduced to two. On the other hand, the description of the tail as composed of six flints does not tally with the photograph. This detail has the ring of truth about it; so presumably the lengthening of the tail represents a repair at some time before the book went to press. The seven flints could not be recognised in 1955.
5. On one of the Ordnance Survey's periodic checks (probably in either 1956 or 1965) a photograph was taken – oblique and foreshortened, but adequate in detail (Hampshire Chronicle 28/10/1805). The giraffe-like neck seems even longer, and the head smaller and more shapeless; the body looks almost pregnant, and one of the 'vertebrae' can be seen. Four evenly spaced legs complete the figure. Sadly, we cannot say who carried out this much needed scouring.
6. Several aerial photographs of Woolbury Rings taken between 1967 and 1968 (M Hows *pers comm.*) include the horse incidentally, without any detail. They seem to show four legs with little differentiation between them. The tree cover on the ramparts was clearly growing more dense.
7. An accurate survey was carried out in 1999

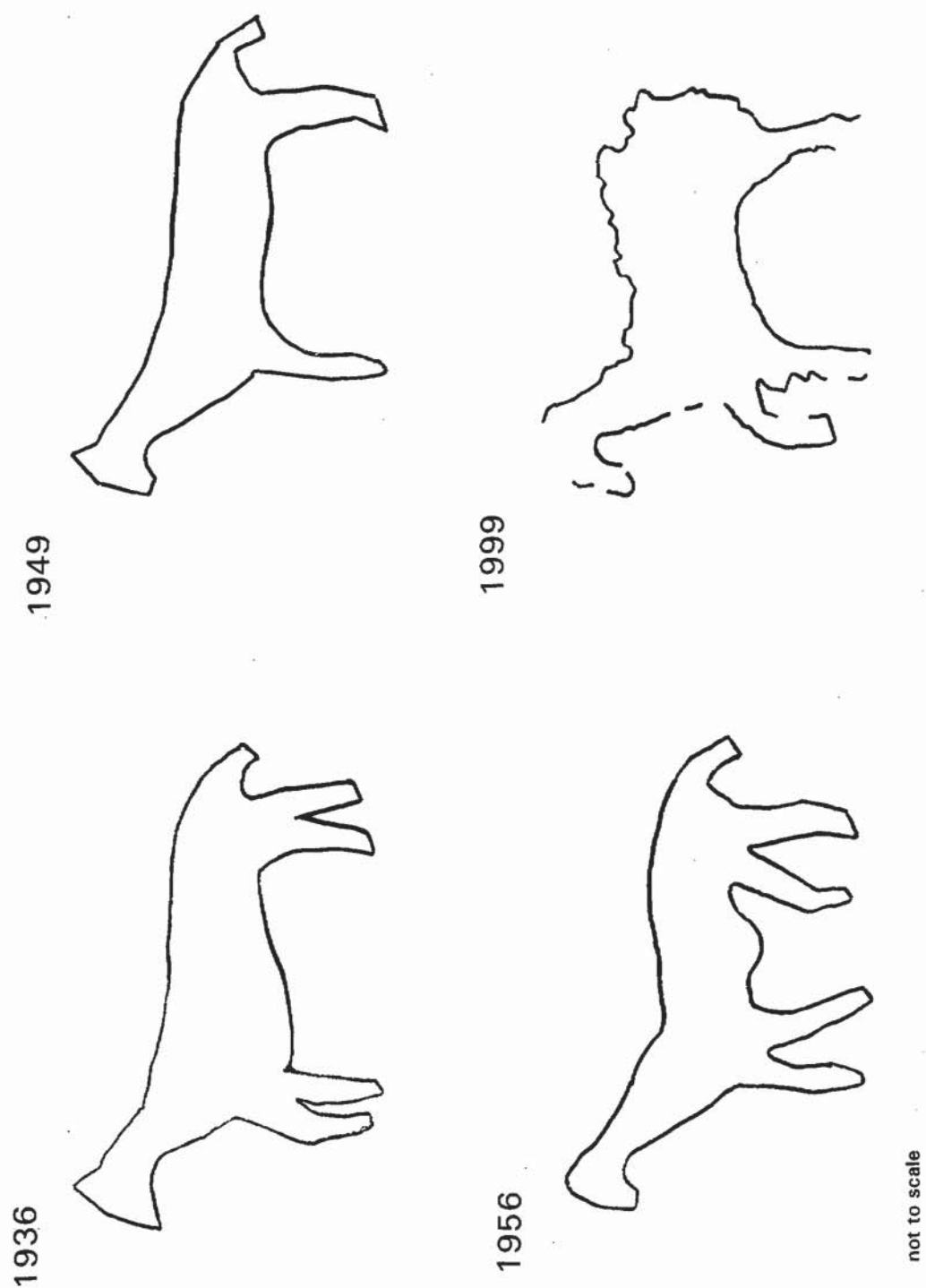


Fig. 2 The changing the shape of the Woolbury Horse: 1936 newspaper snapshot reversed (Andover Advertiser 19/09/1986); 1949 measured drawing by (Marples 1949); 1956 drawing from a photograph taken by the Ordnance Survey; 1999 as surveyed before restoration (by A Johnston)



Fig. 3 The restoration completed on 23 October 2000 (author)

in advance of restoration, and again in 2000 when the work had been finished. The clearest feature of the horse was the spurious prancing leg, still to be seen,

MAINTENANCE OF THE HORSE

The term *scouring* to describe the regular maintenance of a hill figure goes back at least to

Plenderleith (1885). It was already popular thanks to Thomas Hughes' novel (Hughes 1992) and has been adopted by recent writers (Marple 1949; Bergamar 1997). In many places the occasion of a scouring – or in some cases the recutting of a neglected figure – was accompanied by rural merrymaking and often became an annual event. For a while in, the 1930s the Woolbury Horse may have received some annual maintenance. At least this is implied

by the childhood memory referred to above (Andover Advertiser 19/09/1986) 'I remember a small party of us would go to the Common on Good Friday to clear the weeds growing around the horse. It was laid out on the turf and could be seen from the Winchester road as one cycled along'.

The known or suspected scourings are:

1. 1929. The horse was 'tidied up and white-washed' (Marple 1949). This treatment is unique but so, too, was a grey horse (grey because it was made of flint).
2. 1940. All known hill figures were either camouflaged or turfed over and restored after the war by contractors employed by the Air Ministry (Marple 1949, 129). Being a few miles from Middle Wallop aerodrome our horse, too, may have benefited.
3. 1967. The Stockbridge Youth Club did the scouring (Bergamar 1997).
4. 1968–1970 (approx). A working party from the Boys Brigade carried out the scouring (D Hutchison *pers comm.*).
5. 1983. The National Trust proposed a scouring and volunteers were called for by from the Somborne and District Society (Somborne and District Society Newsletter, winter 1982–3; Spring 1983). The result is not recorded. On the other hand (D. Hutchison *pers comm.*) recalls that the 1983 scouring was the work of boys from Winchester College. This may be when the extra foreleg was added.
6. 1990 (approx). Some clearance of undergrowth took place, unrecorded (author, *pers obs.*).
7. 1999. Clearing and conservation followed by official survey.

THE 2000 RESTORATION

The horse is on private land, and there is no public access to the site. The owner, Mr D Hutchison, kindly gave permission for the work. In contrast to Woolbury Ring the White Horse is not a scheduled monument; it is, however, a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Accordingly,

both English Heritage and English Nature were consulted and both offered advice. The White Horse is strictly outside the National Trust boundary of Stockbridge Down, and so we are indebted to the Trust and its Warden for the continued maintenance of the Horse. Access is permitted on written application to the landowner.

The restoration took place in the winter of 2000 (Fig. 3). The site was cleared and a substantial deer- and rabbit-proof fence installed by a team of National Trust Volunteers. This impressive operation utterly transformed the site in the course of two weekends and was supervised by the Warden, Mr Chris Stock. The restoration of the figure was undertaken by the author and Mr E Merrikin; the survey was the work of Mr Alan Johnston.

Restoration could have followed one of three possible approaches: 1) to restore it to its original form, 2) to return to the outline as recorded by Marple or 3) to preserve the outline as found in 1999. After much discussion we judged that the 1842 Tithe Map was probably purely conventional and therefore could not give us the authentic outline. Marple's outline, on the other hand, was by now unrealistically degraded and therefore equally misleading. In other words, we could never recover the original outline in its entirety. On the other hand, to our surprise we found that the back of the horse had been terraced into the hillside and was authentic. In practice, therefore, the result was a compromise. We used the genuine parts, we recreated three limbs from the photographs and we accepted the fourth, prancing foreleg. Not only was the last a welcome improvement, but also had by now itself become part of the history of the figure and its evolution. The giraffe-like neck is unchanged. We also found no sign that ears had ever existed. As a matter of principle, only those flints that were actually found loose on the site, or displaced in some way, were used in the restoration. We found a horizontal band of substantial flints at the top of the figure in situ, but realised that the builders must also have searched for some distance around the site in their quest for suitable flints. The figure



Fig. 4 The Woolbury Horse as restored in 2000. The rampart of the hill fort lies directly below it. Photograph by Gary Spencer

is now stable, but is still at risk from rabbits and the feet of visitors. In future spot-weeding will be used on selected plants on the figure itself, and hand-weeding for the rest.

CONCLUSIONS

A few years ago the Woolbury horse was in danger of disappearing for ever; even the story of its origin as never been properly told and has had to be pieced together from many scattered sources. Today, however, the animal that had been described as 'spiritless and listless' (Bergamar 1997) and 'angular and shapeless'

(Marple 1949) has recovered something of its original spirit and dignity (Fig. 4).

On the opposite side of the valley (and visible from it through a powerful lens) is another monument to a more celebrated horse, this time buried beneath an obelisk on Farley Mount. (For the remarkable story of this horse see Read 1908, 90; Collison Morley 1950, 190). It is a striking testimony to the English love of horses that there should be two monuments commemorating horses within a few miles of each other in Hampshire. In Berkshire the Vale of the White Horse contains the archetypal white horse, the prehistoric steed of Uffington; and in Wessex there are now no less than nine

such hill figures to be seen on the downs. The latest, at Roundway, was cut to commemorate the Millennium.

The hill figures of Wessex form a distinct group with many features in common, not least the fact that they all face to the left. The Woolbury Horse is a distant outlier of this group, also facing left. On the other hand, ours can claim to be unique in three important respects. First, it is the only grey horse, being uniquely made of flint. Second, at 8.2 m long it is the smallest in the British Isles. And, third, it is the survivor of a pair of monuments, the White Horse and the Memorial Cross.

It is to the Memorial Cross that we turn for our final comment – for it might well have been the more important if the two. Wigmore's cross used to stand by the wayside until road improvements swept it away. Is it too much to hope that it might be rebuilt nearby?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge with gratitude the permission and background information given to us by the landowner, Mr O G Hutchison of Heath House, Stockbridge, SO20 6BX. We are equally grateful to the National Trust and its Warden, Chris Stock, whose volunteers transformed a jungle into a sensitively managed site. The stone-by-stone restoration was done from start to finish by Ed Merrikin and the author, with two expert surveys by Alan Johnston. For some fine aerial photographs we are indebted to Gary Spencer. For valuable additional information we have received much help from the staff of English Heritage, the Hampshire County Record Office, Mark Hows, the late Philippa Stevens, David Allen, D King and Bill Jones of the Andover Advertiser. Lt Col Anthony Claydon kindly unravelled the Wigmore family for me and provided much invaluable documentation.

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