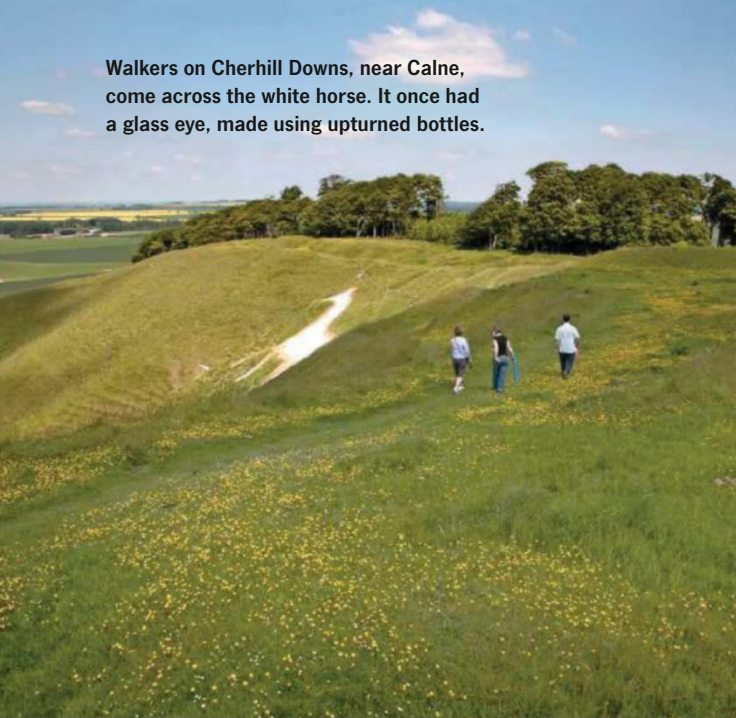


Walkers on Cherhill Downs, near Calne, come across the white horse. It once had a glass eye, made using upturned bottles.



The 19th century Lansdowne, or Cherhill, Monument built as an 'eye-catcher' at the edge of the Bowood Estate.



ON A HILLSIDE bathed in sunlight, a gleaming white horse appears to trot across an ancient landscape. Its pricked ears are caught by the rays of a May sun that sends undulating shadows over the surrounding land, carpeted in shades of green.

The appearance of movement is deceptive. This horse is, in fact, carved into the ground and covered with layers of compacted chalk kibble. It is the Cherhill White Horse, the second oldest of Wiltshire's original 13 white horses. A striking feature, it sits proudly in a landscape that has seen human occupation for the last 4,000 years. This area of downland is filled with Neolithic henges, barrows and avenues. The Romans came here, and the Normans, who made their mark building castles and medieval settlements, such as Devizes, to the south.

In early summer, the land ripples with colour. Butter-yellow cowslips and the deep blue chalk milkwort are the first wildflowers to make an appearance, followed by the early purple orchid. Rare butterflies, including the iridescent Adonis blue and the multi-hued orange marsh fritillary, flit from flower to flower. Above, the skylark sings.

Labour of love

Legend has it the 129ft long, 142ft high (39m x 43m) horse was constructed on a whim by Dr Christopher Alsop, of nearby Calne, in 1780. Standing a set distance away from the bottom of the hill, he called instructions up to his workforce, using a megaphone. This way, they could mark out the shape with a true passer-by's perspective. The result is that, of the seven other Wiltshire horses visible today, this is arguably the most realistic.

Today, the horse is owned by the village of Cherhill. It is regularly tended to by the Cherhill White Horse Restoration Group, founded in 1980 to mark the 200th anniversary of the horse's creation. Before then, it was the landowner who had responsibility for its care. "One owner had to cover it with brushwood and timber during the Second World War. This was because it was such a visible landmark for enemy bombers," says David Grafton, a committee member of the group. "Another tried to fill in the horse with concrete, but the hill is so steep, the concrete just slid into the valley."

A major restoration in 2002 saw 157 tons of fresh chalk spread over the site. Now, villagers, volunteers and local Scout groups gather every two years to touch up particular sections of



David Grafton is one of many volunteers who help to maintain the Cherhill White Horse, ensuring it retains its features and is topped up with visible white chalk.