

# CERNE ABBAS FROM EARLIEST TIMES




*Kettle Bridge, 14th C, on the River Cerne*

## Why ‘Cerne Abbas’?

The name ‘Cerne’ is believed to be derived from the Celtic god ‘Cernunnos’ and now also is the name of the river on which the village is situated. The Abbey which gave Cerne Abbas the second part of its name was established in 987.



 Roman Dagger Pommel  
Actual size

*A Roman Dagger Pommel*

A Roman dagger pommel in the form of an eagle holding a seed in its beak was discovered to the south of the village. It dates from the 2nd century.

*(R Lovett 2004)*

## The Early Years

There is evidence of man’s activities round the village since earliest times. Recent excavations in Simsay field to the east of the village have found archaeological evidence dating from the Iron Age (about 750 BC to AD 43). The village was almost certainly a staging point on the roads which crossed the ancient countryside.



*A typical early Saxon burial*

## The Roman Influence

A large Romano-British T-shaped drying or malting oven, dating from about the 2nd century, was found in Simsay. Close by was a single burial probably of the same date. The burial was almost certainly non-Christian because of its NW-SE orientation. A series of ditches located on the same site are likely to be from Anglo-Saxon times, probably dating from around the 10th century when the Abbey was founded.



*The Abbey Porch*

## Foundation of the Abbey in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century

The defining moment in the history of Cerne Abbas was the establishment of the Benedictine Abbey in 987, but it is probable that a religious order existed here at least a century earlier. A full history of the Abbey can be seen under the Abbots Porch in the grounds of Cerne Abbey at the top of Abbey Street.

## The Domesday Survey

The first authentic account of the ‘Manor’ of Cerne Abbas is from the Domesday Book of 1086, in which is recorded that there was arable land for 20 ploughs (each drawn by an eight-ox team), a mill and extensive woodland. The population was stated as 26 villeins (villagers) and 32 bordars (smallholders). The Domesday Book also records that the Abbey owned significant amounts of property around Dorset.



*The Book of Cerne*

## The Book of Cerne

A book of private prayers and devotions. Shown here is the opening of the passage from St Mark, facing the evangelist who appears in a roundel above his symbol, the lion. Aethelwald, Bishop of Lichfield from 818 to 830, was patron of the book, although other earlier Aethelwalds have been suggested. The prayer book was later bound with manuscripts from the Cerne Abbey library. It is now to be found in the Cambridge University Library.



# THE ABBEY YEARS



*Tithe Barn on The Folly*

## Tithe Barn

For more than 500 years the Abbey dominated the area, farming its own lands and, as landlord of the villagers and smallholders, collecting their tithes. The tithes were stored in the large 13th century Tithe Barn to the west of the village (much of which is still standing, but now a private house).



*Preaching Cross 15c.  
in the burial ground*



*St Mary the Virgin Church*

## St Mary's Church

The Abbey provided the village with the parish church of St Mary the Virgin, the first vicar being inducted in 1317. The history of the church is displayed by the south door.

## The Market Square

In 1214 King John granted Cerne Abbas the right to hold a market and in 1460 Henry VI further granted the village three fairs each year. The site of the market was the Market Square at the southern end of Abbey Street.

## The Early Development of the Village

Abbey Street is believed to have been built around 1400 as workshops and ancillary buildings for the Abbey. The timber-framed houses are rare survivals in Dorset from medieval times. Of particular interest is the Pitchmarket; it is where farmers would pitch their corn sacks on market days for purchasers' inspection.



*The Pitchmarket*

## Medieval Cerne

Little more is known about Cerne Abbas as many of the records were lost with the Dissolution of the Abbey in 1539, but it is said that Margaret of Anjou, wife of Henry VI, with her son stayed at the Abbey before the battle of Tewkesbury (1471), during the Wars of the Roses. It is also unlikely that the Abbey and village would have escaped the ravages of the Black Death which arrived in England at Weymouth in the summer of 1348 and is estimated to have killed up to half the population of the country in the following two years.

## Industry

Sheep dominated Dorset farming until the early 18th Century and the present enclosed downland farms, now growing crops of all descriptions, were previously open fields grazed by immense flocks.



*Wool seals found in Cerne  
(R Lovett 2004)*

## The Wool Industry

A wool textile industry was established in Dorset by the early 1500s. A local find of lead seals dating from this period, attached to cloths to indicate quality and that tax had been paid, shows that this industry was flourishing here. Sheepskins also created a thriving parchment making trade.



*The New Inn*

## The New Inn

The New Inn started life, perhaps in the 1200s, as a simple two bay hall house with a central fireplace, the smoke finding its way out through vents in the roof. However, a great deal of time, trouble and wealth was expended from the mid 1400s to the early 1500s in extending the building to something like its present size and shape. It can therefore be conjectured that it was a wool merchant's house, reflecting the fortunes being made by such people at that time.



# DISSOLUTION OF THE ABBEY AND ITS AFTERMATH

## Cerne in decline

In 1539 the Abbey was surrendered to Henry VIII and the village lost its livelihood. The Manor of Cerne Abbas passed into the ownership of a series of private landlords, who systematically stripped the Abbey of its materials for profit, such that a survey of the village by John Norden in 1617 found the Abbey 'wholly ruined' and Cerne 'most disorderly governed'. However, much of this material contributed to a period of re-building Cerne Abbas and recognisable fragments of the Abbey can still be found in houses around the village and beyond. It is no accident that the Royal Oak can claim to have been built in 1540.



*Abbey remains showing a Catherine Wheel*



*Unfinished portrait of Oliver Cromwell  
by Samuel Cooper*

## The 17th Century and the Civil War

The 17th Century saw a steady recovery in village fortunes. However, it did not escape the English Civil War and suffered the fate of most of the towns in the West of England, in being occupied alternately by the opposing parties. In 1645, Cerne Abbas was visited by Cromwell himself in order to ensure loyalty to the Parliamentary cause. However, the town's essentially Royalist and Protestant leanings were indicated by an entry in the church records for 1688 where thanks are given for 'being preserved from Popery and arbitrary power', because of the removal of James II by William and Mary. On the other hand, just three years previously, these same records gave thanks for the defeat of Monmouth by James's forces; an indication that the town's people could perhaps be seen as bending to the prevailing wind!

## Nonconformism

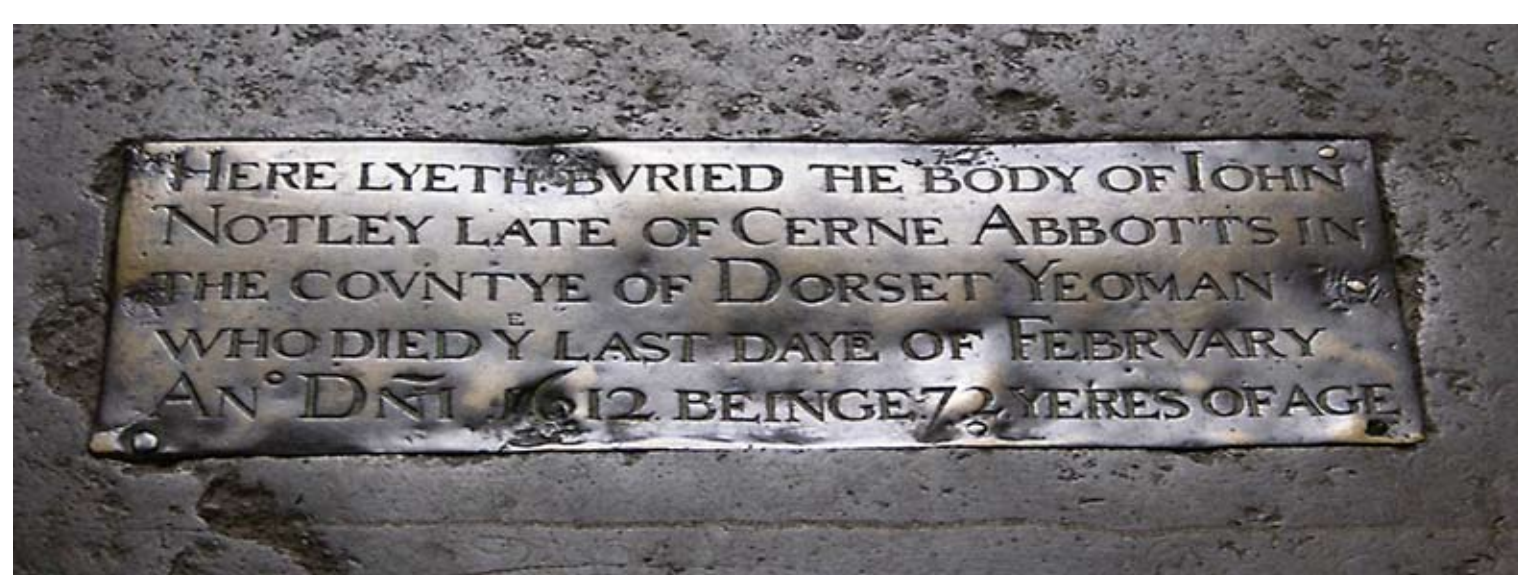
There is evidence during the 17th century of the rise in interest in nonconformist religious beliefs. We know that a meeting of the Dorset Quakers in Cerne Abbas in 1659 was broken up by a riot, possibly because they insisted on calling the village Broad Cerne, reflecting their detestation of the word Abbas. Certainly the Congregationalists had formally established themselves by the beginning of the 18th century and they continued to thrive well into the 20th. The Congregational Chapel in Abbey Street was re-built in 1878 and became a private house in 1982. Other nonconformist churches were also established in the village, but no traces survive.



*The Congregational Chapel in Abbey Street*

## The American Connection

Two memorial brass tablets in the floor of the nave of the church, dated 1612 and 1626, refer to the Notley family. The Notley's were early settlers in America and owned land which they called Cerne Abbey Manor in Washington, now the site of Capitol Hill.



*The Notley memorial brass in St Mary's Church*

## The Washington Connection

In 1676, Thomas Washington married Maria Randall in this church. They lived in the Pitchmarket. The pump head from that house, dated 1697 and bearing the initials TMW, is now in the Dorset County Museum in Dorchester. It is said that Thomas was the uncle of George Washington, the first President of the United States, but this is unproved.



*The pump head from the Pitchmarket  
now in the County Museum*



# RISE AND DECLINE IN VILLAGE FORTUNES

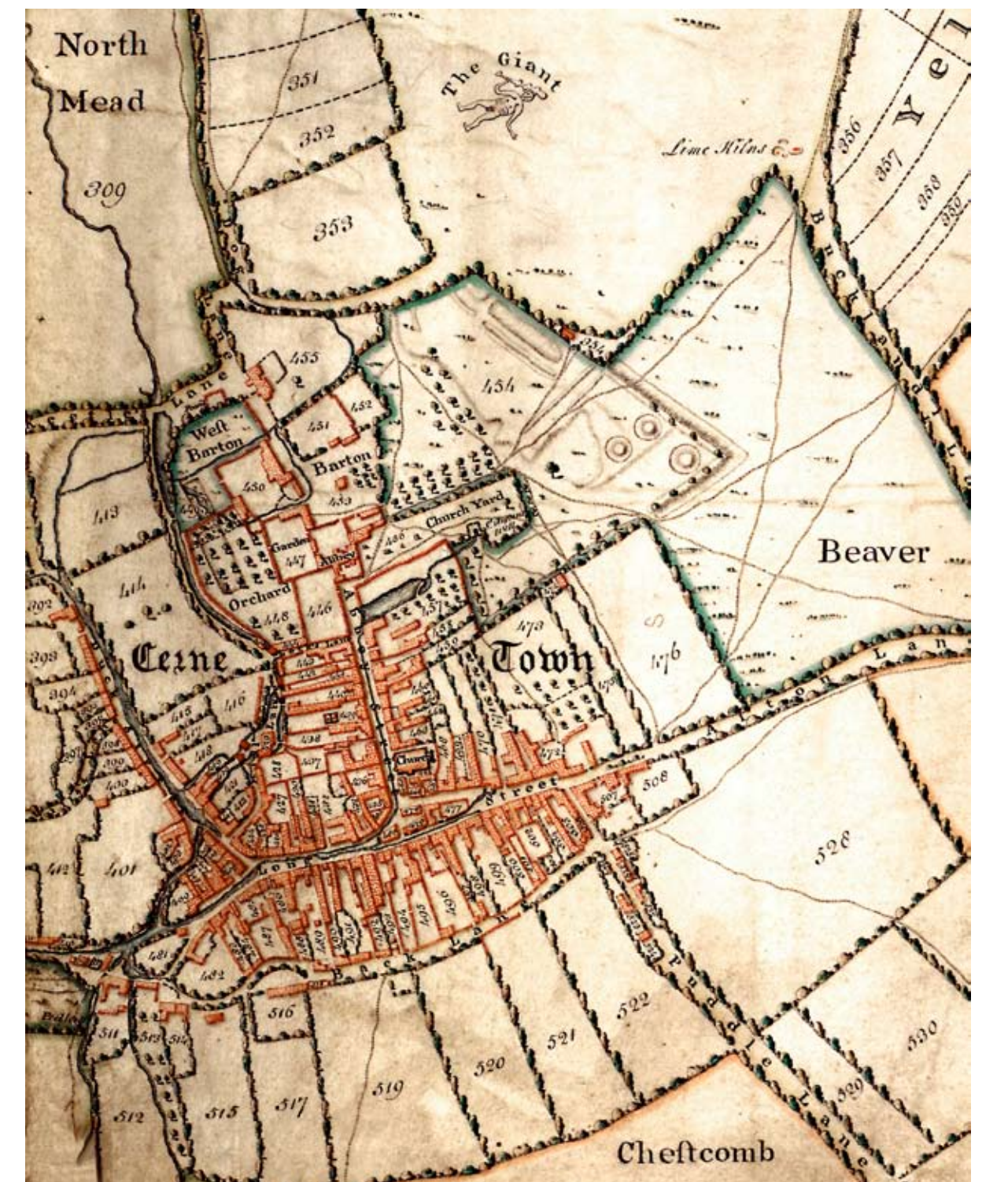
In 1705 Cerne Abbas came into the ownership of the Pitt family of Stratfieldsaye. It flourished as a small market town of some 1500 people, its wealth partly generated by brewing, its underground water, according to one Bishop Pococke, making it 'more famous for beer than in any other place in the kingdom'.

Its beer was also exported to the Americas.

In 1747 the village supported 17 public inns and taverns! There were also milling, tanning, silk weaving, glove and hat making, as well as other small local industries. Clock and watchmakers were established in the Market House from about 1750, the shop filling the open hall at ground level.

## The 18th Century and the prosperous times

The relative prosperity undoubtedly contributed to the 'gentrification' of many of the older houses in the village into what we see today. This map of 1768 was produced for George Pitt, created Baron Rivers of Stratfieldsaye in 1776, as a survey for rental purposes. The fact that little changed until the mid 1960s is a good indication of the relative decline and stagnation in the village's fortunes over that period.



Map of Cerne 1768



Cerne Abbas Workhouse

## The 19th Century and Decline

The early 19th century saw the gradual decline in the village's fortunes, particularly for farming, and the Dorset labourer became a byword for poverty and degradation. There was a massive increase in the numbers of able-bodied poor relying partly on help from the parish rates. In an attempt to address the problem, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834

empowered parishes to form 'unions' and to set up workhouses. Into these workhouses went the sick, aged, feeble-minded and orphans, as well as able-bodied adults and vagrants. The Cerne Union was formed by the amalgamation of 20 local parishes and the Union Workhouse (on the Sherborne Road opposite the Giant) was established in May 1837. It was to survive as a Workhouse into the 20th century.



School Class of 1898

## Education

Private schools existed in Cerne Abbas from the late 18th century with the National School being built in Duck Street in 1844. It continues to this day, now as the Cerne Abbas Church of England Voluntary Controlled First School, and is believed to be the oldest school building still in use in Dorset.

## Law and Order

The County and Boroughs Act of 1856 caused the establishment of a new county police headquarters in Long Street, today still easily recognisable with its chequered façade. It comprised cells, a sergeant's house and a courthouse to which Petty Sessions moved in 1860 from The New Inn where they had previously been held.

By the end of the 19th century the complex supported six constables and a sergeant; there certainly would not have been cause for complaint that one never saw a policeman! The complex was closed in the 1960s and became private houses.



Sergeant Harvey in Long Street c1927



Frank Thorne - Carrier

## The Railway that Nearly Came

A scheme was proposed in the 1830s to build a railway from Bath and Weymouth via the Cerne Valley, but it was subsequently run through the Frome Valley. As a result, the coaches ceased to run through the village and within 50 years the population had halved. What movement of people and goods then took place relied on the Village Carrier, initially using horse-drawn carts but later by more modern means.



# 20th CENTURY AND A NEW BEGINNING

## Rebirth

The village perhaps reached its lowest point in the early 20th century and, according to a visitor in 1906, the village was 'silent and well-nigh deserted'. However, the year 1919 saw another defining moment in the village's history, with the sale at auction by the Pitt-Rivers family of the various properties still in their possession; effectively most of Cerne Abbas. The sale realised £67,402 for the family and many of the properties were sold to the tenants. This event, together with the

mobility provided by increasing car ownership, slowly brought new life to Cerne Abbas. Farming became the main local industry once more with many of the village businesses continuing well into the 20th century. Today, Cerne Abbas is a thriving and active community of over 700 people. It also welcomes thousands of visitors who come to see this quintessentially English village, called 'Abbots Cernel' in Thomas Hardy's journals, and perhaps its most defining feature: the Cerne Giant.



*St Mary's Church from Market Square c1895. The shop on the right belonged to a Mr Clark, a watchmaker whose family had been on this site since the mid C17th. It closed in 1900. Note the cottages in front of the church; they were pulled down by 1916*

*Long Street looking west from Market Square c1890. 'The Red Lion', now 'The Giant Inn', had a thatched roof. The pub was rebuilt after a fire in 1897*



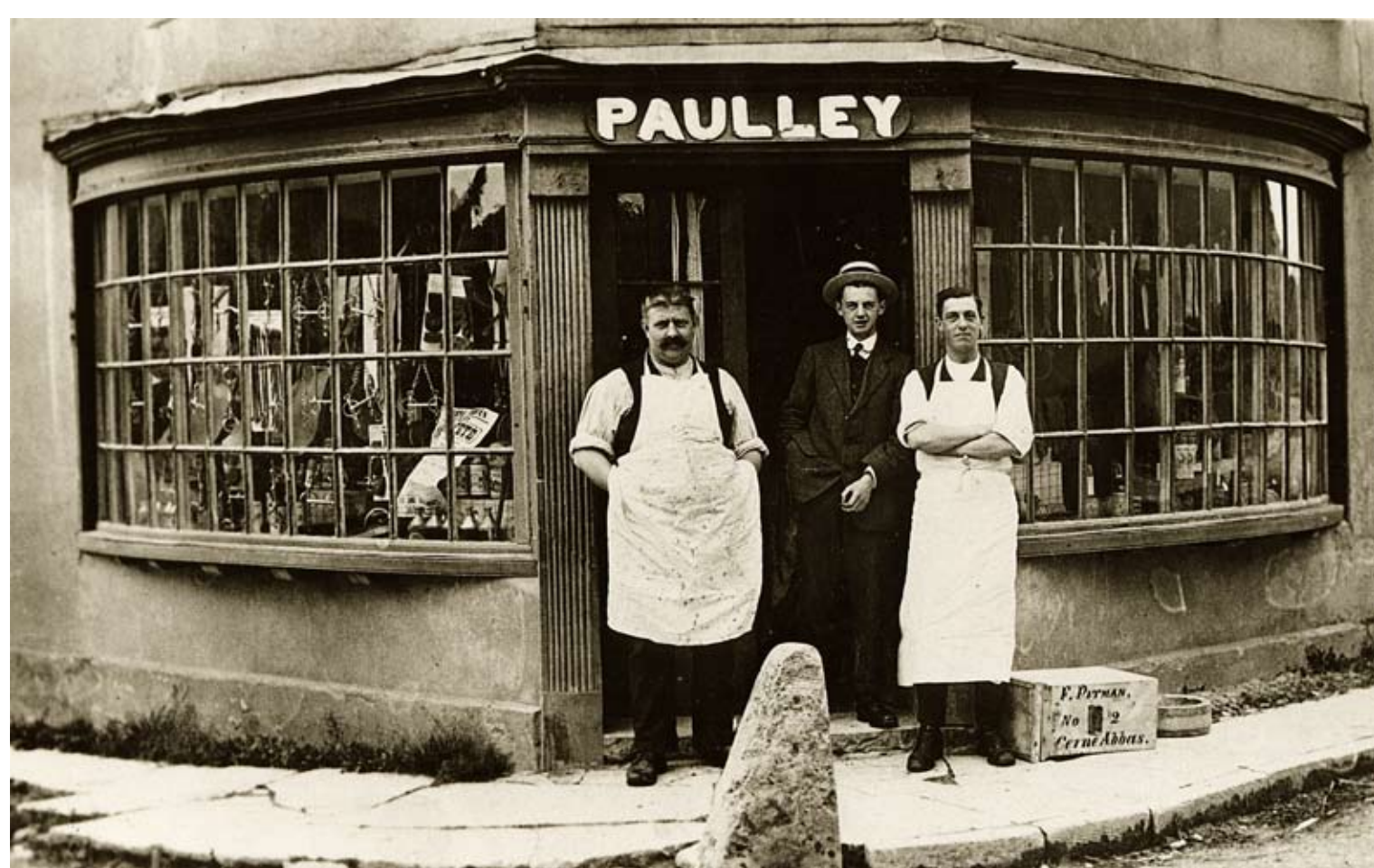
*Back Lane c1905  
The cottages still exist*



*'Tiger' Thomas Curtis (second from left) c1920. He ran the forge in Mill Lane until his death in 1931 at the age of 91*



*Milking Team at Barton Farm c1916*



*Paulley, in Long Street, was the last saddler and leather worker in Cerne Abbas and closed in the 1930s*



*Jane Way (on the left) and family c1912. The shop was in Market Square*



*Parade of Ancient Order of Forresters in Long Street c1901*



*The 'Union Arms' in Acreman Street c1905. Charlie Fox, the landlord, is at the back in a white apron*



*The Post Office at 1 Abbey Street, c1910. The post master (at the rear) was William Cornick*



*Mr Green the butcher c1910. His cart is now preserved in the County Museum in Dorchester*



# THE CERNE ABBAS GIANT

## The Giant

The Cerne Abbas Giant is the figure of a naked, rampant, club wielding man on a hillside to the north of the village. He is 180 feet (55 metres) high and 167 feet (51 metres) wide. In his right hand the Giant holds an enormous knobbed club 120 feet (36.5 metres) long. The carving is formed by a trench 1 foot (0.3 metre) wide and deep which has been cut into the underlying chalk and then given a chalk infill.



*The Cerne Giant and The Trendle (top right)*

## Old ?

The Cerne Abbas Giant has conventionally been viewed as a great symbol of ancient spirituality, dating from pre-historic or Romano-British times. A mound below the Giant's left hand may be the sculpted remnant of a severed head which he once clutched – a rather grisly if common ancient Celtic religious symbol. Alternatively, the Roman hero Hercules was often depicted naked with a club in his right hand and a lion skin draped over his left shoulder. Scientific tests have suggested that there might once have been something draped over the Giant's left side, but long since grassed over. Perhaps to support its possible Roman origins, in the Museum of Arles in France can be seen a small collection of terracotta statues of the Giant, found when the Roman barracks there were excavated.

## ..or Relatively New?

Another view is that it was the work of the monks of the Benedictine Abbey of Cerne, as a similar figure is to be found close to the former Benedictine Priory at Wilmington in Sussex. The problem with all these conventional views of its age is that there is no written reference in any archives to the Giant before an entry in 1694 in the Churchwarden's accounts for St Mary's Church in Cerne Abbas, when '3 shillings' (15p) was paid for 'repairing ye Giant'. Successive Churchwardens have also used the symbol of the Giant on lead plaques to be found on the roof of the church.



*Giant and female partner 1997*



*Lead plaque on the roof of the Church*

## Commission of Enquiry

In 1774 the Rev. John Hutchins claimed he was told that the Giant was 'a modern thing' cut by Lord Holles. Denzil Holles, who owned Giant Hill from 1642 to 1666, was a fierce critic of Oliver Cromwell. So, was the Cerne Abbas Giant cut by Holles, to satirise Cromwell's stern puritanical rule? In March 1996 the Bournemouth University School of Conservation Sciences arranged a commission of enquiry, in the course of which the age and significance of the Giant was argued by specialists. However, as with all previous studies, there were no definite answers. Perhaps it is best left so and we can continue to speculate.

## The Trendle

Just above the Giant's outstretched hand is a small square Iron Age earthwork called the Trendle. The purpose of this earthwork is uncertain although it is widely accepted that a temple once stood here. For hundreds of years it was the local custom to erect a maypole within the earthwork about which childless couples would dance to promote fertility. This custom has not survived, but at day break on every May Day the Wessex Morris Men continue to perform their ancient traditional dances on the Trendle and afterwards in the Market Square in the village.



*Wessex Morris Dancers in the Market Square*



*Rechalking of the Giant*

## The National Trust

The Giant was scheduled as an ancient monument in 1924 and is now in the care of the National Trust. Every few years the Trust arranges for the chalk infill to be replaced, assisted by local people. A fence prevents public access to the Giant, but he is best viewed from the A352 road heading towards Sherborne.

This exhibition has been created as a result of a grant from:

