

Re-Visiting the White Horse



Holly Bird

by Matthew Power
Arlof, Count of Arannor

The White Horse of Uffington reconstruction, set on the hill overlooking the main battlefield at Cooper's Lake Campground, Pennsic XXII, represents the ideal project to me: a mass audience, inexpensive materials, and a powerful sense of place. Until now, we, the perpetrators, have never publicly taken credit for that project, for fear of weakening its power. I'm now convinced that clarifying that project will not violate the moment it created.

Holly Bird (Mistress Hollen of Kestrelmere) and I had discussed reconstructing a chalk figure at the previous Pennsic gathering, but for various reasons, the idea fell into the abyss of wishful thinking. Then, on a Wednesday morning at Cooper's Lake Campground, we began to talk about it again, this time involving the whole camp. Holly, Hilary and I set out on a mission to find a suitable material of which to create the figure. The grass on the hill was knee deep, so we ruled out using sand or real chalk. Someone suggested using white paint, but the tall grass and environmental aspects killed that idea. We had considered white unbleached muslin, but several hundred yards could get

very expensive very quickly. As is the nature of such things, we discovered the right material by accident—white table covering material. The three of us split the cost, which came to about \$100. We based the amount of fabric on a two-thirds scale sketch (right) Holly had done from a photograph that I just happened to bring to Pennsylvania.

At about midnight Friday night, by brother Mitch (Tarok the Unfrozen) Merald Clark (Duke Sir Merowald), Hilary and I headed for the hills, so to speak. We used inexpensive cotton string and wooden stakes (that we made in camp) to create a grid of 10x10-ft. squares. The final image would be more than 200 feet long. As Tarok and Hilary finished the grid, Merald and I began creating the head and eye.

Shortly, Holly joined us, along with (as best I can remember): Sir Benen and Lady Sorcha (now Count and Countess) Sir Ropesle, Ken Foit, Syr Brian McNaughton, Guy and Debbie Pettingill (Leonidas and Carmella—publishers of the Pennsic Independent), and several others whose memories I have displaced by reading too many childrens' books aloud.



What we thought would take about an hour took four or five hours. Fortunately, a damp fog passing over the campground kept our work secret from most of the drunken revelers in their camps. At one crisis point, we ran out of fabric before we finished the horse's limbs. Fortunately, Merald, Benen and Holly all make their living as professional graphic designers. They quickly took us "off grid" and began eyeballing the figure to cut some here and add some there. Benen made it happen.

Just before dawn, exhausted and soaking wet, we turned away and walked across the field. As we turned

back, the fog had begun to clear, and we all felt a mystic chill, as the white figure came to life. We went back to camp to catch a couple of hours of sleep before the events of the day.

Beyond the facts of its creation, I have just one anecdote to relate about the effect of the spectacle. In the middle of the field battle on Saturday, a marshall called "hold." Hundreds of heads turned silently to gaze at the hill. Somebody in front of us asked "What's with the white horse?" Around him, no one answered. They knew that if he needed to ask, he would never comprehend the answer.

Above: The actual figure, carved into a hillside overlooking the small town of Uffington, England. Friends who have visited say the horse is actually difficult to see from the ground.

Right: On this scrap of vellum paper, Mistress Hollen superimposed the shape of the white horse over a scale grid. Each block represented a 10x10-ft. square, with the overall length of the figure just over 200 feet.

Below: One of the few existing photos of our Pennsic reconstruction (taken shortly after the field battle). The photo barely does justice to the size and impact of the finished figure.

