



## *Thin Places, Sacred Spaces, Historical Traces*

### **St Helen's Tour of Mystic Britain A Visitors' Guide**

#### Chapter 8 – Canterbury: August 2023

This week we cover more of the east coast of England, skirting London on our way to Canterbury. The Archbishop of Canterbury being the central figure of the Anglican Church worldwide, this is indeed a good place to stop; Helen will tell us of its history and controversy as we visit. While we're in the south of England, we'll head west, south of London (don't worry, we'll get there), to some ancient art that still has something to tell us. Val will regale us with stories of the "long man of Wilmington" and some other chalk figures.

Canterbury is perhaps the most recognized place name among Anglicans. The Archbishop of Canterbury is "primus inter pares", first among equal archbishops, but exercises no direct authority outside England. The 105<sup>th</sup> Archbishop is Justin Welby appointed in 2013 having been Bishop of Durham for only 2 years. He was ordained in his 40's following a successful career in business.

The first Archbishop of Canterbury, St. Augustine, came to England from Rome in 597, sent by the Pope to convert the Angles. The local king, Ethelbert, gave him St Martin's (the first church founded in England, the oldest parish church in continuous use and the oldest church in the entire English-speaking world) rebuilt from a late Roman church by his Queen,



*Canterbury Cathedral (Photo: [www.e-architect.co.uk](http://www.e-architect.co.uk))*



*St Martin's Church (photo:*

*[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St\\_Martin%27s\\_Church,\\_Canterbury](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Martin%27s_Church,_Canterbury)*

Bertha who was already a Christian. Augustine converted her husband, and he granted land to build the first cathedral. Canterbury has been the ecclesiastical capital of England ever since. It was not until Thomas Beckett, 40<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered in the cathedral in 1170 that it became a place of pilgrimage. Thomas Beckett was a courtier and friend of King Henry II. Made Lord Chancellor in 1155, his duties included collecting revenue from landowners and the church. King Henry, looking for more control over the church, quickly appointed his friend, Archbishop of Canterbury, on the death of the incumbent, necessitating an ordination and consecration as archbishop in the same week. Instead of becoming Henry's ally, however, Beckett surprised everyone

by becoming ascetic and championing the church above the state. Matters became tense between them, and in 1170 the King, known for his outbursts of temper, expressed his displeasure in front of the court and four knights took it as an order to execute the Archbishop. He was slain inside the cathedral on his way to Vespers. He was immediately declared a martyr and within 2 years, beatified. Henry II made a pilgrimage to the cathedral in penance for his part in the murder and from that time on Canterbury became a prime pilgrimage destination. The shrine erected in 1220 became more and more decorated by pilgrims; when it was dismantled in 1536 it is said to have taken 26 wagons to move the treasures to the Tower of London.

Chaucer wrote “Canterbury Tales” about a group of pilgrims on their way to visit the shrine in the 1390's; one of the first books written in vernacular English, it remains a classic. *Wikipedia, [www.canterbury-cathedral.org](http://www.canterbury-cathedral.org)*

The Long Man of Wilmington (or Wilmington Giant) is a 226' tall hill figure holding two even taller staves, cut into the chalk on Windover Hill on the South Downs. The 2nd largest such representation of man anywhere in the world (the ‘Giant of Atacama’ in Chile) stands at 393'. Our giant appears tall and thin from the air (and can be seen clearly on satellite photos), but from the ground his proportions appear more proper, even portly. Archaeological work in 1969 dispelled the local myth that his manhood was removed by puritans.



*Long Man of Wilmington (Photo [chesterfieldpagans.org](http://chesterfieldpagans.org))*

Originally marked out in packed chalk, the figure was scoured and ‘framed’ with bricks in 1874; these were painted green during the war to prevent enemy planes using the Giant as a navigation tool. In 1939, several youths were fined 30 Shillings (a lot of money then) for throwing some of the bricks down the hill. They probably also received a ‘good hiding’ from their parents! The brick outline was finally replaced in 1969, by 770 concrete blocks which probably changed the original shape even further.

The origin of The Long Man remains a mystery though ‘best guesses’ and theories abound, ranging from being carved by idle monks (disproved by the finding of Roman remains amongst the chalk), any number of ‘hero’ figures (Beowulf, Woden, Apollo, etc.) and even a very tall Roman Standard bearer. A busy thoroughfare throughout history, the downs may have been seen by Phoenician traders. From Neolithic times, flint was mined on the hill and burial mounds were constructed. Perhaps the giant was a protector of the area, to warn people away from the mines, or a representation of an important person in the site’s history. It is more likely that the site had a religious significance, as people throughout the ages have tried to represent something bigger than their knowledge of the world with impressive efforts.

Below the hill in the village of Wilmington is a French priory built by Norman Benedictine monks. Falling into disuse in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it was used as a farm building until 1925 when, along with the Long Man, the Sussex Archaeological Society took responsibility. Wilmington also has a 12<sup>th</sup> Century church whose 13<sup>th</sup> Century North Chapel contains a beautiful stained glass window known as the ‘Bee and the Butterfly Window’ depicting St. Peter surrounded by different insects. As the Long Man is sometimes called a ‘Guardian of a Gateway’, this representation of St. Peter, the ‘Guardian of the Gates of Heaven’ is a Christianization of a pre-Christian theme. This is quite common; a pre-existing attribute of a place or date being replaced with an affiliation with a Saint with similar properties or attributes.

*(Credit: various sites under: [sussexarch.org.uk](http://sussexarch.org.uk))*

Chalk Hill Figures. A little further west, white horse and hill figures are among the most interesting features of the chalk downlands. Some of these can trace their roots back to Celts who first came to



Britain in 500BC, bringing their style of pagan worship. They thought of their gods as giants and portrayed them as such; many grassy hills in Britain still boast huge figures of men and horses.

A more famous figure is the ‘Cerne Abbas Giant’, cut into the hillside above the village of Cerne Abbas near Dorchester. At over 180 feet (with very obvious ‘virility’!), he was identified during Roman times as Hercules and associated with a fertility cult, Priapus Worship, revived by Emperor Commodus in the late 2nd Century. Until 1635, a maypole was set up near the giant and today couples still make night-time pilgrimages to the giant to make sure their marriage will be blessed with children.

The Celts also worshipped horses and one of the most famous and oldest is the rather strange creature on the hill above Uffington, Oxfordshire. It is thought to have been



*Cerne Abbas Giant, (photo: [dooyoo.co.uk](http://dooyoo.co.uk))*



*The White Horse of Uffington (Photo credit, [chesterfieldpagans.org](http://chesterfieldpagans.org))*

made by the Belgic tribe in southeast England between 50 BC and 50 AD. It is 375 feet long and 130 feet high and probably represents a Celtic god. It has a strange ‘beaked’ muzzle and the limbs are disjointed. A similar ‘horse’ is featured on old Celtic coins from 150 BC.

‘The White Horse’ cut into the hillside at Westbury in Wiltshire, was altered and re-cut in conventional form in 1778. White horses and horseshoes have been considered lucky. The horseshoe is a lunar symbol which perhaps explains the crescent on the tail of the Westbury horse. The ‘Great Red Horse’, found on Sun Rising Hill at Tysoe is the only remaining horse of three cut into the hillsides between Lower and Middle Tysoe. One is believed to have been 300ft long and 210 ft high and gave its name to the Red Horse Vale. It is not known how many more of these horses have disappeared,

the grass slowly encroaching on them, but it is believed that they were numerous at the time of the Celts. (credit: [historic-uk.co](http://historic-uk.co))

Our visits this week have been disparate, both in location and nature. St Martin’s, the oldest still active church in the English speaking world, brings to mind themes of constancy and links with our past. Thomas Beckett’s “conversion” after becoming archbishop may say something about the fact that God can use even political/worldly people and events to effect his purpose (and give direction to his church). Chalk figures coming from long ago and pagan religions tell us how ancients represented that which was unknown or only suspected, but still revered, with size and impressiveness. How are these “thin places”? Don’t we still look back to the mystic to help us make meaning out of that we don’t fully understand? Do we not still represent the unknowable with grandeur and scale (ever seen Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro?). Seeing these places helps us think about meaning and transcendence. The resulting contemplation is good for us; these thoughts can lead us inside, to our own “thin places”. Let’s continue to contemplate as we visit more “mystic places” on our continued pilgrimage.

Your Mystic Britain travel guides

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