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The Magic of the Downs: Englishness in Crisis in Eric Ravilious's Chalk Figure Paintings

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Musing over a solitary walk through Dorset in 1936, the naturalist H. J. Massingham (1888-1952) reflected that he had discovered something more than the proverbial greenness and pleasantness of the English countryside. Among the still-perceptible remnants of prehistoric civilisations, Massingham was struck by the “strangeness of the setting ... It seems to be the land of the *living* dead”.¹ The disquietude of the landscape was emphasised by the presence of what he terms a “monster” in its hills—the Cerne Abbas Giant, an enormous, naked, club-wielding figure carved into the chalk earth of the downlands.² Three years later in 1939, the watercolourist and engraver Eric Ravilious (1903-42), linked to Massingham by a shared social network of artists, writers, and archaeologists, would walk this strange landscape too, and many others that were similarly peopled by mysterious chalk giants and horses that are unique to the English countryside. The series of paintings of these figures that resulted from his ramblings, executed in the earliest months of the Second World War, would focus on scenes that were not merely disquieting but profoundly disquieted by the threat of annihilation. In this essay I examine Ravilious's chalk figure cycle as an expression of these fears, exploring the artist's understudied interventions into the iconography of these apparently ancient carvings to demonstrate how they dramatise the psyche of a nation on the brink of war. At the heart of my argument is an interrogation of what I hold to be an oxymoronic tendency permeating Ravilious scholarship, the notion that Ravilious was simultaneously a quintessentially English painter and an apolitical one. An interest in the deepest recesses of English myth and national icons could not, I argue, avoid engaging with urgently felt political questions over national identity. While this is arguably true at any point in history, it is particularly vital to remind ourselves of this at the uniquely charged historical moment Ravilious found himself in when he travelled through the downlands.

The art historian Alex Potts has noted that periods in which “the ‘outside’ world appeared particularly threatening” breed a proliferation of images of rural England “to celebrate an English essence, enduring safe and beautiful, a home, a haven, and at the same time England's glory”; tellingly, Potts refers to the southern English countryside around which such images coalesce as “Constable country” in deference to the importance visual art can have in shaping the relationship between England and the English.³ Just as in Potts's work, studies of the relationship between visual art, landscape, and Englishness often focus on the period between the First World War

and the Second World War precisely because the interwar years were bookended by traumatic ruptures in social life in which the world beyond England's shores had rarely seemed more threatening and the idea of the countryside gained significant political power. As the historian Jay Winter memorably stated, “an old nation either unaware of or untroubled by fundamental threats does not have to define who or what it is... That British privilege was a casualty of war”.⁴ The answers to these existential questions were sought in the English countryside, reinvented between the wars as the spiritual home of national identity in works such as Ravilious’.

Aged fifteen at the date of the Armistice, the England Ravilious came of age in was one that envisioned the countryside as an holistic and stable antidote to the fragmented bodies and landscapes of the First World War.⁵ Imbued with a mythic sense of stasis in answer to the chaos of modernity, the darkest recesses of which were felt to have been exposed by the mechanised carnage of the conflict, historians have been quick to recognise the conservatism that is supposedly inherent in the sense of Englishness that an enthusiasm for the countryside provided throughout the interwar years. Winter has noted that this ‘ruralism’ was seized upon by right-wing commentators, and Martin J. Weiner’s unparalleled study of the modern relationship between Englishness and the countryside argues that the nostalgically imagined national identity engendered by this even led to a veneration of the halcyon days of aristocratic feudalism.⁶ It is perhaps because of this accepted narrative that the work of Ravilious, an artist who was and is conceived of as quintessentially English, has been relatively absent from such politically-minded discussions. If Ravilious’s work is invoked at all in such contexts it functions as little more than window dressing, its apparent quaintness being unquestioningly accepted as evidence of this backward-looking tendency. As I show here, Ravilious’ relative aesthetic conservatism did not translate to its political equivalent; rather, a closer examination of Ravilious’s chalk figure paintings than has previously been afforded reveals a frank and thoroughly modern engagement with the threat to Englishness that the Second World War posed. Before analysing Ravilious’s work, I will elucidate how a network of influences – social, artistic, and political – including H. J. Massingham were at play in his practice by 1939, demonstrating how they manifested themselves in a cycle of images that highlight the ideological malleability of the most ancient myths of the English countryside.

RAVILIOUS IN 1939: POLITICS AND MAGIC

In writing about Ravilious, Alan Powers claimed that “it is impossible to avoid the question of Englishness”, and the tendency began almost immediately after Ravilious’s death.⁷ In a 1947 obituary the publisher Noel Carrington stated Ravilious was “a very English artist... devoted to the English countryside”.⁸ What being a very English artist means, however, is unclear, and seems to refer to little more than the

fact Ravilious rarely left England and painted its landscapes. Freda Constable ventured that it means his work is “an expression of English moderation”, itself a vague remark that supports possible misreadings of Ravilious’s work through its connotations of conservatism or apoliticism.⁹ Indeed, even a recent biography characterises Ravilious as an artist who was “by nature... inclined to escape into the newest P. G. Wodehouse” rather than read his friends’ Left Book Club publications.¹⁰

It is my contention that one cannot be so overtly concerned with national identity – Ravilious once remarked that his greatest ambition was to revive the English watercolour tradition, for example – while producing work that remained apolitical, and that this was particularly true of the interwar period.¹¹ As we have seen, interwar England was a place fraught with existential questioning as to foundational issues of nationhood and identity, and Alexandra Harris has explored how these concerns led to a rediscovery of England’s traditions and landscapes among the generation of artists to which Ravilious belonged.¹² In doing so, England’s modern artists were in step with broader trends in English culture. The 1924 election saw Stanley Baldwin take office for the first time – he returned between 1935 and 1937 – which meant putting in office a man who fretted over “what England may stand for in the minds of generations to come if our country goes on ... in seeing her fields converted into towns” in a speech which included the rhetorical flourish of stating that “England is the country, and the country is England”.¹³

The interwar years saw a proliferation of domestic tourism to the countryside and these tourists went looking for more than diverting views. Rather, as Martin Weiner records, they saw in the countryside a restorative stability which was at odds with modernity and expressive of the true nature of Englishness, which could be spiritually accessed by exploring its landscapes.¹⁴ Frank Trentmann’s masterful study of this revival of interest notes the “demand for mysticism” that motivated these excursions, pointing to the popularity of night trains that would take Londoners to unspecified rural locations for nocturnal explorations and guide books that provided helpful information for “Ghost Hunter’s Rambles”.¹⁵ Few people understood this better than H. J. Massingham. His influence is felt in Ravilious’ reinterpretations of the chalk figures of ancient England, and Massingham’s prolific output of books concerning the southern English countryside both informed – and was informed by – this culture of popular mysticism. In *English Downland*, Massingham observed that a renewed interest in the countryside was symptomatic of a culture “which has developed a passion for the country out of the disillusion bred by the Industrial and Machine Ages”, sending city-dwellers looking to pastoral landscapes as “a ticket-of-leave from Progress and an introduction to the simpler and deeper emotions of our being”.¹⁶ The downland landscapes in which the chalk figures are found were singled out by Massingham as being particularly potent spaces for reacquainting oneself with the irrational, numinous forces of the English past that stood in opposition to the threat of Progress. Sounding much like the writer of a ghost-hunter’s guidebook,

Massingham tantalisingly told his readers that "if ever there was an abandoned country, left to the ghosts and the fairies, it is downland".¹⁷

This was an England haunted by echoes of an enigmatic national past of which the chalk figures, mysterious in their possibly ancient origins and imbued with folkloric associations, were conspicuous representatives. Coinciding with this spiritual quest was a flourishing public interest in archaeology and prehistory which intensified in 1939 with the discovery of the Sutton Hoo treasures.¹⁸ The chalk figures, combining these two interests, invited renewed speculation and investigation, something Ravilious participated in. His 'Preface by the Engraver' in the Lanston Monotype Company's 1929 Almanack, a book for which he provided engravings including a depiction of the Wilmington Long Man, is his only published writing and segues quickly into his theories over the origins of this figure. Ravilious's theory, linking the Wilmington Long Man to an image of Virgo in a fourteenth-century Italian fresco, is an idiosyncratic one, although his comment that this would mean "the sex of the 'Long Man' is mistaken: he should be the giantess" attests to his genuine interest in attempting to understand these carvings.¹⁹

Furthermore, contemporary accounts from Ravilious's friends suggest an often unelucidated sympathy to such mysterious things as the chalk figures lying beneath the apparent quaintness of his canvases. Helen Binyon offered glimpses of Ravilious's curious and somewhat ethereal temperament, informing us that on a rambling trip he woke his companions with his "loud laughter in his sleep – so entertaining were his dreams".²⁰ She also recorded a conversation between Ravilious and the artist Edward Bawden that Ravilious concluded with the bizarre, unprompted comment "I should like to spend a whole night walking towards the moon – good night".²¹ Binyon, who noted Ravilious's ability to "abstract himself in spirit", was echoed by another of his friends who remembered Ravilious "always seemed to be slightly somewhere else, as if he lived a private life which did not completely coincide with material existence".²² This peculiar, numinous tendency found expression in his work, with Richard Morphet seeing easy comparisons to be made between Ravilious and the visionary Neo-Romantic Cecil Collins.²³ Few critics and biographers have failed to note the influence of Paul Nash, Ravilious's tutor at the Royal College of Art and lifelong friend, whose landscape paintings fused Romanticism with Surrealism. Attempting to reconcile English tradition with this continental influence, Nash wrote in 1937 that surrealism was "a native of Britain... The genius of Shakespeare, the vision of Blake, the imagination of Coleridge, the inspiration of Carroll and Edward Lear, all belong to surrealism".²⁴ It would be a mistake to overstate Ravilious's indirect debt to surrealism, although the claim that any of its residual practices filtered into Ravilious's work through the lens of Nash's defence of its Englishness is noteworthy. It would equally, however, be a mistake to ignore Ravilious's interest, shared not only by the surrealists but by the English public who flocked to the countryside to feel a sense of national belonging and spiritual wonder, in the inexplicable and the magical.

Ravilious's chalk figure series therefore reflected a widely-felt interest in the countryside's mythic qualities that characterised contemporary understandings of authentic Englishness. However, it also reflected newfound anxieties along these lines. Just as the First World War had catalysed the rediscovery of the English landscape, the coming of the second prompted fears over its destruction. In traversing the downlands to paint the chalk figures, Ravilious's activities paralleled the state-sponsored *Recording Britain* project to which many of his friends contributed, a project that aimed at preserving in paint the beauty of the English countryside for fear of bombing or invasion.²⁵ The chalk figures were particularly loaded subjects, not only for their perceived links to England's ancient roots but also for their recent disappearances – by the time Ravilious travelled to paint the Cerne Abbas Giant in December 1939, it had been turfed over so enemy bombers could not use it to navigate the terrain below. Evoking the damage already done to the English countryside by the threat of war, painting the chalk figures brings Ravilious's oeuvre into close proximity to a crisis in Englishness when it was needed more than ever before to support the war effort. The art critic Herbert Read's comment that an exhibition of paintings from the Recording Britain project "shows us exactly what we are fighting for" is indicative of the existential weight on images of the English countryside at this moment.²⁶

That Ravilious's chalk figure paintings reflect political anxieties should not be surprising when we consider another growing tendency in the artist's life – his increasing engagement with left-wing politics. Ravilious's friendship with Paul and John Nash connected him to figures from a generation who had served as Official War Artists in the First World War, and who expressed their disgust and frustration at the outbreak of another. Ravilious's contemporaries, including Royal College of Art friends Edward Bawden, Barnett Freedman, Peggy Angus, and Helen Binyon, were all active in the left-wing Artists International Association (AIA) by the mid-1930s and convinced him to join too. Even before active membership of the AIA, Ravilious was attending lectures about the Spanish Civil War, and the threat of an impending European war, in 1936. Although he wrote that he and his artistic friends could "pledge ourselves to fight in the event of a class war here like the one in Spain", he felt that the more immediate way to help was to "assist by designs and drawing for the rather bad leaflets and such that are produced, and this I mean to do".²⁷ Ravilious was thus considering the political potentialities of visual art by the late 1930s and had become a surprisingly committed member of the AIA, an organisation that stood "for Unity of artists against Fascism and War".²⁸ Ravilious sold works to raise funds, sat on its exhibition hanging committees, and even volunteered to take in a refugee fleeing fascism.²⁹ Tellingly, at its first Congress in 1937, the AIA also expressed "disgust at the continued ruin of the natural qualities of the countryside by vulgar erections and signs... Congress suggests that all government bodies seek the assistance of artists and architects in decisions regarding such material".³⁰

I contend, therefore, that Ravilious was certainly not an apolitical artist by 1939, and that if he was a very English artist it was owing to his ability to interpret and express the numinous qualities of the English countryside that were so central to national identity. This appeared to have been apparent to both the military, who initially selected the chalk figures as subjects for Ravilious to paint (although they had covered them by the time he reached the sites), and by Noel Carrington, the publisher who would later call Ravilious a very English painter in his above-quoted obituary. Then the editor of *Puffin*, Carrington discussed the possibility of a book about the chalk figures with illustrations by Ravilious in 1941, although Ravilious had been considering this as early as 1939, likely reflecting his interest in the AIA's mass-audience *Everyman Print* series. While the book remained uncompleted, Ravilious produced a dummy copy and correspondence with Carrington reveals that none other than H. J. Massingham was Carrington's first choice of writer, who had speculatively planned to take the name of Massingham's 1927 book *Downland Man* for Ravilious's project.³¹ Ravilious had previously collaborated with Massingham on an edition of the writings of Gilbert White the year before he painted the chalk figure cycle, and his enthusiasm for Carrington's project attests to the notion that he likely shared, or was at least familiar with, Massingham's theories about the chalk figures. It is unclear whether the two men met, but they had many friends in common – including Paul Nash – and Massingham's respect for Ravilious is evident, stating in a letter that he had “shown everybody who comes to see me the Ravilious wood-engravings [for *Selborne*] and they are unanimous in being enchanted with them”.³² Turning now to the six paintings of Ravilious's cycle, I argue Massingham's theories provide the key to understanding Ravilious's interpretations of these ancient symbols of the English landscape, allowing us to decode the meanings behind their often unusual treatments.

WESTBURY, OSMINGTON, UFFINGTON: THE HORSES

Massingham authored two books of particular note for this study. These are *Downland Man* (1927), the book after which Ravilious's was going to be named, and *Fee Fi Fo Fum* (1926), an ironically small volume detailing Massingham's speculations over the origins of the giant chalk figures. Ravilious's six paintings show five figures – the Cerne Abbas Giant, the Wilmington Long Man, the Uffington White Horse, the Osmington White Horse, and the Westbury Horse twice, once in *The Westbury Horse* (Fig. 1) and again in *Train Landscape* (Fig. 2). Massingham sees a division in these figures' origins, arguing that only the Cerne and Wilmington Giants and the Uffington Horse are truly relics of England's ancient past, the rest being carved later.³³ This distinction was of paramount importance to the politicised view of prehistory Massingham expounds in *Downland Man*, casting the figures he believed to be genuinely ancient as the only products of an untainted and authentically English civilisation that existed before the adulterating taint of foreign invaders could take

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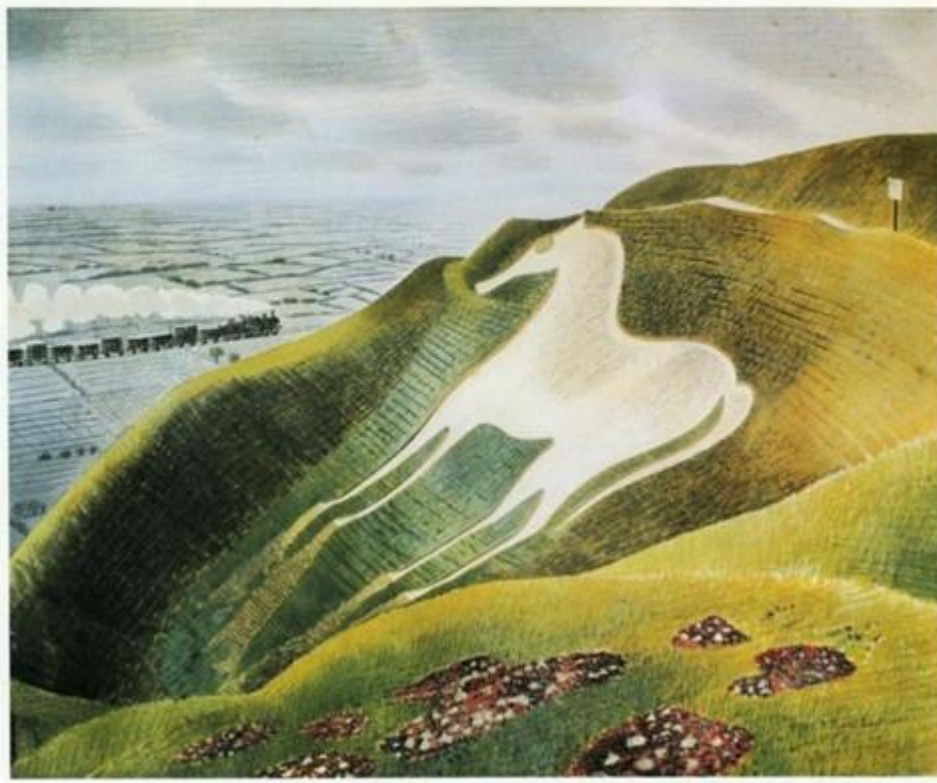


Figure 1. Eric Ravilious, *The Westbury Horse*, 1939. Watercolour on canvas. Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne.



Figure 2. Eric Ravilious, *Train Landscape*, 1939. Watercolour. Aberdeen Art Gallery, Aberdeen.

hold. Like Nash, Massingham was old enough to remember the First World War; like Nash, it had a lasting effect on his work. This is why he was so keen to stress the genuine antiquity of the chalk figures. Writing about the Wilmington Long Man, Massingham passionately argued that the figure must predate the Celts because "the Celts, as their warlike disposition, parasitism upon the megalithic civilisation both in thought and actual occupation, and the memorials they have left, betray, were not great builders and were deficient in 'l'art de construire'".³⁴ In addition to their artlessness, it was their warlike disposition that Massingham found so repellent, and directly contradictory to the spirit of their native English predecessors. These neolithic ancestors, he says, "were true to what... we call the spirit of the Downs".³⁵ In contrast, the invading Celtic culture "was not, in fact, a civilisation at all, but a retrogression from a previous and far higher standard of culture"; this was because, before their arrival, the Englishmen responsible for these chalk figures "knew little or nothing of warfare".³⁶ He continues, in the most explosive pages of *Downland Man*, to stress that:

the Celts... are the jetsam of the archaic civilisation in its fall... And are not we, the highly civilised, branded with the same mark? Our social life and our human values are threatened with the same cataclysm that overwhelmed the ancient world. But its results will by inexorable logic produce a heavier crop of mischief, terror, and savagery than befell the first civilisations- in the proportion to the extent we have elaborated and perfected the science of warfare.³⁷

It is a statement of apocalyptic intensity, one that belies Massingham's desire to cast the chalk figures as the products of an earlier age, and one that in turn perhaps explains why it is these three supposedly genuine products of a prelapsarian age find the most to say about the coming conflict in Ravilious's paintings. In Massingham's view these wellsprings of English history and mythology are symbols that warfare, and particularly mechanised modern warfare, is anathema to the foundational characteristics of England. Ravilious's paintings arguably indicate the same division, depicting the Uffington White Horse, the Cerne Abbas Giant, and the Wilmington Long Man in paintings that bristle with an intensity that is difficult to discover in his earlier work and even harder to reconcile with his posthumous reputation as an essentially lightweight artist.

The Westbury Horse paintings are idyllic, unchallenging images. In *Train Landscape*, the horse is viewed, as it would have been by a tourist, from the window of a passing train. It is set in a peaceful landscape with a placid overcast sky that rhymes with the train seats, creating a harmonious whole. Recent conservation work on the painting has revealed that the hillside was initially occupied by the Wilmington Giant, not the Westbury Horse. Although the reasons for this substitution are necessarily a matter of conjecture, I posit it may suggest Ravilious's acknowledgement of the differing degrees of symbolic power between the genuinely ancient chalk figures and their less

historically impressive counterparts; it may have been inappropriate to Ravilious to depict so potent a figure as the Wilmington Long Man in so lighthearted a manner. *Westbury Horse*, meanwhile, reverses this viewpoint, occupying the hillside on which the horse is carved and featuring a diminutive train in the distance. Visible on the hillside is a signpost positioned just above the horse, an example of the type of eyesore that blighted the countryside according to the AIA and indicated the newfound enthusiasm for the chalk figures among English tourists.

These images suggest a cosy domestication of England's past, transforming its symbols into enjoyable landmarks that coexist peacefully with a distinctly modern tourist engagement. Similarly, *Chalk Figure Near Weymouth*, depicting the Osmington White Horse – the only figure not named in Ravilious's titles, indicating a lesser interest in its specific history – is the least dynamic of the series. Although it bears compositional similarities to *The Cerne Giant* and *The Wilmington Giant*, with the three chalk figures occupying analogous positions in their compositions, it lacks the meteorological drama and the tension created in the paintings of the giants. If the *Westbury Horse* paintings both imply the presence of tourists through their subjects, *Chalk Figure Near Weymouth* implies this presence through its composition. It resembles nothing more than a souvenir postcard, confounding Massingham's view that the correct way to authentically commune with the English countryside is to never "consult a guide-book nor visit a beauty-spot: in the words of King Lear, never, never, never, never".³⁸

By contrast, Ravilious's paintings of the figures that Massingham identified as belonging to ancient England are among the most unsettling compositions of his career. *The Vale of the White Horse* (Fig. 3) stands alone among the horses for its ferocity and vitality, conveyed by Ravilious's departure from the conventional viewpoints evidenced in these other works. We are no longer safely on a train or at the foot of a hill; there are no signs of human life here, and we are stranded upon the hilltop in the driving rain. The Uffington White Horse itself is curiously diminutive, a visual trick Ravilious also employed when depicting the chalk giants, and its naturally abstracted form is here pushed close to the point of pictorial illegibility. It is likely that Ravilious was influenced by the near-contemporaneous writings and photographs of Paul Nash. In a 1938 article, Nash described the Uffington Horse as one of England's "unseen landscapes" which are "unseen merely because they are not perceived".³⁹ Nash argues that the horse is not properly perceived owing to "the rather futile game of 'picking out' the White Horse", when "seen on its own hill it becomes an affair of violent foreshortenings or tapering perspectives more or less indecipherable".⁴⁰ Instead, he argues, the horse- which is in his view "more of a dragon", a point on which Massingham agreed-⁴¹ is best enjoyed in the abstract, when the "landscape asserts itself with all the force of a triumphant fusion of natural and artificial design".⁴² To stress his point he produced photographs of the Uffington Horse which bear some relation to, although are more boldly abstract than, Ravilious's own relatively obscured horse.



Figure 3. Eric Ravilious, *The Vale of the White Horse*, 1939. Watercolour. Tate, London.

Later critics have noted that *The Vale of the White Horse* differs significantly from the other horses, emphasizing the uncannily animated nature of the landscape. For Powers, “the rather forbidding hillside writhe[s] like a giant skin, freckled with hairy stalks of dead grass”;⁴³ for Russell, *The Vale of the White Horse* is an “elemental scene, with ... turf that seems stretched taut like skin over the underlying chalk”.⁴⁴ It is important to remember how these chalk figures were made when observing this trend in criticism towards personifying the landscape- that is, by cutting away the grass on the hillside to expose the chalk earth that lies beneath. With this in mind, Ravilious’s conception of the Uffington Horse seems close in nature to Paul Nash’s, with the raw foundations of the English countryside- the raw landscape, in Nash’s terms, or the raw flesh in Russell and Powers’ terms- asserting themselves with a primal intensity. Owing to the low viewpoint, the most distant details of the white horse seem to rise up to meet the sky itself, baring themselves as the unadorned flesh of the landscape to the downpour.

If it is to Nash that Ravilious was indebted for the visual qualities of the Uffington Horse, it is to Massingham he appears to be indebted to for its symbolic meaning. As a genuinely ancient chalk figure, the Uffington Horse (or dragon, as Massingham thinks it is) belongs, in Massingham’s view, to the Neolithic period, or at least to a period predating England being invaded by foreign forces who “pictured themselves

as big game hunters ... [and] came to slay the dragon, not praise him".⁴⁵ Condemning these later barbaric invaders, Massingham states that "they are no patriots, these men who have no word of salutation for our native dragon-god".⁴⁶ It is evident how an ancient symbol of native Englishness that outlasted a foreign invading force would have been appropriate to Ravilious's work at a point in his career when he was concerned about the War and involved in anti-fascist movements. Rather than being obscured from the sight of enemy aircraft as the chalk figures were in reality, the Uffington White Horse of Ravilious's imagination rears up to face the storm, seeming to harness its primitive energy to enliven the entire landscape as it does so. *The Vale of the White Horse* revels in defiance, a reassertion of England's power that synthesises Nash's visual vocabulary and the political implications of Massingham's archeological theories to present an image in which the ancient, enchanted flesh of the countryside rises to meet that which threatens it. Turning to the giants, Massingham's two other genuine representatives of ancient England, the influences of Massingham and Nash continue to inform Ravilious's work, although the triumphalism of *The Vale of the White Horse* becomes increasingly problematised.

CERNE AND WILMINGTON: THE GIANTS

In addition to the contemporaneous acceptance of the antiquity of the Cerne Abbas Giant and the Wilmington Long Man, these also recommend themselves for separate study from the other chalk figures in Ravilious's cycle due to the timings of their emergence in his art and his personal feelings towards them. *The Cerne Giant* (Fig. 4) is the last of the series and was painted in December 1939, after Ravilious's appointment as a War Artist when the situation abroad was worsening. The Cerne Abbas Giant also appears to have been a favourite of Ravilious', with Russell recording Ravilious owned over forty postcards depicting it.⁴⁷ *The Wilmington Giant* (Fig. 5), on the other hand, is Ravilious's third Long Man of Wilmington, previously appearing in his Morley College mural and the Lanston Monotype Almanack. The Long Man is a figure whose proximity to Ravilious's hometown of Eastbourne made it a familiar sight from his childhood, and Ravilious's musings over the Long Man's origins in the Almanack attest to his interest in the figure. Furthermore, just as Massingham believed that the Cerne Abbas Giant and the Wilmington Long Man were brothers,⁴⁸ Ravilious's two paintings are evidently related to one another in compositional and thematic terms, united in reprising and complicating the composition of *Chalk Figure at Weymouth*.

Despite recognising the primal energy of *The Vale of the White Horse*, Powers unexpectedly reads a playfulness into *The Cerne Giant*, stating that although "the bleak December cold permeates the painting ... there is a high spiritedness to it".⁴⁹ Similarly, Alexandra Harris has stated that the Wilmington Long Man "keeps his place obediently within the little picket fence that hems him in".⁵⁰ Only Russell has



Figure 4. Eric Ravilious, *The Cerne Giant*, 1939. Watercolour. Private collection.



Figure 5. Eric Ravilious, *Wilmington Long Man*, 1939. Watercolour. The Victoria and Albert Museum.

identified *The Cerne Giant* as a painting “of unusual intimacy and menace”.⁵¹ Russell's reason for this is intriguing, but he does not elaborate on this thought. As in *The Wilmington Giant*, the chalk figure is relegated to the background of the painting and the foreground is dominated by “crooked posts and twisting wire” which “recall the work of [Ravilious's] friend John Nash, whose paintings of trench warfare helped to define our collective memory of World War One”.⁵² I argue that it is, as at Uffington, not John but Paul Nash who exerts this influence. There are compositional similarities to Paul's famous 1917 painting *Wire*, in both the wire's foregrounding and the dramatic diagonals formed by storm clouds in the background. Nash's interest in chalk figures paralleled Ravilious's, as evidenced in his photographs on the Uffington White Horse, and Nash had painted the Cerne Abbas Giant four years before Ravilious in 1935. Furthermore, when Ravilious wrote to John Nash's wife Christine for advice about where to find subjects to paint in the English countryside, she suggested that “reference to the ‘Shell Guide to Dorset’ by Paul Nash will give you some idea of the strangeness of the Country”, and thus Ravilious was likely thinking of Paul Nash when he visited Cerne Abbas.⁵³ Although I disagree on his choice of Nash sibling, Russell's identification of the barbed wire here with the barbed wire of the trenches is instructive in Ravilious's transformation of a quaint Dorset scene into a portentous image.

Massingham also asserts his influence over Ravilious's treatment of the Cerne Giant in particular, supporting in his writing the popular conclusion that the giant was created by a Hercules cult in Britain. Massingham's idiosyncrasy in this is arguing that although we may “be inclined to make the Romans responsible for [Hercules'] worship here”, “the story ... is not Roman at all”, maintaining his belief that the Cerne Abbas Giant belongs to an authentically English civilization who passed the Hercules myth down to the Romans.⁵⁴ If Ravilious believed this, then the subject of the Cerne Abbas Giant is particularly loaded. The giant, famous for his brandished club and openly displayed manhood, is an obvious symbol of an ancient variant of warrior masculinity even without this association. With it, however, his claim to symbolising this is strengthened by his well-known heroic and mythological origins; furthermore, like the Uffington Horse's ability to outlast foreign invaders, the Cerne Abbas Giant's alleged pre-Roman origins also indicate his resilience to invading forces.

While Ravilious appears to be synthesising the archaeological theories of Massingham and the artistic precedent of the Nash brothers as he did in *The Vale of the White Horse*, in this case these two influences represent elements of the painting in dramatic opposition to one another. The painting is a compositional confrontation between an ancient symbol of warriorhood intrinsically tied to the English landscape and a new, invading force suggestive of modern warfare. Alan Krell notes that barbed wire was “ever-present” in wartime Britain, an intrusive reminder of the conflict through its uses in military activity and coastal defence.⁵⁵ Not only recalling the war imagery of

the previous generation through the work of the Nashes, particularly Paul, Ravilious's threatening barbed wire was also referencing a legible symbol of the threat of invasion.

Furthermore, the physical characteristics of the Cerne Abbas Giant in this painting signal that Ravilious was attempting to do something more than simply record his image for posterity. The giant would have been a familiar face to Ravilious's public through his appearance in a poster from Shell's *See Britain First* advertising campaign, a series of works that capitalised on the interwar interest in exploring the English countryside. It was a series Ravilious must have been familiar with, given the involvement of Paul Nash and Edward Bawden, and the poster depicting the Giant, painted by Frank Dobson, is a cheery affair somewhat reminiscent of the brightness of Ravilious's Westbury Horse paintings. Dobson's giant, according to Cyril Connolly's assessment of an exhibition of these Shell posters in which he labelled the company "The New Medici" for the breadth and popularity of their patronage, was "the huge comic embodiment" of the Shell campaign's attitude that the countryside should be viewed not "as something to be jumped over or knocked about, but as the quarry of artistic forms".⁵⁶ The Cerne Abbas Giant thus re-entered the popular imagination in this period as both an enticing mystery and a loveable artistic achievement from the national past, something Massingham acknowledged in teasingly writing that the "Cerne Hercules is set out upon the hillside in the best Slade School [of Art] manner".⁵⁷ Ravilious's deviation from this familiar version of the giant would thus have been immediately evident, signaling a distancing from this playful engagement with ancient England.

The most immediate difference between Ravilious's giant and the real giant, a difference which has gone bewilderingly unremarked upon, is the colour. Obviously, the chalk giant is white, not the deep red of Ravilious's painting, and with no natural or artistic precedent for this alteration Ravilious's decision must be read symbolically particularly as Helen Binyon recorded that Ravilious was typically concerned with conveying naturalistic colour.⁵⁸ On a pictorial level, the substitution increases the sense of unease and intensity that permeates the scene, responding to the forebodingly stormy weather and granting the giant a level of clarity despite the thick fog. The colour also abounds with obvious symbolism of passion or anger, although it would arguably do a disservice to Ravilious's interpretation of the scene to suggest that this is the extent of what is being aimed at. Rather, as with the Uffington Horse, the method of making chalk figures – that is, cutting into the earth to carve their forms from the chalk below – seems pertinent to understanding Ravilious's red giant. While the pristine white chalk of the Uffington Horse shines through the dead grass to confront the implied threat in the painting, the red Cerne Abbas Giant seems more like a wound either revealed beneath the surface or endured by the act of lacerating the earth. In *The Cerne Giant*, the damage to the English countryside and all it stands for has already been done; the act of cutting into the earth, seeming to bloody the chalk beneath, has

been transformed into a violent portent of the danger to come. Coupled with the Giant's diminutive stature, brandishing his club furiously at the barbed wire representative of a mechanised brand of warfare for which the Giant seems hopelessly ill-equipped, it is difficult to read *The Cerne Giant* as a comparably optimistic image.

A similar effect is achieved in *The Wilmington Giant*, in which the chalk figure most intimately connected to Ravilious's childhood is similarly menaced by the lines of barbed wire that cut across the very forefront of the scene. Although Ravilious's manipulation of colour to convey anxiety is less pronounced than in *The Cerne Giant* it is still discernible, with the large outcrop of foliage to the right of the chalk figure being simplified into a stark, blackened form that resembles a crater in the earth. The poignancy in this painting can be inferred less from visual cues and more from Ravilious's relationship with, and understanding of, the figure itself. In his preface to the Lanston Monotype Corporation Almanack, Ravilious states that he understands the figure to be a "Sun-God pushing aside the gates of darkness".⁵⁹ The symbolic potentialities of Ravilious's painting are not difficult to elucidate with this in mind. Entrapped by the barbed wire in the foreground and with dark clouds mounting in the sky to the left and the right of the chalk figure, this remnant of both England's ancient past and Ravilious's personal past seems to be fighting a desperate battle to deflect the advancing darkness of war. It is likely no mistake that the threats to the two giants and the Uffington horse are all expressed meteorologically, in looming clouds or driving rain- the chalk figures were, after all, covered up precisely because of imagined threats from above in the form of enemy bombers.

Perhaps owing to their later appearances in the cycle of chalk figure paintings, allowing them to speak to a deepening sense of anxiety over the future of England as the international situation worsened, Ravilious's chalk giants lack the gaiety or triumphalism of the horse paintings. Depicting symbols which elucidated the ways that the conflict had already begun to desecrate the countryside, in the form of the barbed wire, these paintings seem to prophesise further and far greater damage in the blackened patch beside the Wilmington Long Man and, most disturbingly of all, the bloodied flesh of ancient England in *The Cerne Giant*. While this likely reflects literal fears of the damage done to the countryside, it should not be forgotten that throughout the interwar years the countryside spoke for all of England, and the chalk figures – satisfying a desire for the mystical sense of belonging and continuity with the deepest recesses of Englishness – spoke very powerfully indeed. Informed by the theories and aesthetics of a generation who had fought the war that had sent England seeking its greenness and pleasantness in the first place, these final evocations of the magical downland seem saturated with the fear that this sense of identity would be shattered once more.

CONCLUSIONS

When subjected to the sustained analysis they have so far been denied it is difficult to maintain a credible case for the commonplace notion that Ravilious's chalk figure paintings were the work of an artist who remained aloof to the unignorable anxieties of the period. The Englishness which is considered to be intrinsic to Ravilious's paintings must be read – at least to some degree – politically, when fully situated within the charged atmosphere in which these works were completed. Furthermore, the artistic, social, and political networks that Ravilious operated within towards the end of his career indicate that this direction was highly likely to have been intentional. The intensity of the landscapes occupied by the supposedly ancient chalk figures, thrown into sharp relief by the jocularity of his paintings of their more recent equivalents cannot be avoided. Instead, they can be reasonably explained with particular reference to the pessimism of H. J. Massingham and the modernity of Paul Nash.

Far from being a parochial painter of unchallenging idylls, the chalk figure paintings indicate that Ravilious was an artist capable of articulating the complex relationship between nationhood and landscape at its most existentially fraught. Indeed, just as Alex Potts considered the southern English countryside to be "Constable country", I would argue it is equally proper to speak of the landscapes discussed here as 'Ravilious country'.⁶⁰ As indicated by the relatively recent interpretations of Ravilious's work by Russell, Harris, and Powers, there is finally a growing tendency among critics to look closer at his paintings – although, there also remains a fundamental unwillingness to consider them serious, symbolically complex images. The recent rediscovery of the dummy copy of Ravilious and Carrington's proposed book containing these paintings has reinvigorated critical interest in them, evidenced by a forthcoming exhibition at the Wiltshire Museum titled *Eric Ravilious: Downland Man* that seeks to explore both how the enchanted, prehistoric downland landscapes influenced Ravilious and how Ravilious's responses in turn informed our view of them. Somewhat more surprisingly, the young writer Max Porter's 2019 novella *Lanny*, a book in which the ancient forces that lie dormant in the English countryside reassert themselves with sinister consequences, features a pivotal scene in which a character's strained relationship with rural England erupts in an act of vandalism upon studying a postcard of Ravilious's *Westbury Horse*.⁶¹

Two further such acts of so-called vandalism dealt upon the chalk figures themselves are instructive in recognising the continued relevance of the message implicit in Ravilious's chalk figure cycle; namely, that the meanings of these mysterious, ancient carvings are never static and that, in periods of crisis, they continue to speak to contemporary anxieties. One day in April 2020, with the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions at their most stringent, *BBC News* reported that the Cerne Abbas Giant had unexpectedly gained a face covering to protect him from the virus.⁶² More recently

still, in January 2021, at the beginning of the third lockdown, they discovered that the same thing had happened to the Wilmington Long Man.⁶³ Both of these amendments to the figures were made by anonymous craftsmen under the cover of darkness, protecting themselves from censorious official responses from the National Trust and local police forces who regarded their actions as nothing less than the egregious defacement of protected landscapes. What these official responses failed to grasp is that these actions were, in fact, close to the spirit of Ravilious's popular paintings which have helped to shape our view of the chalk figures. Far from defacing these landscapes, these modern additions illustrate how, at a point when the outside world again seemed threatening, and feelings of belonging and togetherness were paradoxically harder to achieve and more necessary than ever, the enduring magic and history of these sites continues to suggest them as spaces in which national anxieties can be articulated, shared, and – even if only in images – conquered.

¹ H. J. Massingham, *English Downland* (London: Batsford, 1936), 43.

² *Ibid.*, 51.

³ Alex Potts, "'Constable Country' Between the Wars." *Patriotism: the Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, ed. Raphael Samuel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 162.

⁴ Jay Winter, "British National Identity and the First World War." *The Boundaries of the State in Modern Britain*, ed. S. J. D. Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 265.

⁵ Sue Malvern, *Modern Art, Britain and the Great War: Witnessing, Testimony and Remembrance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 155.

⁶ Winter, *British National Identity*, 264; Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit: 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 50.

⁷ Alan Powers, *Eric Ravilious: Artist & Designer* (London: Lund Humphries, 2013), 193.

⁸ Noel Carrington, "Eric Ravilious." *Graphis*, vol. 2, no. 16 (1946), 432.

⁹ Freda Constable, *The England of Eric Ravilious* (London: Lund Humphries, 2003), 15.

¹⁰ Friend, Andy. *Ravilious & Co.: The Pattern of Friendship* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), 255.

¹¹ Binyon, *Memoir of an Artist*, 43.

¹² Alexandra Harris. *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames & Hudson), 2015.

¹³ Stanley Baldwin. Speech given to the Royal Society of St. George, May 6th 1924. In: Stanley Baldwin. *On England: And Other Addresses* (London: Penguin), 1937, 7.

¹⁴ Weiner, *Decline of The Industrial Spirit*, 5-6.

¹⁵ Frank Trentmann, "Civilization and Its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism in Twentieth-Century Western Culture." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 29, no. 4 (1994), 587, 593.

¹⁶ Massingham, *English Downland*, 7-8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸ James Russell, *Ravilious in Pictures: Sussex and the Downs* (Norwich: The Mainstone Press, 2009), 36.

¹⁹ Powers, *Artist and Designer*, 40.

²⁰ Binyon, *Memoir of an Artist*, 24.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

²² *Ibid.*, 21; Powers, *Artist and Designer*, 13.

²³ Helen Binyon and Richard Morphet, *Eric Ravilious: Memoir of an Artist* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1983), 10.

²⁴ Paul Nash, "Surrealism and the Illustrated Book." *Signature* no. 5, March (1937), 131.

²⁵ Harris, *Romantic Moderns*, 206.

²⁶ Herbert Read. "English Water-Colours and Continental Oils." *The Listener*, vol. 26, no. 654 (1941), 121.

²⁷ In Friend, *Pattern of Friendship*, 255.

²⁸ Robert Radford, *Art for a Purpose: the Artists' International Association, 1933-1953*, (Winchester: Winchester School of Art Press, 1990), 41.

²⁹ Friend, *Pattern of Friendship*, 256.

³⁰ In Radford, *Art for a Purpose*, 55.

³¹ An approximated finished version based on the recently rediscovered dummy of this book, called *White Horses*, has been produced. An introduction printed on the insert quotes these letters, although Carrington eventually decided he would write the text himself.

³² In Powers, *Artist and Designer*, 53.

³³ H.J. Massingham, *Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum; or, the Giants in England*, (London: Kegan Paul, 1926), 103-4. The most recent investigation into dating the Cerne Abbas giant is currently poised to conclude that the Giant is in fact mediaeval, and not prehistoric, in origin. The Long Man of Wilmington is thought to have been carved in the eighteenth century.

³⁴ H. J. Massingham, *Downland Man* (New York: Doran, 1927), 74.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 240, 267.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 291-292.

³⁸ Massingham, *English Downland*, 40.

³⁹ Paul Nash, “Unseen Landscapes.” *Country Life*, May 1938, 526.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Massingham, *Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum*, 109.

⁴² Nash, *Unseen Landscapes*, 526.

⁴³ Powers, *Artist and Designer*, 120.

⁴⁴ James Russell. *Ravilious in Pictures: Sussex and the Downs* (Norwich: The Mainstone Press, 2009), 42.

⁴⁵ Massingham, *Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum*, 112.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Russell, *Ravilious in Pictures*, 40.

⁴⁸ Massingham, *English Downland*, 88-91.

⁴⁹ Powers, *Artist and Designer*, 121.

⁵⁰ Harris, *Romantic Moderns*, 214.

⁵¹ Russell, *Ravilious in Pictures*, 46.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Letter from Christine Nash to Eric Ravilious, November 1937. Private collection.

⁵⁴ Massingham, *Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum*, 68.

⁵⁵ Alan Krell, *Devil's Rope: a Cultural History of Barbed Wire*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 102.

⁵⁶ Cyril Connolly, 'The New Medici', *Architectural Review*, July 1934, 262.

⁵⁷ Massingham, *Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum*, 66.

⁵⁸ Binyon, *Memoir of an Artist*, 98.

⁵⁹ In Powers, *Imagined Realities*, 60.

⁶⁰ Potts, *Constable Country*, 162.

⁶¹ Max Porter, *Lanny* (London: Faber & Faber, 2020), 96-7.

⁶² “Coronavirus: Cerne Abbas Giant given Face Mask Makeover.” *BBC News*, BBC, 25 Apr. 2020, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-dorset-52427165.

⁶³ “Long Man of Wilmington Carving given Face Mask Makeover.” *BBC News*, BBC, 29 Jan. 2021, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-55861345.