



Viewpoint

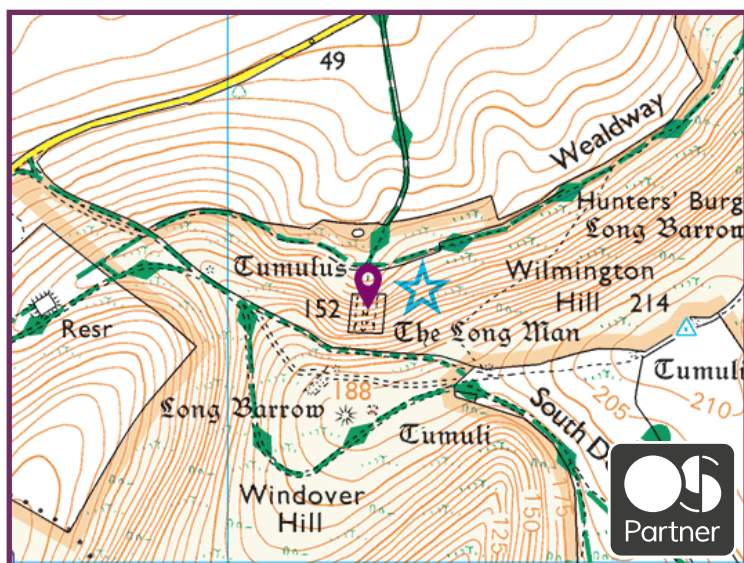
A tall story



Time: 15 mins

Region: South East England

Landscape: rural



Location: Long Man of Wilmington, Windover Hill, Wilmington, East Sussex BN26 5SW

Grid reference: TQ 54255 03458

Parking: Use the free (but height restricted) car park beside Wilmington Priory (grid ref: TQ 54330 04189)

Keep an eye out for: 'Extras' – things campaigners and pranksters have added to the figure include flashing lights, pigtails, a baseball cap and Y-fronts!

Keeping watch over the South Downs, the Long Man of Wilmington is one of Britain's most mysterious residents. Standing proud with a stave (stick) in each hand, he is supported by grassy hills and shrouded in myths and folklore.

The Long Man is one of over 50 hill figures in Britain, many of which depict white horses. At 226 feet tall the Long Man is the largest 'human', some 46 feet taller than the Cerne Abbas Giant in Dorset. Though Britain's hill figures vary in size and shape, most of them appear in the southern counties of England - especially Dorset, Wiltshire, Hampshire and Sussex.

Why do so many hill figures live in southern England?



To begin look at the Long Man's shape. His name comes from his stretched body which appears in proportion when seen from below.

Now take in the landscape around him, a grassy slope with very few trees. This slope, Windover Hill, is typical chalk downland.

The Long Man's home is part of the South Downs chalk ridge that rolls gently through Hampshire and Sussex. Though they look tranquil today the Downs have dramatic origins.

The chalk formed around 130 million years ago when the land here was under a warm tropical sea. Chalk is made from the compressed skeletons of ancient sea creatures, which give the rock its white colour.

Around 25 million years ago the chalk was transformed. Massive movements inside the Earth lifted and folded huge areas of land into wave-like peaked shapes. This process formed the mountains of the Alps. In Britain this process one created the North and South Downs, two chalk ridges with a steep cliff on one side and a gentle slope ('down') on the other.

Windover Hill's chalk slope helps to make the Long Man visible. The land's other natural properties help as well. Chalk is soft and porous which means water easily drains through it. This produces soil that is too thin and dry for large trees. But it can be cut back with basic hand tools to reveal the rock underneath.

As a result hill figures have appeared throughout the chalky regions of Southern England since at least the Bronze Age (between 1200 and 700 BC). The Long Man's age and mysterious origins are keenly debated but one thing is certain – like so many of us he is a product of his environment.

Set in stone

From his location and white outline, you would guess the Long Man is made of chalk. Instead the figure we can see today is a series of painted concrete blocks. But why?

Chalk figures need constant maintenance or they soon vanish. Grass and vegetation quickly grow back and keeping figures visible takes a lot of time and physical effort. Around 35 have been lost to nature.

Also look carefully at the grass around the Long Man; can you see slight horizontal ripples? These are 'terraces' made by soil moving downhill, a bit like raindrops running down a window pane. This 'soil creep' occurs naturally through gravity and weathering but speeds up when soil is disturbed, such as by grazing sheep or burrowing earthworms.

So in 1969 the Long Man was preserved in concrete to prevent soil covering his bones and worms eating his flesh.