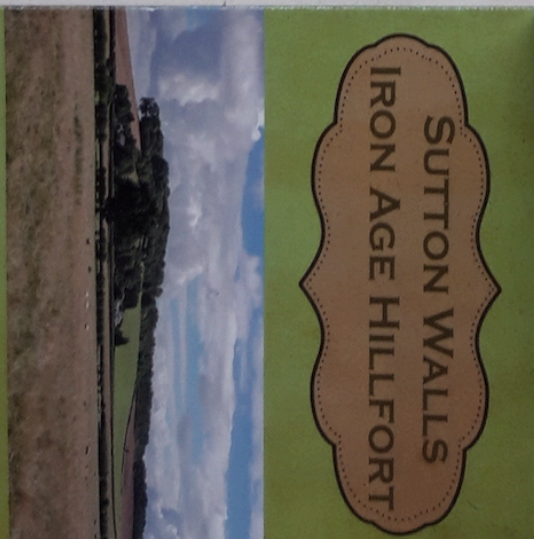


**HISTORICAL WALKING TRAIL**  
 Transport yourself back in time to explore life on Sutton Walls in Iron Age Herefordshire.

Managed by The Sutton Walls Conservation Group



# SUTTON WALLS IRON AGE HILLFORT

**Location**  
 Nearest postcode HR1 3AV. Takes you to Sutton St. Michael Church (marked on map)  
 OS Explorer Map 202 at grid reference S0525464, or co-ordinates 52.113869, -2.695070  
 No on-site parking but parking available at Sutton St Nicholas village hall or the Golden Cross Inn in Sutton (please ask the publican's permission) and at Marden Parish Church or Marden Village Hall (upper car park). Visitors park their vehicles at their own risk.  
 Unfortunately, there are no on-site facilities.

**Further Reading and Watching**

- The Sutton Walls Conservation Group: [www.suttonwalls.co.uk](http://www.suttonwalls.co.uk)
- Keith Ray: *The Archaeology of Herefordshire: An Exploration* (2015)
- George Children & George Nash: *Prehistoric Sites of Herefordshire* (1994)
- Kathleen Kenyon: *Excavations at Sutton Walls, Herefordshire, 1948-1951* (1953)
- Lock, G. & Ralston, I. 2017. *Atlas of hillforts of Britain and Ireland* [ONLINE]. Available at: <https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk>
- Time Team, Season 17, Episode 12: *Commanding Heights: Dinmore Hill, Herefordshire* (2010)
- Time Team, Season 7, Episode 10: *In Search of the Palace of King Offa, Sutton St. Nicholas, Herefordshire* (2000)

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Today, except for a few walkers and a single field of crops, Sutton Walls stands deserted above the villages of Sutton St. Nicholas and Marden. However, it has not always been such a serene and peaceful place. This walking trail will take you back to Sutton Walls 2500 years ago, to an Iron Age Herefordshire full of hillforts, farmsteads and to a thriving agricultural community.

**1 The First Settlers**  
 As you climb the gentle slope towards the hillfort, you are maybe walking a similar path to that taken by the Iron Age inhabitants of the area. Sutton Walls' large hill with a commanding position above a meander of the Lugg, surrounded by fertile land and rich natural resources, prompted people to live and build on the hilltop. Would you have chosen to build your home here?

**2 Building the Ramparts**  
 Having occupied the site for a considerable period of time, the inhabitants exercised a huge amount of strength and manual skill to construct the ramparts that stand before you now which would have been even more impressive then. The construction process consisted of levelling off the bottom of the hill below the ramparts. Then the waste material, as well as material from wide scoops dug out from the hilltop, were used to raise the ramparts above the crest of the hill on top of which a wooden palisade would have been constructed. Unfortunately, due to erosion, the ramparts no longer tower as high as they used to. Despite this, can you imagine using Sutton Walls as a place of defence and refuge in times of unrest?

**5 Homes on the Hilltop**  
 On this modern concrete slab, you are now inside the hillfort. It would have looked very different during the Iron Age as quarrying for gravel and subsequent landfill activities during the 20th century have scarred the hilltop. During the Iron Age the ramparts would have been a formidable structure rising above the hilltop with the only entrances or exits at the east and west ends. The large scoops around the perimeter of the enclosure from the construction process would have provided an area of shelter from the elements. It is in these hollows that the Sutton Walls people built their wattle and daub roundhouses.

**6 Iron Age Industry**  
 Where you just reached the west entrance to the hillfort, you have Dame Kathleen Kenyon, a leading British archaeologist who also excavated at Jericho, conducted excavations between 1948 and 1951. Her work revealed that the people at Sutton Walls were relatively affluent for the standards of the day thanks to the presence of several industries in operation at the camp. Can you work out which industries she discovered from the photos of two of her finds below?



CC: Hereford Museum & Art Gallery

**A** This is an iron anvil and it's one of the largest and finest Iron Age iron objects to be found in Britain. These ancient tools are still used today as a surface to work metal objects. This anvil, along with the discovery of a considerable amount of iron slag, is evidence for a productive iron smelting industry at Sutton Walls.

**B** These are fragments of Iron Age clay loom weights which were hung from the vertical thread on a weaving loom to keep it taut. They signify the presence of a textile industry at Sutton Walls.

**7 The Mystery of the Skeletons**  
 Near where you are currently stood Kathleen Kenyon excavated part of the ditch surrounding the ramparts at the west entrance. It revealed this part had been hurriedly recut to strengthen fortifications around the time of the advancement of Roman power into the area (early 1st century). Within the ditch she made a mysterious discovery of 24 skeletons which showed evidence of physical injury and decapitation. Kenyon believed them to be the bodies of native defenders of the hillfort defeated by the Romans. However, recent research has revealed they are likely to date much later than this making their identity once again a mystery. Could it be they are linked to the legend of King Offa and Ethelbert (9) and Marden Church which lies in the valley below? Nevertheless, even if the Romans didn't attack Sutton Walls, its people did have to accept Roman rule. This is evident as many Roman objects have been found at the camp including pottery and brooches. What would you have done faced with the expansion of Roman rule into your area?



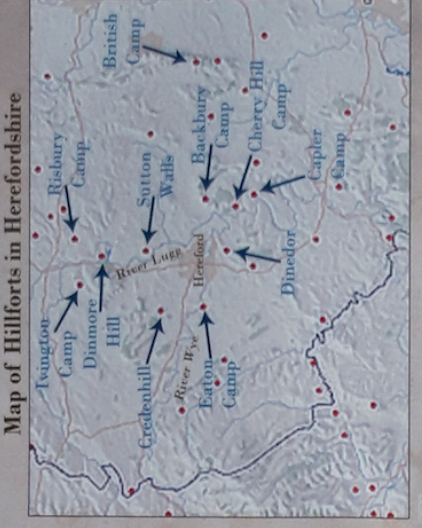
Romano-British iron sickle with socket for a wooden handle used for harvesting grain crops or cutting vegetation.

CC: Hereford Museum & Art Gallery

**3 To See and Be Seen**  
 Looking out across the valley (on a clear day!) you can see all the way to the Black Mountains. These outstanding views would have provided the Sutton Walls people with an early warning system to prepare for any attacks. What's more is that just as you can see for miles around, Sutton Walls can be seen from miles around in return. This was part of the camp's design and purpose as it enabled the group to mark their territory to display their power to other hillfort groups in the local area and to be clearly visible for communal gatherings.

**4 Farm Life**  
 From here you can see that the land surrounding the camp is predominantly farmland which hasn't changed since the time of the camp's occupation. Grain was sown in the fields outside the hillfort then harvested and brought inside the camp using sickles like the one shown below, found at Sutton Walls. Excavations have also shown that the community was rich in livestock as enormous quantities of sheep, cattle and pig bones were found.

**8 Community Gatherings**  
 Looking North from the edge of the tree line you can see Dinmore Hill and the map below shows you this is not the only hillfort place by. These hillforts were most likely used as meeting places for local Iron Age groups including the people of Sutton Walls. Time Team digs at Dinmore revealed subtle construction differences in different sections of the earthwork structure there which would probably be uncovered at Sutton Walls as well. This evidence suggests hillforts were built by separate groups and may have had a similar role in Iron Age life to Stonehenge as sites where communities gathered to perform religious rites, celebrate festivals, to hold markets and for feasting.



Map (without labels) CC: Lock & Ralston

**9 The Legend of King Offa and King Ethelbert**  
 By 300 A.D. the camp was abandoned and consigned to agricultural use. The trail ends here but it may not have been the end of life (and death!) at Sutton Walls. Legend has it that the camp may be the site of a great murder. In A.D. 794 King Offa of Mercia promised his daughter in marriage to King Ethelbert of East Anglia. The wedding was to be at his palace at Sutton. However, his wife convinced him that Ethelbert had intentions to claim Mercia and should be killed. Ethelbert and his entourage arrived at the palace on the eve of his wedding, but his courtiers were immediately murdered, and Ethelbert was beheaded. At his burial site a spring of water allegedly rose up which is the site of St. Ethelbert's Well in Marden Church. His body was later reburied in Hereford where today Hereford Cathedral is dedicated to St. Ethelbert as well as to the Virgin Mary. Could the mysterious skeletons discovered by Kenyon at the west end date to around this time, and could they be Ethelbert's entourage? What do you believe went on here just over a thousand years ago?

**The Sutton Walls Conservation Group**  
 The Sutton Walls Conservation Group was set up in 2017 in response to a request from Historic England for volunteers from Sutton St Nicholas and Marden to start a community group to try and raise awareness of the plight of this scheduled ancient monument through the creation of a Conservation Management Plan. We are a group of like-minded local volunteers who want to see this historic hillfort preserved for future generations and removed from the Heritage At Risk Register. Follow our work at [www.suttonwalls.co.uk](http://www.suttonwalls.co.uk) or our Facebook page [Sutton Walls Conservation Group](https://www.facebook.com/suttonwalls). Want to get involved? Contact us via our Facebook or email [suttonwallsiscg@gmail.com](mailto:suttonwallsiscg@gmail.com)