

Sutton Walls Camp awarded Historic England Grant

Sutton Walls Conservation Group is delighted to announce Historic England has awarded the Group a repair grant of £12,660 to help towards saving this important Iron Age hilltop settlement, which could also be associated with the Saxon King Offa of Mercia and a macabre story of a royal murder.

For twelve years, Sutton Walls Camp has been assessed by Historic England as 'At Risk' due to its chequered history as a landfill site and the lack of sustainable habitat management which is affecting the significance and public enjoyment of the Scheduled Monument.

Sitting quietly atop the hill between Marden and Sutton St Nicholas just four miles north of Hereford, the Walls are one of the most famous Iron Age hillforts in Britain. Huge earth ramparts erected by local Iron Age populations to defend their hilltop settlements are common across Herefordshire and the 'landscapes of power' of the Welsh Marches. A quick look at Sutton however, uncommonly reveals just one large bank, a single rampart forming a ring of steel.

Since its excavation by Dame Kathleen Kenyon between 1948 and 1951 Sutton Walls has appeared in nearly every book on the late prehistory of Britain. Her excavations revealed 500 years of permanent settlement, with foundations of roundhouses, corn-drying ovens, cooking hearths, and burials dating from around the 2nd century BC before the native Iron Age populations were 'Romanised' by the incoming administration and military control, all the way through until the end of the 3rd century AD when Rome retreated from Britain. It is Kenyon's most extraordinary find which presents a modern-day conundrum. At the West entrance was a large pit containing a 'war cemetery' of twenty-four skeletons, many decapitated. Kathleen Kenyon believed them to be the bodies of native defenders of the hillfort defeated by the Romans. They were naked and stripped of any items that could date their demise, so archaeologists now are questioning whether they may be Saxon, possibly the entourage of King Ethelbert, the East Anglian king who was treacherously murdered by Offa at his court of 'Southtown' or Sutton.

Sadly, the hillfort has suffered over the years. During the 1940s the sand and gravel capping across half the hill was quarried, and this area since used for landfill until 1985. It is now largely at risk from general deterioration, unmanaged scrub and trees which along with an increase in burrowing animals, is disturbing the remaining archaeological layers, along with limiting ground cover that knits and stabilises the steep slopes of the ramparts and entrances. This is altering the significance of the monument and urgent action is needed to turn the management of the site and its valuable habitats around to conserve and enhance the monument's condition.

Sutton Walls Conservation Group was set up in 2017 to conserve and manage the site.

The heritage at risk grant of £12,660 from Historic England has enabled the group to commission surveys to help detail the conservation management planned for the monument. Ecological survey by Worcestershire company Swift Ecology will monitor and record the habits of bat and badger populations over the seasons, mapping significant older trees and informing how the site is managed. Herefordshire Archaeology will provide an accurate digitised map of the site to show the archaeology and other visible human-made and natural features. Hereford-based geophysics specialists TigerGeo are tracking some of the arable land in and around the Walls with magnetometry, which will yield more detail of what survives unexcavated within the hillfort and characterises some of the features outside the entrances to the Scheduled Monument. Chair of the Group, Anna Toon, commented:

‘Sutton Walls Conservation Group is very grateful for the support of local landowners who are enabling this grant from Historic England to generate information and excitement around the first phase in this community conservation project. We cannot wait for the results!’.

Heritage At Risk Project officer Jez Bretherton said that ‘the Group’s proposals were warmly welcomed by Historic England’s Midlands Team, We are happy to grant aid carefully-planned conservation of this site, whilst helping the Group engage the interest of local and wider communities to tell the story of this fascinating Scheduled Monument.’

Historic England gives grants for the repair and conservation of listed buildings, scheduled monuments and registered parks and gardens. This includes project development actions which enable repair or improved future management. Our Heritage at Risk programme helps protect and manage the historic environment. The public body works with owners, friends groups, developers and other stakeholders to find solutions for ‘at risk’ historic places and sites across England.

For more information, to become a Friend or to get involved as a volunteer in the future when Covid restrictions allow please contact:

Jane Keating – Secretary to Sutton Walls Conservation Group

suttonwallscg@gmail.com