

News

Attention: Immediate
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In sleet, hail and high wind, community spirit shines through at hillfort hug



Images from the Hillfort Hug 2017 and Hearts Around the Hillfort event at Old Oswestry hillfort. Credits as captioned.

While many of us were huddled around the fire, hardy supporters of heritage and greenspace scaled the ramparts of Old Oswestry in the bitter February cold for the annual hillfort hug.

On Sunday 12 February, over 350 people braved sleet, hail and biting wind to congregate on the Welsh Marches hillfort in a display of community affection ahead of Valentine's Day. It was the third hug to be organised by the HOOOH Community Group which is facilitating community engagement in Old Oswestry's preservation, discovery and promotion, and opposes the allocation of neighbouring land for 117 houses.

The assembled crowd formed a heart shape on the slopes while a drone whirred above to capture the scene. Many then joined in a human chain on the top of the 3,000-year-old earthwork, known as the Stonehenge of the Iron Age.

Hug organiser, HOOOH, had also encircled the hillfort's huge plateau with a 1 kilometre-long bunting with over 850 hearts. Each one carried a message in tribute to the hillfort and green heritage donated from every part of the community, including schools, shops, businesses, groups and care home residents. Despite the cold, many people spent time reading the heartfelt messages as the drone swept overhead to record yet another landmark gathering on this much loved fort.

A number of Oswestry town councillors attended, including the Mayor Paul Milner. They were clearly impressed by the show of support from the local community despite the weather.

Huggers travelled from as far away as Tyneside, South Wales, London and Wiltshire, among them a number of high profile figures from the heritage world. Dr Mike Heyworth, director of the Council for British Archaeology, attended having visited previously in 2015 to highlight his concerns over housing development within the hillfort's landscape. After the hug he tweeted: "Great to join everyone at Old Oswestry to hug the hillfort - huge turnout around the ramparts."

Leading lights from the Stonehenge Alliance action group, Dr Kate Fielden and Kate Freeman, were also present and addressed the crowd. They offered words of support and admiration for the event, as well as drawing parallels with their campaign against the planned A303 tunnel through Stonehenge's iconic landscape.

The hug was preceded the day before by a seminar exploring the archaeology and wildlife of Old Oswestry, the third to be staged by HOOOH. Experts talked about the diverse value of the hillfort, from its archaeological interest to the hundreds of species of flora and fauna, some rare and at risk, that it sustains.

In a new initiative, volunteers coordinated by HOOOH are helping with the hillfort's landscape maintenance working with the monument's guardian, English Heritage. They recently took part in a session of vegetation clearance around the ponds within the hollows at the western entrance. More volunteers are being sought for the ongoing programme which aims to protect the hillfort's heritage fabric while enhancing its ecology. Anyone interested in helping should contact Neil Phillips on 07751 160576.

HOOOH is due to launch a series of activities offering people the opportunity to discover more about the hillfort's wildlife under the banner 'Hillfort Watch'.

The group is also developing the concept of the Oswestry Heritage Gateway north of the town. This would demarcate a landscape rich in history stretching from Brogyntyn Park in the west, through Old Oswestry, the Cambrian Heritage Railway and Park Hall military camp, to Whittington's hillfort and castle in the east. HOOOH says that this could provide a green zone and significant economic stimulus for heritage tourism within the area.

Since 2012, thousands of residents on the Welsh/Shropshire border have been opposing plans for a housing estate that could trigger the urban enclosure of this nationally important Iron Age site.

HOOOH heritage adviser and campaigner, Dr George Nash, said: "This is a battle that we cannot afford to lose. This and preceding hugs send a clear message to the powers that be. In spite of Shropshire Council's decision to allocate neighbouring land for housing, the local community continues to fight for the right to keep this part of the landscape clear of urbanisation."

ENDS

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