

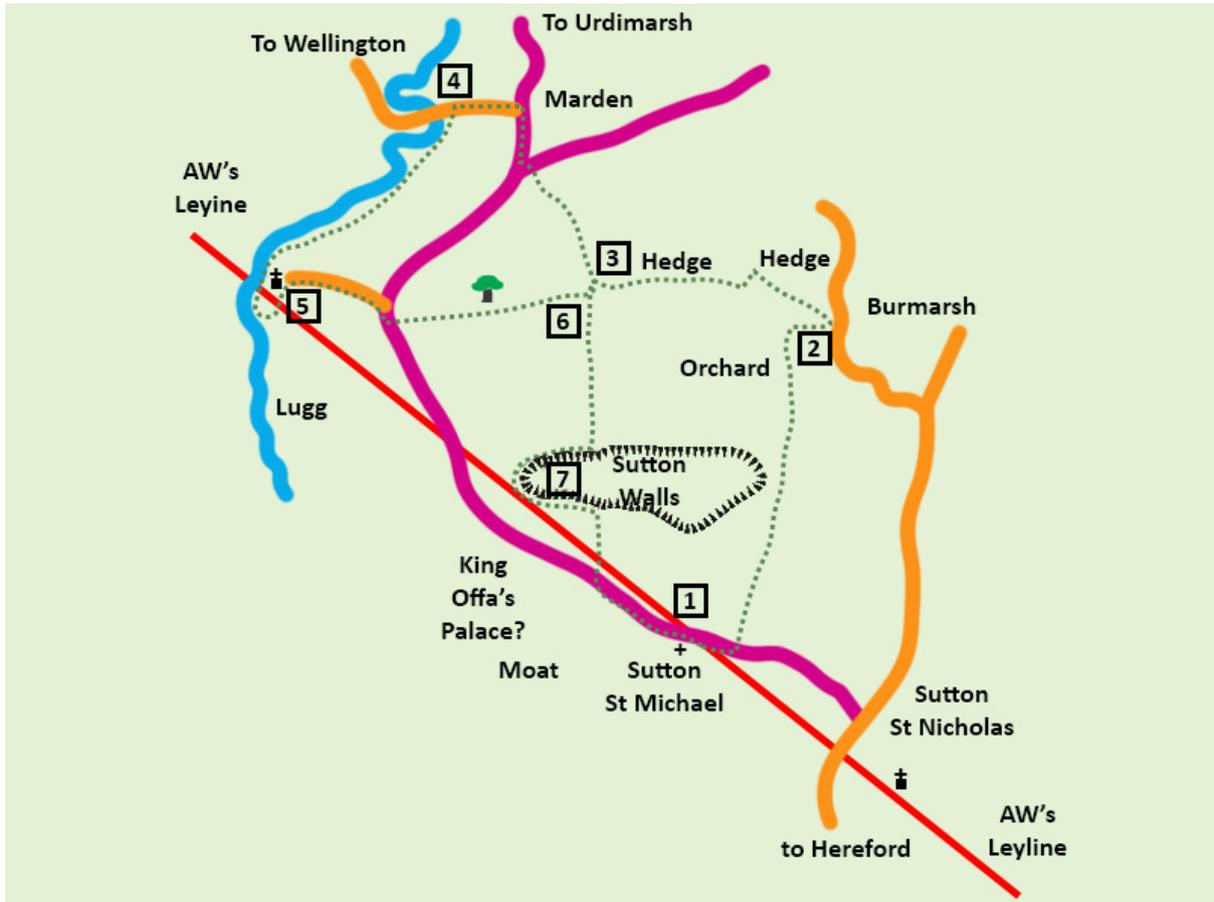
Walking with Alfred Watkins

Walk Five - Sutton St. Michael and Marden

- 4.75 mile easy walk. Five stiles. Easy terrain
- Easily attained views. Two villages, ley lines and a significant historical site
- OS Map - Leominster and Bromyard (Explorer 202)

The Route

1. Sutton St Michael Church. HR1 3AY. With your back to the notice board, TR. After about 225m, TL across road, up wide bridle path at Ordis Farm. Go up 350m, and where the bridle path swings right, keep ahead through gate, now up footpath. Crest the L edge of crop field and skirt Sutton Walls. (Great views back to Woolhope Dome (Seager Hill), around to The Malverns and Titterstone Clee Hill.) Go down through gap in hedge. Keep ahead in orchard, following telegraph line, along aggregate track. Follow track around to R, to point level with stone & brick house, 30m before the road (at Burmarsh.)
2. Marker post. TL through gap between trees to follow R edge of scrubby field behind gardens. TL, with hedge R, and pass a line of trees over to your L, along hedge to corner. TL, with hedge R, back towards orchard. TR at corner and follow hedge (R) until you reach, and pass through a k-gate. Cross field, via oak, to next k-gate at cross paths (under tree).
3. and 6. Kissing gate at cross paths. Don't go through gate. TR to put field edge on your L, through two gates, over brook, gate and stile to road in Marden, opposite Quylene. TL to road junction. TR as if for Urdimmarsh, to next junction. TL as if for Wellington. Follow road down to bridge.
4. Laystone Bridge. TL through k-gate on near side of bridge to follow footpath downstream, via paddock, top L bank of pasture, stile, big pasture and two stiles at riverside, to churchyard.
5. St Mary the Virgin Church, Marden. Circle the bell tower and church anti-clockwise. (Alternative possible site of Offa's palace just a little right on south side of church.) Go up drive past the Old Vicarage, grid, along lane by Marden Court Farm to junction. TR along road for 100m. TL across road. Follow bridle path, R of dead tree, along L edge of arable field to k-gate.
6. and 3. Back at cross-paths, again-do not go through gate. TR to follow L edge, over stile, up to wooded hill. Cross stile into wood, go forward and TR. Now follow path anti-clockwise just below ramparts. About 50 metres before corner and obvious right angle which will take you left, drop down narrow path (right) under trees to edge of wood and see the alignment of Marden and Wellington churches to the corner up to your left. Return to main path. Continue line to
7. Sutton Walls. "Alfred Watkins's" hill notch in south-western corner of vallum. Carry on from this point, until you reach the wide cross path. TR down it, becoming surfaced, to the road between Downfield and Freens Ley. TL, go very carefully along road to start point.



King Offa's Herefordshire palace, on a ley line

In the chapter of his seminal book *The Old Straight Track* called "Confirmation", Alfred Watkins notes that "Working on the track and following up a ley often leads to disappointments, but vivid and strange bits of coincidence and verification are so frequent, and so convincing in their logical sequence, that it seems necessary to quote a few."

"During my researches I stood in a gap (hill notch) in the south-west corner of Sutton Walls, and noted that Marden and Wellington Church towers were in alignment to it, and continuing the ley on the spot to the south-east by sighting rods, they sighted to the highest wooded point in the Woolhope range – probably Seager Hill. I marked this on the six-inch map at the time, and found it went through Weston Beggard Church."

We can have a good look at the ley line that Alfred describes as the notch to which he refers is on the route of this easy walk with surprising views.

More than a year after his determination of the ley, Watkins further explains that "the owner of Sutton Walls - Mr Joseph Quarrel - came to me in the corn market (November 19th, 1924) to say that he had just seen from the foot of the hill looking up a newly ploughed field, the ancient road as a dark mark going up to the end mounds. I went the next morning, and Mr Quarrel sent with me a lad who had seen it with him, and who pointed out how it went exactly to the above-named gap, and also that it came down to a certain oak tree on the road. By this time the harrow had obliterated three parts of the indication, but the dark mark, still to be seen at the top, confirmed the accuracy of the information, and the ploughman at work harrowing on the field had also noticed the dark line. The track was thus seen by these three, not knowing anything of my work, was precisely on the ley which I had previously marked on the map from sighting over the two churches. It was a vivid confirmation, and another instance of a track coming to the edge of a camp."

Having identified an old straight track in these parts with the usual painstaking research, Alfred would have been boosted even further by the knowledge of a significant journey made along it some eleven hundred years before; although, knowing Alfred, he probably did know already!

It was actually in 794 that Ethelbert II, King of East Anglia, set out to court and claim the lady to whom he was betrothed - Alfthrytha, the daughter of Offa, king of Mercia. After the full entourage broke its journey at Backbury Hill, about two miles from Seager Hill, he pressed on for Sutton Walls.

Waiting on the upper balcony of Offa's Palace, the princess watched as Ethelbert and his retinue approached and made some admiring comments about his comely appearance. It was the eve of their intended wedding and Ethelbert was duly invited into the palace; as he stepped into the great hall, the doors slammed shut behind him and he was wrestled to the ground. Thereupon, one of Offa's trusted henchmen, a noble called Winebert, stepped forward and cut off his head. Ethelbert's body was then dumped in reeds on the left bank of the River Lugg.

Offa, eventually seized by remorse, travelled to Rome to ask Pope Adrian what he should do to atone for the crime. The pope advised him to build a place of worship where Ethelbert was buried, dedicate it to the Virgin Mary - and make sure it was situated one mile northwest of his palace. So it is that Marden Church now occupies the riverbank.

For a long time, the site of Offa's palace was thought to lie within Sutton Walls; however, work carried out by Herefordshire Archaeology points us instead in a slightly different direction. The newer possibility is just west of Sutton St Michael Church, an area which includes the pool seen from the southern fringe of Sutton Walls. Another suggestion places the palace just west of the church at Marden.

For those who invest Alfred's Old Straight Tracks with a mysticism and a foreboding, it's enticing to know that whichever site you choose for Offa's fateful palace and the foul deed, it is perilously close to Alfred's ley line.