An alternative family Christmas event at Butser Ancient Farm!

Tuesday 8 November, 2022

Butser's magical experimental archaeology site is opening to the public this winter, honouring nature and introducing a festive twist in their new family trail

Butser Ancient Farm is opening to the public this Christmas and inviting families to slow down, reconnect with nature and explore the ancient folklore of winter.

As an alternative to the traditional Father Christmas experience, Butser's Ancient Winter Magical Adventure is honouring the balance of the masculine and feminine energies as the season turns. They are inviting The Deer Queen and Holly King into their magical, ancient houses to greet families and help them celebrate the turning of the year. Visitors can expect a hint of magic, a taste of the old, make and take crafts, a magical trail, mulled drinks, and sweet treats.

The Deer Queen will be summoning back the light in The Horton House, Butser's reconstruction of an excavated Neolithic building dating to 3800-3600 BC. The addition of a feminine character to the festivities is a nod to the idea of the rebirth of the sun at midwinter. Science tells us that our beloved Rudolph is actually female, as in fact all of Santa's antler-laden reindeers are. Males drop their antlers in November, leaving them without antlers until the following spring, while females keep their antlers through the winter ready to protect their calves in the spring. Since the Stone Age the deer was honoured. Her image was painted on cave walls, antlers adorned shrines and were buried in ceremonial graves. Deers were etched in stone, turned into head-dresses, and even tattooed onto skin. In ancient and modern folklore her antlers were frequently depicted as the tree of life, carrying animals, the sun, moon, and stars. Butser's Winter Adventurers will be able to meet the Deer Queen and make a special gift to bring back the light.

The Holly King is the personification of winter in various folklore and mythological traditions. He battles endlessly with The Oak King of Summer, reflecting the seasonal cycles of solar light and dark, crop renewal and growth. The Holly King regains power at the Autumn equinox, peaking during Midwinter. Our trail goers can meet him in our Saxon House. Our second Anglo Saxon building was finished earlier this year and is based on the foundations uncovered during excavations close to our nearby village of Chalton. We believe the house originally stood somewhere around 700AD.

Despite its humble beginnings as a research site 50 years ago, Butser Ancient Farm has become one of the South East's top visitor attractions welcoming over 50,000 visitors a year including over 30,000 schoolchildren who learn about the lives of our ancient ancestors from the Stone Age through to the Anglo-Saxon periods. As a not-for-profit, independently run Community Interest Company we rely on the support of many organisations and individuals, as well as our own fundraising events, to make our research and education work possible.

Therese Kearns, Experimental Archaeologist at Butser Ancient Farm said:

"The importance of the winter sun is a recurring theme in British prehistory, manifested in the many sites with clear evidence of celebration at this time of year. The building of massive monuments such as Newgrange in Ireland and Stonehenge in Britain demonstrates the importance of marking this time of year which would have been crucial for early farmers."

Kristin Devey, Events coordinator at Butser Ancient Farm said:

"We are delighted to be able to open the farm to the public this Christmas, so more people can experience the wonder of Butser at this special time of year. Families will be able to take away knowledge of the folklore of Winter, as well as some lovely crafts and magical memories.

"The addition of a Deer Queen to our activities this year is an important balance to the Holly King tradition. Although it is impossible to know exactly how ancients celebrated the feminine as Winter reached its peak, we know that the Venerable Bede wrote in 725 AD about 'Modraniht', or the Night of the Mothers. Some scholars believe it was an Anglo-Saxon festival that took place on the eve of Winter Solstice, or Christmas Eve. Representing the balance between the feminine and masculine, with our powerful Deer Queen and Holly King, is an exciting twist. They will enthral children and adults alike!"

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The trail is running from 10am to 3pm on Saturday 3rd and Sunday 4th December 2022, then again on Saturday 17th and Sunday 18th December 2022.

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