

The upgrade to the West Highland Way at Keilator, Glen Falloch

Description



Keilator Farm with the “upgraded” section of the West Highland Way behind it visible as a scar across the landscape

In March there was quite a debate on Facebook – 130 comments – about work that had recently been completed on a 1km section of the West Highland Way by Keilator Farm in Glen Falloch just before it reaches Crianlarich ([see here](#)). To their credit Gordon Baillie Contracting Ltd have not tried to remove any of the comments which are worth reading. Views ranged from those who welcomed the work as making the path easier to walk to those who saw it as a desecration of the landscape and a suburbanisation of the outdoor walking experience.



Part of the section of path that has now been upgraded showing how it looked in September 2012.

The West Highland Way by Keilator follows the line of the old military road above a wall which has a very fine topping of *Rhacometrrium* or woolly hair moss. Back in 2012 it offered uneven but not particularly difficult walking.

The pathwork was funded by the release of £50k capital funding from Scottish Natural Heritage but appears to have come through the Rural Payment scheme and was overseen by staff from the Loch Loch and Trossachs National Park Authority. Generally there is far too little investment in the West Highland Way, despite it being promoted as one of Scotland's great tourist attractions, so if money was available and this section of the Way had deteriorated significantly since 2012 in principle staff were completely right to grab the opportunity.

In May, Park staff included this in their update report to the Local Access Forum:

West Highland Way

As previously reported, the preparatory stages of a £50k project to upgrade a badly degraded section of the WHW at Keilator Farm, Crianlarich had commenced. Funded by SNH and project-managed by the NPA, the work capitalised on good weather conditions in end-Feb / March and has been completed.

The new path is built to IPA specification using locally sourced material and dressed with a whin-type surface for a good 'landscape-fit' and recreational feel - the path has started to bed-in well and the NPA has received many positive comments.



WHW Keilator – before upgrade
Loch Lomond & The Trossachs Access Forum Meeting
9 May 2019



After

IPA = Improving Public Access, an initiative which is part of the Rural Payments Scheme.

This report didn't explain why the path appears to have degraded so badly since the photo I took in 2012 (I had been subsequently but not taken the photos). From the left hand photo, which shows ATV tracks, and from the comments on Facebook about wading ankle deep through cow shit, some of the deterioration at least appears to have been caused by agricultural use rather than by walkers. There is no mention here of the debate that had taken place on Facebook or of all the critical comments there but possibly staff were unaware of this. I therefore decided to go and take a look for myself at the end of May.



The West Highland Way by Keilator follows the line of the old military road. This photo shows the “unimproved” path just before where the recent work started. Its a fairly rough path but not difficult walking.



The join between the old and the new, the difference in appearance between the two is striking. One can understand how some people thought from the photos on FB that the new section had been finished with tarmac!

Setting aside its appearance, the first I noticed on reaching the new path were the turves which had been dumped on the lower side of the track. That is contrary to standard pathwork good practice. Moreover, while the LLTNPA's requirements are often ignored, a standard condition for all new hydro tracks is that turves should be properly stored and replaced. If the specifications for works under the Improving Public Access scheme allows work of this poor quality its not fit for the purpose.



Note the wheel damage that has already been done to the ground on the left side of the track.

You don't have to walk far to find plenty of places where the turves could have been re-used. Nor to find evidence that the damage that had been done to the West Highland Way by agricultural use appears to be continuing. What's the point of spending public money on repairing paths – this section of the West Highland Way had previously I understand been upgraded using machine tools – unless proper measures are in place to prevent further unnecessary damage and the work is done to appropriate standards?

The wheel damage reminded me of the cows on the other side of the Glen which had three years ago effectively destroyed the green central strips running down the middle of the new hydro tracks.



A little further on the path “upgrade” gets even worse



I have to say that however critical I have been about hydro schemes, I can think of few scars apart from the Conic Hill hydro as bad as this. Prior to the upgrade, there was a bad scar here, but the amount of the scarring appears to have increased as a result of the works and there has been no apparent attempt to restore past damage (the LLTNPA has subsequently informed me that restoration of past damage above the drainage ditch was not in the specification). The upper bank is far too steep. Meanwhile the excavated material has been dumped on the lower side without any apparent attempt at restoration. This doesn't just impact on the walking experience, it has done nothing to address the landscape scar that can be seen from the other side of the Glen (top photo).



One of the great things about this section of the West Highland Way previously was the fine wall that ran alongside it. While much more recent than the military road, somehow it befitted the route, well built and moss covered. Unfortunately the path upgrading work has treated the wall as being of no account or perhaps as a retaining wall which will prevent the rubble eroding further. To use SNH and National Park terminology jargon, the “landscape character” of the wall has been to a great extent destroyed.



None of this damage required planning permission. Under the LLTNPA's best practice guidance on renewables they recommend that benches cut across hillsides should be avoided but this is precisely what they have allowed to remain at Keilator. The LLTNPA urgently needs to set standards for footpath design and work which are appropriate for a National Park.



Surfacing from the path is already eroding away and the standard of finishing around the culverts is as poor as any old bulldozed track. Is this the way to treat the old military road and what is our best known long distance walking route?



Another collapsing culvert which unless addressed is likely to erode back into the path surface in the near future



The ground in this photo could have immediately been restored with turves if they had been kept instead of dumped on the lower side of the path. Instead its likely to take several years to revegetate.

After seeing all this for myself, I sent the LLTNPA access team some photos on 6th June, suggested they go and take a look themselves and come back to me about whether they really believed this was an example of a path bedding in well:

Having visited I would have to say that in my view the quality of the work falls well below what one would expect for a National Park. I am not sure if you have visited the site but first photo shows a very different view to that contained in the update report. The exposed batters, which are too steep to revegetate, are contrary to the Park's guidance on hill roads and can be seen from high up in upper Glen Falloch. Significant amounts of turf, that could have been used to restore some of the batters – had they been angled properly – has been dumped on the downside of the path (photo 2).



I also noted that the track down from the WHW to the farm had been upgraded using the same material and at the same time (photo above). I asked the LTTNPA whether this formed “*any part of the grant agreement or was it arranged and paid for completely separately by the farm?*”

I received an immediate acknowledgement, which was appreciated, but two months later I had had no response so I sent a reminder on 6th August. I have had no acknowledgement or reply.

What needs to happen

Our National Parks should be setting high standards for footpath work and what has happened on the West Highland Way falls far below that. In my view staff, the Local Access Forum and members of the Planning and Access Committee need to visit the site urgently along with staff from SNH and footpath experts with a view to:

- agreeing a programme of remedial action to restore the damage that has been done
- investigating the reasons why this section of the West Highland Way has needed extensive work not that many years after it was last “upgraded”
- consulting with recreational organisations to adopt a clear set of standards for footpath work in the National Park and set up mechanisms to enforce this
- entering into wider debate with recreational organisations about what type of paths are appropriate where and more specifically about whether this type of upgrade is appropriate for the

West Highland Way

I will now be writing to the Convener of the National Park, James Stuart, asking that this is done.

Addendum

In response to comments from Mary, below, there are a couple of photos from Gordon Baillie's contracting page before the work was done and I have chosen one where I have a similar photo – in the post above but which I have now annotated – to show the before and after:



Looking west along West Highland Way to junction with Keilator farm prior to works. Photo credit Gordon Baillie Contracting Ltd



Photo is taken several metres closer to the farm junction than that by Gordon Baillie

I am not disputing the track had been messed up by farm vehicles prior to the works. Indeed the right hand edge of the Gordon Baillie photo shows a section of path above the track and it appears that the deep mud forced walkers off the track eroding the land above. That needed to be fixed. However, the photo clearly shows how an area of ground has been scraped free of turf leaving it bare. That, and the removal of the boulders has increased the area of exposed bank making it more visible.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

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2. landscape
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