

Coilessan Glen – a dismal walk out along the Cowal Way

Description



(Above) View across to Ben Donich and The Brack from Cnoc Coinnich

Last Saturday I took to the hills above Ardgartan to climb The Brack and Cnoc Coinnich, both of which are classed as Corbetts. I had not planned to be on the hills at all that day, but the sight of bright blue sky above early morning mists in the Blane Valley proved irresistible. Armed with an old OS map and a hastily printed route description from the Walkhighlands website – with so much commercial forestry in the area I reckoned extra help in finding a way on to the hills and off at the end of the day would be needed – I set off from Ardgartan visitor centre along a section of forest track forming part of the Cat Craig loop, presumably a cycle route.

The footpath for The Brack is clearly signed where it leaves the forest track and lifted me quickly above the dismal forestry. Like most of the hills around Arrochar, The Brack and Cnoc Coinnich present characterful upper slopes rich in interesting detail while the lower and mid slopes have been stifled under a blanket of dull green conifers. It was an exhilarating day, the fascinating skylines of gnarly summits in all directions marred only by the tide of commercial forestry lapping at their flanks.

(Below) Looking East from Cnoc Coinnich (Glen Douglas far left)

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I had initially considered retracing my steps over The Brack from Coinnich to descend by my route of ascent, but opted in the end to walk out by Coilessan Glen and the Cowal Way, largely out of curiosity to see what had happened to the forestry track “upgrades” condemned by Nick Kempe in his blog of November 2017 ([see here](#)).

I had cause to regret my decision more than once on what must be one of the most dismal walk outs from any hill. It’s nobody’s fault that the Cowal Way, as it cuts across the col between The Brack and Cnoc Coinnich, is a swamp concealed by shaggy long grass. The mess lower down, however, is purely human in origin and shows the ex-Forestry Commission in a very poor light indeed. What must walkers along the Cowal Way think when, having escaped the bog and descended the steep section of waymarked path alongside the trees, they meet the scenes shown in the photographs which follow?



Tastefully designed work in progress at the junction of the Cowal Way with forestry track [Ed. See [he](#) of post for how this appeared in April]

What appears to be a new or newly “upgraded” section of forest track cuts across the Cowal Way path like a motorway bisecting a sheep track. The drainage ditch is bridged by an ad hoc walkway that has already been significantly eroded (to the left in the above photograph, taken from the forest track looking uphill).

Immediately to the left (looking down), a massive culvert indicates the volume of water expected to course down these ravaged slopes in periods of high rainfall or snow melt. There are signs that the boulders screening the pipe won't be in place for too long.



To the right, a bleak view of an industrial highway that seems unlikely to resist erosion in the medium to long term. How do those trees stay in place?



The old Cowal Way path resumes on the far side of the forestry track, but only for a short distance. I noted that, in at least one place, young conifers were growing together across the path and will eventually block the way. This may indicate that most walkers simply take to the forest track at the junction above and few now bother with the original path. This is easy to understand: after a short distance the path rejoins the same track again (*see photograph below*) and from here on the walker has no option but to keep to the track/motorway.



Access to the remnant of old path for walkers approaching from Coilessan – not exactly enticing

Admittedly the upgraded track surface is less hard on the joints than tarmac, but the experience is dismal as you head downhill towards Loch Long. Views are almost non-existent, the track verges are shoddy and the track surface itself appears to be breaking up already

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Looking back to the hills at the junction with yet another track (a cycle route heading left)

The Walkhighlands route description is clearly somewhat out of date but was invaluable at junctions such as the one shown above.



Disintegrating surface finish – one of many examples seen along the way



How long before the verge collapses into the burn?

Eventually I escaped on to another track and from there across a bridge that seemed to be under renovation, eventually reaching a single track road. Two LLTNPA signs informed me that I was in a camping management zone and would need a permit to camp on the shores of the loch on ... what kind of pitch exactly? Peering through the beautiful beech woodland I spied a possible pitch for a small tent (on the right in the picture below) but the rest of the area did not look campable. There may well be suitable ground closer to the Coilessan houses – one of the signs indicated as much but I did not have time to go down to the shore to check – but for the walker coming from Ardgartan this area of woodland is presented as campable. Other than the small green area glimpsed through the trees, your choices are somewhat limited ...





I left the single track road eventually to follow the Ardgartan shore walk, which is also part of the Cowal Way. I could not help thinking that anyone walking this route from the Ardgartan side would think they had struck lucky as they followed the narrow footpath through mature broadleaf woodland by a rushing burn, along the peaceful shores of Loch Long and up on to the pleasantly wooded single track road.

What a shock, then, to cross the bridge at the end of the tarmac road and meet the black highway from hell. At least I was lucky to be walking away from the hills after a great day out. Had I been a long-distance walker committed to the Cowal Way it would have been a very different story.

The Forestry and Land Scotland website promotes a fairytale in which the visitor is promised “*endless trails through an area of vast natural beauty*”. “*The trails offer great views*”, it trumpets, with the forest of Sitka and Norway spruce described as providing “*ideal habitat for red squirrel, roe deer, buzzards, owls*”. The truth is that any views have long since been swallowed up by conifers. As for wildlife, in all the time I spent tramping the forest tracks I saw and heard one robin.

That this corner of the National Park should have been abandoned to commercial forestry interests is not only sad, it is shameful.

I will not be back.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. Forestry and Land Scotland
2. hill tracks
3. landscape
4. LLTNPA
5. paths

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