

**The Mountaineering Council of Scotland
Access & Conservation Committee**

**REPORT
BEINN A'BHEITHIR
CONSTRUCTED PATHS OUT OF GLEANN A' CHAOLAIS
By Mike Newbury**

Beinn a' Bheithir forms a north facing horseshoe round the dense forestry plantations of Gleann a' Chaolais (Glenachulish).

Forestry Commission are planning a re-design of the forest with a more varied, and in places, open structure, permitting easier unmarked access to the ends of the ridge, but they have already formed 2 constructed 'mountain access' paths to take the majority of walkers from the forestry roads up to the forest boundary. The paths were built in winter 2004-2005 with subsequent input in winter/spring 2006. Some repairs are needed which will be contracted out. Basic maintenance will be undertaken by a Forestry Commission team.

The head of Gleann a' Chaolais is split by a prominent horned spur, Sgorr a' Chaolais. The western path follows the main stream on that side, to the FC boundary in the corrie below the saddle west of Sgorr Dhonuill; and the eastern path slants up the slopes of the north spur of Sgorr Dhearg to the boundary in the corrie below the saddle to the west of that peak.

I inspected the paths on 24 October, 2006 in dull conditions followed by heavy rain.

A. The Western Path

Approach

From the FC car park at Glenachulish, follow the main forestry road southwards beside the stream for 1km, then turn steeply up a short link road and continue southwards for 1.5km to where the road crosses the main stream and bends sharply back to left. Here the 'mountain access' path leaves the road. The route along these roads was not signed at time of inspection: I understand this will be done.

The road makes a pleasant walk, with fringes of birch, alder and scrub willow softening the plantation edges (photo A1).

The Path

The start of the path is part aggregate surfaced and part pitched (photo A2). The pitching is well built



Fig. A1



Fig. A2

(though rather step-like) with good foot placements but there is a design fault where it bends round some easy ground (photo A3), encouraging off-path use by downhill walkers, with consequent spillage of aggregate and erosion so that the stones will ‘grow’ as the ground sinks and become useless. A solution might be a blocking stone at the top and some brushwood on the slope.



Fig. A3



Fig. A4

Stone-lined cross-drains (photo A4 & 17) are well-built.

There is a well-designed stile (photo A5) over an internal forestry fence 70m. along the path. A dog gate is needed in the mesh fence which FC have promised to install.



Fig. A5



Fig. A17

A stream at about 130m. along is crossed by stepping-stones; these are green and rounded, and in my opinion, dangerous. (photo A6) They should be replaced by stones fit for purpose. It is easy to step on the gravel adjoining, but only when the water is low. The next stream also has an awkward crossing, involving a bank with a choice of sloping rock ledges or muddy pockets.



Fig. A6



Fig. A7



Fig. A8

The next section of path is well contained by turf and boulders (photo A7), but where it rises, the surface material is flowing over inadequate anchor-bars (photo A8). There is a short section following the top of an eroding slope where the blocks of stone look unstable in the long term and the sharp crest above is undermined and discharging material on to the path (photo A9).



Fig. A9

A pleasant level section through larch trees follows (photo A10) and through open ground (photo A11), but where it rises there is movement of surface material flowing over anchor-bars, with loss of fines, and cobble stones appearing (photo A12).



Fig. A10



Fig. A11

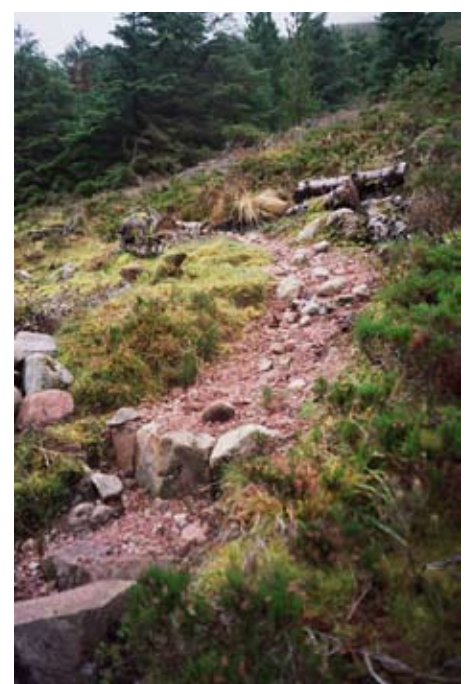


Fig. A12



Fig. A13



Fig. A14



Fig. A15

A level section (Photo A13) is also rough, but well contained in deep heather.

Thereafter, the path rises out of the forest on a good line up a slight morainic ridge above the stream. It is partly pitched and partly aggregate surfaced. The pitching has good foot placements and is easy in descent as well as in ascent, but mostly lies within a ribbon of rubble, liable to erosion which could be aggravated by off-path use in descent as the ground here is more open. In my opinion, boulders, groups of large stones, turves etc. should be gathered, to landscape the path, contain path use, and most importantly stabilise the slope (photos A14-16) – but without robbing the adjoining ground! The aggregate sections are not holding well (see photo A16) – more anchor-bars and path containment is needed. Photo A20 shows a general downhill view.

The last section to the boundary fence is unconstructed (photos A18-19). The turf is soggy in wet conditions, and would not take much wear. I consider that it should be monitored and some ditching installed if the turf begins to break up.



Fig. A16

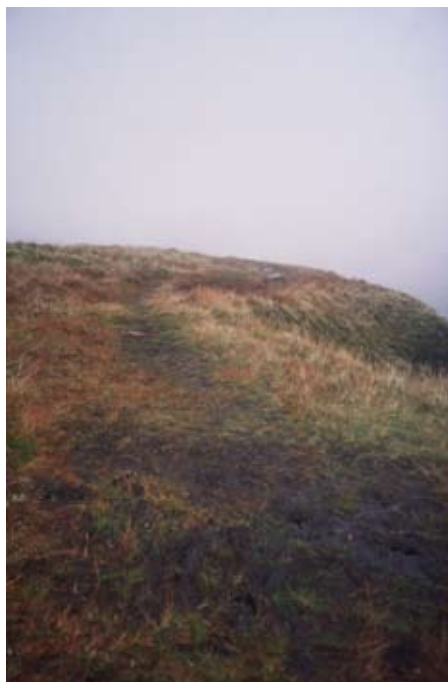


Fig. A18



Fig. A19

In summary, this is a useful path on a good line, but in my opinion, there are some defects in construction which will cause rapid deterioration unless remedied. In particular, the construction does not cope adequately with gradients.



Fig. A20

B. The Eastern Path

Approach

From the FC car park, follow the forestry road south for about 0.7km. and turn left over a bridge, then sharp right and after 0.8km. swing sharp left for 200m. to a road junction. The entrance to the path, in the form of a wide, steep track, rises steeply to left immediately above the road junction. The road up from the bridge is little used by vehicles and makes a pleasant walk with good regeneration of native trees and bushes on either side. There was no signage on the roads at time of inspection: I understand this will be remedied.

The Path

The start of the path is excessively steep with an oversteep and unstable side slope above (photo B1). The rest of this section, which runs for about for about 400m. up to a forest road crossing, follows an easy gradient and the surface is beginning to vegetate. There is a good seepage ditch on the top side, and the verges and side slopes are well covered in turf (photo B2 – taken in heavy rain). Some channelled water-bars are needed (in this section through the lower forest) to take off surface water – I noticed rivulets beginning to form.

From the road crossing the first 10m. has been pitched with huge boulders. A channel alongside needs block-ing or it will form a storm drain and erode (photo B3).



Fig. B1



Fig. B2

The path continues pleasantly at an easy gradient on a well-grassed bench (photos B4 & 5), but as soon as the gradient increases, problems arise: the gradient (up to 18 degrees) is too steep for the granular surfacing material, which is migrating downhill. Anchor-bars and a little pitching have been installed, but they are inadequate and material is flowing over and round the stones (photos B6 to 9).



Fig. B3



Fig. B4



Fig. B5



Fig. B6



Fig. B7



Fig. B8



Fig. B9

There follows a pathwork disaster: because of slumping of a wet over-steep side-slope above the path, earth and stones have fallen away,

engulfing the path (photos B10 & 11). The path here will have to be re-constructed and I can see no alternative for holding the side-slope except some form of revetment. Attempts to get away without it have failed.

Continuing above the landslide, the path gradient eases and the path itself is good, but the side-slope above looks close to collapse and I would suggest a precautionary revetment (photos B12 & 13). The path, machine-built so far, then comes to the end of a long rising traverse of the steep hillside and is thereafter hand-built.



Fig. B11



Fig. B12



Fig. B10



Fig. B13

A short section follows, rising and twisting up the hillside with stone steps and aggregate surfacing. The path here is narrow and precarious. I consider that more solidly placed anchor-bars are required (finish of this section shown in photo B14). The path continues on a near-level shelf into a dense plantation and is well built and contained (photos B15 & 16).

Leaving the trees, the hand-built path continues on a traversing line, well-contained in the turf slope (photos B17 & 18), and over a plantation fence by a stile, then along the derelict boundary fence, where path construction work is only intermittent (not photographed). There are 2 problems here:-

(1) Where it follows below the fence line, the path drops down the side of a hummock so that on return there is a short un-made rising section. It is just here that the old route, marked by a cairn, descends through a gap in the trees down a steep, wet slope, so that if used for descent only, the constructed path could be completely missed. Indeed, on the forest road, I met a muddy walker who had done just that.



Fig. B14



Fig. B15



Fig. B16



Fig. B17

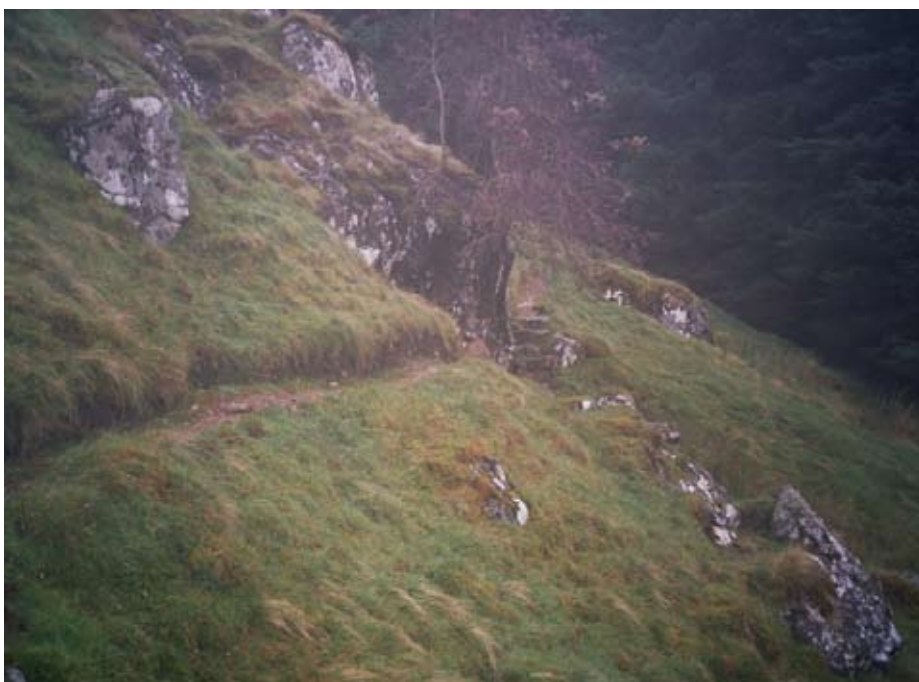


Fig. B18

I consider that an unobtrusive sign eg. a marked stone, is essential here.

(2) Where it eventually crosses the FC boundary, the path delivers walkers into an atrocious bog. The route beyond the FC boundary presents an intractable problem outwith FC control. Maybe a point could be found on the boundary fence from which drier ground is accessible. A prominent marker where the new line crosses the boundary would be required to guide walkers approaching from above.

Summarising, this is a useful path, mostly well-built but requiring additional well-constructed anchor-bars on the rising traverse section, some revetment work at the landslide and immediately above it, and some reconstruction of the short section between the machine work and the plantation beyond.