

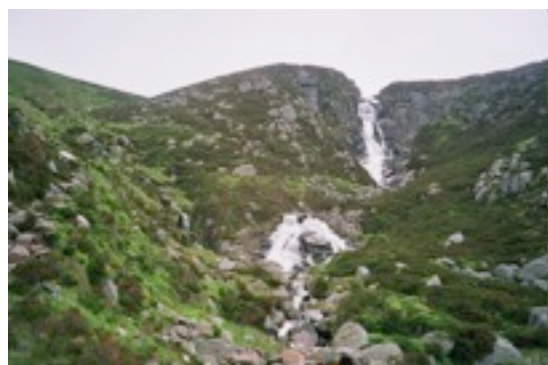
**UPLAND PATH ADVISORY GROUP
SITE VISIT TO LOCHNAGAR
ON 13 JUNE 2007**

Present: Fiona Cuninghame, Recreation & Access Officer, Scottish Natural Heritage(SNH)
Alison Matheson, Recreation & Access Officer, SNH
Glyn Jones, Senior Ranger, Balmoral Estate
Fiona Smith, Ranger, Balmoral Estate
Chris Yorke, Project Manager, Upper Deeside Access Trust (UDAT)
Murray Swapp, Project Area Officer, UDAT
Kevin Fairclough, former Area Officer, UDAT
Angus Turner, Upland Access Ltd. (Contractor)
Fran Potheary, Outdoor Access Officer, Cairngorms National Park
Mick Pawley, Countryside Senior Manager, Angus Council
Peter Duncan, Reserves Manager East Highlands, SNH
Dougal Roy, Member, Access & Conservation Committee, MCofS
Mike Newbury, Member, Access & Conservation Committee, MCofS (Reporter)

The group met at the Spittal of Glenmuick car park, and with estate permission took sufficient cars along the track past Allt-na-giubhsaich (about 1 mile) (where the main route to the summit starts) and on to Glas-allt-Shiel (another 3 miles) for the start of the Glas Allt Path.

Here Kevin Fairclough indicated the route to be taken, viz. up to the summit plateau, eastwards around the rim of the big north-facing corrie, down to the bealach separating Meikle Pap, down the main path almost to the vehicular track and back over the moorland path to the bridge on the Glas Allt Path, then down to our start.

The Glas Allt Path up to the bridge



Photos
1 - 5

The path starts through a pine wood, and then by a zig-zag up a steep heathery slope. The path here is deeply grooved in places, and there is a little old failed pitching, but the erosion is well contained. (Photos 1-3) It continues along the steep left (facing) side of a gully where it is rough and rocky; then up past a spectacular waterfall (Photos 4 & 5) and along beside the stream with some boulder paving which is contained by a steep bank above and below. (Photo 6) Approaching the bridge, the path becomes cobbly, although almost level.



Photo 6

We were told that the loss of surfacing is caused by flooding, as the bridge with its concrete abutments forms a pinch point blocking the stream in spate, especially when it is choked with snow.

This whole section of path will be checked in course of an overall condition survey this summer for possible remedial work.

The bridge (Photo 7) is strongly built of timber on girders, with hand-rail, but looks out of place in the open surroundings. It is proposed to replace it upstream with large stepping-stones, possibly with slabs on top to form a clapper bridge, and remove the concrete abutments.



Photo 7

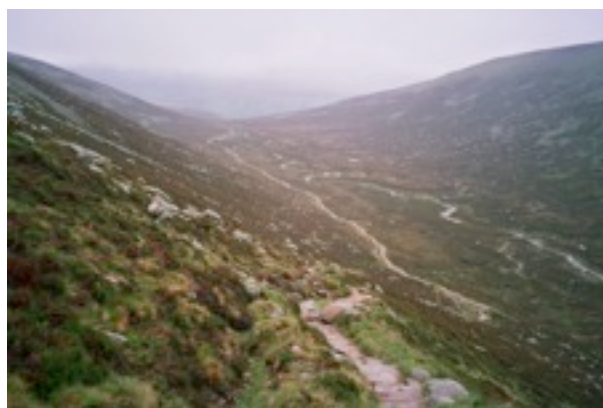
The Glas Allt Path from the bridge to the pitching

Continuing up the now gently sloping floor of the glen to right (true left) of the stream, a stalkers' path extending to approximately 1350 metres, was repaired in two phases in 1998 and 1999 by Highland Conservation Services Ltd. (Photos 8 & 9, both looking back)

Although surfaced with mobile granite grit, there does not appear to be significant loss of fines, maybe due to minimal gradient, moderate usage and good drainage. There are massive granite-lined cross drains. Although apparently stable, the path still shows up starkly from above and there is little colonisation by algae, mosses or dwarf grass. (Maybe a short stretch could be dressed experimentally with peat and fertiliser?)



Photos 8 & 9 (looking back)



The adjoining erosion scar had colonised poorly and was spot turfed and grass seeded in 2006, using a seed mix of fescues and bent. In the lower section, the seeded grass has largely browned off; but it has done well, and blended nicely into the landscape, further up the path where the barren mineral surface was dressed with locally extracted peat.

Pitched Section

A pitched section follows, rising diagonally leftwards up the hill flank. This was built in 2000. The pitching is of massive slabs with good foot placements, a little stepped in appearance, but well contained and effective with no off-path wear apparent. (Photo 10)



Photo 10

The Glas Allt Path above the pitching

From the top of the pitching for 1350 metres to the junction with the path round the rim, a full scale reconstruction was undertaken in 2006, pre-emptive work having failed on the mobile slope. For this remote working, temporary cabins were erected (with planning permission) on the floor of the glen below (site now barely visible). Two tracked excavators of 1.6 tons and 3 tons respectively, together with powered carriers, were brought in by a circuitous route.

The path, described as 'stalker style', forms a raised semi-causeway rising leftwards across the hill flank with a continuous topside ditch providing the material which was taken out by machine and graded to fill the 1 metre wide path contained by a line of boulders on either side. (Photos 11 - 16) The surface material excavated was back-filled into the ditch which is wide and shallow and has been seeded with a fescue/bent grass mix with fertiliser (using Scotia Seeds special seed mix, Seed Aide mulch and Mascot Planting Plus low-nitrogen fertiliser). The ditch will normally take only seepage, but there are massive open

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stone-lined cross drains, with voluminous stone-boxed letts for gathering silt. The upper edges of the ditch are over-steep in places, but maybe not high enough to matter.



Photos 11 - 16



There are two places near the start where some surfacing has moved, exposing larger stones, and it seems that the gradient, although only about 14 degrees at most, is too high without extra anchor bars for support.

Near the top of the path especially, anchor bars of massive boulder slabs cross the path. They are well contained on either side and in places there are several together forming a short stair. The risers are high and the effect may be too formal, but the work appears to be very functional.

Some peat has been incorporated into the surfacing to help it stabilise, but time will tell whether the fines will eventually be lost, exposing cobbly stones as on the older sections of the main north-east approach path to Lochnagar. If so, it will become uncomfortable

underfoot, but because of the raised surface and the steep slopes above and below, path avoidance would be much more difficult than on the main path. Maintenance should include not only the return of material out of the drains, but also topping up with surfacing material from other sources.

The path designer for phase 4 was Conserve, the contractor was Highland Conservation Services Ltd., and the contract was managed by UDAT and Balmoral Estate. The pathwork was completed in 8 working weeks in June and July 2006 with a two 2-man team on a 5-day working week. The contract value was £81,000.

The path round to the corrie rim

From the junction at the top of the new pathwork, we turned east on a good natural path converging with the edge of the big north-facing corrie, then north-east close to the edge, on a near-level area of natural granite paving. There is some wear of the ground between the stones here, but the short turf is mostly persisting. However, as the slope down to north-east increases, we came on to a wide erosion scar of about 100 metres which is apparently active and needing early treatment. Then came the top of fresh pathwork forming the rebuilt Ladder Path, and it became obvious to the whole party that this is where the money ran out. (Photo 17)



Photo 17

The re-built Ladder Path

This route forms the approach to the summit on what UDAT describe as ‘one of the most popular mountain paths in the Cairngorms, giving relatively close access from the road head at the Spittal of Glen Muick to North East Scotland’s most famous Munro and to its most magnificent winter corrie. The mountain attracts some 20,000 climbers and hillwalkers throughout the 12 months of the year from across Scotland, the UK and abroad’.

UDAT say, ‘The terrain is dominated by extensive areas of granite boulder and scree with thin acid soils and fragile vegetation set on a steep slope of between 10 and 20 degrees. The combined effects of sustained year round use, the mobility of the slope and its exposure to severe rain, wind, frost and snow has resulted in extensive path erosion and braiding on a major scale. This is compounded by the fact that the desire lines for ascent and descent do not coincide and if unchecked are likely to lead to accelerated damage across the whole slope. A strategic assessment of the condition of this route carried out in 2000 judged it to be within the top 5% of most damaged mountain paths in Scotland. Extensive site survey work and a stakeholder/user consultation workshop in 2001 ranked it as a very high work urgency priority.’



Photos 18 & 19

The solution adopted was to form a single ascent/descent route winding up the steep massive boulder scree close to the rim and merging into pitching comprised of large slabs above and below. It was discovered that the blocks could not be readily moved around for this purpose because of the huge voids below, so blocks of similar granite were brought in by helicopter in bags, and deposited near the chosen line, whence they were winched into place. (Photos 18 & 19)

This we found to be a varied and entertaining descent with little perception of artificiality. The construction is stable, sensitively executed and should not require much maintenance. The old Ladder Path has been blocked off and the erosion scar spot-turfed and re-seeded (using Scotia Seeds special seed mix, Seed Aide mulch and Mascot Planting Plus low-nitrogen fertiliser) As far as could be seen in the mist, this is completely successful and there is only one short length of incipient off-path use, which will be dealt with.

The Bealach

The bealach separating the north outlier of Meikle Pap is wide and flat. It is peaty with widespread flattish boulders, turf, and formerly trampled areas. It was seen in May 2005 by Dougal and Mike when the work was beginning. In the BUFT Monitoring Survey Report (link <http://www.mountaineering-scotland.org.uk/access/uplandpaths1.html>) the writer said:

‘The work in progress on the saddle comprises a causeway of flat-topped boulders sunk into a low trench and edged by boulders and heather turves. Scattered boulders are also being brought in where there are insufficient to deter walkers from trampling the adjoining peat – but I have my own doubts as to whether (as seen under construction) the causeway surface will be level enough or some of the near areas rough enough, to achieve this purpose.’

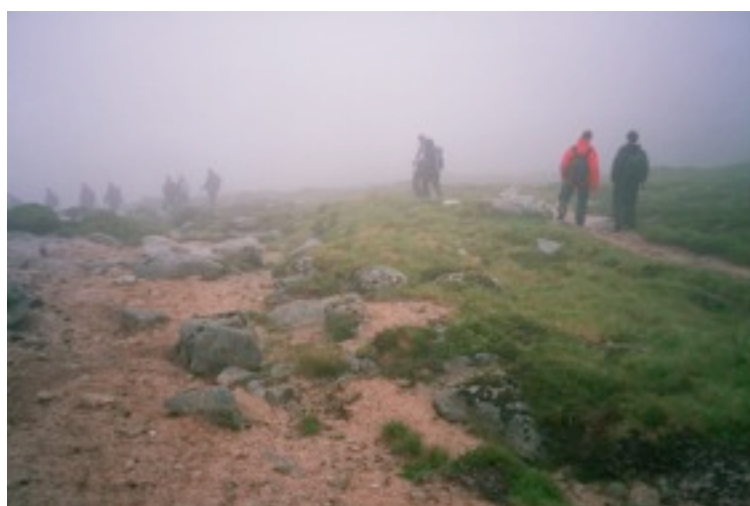
Photos 20 & 21



These fears appear to have proved false in the event. The slabs are large, near level and close together, forming an excellent walking surface with the edge stones preventing edge wear, and it seems there has been no temptation to step over them as the turf on either side is unworn and in excellent condition. Of course, some will object: walkers may prefer treading on a natural mountain, but their numbers have led to degradation, and the slabs are less obtrusive than a landscape scar, or in the writer's view, than most aggregate surfaced paths in the Cairngorms. (Photos 20 & 21)

The rebuilt Ladder Path including the section on the bealach was built in 2005 & 2006 over a total of 15 working weeks. The contractor was Upland Access Ltd., operating two 4-man teams at a negotiated day rate. The designer was Conserve and the contract was managed partly by Conserve and Balmoral Estate and partly by UDAT and Balmoral Estate. The contract value was £97,000 for pathwork only and the overall project value was £116,000 including imported materials cost, two helicopter air lift operations and project management fees. BTCV Scotland Action Break Volunteers and Balmoral Ranger Service carried out landscaping works at the top and bottom of the old Ladder Path during the summer of 2006.

The main path from the bealach down to near the vehicular track.



This is described as at May 2005 in the Monitoring Survey Report noted above, but there has been some considerable deterioration since then.

Starting at the lip of the bealach, the big erosion scar (Photo 22) on the left seems to have recovered a little, because no doubt the slab path delivers walkers right on to the unfriendly pitching so that it cannot be missed; but below this, the erosion is worse. The 2005 report says:

Photo 22

'...the path is intermittently good and bad with protruding boulders and loose cobbles. In some places, off-path wear comprises no more than a widening, and in some places there is incipient braiding. We counted some 20 deviations, apparently triggered by even a few metres of cobbles, or the odd boulder, or unfriendly pitching, all diverting downhill walkers, and it seemed that once diverted, walkers tend to continue on braid lines parallel to stretches of perfectly good path.'



Photos 23 & 24

Now there seem to be hardly any user-friendly sections, and the braiding and diversions are worse. (Photos 23 & 24)

We did not inspect the last 200 metres of path which were reported as very good in the 2005 Survey.

As already noted, this is an important main route, and in the writer's opinion, deterioration has reached the point when major reconstruction is required, and this work is second in urgency only to the 100 metres at the top of the Ladder. The alignment and cross drains are good. How a new construction should be built is problematical – some short sections of user-friendly pitching would be required; but even with copious anchor bars, there would be maintenance problems and containment problems with aggregate surfacing, and this points in the writer's view to at least some boulder slab paving!

The Moorland Path

The UPAG party followed this path for the whole length of 2.5 km. from the junction with the main path just short of the vehicular track, to the bridge on the Allt Glas Path, on a gently undulating line through the heather. It is narrow and entirely natural, and pleasant underfoot except for a few short squelchy sections. It is important as a medium level route for the less confident walker, particularly in mist or bad weather; and it should be monitored for deterioration.

Maintenance

It is understood that the 2-person Balmoral Ranger service undertake routine maintenance on Lochnagar roughly one day in every 6 weeks. This comprises mostly drain clearance and returning suitable recoverable material to the path surface. It is also understood that

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UDAT have not undertaken maintenance on these paths, but as stated, they are undertaking a condition survey this summer to prioritise path maintenance needs.

The BUFT publication 1998 (ISBN 0 953391000) 'Mending Our Ways' says – 'start maintenance before path damage occurs. Planned and managed programmes of routine maintenance are essential to halt or prevent erosion.' 'Where maintenance can not cope with the level of erosion, pre-emptive work may prevent major repairs.'

Similarly, the first PISG principle as stated in the UPAG Upland Pathwork Manual <http://www.snh.org.uk/publications/on-line/heritagemanagement/uplandpathwork/1.1.shtml> (ISBN 1 85397 062) is – 'Pathwork will be carried out within a coherent management framework, including a commitment to long-term maintenance. It will integrate with other management objectives.' Section 1.5 of the Manual provides an introduction to this subject, with further details at the end of each description of pathwork technique in the Manual.

In the writer's view, the present arrangements for Lochnagar are inadequate, and a team or teams (in-house or contracted) dedicated to maintenance and pre-emptive work, are required over the whole of the Cairngorms National Park. Unfortunately, programmed and adequately funded upland path maintenance has been an unfulfilled aspiration throughout Scotland and elsewhere for over 10 years, but without it, especially on granite hills, pathwork investment is liable to be wasted.

(Photos by the reporter)

Mike Newbury