A Signposting Tour of the Cairngorms

Signposting · https://scotways.com/ken/signposting-tour-cairngorms/



1962 drawing of the deputation carrying the sign for Jock's Road through Glen Clova

Signposting moves north

In July 1885 a deputation of ScotWays Directors headed to Forfar for a journey through the Mounth and Cairngorm passes installing signposts, then known as 'tickets', to mark the main routes through the area. These signs not only marked the way, but they also asserted the public's right to use them. Walter Smith, documented the journey and his journal is the only remaining record that exists of what the very first ScotWays signposts looked like.

To celebrate the 175th Anniversary in 2020, ScotWays held a virtual journey following the route that the directors took. James Naughtie, the award-winning journalist and special correspondent for BBC News, took on the role of Walter Smith and narrated Walter's journal. His words accompanied people as they followed the route, virtually, across Scotland. You too can follow that journey here.

Day 1 - The journey begins at Forfar

On this day, the deputation arrived at Forfar Railway Station and spent time getting ready, before heading up to Glen Clova.

Listen to James Naughtie as he tells us all about day 1.

The railway first reached Forfar in 1838, but the coming of new lines into the town meant its station was relocated and enlarged. This second station (1848-1967) will have been used by Walter and his party in 1885.

After the closure of the railway, the station buildings were demolished in the 1970s and Its site is now under Esk Court. However, a bench on the corner of Market Street and Carseview Road marks the station exit, so virtually sit here and picture the emergence of the signposting deputation, one member carrying that mysterious heavy package.

Day 2 - A day in Glen Clova

On this day, the deputation relaxed and explored Glen Clova before the real work starts tomorrow.

Listen to James Naughtie as he tells us all about day 2.

Located within the estate of Balmoral and within the boundaries of the Cairngorm National Park, the Lochnagar range extends to 98,320 acres. It’s has a magnificent north facing corrie which makes it a mecca for winter climbers

Poet Lord Byron spent time in the area in his youth and wrote the poem, Lachin y Gair (also known as Dark Lochnagar), which also forms the basis of a song:

> England! thy beauties are tame and domestic,
> To one who has rov'd on the mountains afar:

> Oh! for the crags that are wild and majestic,
> The steep, frowning glories of dark Loch na Garr
>
> *Lord Byron*

Day 3 - Crossing Jock's Road

On this day, the deputation starts work in Glen Clova before heading over Jock's Road to Braemar.

Listen to James Naughtie as he tells us all about day 3.

Many old rights of way through the hills are also routes formerly used for droving. This trade grew alongside the increasing urbanisation of the 17th and 18th centuries. Drove roads were the arteries down which the thousands of cattle streamed from the Highlands in the autumn to the markets of the central belt: first Crieff, then Falkirk and thence over the Border to England. The trade died out in the late 19th century. The definitive account is in ARB Haldane's "Drove Roads of Scotland" first published in 1952 and still in print.

The Tolmounth (Jock's Road) was once one of these vital arteries. The markets at either end were held a couple of days apart in order to give the drovers enough time to transport cattle or sheep left from the first mart to the second. Glen Clova's Cullow market was held in April and October. The New Statistical Account for Cortachy and Clova (1842) states it "has become one of the best sheep markets in the north of Scotland" and that the grounds are "most conveniently situated for the flocks as they descend from the mountains". It remained in use until relatively late in the nineteenth century; the Cullow Market Stance (NO383614) is shown on the OS 6" 1st edition mapping (1843-1882) but is marked as disused by the time of the 2nd edition (1892-1905).

Battle for Jocks Road - Not for nothing was Jock's Road the first right of way on the signposting deputation's itinerary. Walter A Smith's report is clear their attention had been directed to it as the public right was being disturbed by a new landowner. Following the signposting, the route became the subject of an Action for Declarator of Right of Way by the Scottish Rights of Way and Recreation Society Ltd (our predecessor) against Duncan Macpherson who had attempted to close the route. The case went to the Court of Session in 1886-87 and the House of Lords in 1888. It was proven that it had been long the practice of drovers to take sheep from Braemar over the Tolmount to the market at Cullow, near the foot of Glen Clova.

It is often said that the section of the route known as Jock's Road is named after a John Winter (Jock) thought to be one of those who testified against Macpherson. However, the name Jock's Road pre-dates the court case and the Society's own Walter A Smith subsequently declared Jock's identity to be a mystery, so the story appears apocryphal.

Day 4 - Around Braemar

On this day, the deputation worked west of Braemar out beyond the Linn of Dee.

Listen to James Naughtie as he tells us all about day 4.

The route dubbed the Queen’s High Way by one of the sign-posting delegation is the drove road through Glen Feshie:

although the river crossing just before the Eidart joins the Feshie is normally fordable, the Eidart drains an enormous area south from Braerich and Cairn Toul. The water can rise very rapidly, with no easy crossing further upstream, and lives have been lost there. The delegation’s own Walter A Smith later noted in his 1924 guidebook Hill Paths In Scotland that "a bridge is much needed here!" In July 1957, with the co-operation of the Glen Feshie estate, the Scottish Rights of Way Society commissioned and financed the erection of the Eidart Bridge (NN914886). It was built over the gorge a little upstream of the ford to an innovative design by a Cairngorm Club member, Dr George Taylor of Aberdeen University Engineering Department. Having been given the nod that the Territorials would be pleased to help as a weekend exercise, the bridge was accordingly cleverly designed with the main beam composed of short poles which could be carried by hand by a large number of the soldiers. A rather small group of volunteers first went out for three or four (very wet) weekends to prepare the foundations and so on. The 30 or so Territorials then spent a weekend to move up the main bulk of the materials. Really helpfully they also assisted with the erection of the scaffolding-type bridge at the site and launch it over the gap to the foundation on the far bank. The bridge has stood the test of time well, belying its frail appearance.

Day 5 - Through the Lairig Ghru

On this day, the deputation headed over the Lairig Ghru to Aviemore.

Listen to James Naughtie as he tells us all about day 5.

The Lairig Ghru has long been recognized as a path from Deeside to Strathspey, in use for centuries for a variety of reasons. As the route is quite treacherous and difficult, it lent itself well

to nefarious purposes and was used by cattle thieves in particular before the advent of the droving era. Placename evidence for this is suggested by Allt Preas nam Meirleach - the river of the Robbers' Copse - which the route follows between the Luibeg and the Dee.

The Lairig Ghru was one of the main routes through the Cairngorms that drovers took their cattle. Due to the path's elevation, however, drovers did not bring the calves through here, instead of using the lower Lairig an Laoigh (Calves Pass) to the east. It would have been used by drovers trying to get to Braemar from Aviemore or Nethybridge. The Lairig Ghru is said to have been used for droving until about 1873.

Cairngorm Tragedy - In November 1971 six teenagers from Edinburgh and their two leaders were on a navigation expedition in the Cairngorms. The weather deteriorated and they decided to try and make for Curran shelter. Unfortunately, they failed to reach the bothy in the blizzard conditions and were stranded for two nights high up on the Cairngorm plateau. Tragically when the mountain rescue team found them five children and one leader had died of exposure. The remaining child and leader suffered severe frostbite and exposure. The Curran shelter was demolished in 1975. The tragedy, also often called the Feith Buidhe disaster, is regarded as Scotland’s worst mountaineering accident.

Day 6 - Around Rothiemurchus

On this day, the deputation installed signs around Rothiuemurchus.

Listen to James Naughtie as he tells us all about day 6.

Walter’s report mentions the battle for Rothiemurchus and includes the wonderful statement “Great local irritation is felt at this iron-bound obstruction to an old-established road, and to regular visitors to Speyside it is a harsh and high-handed interference with their wonted quiet, and as they consider perfectly legal, enjoyment of the beauties of this lovely country. The Larig Ghru Pass is as old—one may almost say—as the Cairngorm Mountains themselves and yet if locked gates are put on the roads leading to that pass, *how is one to get up to it?*“

But what was the Battle for Rothiemurchus? In his book Caleb’s List: Climbing the Scottish Mountains Visible from Arthur’s Seat, Kellan MacInnes includes a great summary which is paraphrased here:

1880-1925 encompassed what environmental historian Robert Lambert dubbed The Battle for Rothiemurchus. During this period the Rothiemurchus Estate was the focus of a campaign

mounted by [ScotWays] and in response to requests for action from tourists, walkers and mountaineers who:

… came to see Rothiemurchus estate as a recreational gem, and a fundamental link in the access route to the high tops of the Cairngorms.

In the mid-1880s Loch an Eilein was the scene of a bitter access dispute between [ScotWays] and the Grant of Rothiemurchus family during which hillwalkers took direct action, forcing open locked gates and throwing them off their hinges.

In 1903-04 the dispute flared up again when the new Laird of Rothiemurchus attempted to obstruct the 'driving road' from the south end of Loch an Eilein. [ScotWays] was heavily dependent on activists on the ground who played a vital part in their access campaigns and it was by this route that Caleb [Caleb George Cash was a mountaineer, geographer, antiquarian and teacher how drew up a list of the 20 mountains visible from Arthur's Seat.] who spent every Easter and summer in the area became covertly involved in the campaign.

On 18 August 1904 Caleb who was on holiday at Fearn Bank, Aviemore sent a letter to the Edinburgh home of CEW MacPherson of the Society which contained revealing information about the financial position of the Rothiemurchus Estate and the delicate relationship between the Laird and Donald Grant of the Royal Bank of Scotland's Grantown-on-Spey branch. One favourite method used by the SROWS to pressurise landowners to allow access was to threaten them with legal action. The information contained in Caleb's letter about the dire state of the Rothiemurchus Estate finances at that time would have been very useful to the Society. Knowing the Laird lacked the money to pay expensive lawyers' bills if [ScotWays] chose to launch legal action gave [ScotWays] the upper hand in the Battle for Rothiemurchus:

"I am writing this separately sending it to your home instead of to your office because I don't want it to go into any hands but your own…

Popular rumour here with which as a veteran visitor I am now some little acquainted makes out that Donald Grant [the bank manager] has JP Grant [the Laird] under his financial control *so that DG is de facto proprietor. I heard the remark made once that DG could put JPG out at his will. It may be well for you to know this, but obviously, it would not do for me to tell you! So burn this note.*

Weather glorious for three days. No osprey yet."

Day 7 - The journey ends at Blair Atholl

On this day, the last day of the journey, the deputation installs its last signposts in Glen Feshie, Glen Tromie and at Blair Atholl.

Listen to James Naughtie as he tells us all about day 7.

In 1785, Glen Tilt had been the first of the key sites which evidenced geologist James Hutton's Plutonism theory and revolutionised our concept of time. Hutton's findings meant the glen was famous to scientists around the world. The behaviour of the 6th Duke of Athole in denying public access led Hugh Miller to write in 1847: *"There is scarce in the Kingdom a better-known piece of roadway than that which runs through the glen"* and that *"if the Scottish people yield up to his Grace their right of way through Glen Tilt, they will richly deserve to be shut out of their country altogether"*.

This old route is one of the great historical rights of way in Scotland. In 1847, a party of University of Edinburgh botany students led by John Hutton Balfour had an acrimonious encounter with the Duke of Athole and his ghillies. This resulted in a lengthy legal battle between the ScotWays and the Duke to establish the route's status, a dispute which ultimately went to the House of Lords. Importantly, this case established that ScotWays could act on behalf of the general public in defence of public rights of way.

Atholl Estate dates back to the 13th century. The 145,000-acre estate employs around 75 full time and 60 seasonal staff and has a full-time Ranger.

Duke of Atholl is a title held by the head of Clan Murray and was created by Queen Anne in 1703 for John Murray. The Duke has the right to raise Europe's only legal private army (The Atholl Highlanders), a unique privilege granted to his family by Queen Victoria after visiting the castle in 1844. The current Duke, Bruce George Ronald Murray is the 12th Duke of Atholl.