

Stepping Out

Nate Pedersen finds out how our historic paths are being mapped and revitalised for the 21st century.

Photographs by Nate Pedersen

"TRAVELLING is almost like talking with men of other centuries." So said Rene Descartes and the same could be said of walking a heritage path. Broadly speaking, a heritage path is any old or traditional pathway used in Scotland, such as a Roman road, a pilgrimage route, or a drove road. In short, paths with history behind them. While many of these pathways have been known about for a long time, the first project to comprehensively catalogue them was recently launched

by the Scottish Rights of Way Society.

The aptly named Heritage Paths Project began in 2008 with funds from the Heritage Lottery Fund and Scottish Natural Heritage. The project seeks to acquire and distribute information related to the old pathways through Scotland via their website, www.heritagepaths.co.uk.

"From the beginning, ScotsWays (Scottish Rights of Way Society) has attempted to preserve and promote these old roads through Scotland," says

THE Scots Magazine LOCATION

The well-trodden path near Lairig Ghru, originally 'cattle droves' route.

Neil Ramsay, project officer for Heritage Paths. "The Heritage Paths Project is an attempt to make public the historical knowledge of these paths which ScotsWays has been saving all these years."

The Scottish Rights of Way Society began in 1845 to protect public access to the Scottish countryside and maintain country pathways. Since then, the group has been involved in a number of famous legal battles securing the right of access to the countryside. The society promotes Right of Way pathways by signposting routes, publishing books, and maintaining a website. Their efforts helped to pass the landmark Land Reform Act of 2003, which codified into Scots Law the long-standing tradition of freedom to roam the Scottish countryside at will.

With the advent of the Heritage Paths

Project, the historical element of the old Right of Way pathways returns to the forefront. The comprehensive website for the project, www.heritagepaths.co.uk details 214 heritage paths. Most are illustrated with photographs from the route and contain a route survey, plus whatever historical information is available on the route. In addition, each path can be seen on a sophisticated mapping system, which combines modern Google Maps with the historical Bartholomew maps. Many other paths are known about and awaiting addition to the website. The project also seeks generous input from the public on paths with which ScotsWays may be unfamiliar.

"We see Heritage Paths as a growing entity, with contributions from people throughout Scotland about paths near to them," adds

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Deer street is an old Borders Roman Road.



The bridge over Kintail Water built by General Wade.



The deer staitt line of a road built by General Wade.



Capel Mhorath Track.

Neil Ramsay. To that end, the public is eagerly encouraged to contribute whatever information they may have about an old pathway as well as any historical knowledge they have about established pathways already on the website.

The 214 pathways are divided into 14 different path categories, with somewhat arbitrary boundaries. Many paths are classified under multiple categories. Depending on what other routes are discovered, Neil adds, "There may well be paths requiring the invention of new categories as well."

The current pathway categories are: **Civil Road:** A broad category including parliamentary roads, parish roads, turnpikes, coach roads, etc. Examples are the Old Aberdeen Turnpike (Aberdeenshire), Old Post Road (Borders).

Coffin Road: Roads built for the purpose of transporting corpses from remote or isolated locales to consecrated burial ground. Coffin roads are often characterised by large stones set along the way as "coffin rests" where a coffin could be set while the bearers took a well-earned break. Cairns frequently accompany these coffin rests as it became customary for coffin bearers to add a rock to the cairn while resting the coffin. Examples of these are Monks Road (Fife), Bohennie Coffin Road (Lochaber).

Drove Road: A road built, or used, for driving livestock, generally cattle or sheep, from place to place. Normally, a

drove road leads from rural area to a market town. The most important cattle market, or tryst, was held at Crieff where upwards of 30,000 cattle might be sold in a week. Many drove roads head to and from there. Examples of these are the Road to the Isles (Lochaber), Gypsy Glen (Borders).

Industrial Path: Routes related to the development of industry in Scotland, such as miners' routes, canal routes, or quarry roads. Examples are the Forth and Clyde Tow Path (Glasgow), Balgonie Miners Path (Fife).

Leisure Path: A by-product of the Victorian age, when walking for leisure purposes first became a popular pastime for the leisured class. This category also includes the routes created by Victorians for stalking deer. Examples are Puck's Glen (Loch Lomond), Poldhu Wells (Grampian).

Medieval Road: Roads with firm evidence of having been used in the medieval era. Examples are The Wallace Road (Perth), Maiden Causeway (Grampian).

Military Road: Generally, this category refers to the extensive network of roads built by General Wade and his successors in their attempts to control the Highlands in the 18th century. Examples are Corrieyairack Pass (Inverness), Devil's Staircase (Lochaber).

Pilgrimage Route: Pathways used by religious pilgrims, generally from the medieval era until the Reformation. Examples: Bishop's Road (Fife), St Duthac's Way (Loch Aish).

Railway Track: Pathways following the lines of disused railways. Examples are the Kilmarnock Railway Line (Fife), Fordell Train Line (Fife).

Roman Road: Ancient roads built by the Romans during their occupation of Caledonia. Examples are Dere Street (Borders), Durisdeer Roman Road (Dumfries and Galloway).

Rural Path: A broad category including pathways between rural communities, pathways to shielings, old kirk roads (roads to the local church), etc. Examples: Loch Bhac Shieling Path (Perth), Glen Banchor Cart Path (Cairngorms).

Smuggler's Path: Routes used regularly by whisky smugglers, cattle thieves, or other criminal types for nefarious purposes. Cattle thieving and whisky smuggling in particular used to be practised on such a wide scale that pathways today still bear the name of Thieves Road. Examples are Thief's Road (Dunbar), Monega Pass (Cairngorms).

Trade Route: Pathways used for the conducting of trade, such as those used by fishwives on their way to a fish market. Examples are Creel Road (Dunbar), Whaligoe Steps (Caitness).

Urban Path: A recently introduced category which has yet to be much used, but eventually will encompass pathways of historical or industrial note within urban settings. An example of this is Smelter's Path (Inverlochy).

Many pathways do not fit easily into one category as they were used for

different purposes throughout history. A classic example of such a path is Dere Street, the main Roman thoroughfare into Britain, which is still walkable from the Cheviot Hills to the Eildon Hills. Dere Street is primarily known as a Roman road – however, it has also been used as a medieval road, a pilgrimage pathway and a drove road. As you walk along the broad, grassy track today, you can almost feel the ghosts of Roman soldiers, medieval pilgrims or cattle drovers walking with you.

THE evocative experience of walking a heritage path is what makes the idea of cataloguing them so appealing. Each of the ancient roads has an individual history which comes with it. Paths with such a deep history provide for a thoughtful walk in the countryside as you contemplate all the people who tread the same pathway in previous centuries.

Of the 214 paths currently on the website, two of Neil Ramsay's favourites are the Bishop's Road and the Waterless Road, both in Fife. "They are relatively short, but have an interesting history behind them and are quiet, often empty routes, despite being located in relatively busy Fife," he says.

The Bishop's Road is named for Bishop Sharp, who met a brutal end while travelling the road in 1679 en route to St Andrews. He was surprised and brutally murdered by a band of Covenanters roaming the area. In an interesting twist of fate, the Covenanters were subsequently hung >>



A typical coffin road – a large stone coffin rest can be seen to the left.

Peter Gawthrop and buried on Bishop's Road, not far from a present-day sign commemorating Bishop Sharp. At one time, the Bishop's Road and Waterless Road were likely joined together as one of the primary routes to St Andrews but they are now separated by some distance. The Waterless Road is named for the absence of any water along the entirety of the route.

According to Mr Ramsay, the Holy Grail in Heritage Paths' quest to rediscover old routes through Scotland would be "firm evidence in support of a pre-Roman route". While there are several routes which are thought to date to pre-Roman times, concrete evidence has yet to be unearthed to prove it.

Dere Street, for example, was quite possibly built on top of an existing Pictish tract. Another favourite candidate for a Pictish tract is the Elsick Mounth in Aberdeenshire, which connects two Roman forts far to the north of where the Romans successfully campaigned. As the Romans appear to have been beaten back by the Picts shortly after building their forts, it seems reasonable to conjecture that the route between the two was simply an old Pictish pathway, although firm evidence has yet to be uncovered.

In the meantime, there are plenty of "newer" paths to choose from on the Heritage Paths website which provide fascinating historical insights into a day's walk in the countryside.

As the Heritage Paths project moves forward, it seeks to add sign posts to about 150 routes with relevant historical information. To this end, almost 30 paths have already been signposted, some both in Gaelic and English.

LEARNING resources are being developed for use with schoolchildren and eventually the website will have material for teachers on how various heritage paths could be used to meet certain learning outcomes. "We'd like to empower teachers with the confidence to take their class for a walk on a heritage path," says Mr Ramsay.

It is hoped that a book will also be published, highlighting some of the most important heritage pathways. In the meantime, however, consider visiting www.heritagepaths.co.uk the next time you plan a day's walk in the countryside. Spend your afternoon walking in the footsteps of Roman soldiers and whisky smugglers, country priests and medieval pilgrims, cattle drovers and cattle thieves. And if you have any information relating to old pathways near to where you live, please visit the website and contact Mr Ramsay, for

the same rule applies to heritage paths as it does to good friends – "The more, the merrier." ●