



Suilven

Path Repair Project 2017

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In Spring 2017 ten path workers set out to repair the path to Suilven.

Followed by a photographer and three bloggers this is their story.



Cover and above, photos © Chris Puddephatt.

"The Long and Winding Path to Suilven"

by Chris Goodman, Path Project Officer for the John Muir Trust

After a 2½ hour walk carrying tools, Wednesday saw work start on repairing the path to Suilven. Contract team Arran Footpaths stuck the first spade in the ground as they began efforts to consolidate the steep path on the North side of the iconic community owned mountain.

Next week will see a second contract team, A.C.T Heritage, start work on the approach path to Suilven from Glencanisp which crosses some very wet and boggy ground. Over the next 3 months they will work to create 800m of narrow, meandering hill path where currently a vague and ever widening peaty trod exists.



The path (if you can call it that) to Suilven before work begins. Photo © Chris Goodman

The path repair project is a culmination of 5 years of development work through the Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape Partnership (CALLP) which brings together 14 partners to deliver a range of environmental and cultural projects. It's been a long journey developing the project from observations I first made on the state of the path on a hill walk in 2012 to finally getting work started this week.

Suilven is Assynt's most iconic and spectacular hill and I remember the first time I saw a photo of it, my reaction was, "what and where is that!" Suilven is a huge draw for walkers and one of the reasons I moved to Assynt hence my concern that recreational access combined with the weather could impact on its appearance and the enjoyment of climbing it.

The majority of the work will run over Spring 2017 and 2018 and involve an upgrade to the lower 1.6km of the path as well as more technical stone work on the steep north side of Suilven to help stabilise loose and crumbling sections. It's a big job involving the use of helicopters to fly stone from nearby boulder fields to use in constructing drains and steps along the path as well as machinery on-site to excavate gravel for the path surface.

The John Muir Trust is project managing the work on behalf of the Assynt Foundation who took over the estate on behalf of the community in 2005. The project will cost around £200,000 in total - that's about £100 per metre of path. We are very grateful to generous funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the European Outdoor Conservation Association, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Scottish Mountaineering Trust and all those supporters who donated to the John Muir Trust's Suilven path appeal in 2016.

Information on the project is available on the CALLP web-site <http://coigach-assynt.org/suilvenpath/>

You can see photos of the work and upload your own on Flickr www.flickr.com/groups/suilvenpath/



The path before the repair work began - gullied and peaty. Photos © Chris Goodman



Following pages: one of the worst boggy sections on the walk in to Suilven. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.





21st April 2017

"Baptism of Fog"

by commissioned photographer, Chris Puddephatt

Alarm at 6am; sandwiches already in fridge; cameras in rucksack.

Tea-to-go; drive to meet the workers at Glencanisp.

So this is what Real Men look like: Scott, Alec and Donald. They walk the 11k in two hours; half way up Suilven to where they left their tools. I think its half way up; we've walked into cold, wet cloud and can't see much; we could be anywhere.

Flasks and snacks now.

And more layers; after overheating during the walk, its fleeces, coats, hats, gloves, leggings. The winds blowing; its cold and wet. It's also difficult to stand up. Loose rock; loose mud; wet slope. We really could do with a path here! Oh yes, of course, that is the mission.



Scott moving boulders into place. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

The Men start shifting enormous boulders; clearing the path, shoring up the path and laying the new surface. The only bits good to stand on are the ones they've already done. The pitching is good to walk on; I tell them so.

I'm staggering about the slope with a waterproof camera. Three shots and the freshly charged battery is dead. Good start. New battery goes in, along with part of the cloud and the lens mists up. Then the second battery dies. So much for preparation. Regular camera now; kitchen roll to wipe the lens every couple of seconds. And I'm filthy too.



A muddy Alec. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

The Men are very obliging; not camera shy at all, that's a relief.

Click, click, soggy click.

I rig up my Trail Camera onto a post I've bashed into the ground pointing at the three or four yards Donald is working on for the next two days. Fingers crossed this one works OK. I've put fresh grease on the "waterproof" joints.

Now I can go. The Men stay there, of course, hard labour today. Plenty more to follow.



Above and right: Donald manoeuvring rocks with a pinch bar.
Photos © Chris Puddephatt.

After negotiating my way down the slope, I hide behind a grassy mound to eat my sandwiches out of the biting wind. I've only got another 10k to walk back. After about 5k, I've had enough. It doesn't help that I'm alone now; the walk in was much easier with the others to talk to. But I'm below the cloud now; I think of the Men and stop feeling sorry for myself.



"Boulder Field Blizzard"

by commissioned photographer, Chris Puddephatt

I needed to get up to the "boulder field" where Andy is bagging up stones ready for the airlift by helicopter up to the path workers. I've got directions, but I have to get across a river of variable and unknown depth. Fortunately, John from Glencanisp has offered to take me up there in the Argocat.



John driving the Argo. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

The weather forecast is not good, but I didn't really appreciate that we were driving into a blizzard. Near the boulder field, it's almost a total white-out, and we unwittingly drive past the bags of stone. Of course they're white; the same colour as the snow. A stroke of luck; we spot Andy and his buddy walking towards us, as they arrive at the site themselves. We get out of the Argocat and I get blown over. The wind is absolutely evil, and the blowing snow makes it almost impossible to look into it. I go back to fetch my camera and get blown over again.



Andy and Mark filling bags. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

Taking photos is going to be a challenge. I set the camera to a fast shutter speed, and I would've crossed my fingers, but I've lost feeling in a couple of them now. I get some shots of the stone-baggers whilst bracing myself against a rock. "Creativity" is just a myth right now; I just want to get back to the Argocat without being thrown onto the floor again. Just seeing the machine is a challenge too; its covered in snow and looks like a rock

Back at the Lodge, the weather doesn't seem so bad, but we still can't see Suilven, so its coffee o'clock.

On the way down the drive, I realise the sky has cleared, and there it is; the great big lump. I hang around for about an hour and get enough light on it for a reasonable photo or two.

I'm hoping for better weather for my next visit!



"What's different about Suilven?"

by Mandy Haggith, Director of Assynt Foundation

Suilven is often described as an 'iconic' mountain, and it is certainly distinctive, with its long side-profile and sugar-loaf mounded summit. From different angles it looks like an elephant, or a camel, or a whale. From the sea it is an unmistakable marker post for finding your way into the safe harbour of Lochinver, and its name may result from this, translating from the Gaelic as 'Eye Mountain' (suil is eye, ven a corruption of bhein, from ben) suggesting that it's the mountain to navigate by.

But Suilven is not just an intriguing-looking hill, it is politically iconic as well. What's different about Suilven is that it is one of just a few of Scotland's mountains that belong to the local people. In 2005, [Assynt Foundation](#) bought it, along with Canisp, Cul Mòr and Cul Beag, as part of a community-buyout of two large (44,000 acre) hunting estates and the 'big house', Glencanisp Lodge.



Canisp, Suilven, Cul Mòr and Cul Beag. Photo © Chris Goodman.

This was the first substantial purchase under the terms of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act, which gave local communities the right to register an interest in land and have an opportunity to buy it before it goes for sale on the open market. We bought the mountains with money from various sources who gave it because community-ownership was seen as 'in the national interest'. We bought the mountains on behalf of everyone, so because we now own them, in a way this means that you do too. I like to think of Suilven as the icon of what it means to own a mountain.

Since the community took ownership, Suilven hasn't changed one bit, but local people and visitors can now enjoy it in ways that weren't possible before we bought it. Instead of tip-toeing through the private grounds of a rich family on your approach to the mountain, you can feel welcome to stroll through the Glencanisp Lodge grounds. We have an honesty shop where you can get a hot drink, snacks and other 'Suilvener' goodies at any hour of the day or night. Chris Goodman has his wood carving workshop and [Fergus Stewart](#), an internationally famous potter, has his kiln, studio and gallery there. The Lodge has been used for all kinds of community and creative events, from weddings to fun-days, from writing retreats to fishing festivals, and everyone is welcome to stay for B&B. We have also built an arts studio,

with a stunning view of the mountain, and we look forward to much more creative activity around the Lodge in years to come.

We're also committed to enhancing the environment. We monitor and protect our precious wildlife, such as the golden eagles, ring ouzels, divers, pine martens and otters, and we offer people guided opportunities to spot them. We have improved the state of our wetlands by blocking artificial drainage to re-wet bogs. We are restoring native woodlands to areas where they have degraded or disappeared because of burning, sheep grazing and the excessive numbers of deer maintained by the hunting regime of the past. Deer also cause soil erosion and damage to other habitats like upland heaths, so much of our land management activity revolves around deer control. And of course we have infrastructure including roads, fences and paths to maintain.



Suilven from Quinag. Photo © Chris Goodman.

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All of this costs more than we can really afford. Assynt Foundation is a charity, with five staff, running on a shoe-string. If you'd like to find out more about what we do or how to become a member please visit our web-site.

I think it's fair to say that the current work to upgrade the path up Suilven is also a result of community ownership, thanks to Assynt Foundation being part of the CALL Partnership. The improved path will bring a more enjoyable walking experience and it will protect biodiversity on the mountain. The project is also bringing social and economic benefits through local employment, learning and business.

And remember, Suilven's yours too.

5th May 2017

"Stone for the Mountain"

by commissioned photographer, Chris Puddephatt.

The better weather I was hoping for; a lovely sunny day for the airlift of the bagged stone!

Incredibly only a few days since the blizzard, and look at it!

Amazing.

OMG! Riding in the helicopter!

Lucky, lucky, lucky!

Safety briefing; yellow jacket and hard hat. And sunscreen.



Getting a ride out to Suilven. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

A few walkers come past, directed through by the marshal when it's safe to proceed. A lovely day like this, you'd think there would be more people up here.

The chopper ferries bags of stone from the boulder field very quickly. I know it's going to be expensive, but this is so efficient. Andy's got a list and knows which bag goes where; that'll save additional work moving it again.

We start on the lower path, contrary to the master plan, as the weather still needs time to clear on the ridge. Bag after bag turns up. This is a welcome easy day for Andy, just holding a clipboard and standing around in the sunshine. Oh yes, he also waves his arms around a bit, directing the helicopter where to drop the next bag.

Then the chopper turns up without a load, and without the rope dangling below, and suddenly I'm directed to get on it. Again! Oh yes! We fly around a bit; I think David the pilot may be checking for turbulence. The view is breathtakingly tremendous. Did I say I was excited? Then all too soon, they land to throw me out. Right on the top of Suilven. It's a bit breezy; I hang onto my hard-hat, but it's sunny and lovely. And I'm the only one there. Just wow!

Opposite: The chopper bringing in a bag of boulders. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.



Reality hits me; it's going to take a quarter of an hour to get down to the drop zone; there's only 20 bags coming up here, I better get going. Missing the job isn't an option.

Predictions were right: for photos, this is the icing on today's cake.

I get a few in the bag, and I think I'm good to go.

I carefully pick my way down the loose scree and pebbles; my knees are not loving this as much as the rest of me. I catch up with the lens cap that decided to race me down. Almost at the bottom of the gully, and Shaun, Donald and Alec catch me up, bounding down the hill like kangaroos. I can keep up with them on the flat, so we chat away for about 6 miles to the Lodge.

What a phenomenal day!

Right: Andy directing the helicopter
Below: Flying stone up to the ridge of Suilven.
Photos © Chris Puddephatt.



"Why would anyone do that?"

by Chris Goodman, Path Project Officer for the John Muir Trust

I'm stood on the Bealach Mor on the ridge of Suilven with path contractor Scott Murdoch. It's mid-April, the first day of the Suilven path repair work and we're looking over the site. But Scott's attention is drawn by a stone wall on the ridge a couple of hundred yards from us and he's gazing towards it. It's some bit of work, a substantial wall that's withstood decades of gale force winds and drifting snow. You can tell Scott's impressed by it.

'Wow, can you imagine walking up here every day to build that?' he says and then adds, 'Why would anyone do that?'

I turn to look at him and begin to speak but then he catches my eye and we burst out laughing. Scott and his team will be walking up here every day for the next month to build a path, not that different in the big scheme of things to building a wall - why would you do that?



The impressive stone wall on the ridge of Suilven. Photo © Chris Goodman

It's a question I've picked up on locally, 'Why is the John Muir Trust building a path on Suilven? I thought they were against doing anything on wild land?'

It's a good question and I think highlights different interpretations of the term 'wild land'. For me, it seems, there is a confusion between wild land and wilderness and a perception that the Trust is about stopping any form of development or even clearing people off the land but that's far from the case.

Wild land refers to areas where the impact of humans is less obvious, particularly areas free from urbanisation, intensive farming or industrial development. Wild Land Areas as mapped by SNH are largely uninhabited with no public roads although they often contain paths or an occasional bothy or lodge but true wilderness arguably doesn't exist in Scotland. These wild areas often go hand in hand with some of the most spectacular landscapes that Scotland has to offer and these places are a huge draw for tourists, adventurers, photographers, writers, solitude seekers and more. The argument is that these spectacular places – hills, moors, woodlands, coastlines – have a huge benefit for all of us whether financially, recreationally or spiritually, as well as for wildlife, and that it would be a loss if they were all developed and their special qualities diminished.





For the path on Suilven, the concern was that recreational access was eroding the vegetation along the path line and that an ever widening bare peaty mess or scree scar was developing. In the long term this could really detract from Suilven's spectacular qualities.

While the path work involves a helicopter lift to import stone and construction work which changes the 'feel' of the path, the aim is to keep it as natural looking as possible, a juggling act between trying to halt the erosion while at the same time not over-engineer the path and spoiling the adventure. In the long-term, once the path has weathered in, it will hopefully be far preferable to letting it continue to erode and increase in width.

At the same time the work also creates jobs way out on the wild land itself with two contractors employing ten staff. A good path also helps support a more sustainable outdoor recreation industry which is good for the local tourism-related providers.

Halting the trampling of vegetation and the erosion of peat has benefits for the immediate flora and fauna near the path too and for the locals who like to get up Suilven once in a while then hopefully the long walk will be a bit nicer.



Previous page: The spectacular view of Suilven and Canisp.
Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

Alec working on the ridge. Photo © Chris Goodman

"A Hole Lode of Peat"

by commissioned photographer, Chris Puddephatt.

A heavier rucksack for the long walk today; I'm taking a tripod and a heavier camera with the intention of getting a time-lapse sequence. I've set the camera to take one photo every second for one hour, and this should turn into two minutes of time-lapse. Just got to get there first, and find a suitable section of path work to point the camera at. And no rain for that particular hour either.

In the car park, Chris Goodman pedals his way to meet me, whilst I get bitten by a couple of midges. Local entrepreneur Marianne has sold me the new credit-card-sized Smidge just in time!

Me & Chris spend the next 2 hours walking and blethering. That's a new word for a Sassenach like me, and I'm finding that I like it.



Andy shovelling gravel. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

Up at the path, Andy and Mark have made a lovely job of the first section from the track. We find them about 200 yards in, scratching their heads: they need to find some more gravelly top dressing and its proving a challenge. It needs to come out of a hole very close to the path, which is subsequently restored as best it can, but the hole I see is about five feet of peat and then solid rock. No grit or gravel at all.

Loads of walkers today, and most stop for a chat. There were more yesterday, I'm told.

The Nikon is clicking away on its tripod, and I grab a few more and a couple of short videos with the GoPro.

Time-lapse is going to be the construction of a "cross-drain". Unfortunately, after 35 minutes, work stops as the non-existent gravel is needed to complete it, so I switch the camera off. The footage I have captured is actually quite amusing: Andy and Mark scurrying about like ants. Or was it Buster Keaton?

I leave them all and walk back. After a tip-off, I've got my i-pod to listen to some music, but the birds are a-chortling, so I listen to them instead.



Mark finishing off the drop dressing on the path. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.