

“A Cheeky Raven and Cheeky Dippers”

by commissioned photographer Chris Puddephatt

It's looking like a lovely day, and I'm walking in with the “top path team”, as I think it's my last opportunity to shoot work at the Bealach for this season. The journey is becoming familiar now. A few miles later and we're off the track and chatting to the “lower path team” briefly before the final assault on the North Face. This part of the journey always splits the field, as we all have our own speed up the gully.

Part way up the gully, I see Rab with his head down in a tiny burn; he signals that I should be quiet, and I'm thinking that he's found some wildlife. I'm totally fascinated when I find out that he's making a sound recording of the water trickling its way down hill, and that its part of a collection he's compiling on his travels. Every recording is unique, he explains. Yes, he's properly appreciating something that we all take for granted, and I love the idea.



Rab recording trickling water. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.



Johny winches stone down the badly eroded gully. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

At the ridge, the team divides into two: tidying up a few spare boulders by digging them in for next year, and winching five or six down a terribly eroded section to finish a few steps below. The sun gets hotter, and a Merlin screams past. The winching is slow, tedious and precarious. It pauses several times whilst walkers climb up past the danger zone.

The workers stop for lunch, and I take the opportunity to get onto the summit to record the damage from the recent wildfire. Near to the bealach, its very black indeed, but already green shoots are bursting through. The summit path was the fire boundary; incinerated to the south and completely untouched to the north. The view from the cairn is as stunning as ever, but I'm astonished to look down on the huge swathe of burnt vegetation between me and School Loch. I'm astonished because I struggle to see the damage at all, and I know that the camera won't pick it up. Such an inferno, and in a mere three weeks the wounds are healing rapidly. At least for the flora; the fauna may take longer I guess.

Two walkers wander away from their rucksacks to take photos, and a big glossy raven appears from nowhere. It lands nearby and runs towards the bags. "Hey fellas, any food left here?" I shout. They walk back and the raven picks up the pace, determined to beat them, but bottles out at the last moment!

I've spent too long up here and get back to find the workers getting ready to leave. We're all baked and sweaty. At the bottom of the gully there's a lovely loch with a sandy beach; the others were already in it by the time I arrived. Am I getting in? Check for wild horses. Nope, none here. That was sooooo good!



Green shoots appear amongst the incinerated vegetation on Sulven after a hill fire in early May which burnt for 3 days. The fire started near Fionn Loch and nearly reached Lochinver. It's not clear how the fire started but was likely to be a camp fire which got out of control in dry and windy conditions. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.



Too good to resist, Chris Puddephatt takes a dip. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

31st May 2017

"Changes "

by *commissioned photographer, Chris Puddephatt*

It's six weeks since my first visit on that cold, wet, muddy day and the landscape was still wearing its brown winter cloak. Not anymore! Lots of green lushness and flowers blooming. Heath spotted orchids line the track, and there's sundew in the wet ditches at the sides.

I see lots of walkers today, all taking advantage of the perfect conditions for a trip to the top.

Joining Andy and Mark, they're making pace across the peat, the finished work snaking back like a ribbon. Every one of the walkers uses it. The path is making their journey easier and drier. Of course, the main benefit is that they're not trampling across a wide swathe of boggy ground any more, and the recovery has already started.

Watching Andy drive the digger, I can see he's no novice; whether it's gravelly top dressing or turf, each bucketful arrives with amazing precision.

Andy in the digger and the path snaking back. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.





Precision work with the digger. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

I set up my camera to record a time-lapse sequence and sit down for a while. It's going to take one frame every second for about half an hour and automatically stitch them together.

A couple of well-laden walkers come down the path and comment that they like what I'm doing. Not me, I reply, I'm not building the path, I'm just taking photos. Yes, you, they say. We've seen your photos in the Bothy. And you recognised me? Yes, from the selfie in the loch last week! Crikey, Chris Goodman didn't waste any time printing that one; I'll have to drop by the Bothy on my way back.

I wrap it up after lunch, and realise that this might be my last trip for a while. And I'm not relieved; I am actually a little sad. I've thoroughly enjoyed my part in this project. The path workers have been a great bunch; good company; colourful characters with stories to tell. I'm pleased to have met them; it's been a privilege.

The path does still have a long way to go, but progress is good and it's already making a valuable contribution.

12th June 2017

"So Many Views of Suilven"

by Mandy Haggith, Director of Assynt Foundation

Over the twelve years since the local community has owned Glencanisp Lodge, with its splendid views of Suilven, I have run seventeen retreat weeks for creative writers. Every one of the participants falls in love with the mountain and it has inspired no end of wonderful writing. Even people who have not written poetry since schooldays find themselves coming back from a walk with the words of a new poem ringing in their ears. I tell them that the Assynt landscape is littered with verse – Norman MacCaig found many of the good ones, but there are any amount of new poems out there, waiting for unsuspecting poets to trip over them and bring them home.

MacCaig's classic poem, 'Climbing Suilven' is engraved on a stone at the start of the walk from Inver Kirkaig up the river towards the mountain, just under the bookshop, Achins, where you can buy his collected poems!

I nod and nod to my own shadow and thrust
A mountain down and down.
Between my feet a loch shines in the brown,
Its silver paper crinkled and edged with rust.
My lungs say No;
But down and down this treadmill hill must go.

In 'Moments Musical in Assynt', he compares all the mountains to music.
A mountain is a sort of music: theme
And counter theme displaced in air amongst
Their own variations....

He climaxes with this:

I listen with my eyes and see through that
Mellifluous din of shapes my masterpiece
Of masterpieces:

One sandstone chord that holds up time in space – Sforzando Suilven reared on his ground bass.





Above and opposite page: Suilven – inspiring poets, painters, photographers and more. Photos © Chris Goodman.

One of the regular visitors to the writing retreats has been Colin Will, a poet based in Dunbar who is a Zen Buddhist and much inspired by oriental artistic traditions. We have talked a lot about Suilven as a source of art, and wonder whether as Scotland's iconic mountain it could ever achieve the global status of Mount Fuji.

There is a classic series of prints by the Japanese artist, Hokusai, called '36 Views of Mount Fuji'. Suilven clearly deserves its own similar tribute, and one year we had the perfect opportunity. Colin Will's 72nd birthday fell during one of the retreats. In the Chinese tradition, 72 is a hugely significant age. Most of us will be familiar with the fact that 12-year cycles are important and each year it's the year of a different animal, in a cycle of 12 animals. So in the Chinese system our 12th, 24th, 36th, 48th and 60th birthdays are in the year of our birth animal. Our 72nd birthday completes the 6th cycle and is the age at which we become officially a sage.

So to celebrate Colin's coming-of-age-of-a-sage all of the retreat participants composed poems about Suilven, and I added to it all the poems I have gathered over the years, and we achieved '72 Views of Suilven'. In fact we had a few spare – it was more like 92 views of Suilven!

If this is how poets react to the mountain, I have no doubt that painters, photographers, sculptors, musicians and other artists would produce equivalent riches.

Please share yours with me (hag@mandyhaggith.net). One day, our mountain will be on the global map to rival Fuji as a mountainous source of artistic inspiration.

Everything is perfect, by John Bolland:

Climbing steadily, steadily,
there comes a point when he becomes aware
of silence.

Turning then
to gaze back down the steepness of the talus,
across the cnoc and lochan muir
he can still hear the River Inver roaring,
still hear Glen Canisp's cuckoos clowning in the wood
the peep peep of a buzzard chick beneath the Caistel,
the wind, the trickle of the burn .
And it comes to him that silence is his own.

16th June 2017

"The Start of Something"

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



After four years of preparation I can't believe the path work on Suilven has flown by so quickly. Arran Footpaths have now finished this year's work on the higher sections of Suilven while A.C.T. Heritage are half way through their work on the lower path.

It feels like it's all whizzed by in a storm of activity and action but that's quite often the way with path work – once contractors are on site it's all hands on deck and a race to the finish. But it's also felt like a real privilege to be involved with the whole process and spend more time out there, getting to know Suilven.

Spending more time lower down on Suilven I've noticed things that I've just walked past before, chiff chaffs singing from trees near the start of the path, primroses and foxgloves in flower a bit further along, birch, rowan, willow and aspen growing from inaccessible ledges and gullies and Merlin calling flying over the Bealach.

It's easy to miss these things when summit fever grips you but seeing and hearing the wildlife around Suilven has opened my eyes to how much more is out there. Old long dead pine roots near the path also remind me how much more life has lived out there in the past and how much more could live there now.

While the old pine roots died and got buried in peat thousands of years ago as the climate changed, nowadays the absence of woodland is more down to human intervention. However, the presence of trees wherever there is a ledge or a gully that gives them protection from herbivores gives me hope that with appropriate management our native woodland and all the species that live in it could slowly come back.

The start of the walk out to Suilven takes you through the newly planted area around Glencanisp Lodge. I've been watching over the last several months as the fence went up and the seedlings – oak, hazel, birch, rowan, alder and more – have been steadily planted. It'll take a while but it's the start of something and as I continue to venture out to Suilven I look forward to watching the trees grow, the woodland develop and myriad birds return and find a home there.

Below: School children from Lochinver Primary helping to plant the new woodland at Glencanisp. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

Opposite: The cumulative impact of all our footprints on the way to Suilven. Photo © Chris Goodman.



"Footprints"

by *Mandy Haggith, Director of Assynt Foundation*

As I climb up into the hills, along paths like the one up Suilven, I'm sure I'm not the only one to reflect not only on my literal footprints, but also on my wider impacts on the world. There's something about getting out into nature that helps us ponder the big questions. As I look down across the splendid Assynt landscape - a cnocan-lochan tapestry studded with jewels - I feel closer to the earth and don't want anything to damage it.

A big walk gives us time to think things through, to shape directions we will pursue when we return to normal life, to clarify our aspirations and work out our next steps. Ideally we have time in the day to achieve a state of animal simplicity, simply moving our bodies and using all our senses to observe what we encounter - the texture of lichens, the sound of a ptarmigan, the pineapple (or is it coconut?) fragrance of gorse wafting up from Glencanisp on a warm breeze, and the taste of the chocolate bar reward at the summit.

Our impacts on earth feel less on such days - we aren't driving, we're probably making minimal use of gadgets and are carrying the minimal amount of stuff. We eat simple food and drink water from a rain-fed sparkling burn. We pack up our sandwich and biscuit wrappers and take them back down the mountain, leaving only footprints behind us.

Of course, over time, the cumulative impact of all of our footprints adds up to something. The path up Suilven has eroded. Rare bryophytes on the north side of the mountain become threatened by the ever-widening braid of tracks. And this damage is currently being repaired.





Thinking more broadly, of course the repair work itself has an environmental impact: rock has been quarried and lifted in by helicopter, and machines have been burning fuel. Even repairing environmental damage leaves a footprint. Assynt Foundation is trying to do our bit – we have solar panels on Glencanisp Lodge roof and a hydro-electricity project in our plans. But of course, we have vehicles and heating systems too.



Above: The path work has an impact too but once the work is complete vegetation can begin to recover on the ground adjacent to the path. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

Opposite: Looking across the Assynt landscape and feeling closer to the earth. Photo © Chris Goodman.

Nothing we do makes no impact at all. I have a friend who is fond of saying that the only way to have no impact is to be dead. But we can, and we need to be, conscious of our impacts and try where we can to keep our footprints as light as possible.

The North Coast 500 route has made a huge increase in the number of road miles being driven in our area, and their fossil fuel emissions must have increased accordingly. But I like to hope that many of these visitors have come here and climbed Suilven or the other mountains, pushing themselves by pure animal muscle-power to the spectacular view many hundreds of metres above sea level, instead of jetting off thousands of metres up in the sky in an aeroplane to some distant clime. If so, they have probably used less fossil fuel as a result. And hopefully they will have been inspired by this glorious part of the planet and come down the hill with a renewed commitment to living a more environmentally friendly life. Hopefully it all balances out.

One thing's for sure. Once the pathwork is complete, your literal footprints up Suilven will make much less impact than they would have made before.

10th July 2017

"Reflections"

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

15 years ago I wrote a postcard to my parents from Torridon where I was working for a path team at the time. The card read, 'when the weather is good there can be few better ways to spend a day than doing path work on a hill in the North West Highlands'.

Since then I've shifted rolls to project managing path work and am more often office based than out on the hill but over the last few months Andy, Mark, Scott, Donald, Alec, Shirkie, Johnny and Rab have been doing what I used to do – walking miles out onto the hill, toiling away day after day, shifting tonnes of rocks and soil, building a rugged mountain path using technical understanding and an artistic nature based creativity to make it look 'right', to make it look like their work belongs on the side of a Scottish hill.

Johnny enjoying the view from the work site. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.





A different perspective on the world. Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

There's a different perspective on the world from up there, away from the man made landscape and all of our material possessions, a different perspective on who you are, of your place in the world and on life. I've never felt as alive as when I'm out in the hills and life has never made more sense than when viewed from high up on a summit, in fact, it's only ever really made sense from up there and I miss those days when it was where I worked.

Reflecting on Suilven. Photo © Chris Goodman.



"Nearly There..."

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

It's been a busy few months on Suilven but the path work for this year is now drawing to a close.

Since April, two path contractors, 10 staff and a helicopter have all been involved in moving hundreds of tonnes of materials around to improve the Suilven path. What was once a trampled route across boggy ground, up to 30m wide in places, is now a robust but natural looking path that you can walk without sinking up to your knees in.

The work has been undertaken as part of the Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape Partnership (CALLP) Scheme with the aim of halting the ongoing loss of vegetation and erosion of soil along the path line. As there was no real 'path' as such to Suilven, just an evolved route across the moorland, this has involved substantial work to lay a proper path surface which walkers will use and want to stick to.



A.C.T. Heritage busy shifting materials to construct the path.
Photo © Chris Puddephatt.

Contractors A.C.T. Heritage and Arran Footpaths have done an excellent job of constructing the path and stabilising steep mobile ground. The work has made a huge difference and the walk out to Suilven is much nicer now that you don't have to pick your way through peat hags and deep puddles. The second phase of the work will be carried out over the Spring and Summer of 2018 which will see the path to the foot of Suilven completed and further work to stabilise some of the steep loose ground up to the ridge.



The path after work has been completed and before the project began.
Photos © Chris Goodman.



8th August 2017

"On Age"

by Mandy Haggith, Director of Assynt Foundation

In Assynt we are very proud that our mountain, Suilven, has a starring role in a new feature film, Edie the main character of which is an 80-something woman played by Sheila Hancock. In a lovely interview in the Herald she makes out that this is a somewhat senior age to be trotting up mountains, but compared to the ancient rocks under her feet, it's nothing.

In my long poem about Suilven, I wrote:

*'The mountain appears ancient this morning
but this is an illusion
caused by our scurrying, fleeting
shortness of time and tenacity...'*

*Suilven is a young softy,
hard-headed perhaps, but mostly
just dust washed up,
a grand mud pack,
a mighty sand castle.'*

Below: Suilven at sunrise. Photo © Chris Goodman.

Opposite: What's left of Suilven after a billion years. Photo © Chris Goodman.



Suilven is a billion years old, but that makes it a youngster compared to the Lewisian gneiss on which it sits! The bedrock of gneiss that ruffles out across Assynt is among the oldest rocks on earth, more than 3 billion years old, older than recognisable life. It is a metamorphic rock, formed deep within the earth's crust where minerals were under great pressure. You can see the resulting beautiful patterns, swirls of pink and black, in many places in Assynt.

Over that foundation, gritty sandstone layers built up over millions of years as particles of stone eroded from a massive, long-vanished mountain range (out in what is now the Atlantic), flowing down rivers to be deposited in lakes. These sediments gradually became sandstone. Around a billion years ago, the resulting sandstone deposits were incredibly thick: they were once as high as the Himalayas are today. Isn't it amazing to think that Assynt used to be covered by seven or eight kilometres of rock? Most of this has in turn been eroded away, by wind, water and ice, so now only the little stumps of the Assynt mountains remain.



Most of the bigger mountains have a cap of quartzite, which is half as young again, a mere half a billion years old, and these caps helped the mountains to resist some of the erosive, sculpting power of ice. But Suilven does not. It can therefore claim to have the oldest summit.

These ancient rocks are what our intrepid path builders have been working with. Spare a thought, if you're out there on the path, that the journey up the mountain traverses billions of years. From that perspective, the walk in may not seem quite so long – what are a few hours?

And from the bealach or the summit of Suilven, perhaps you will have a deeper understanding of John Playfair's words: *'the mind seemed to grow giddy by looking so far into the abyss of time.'*

A huge thanks to everyone involved in the project especially Andy, Mark, Scott, Alec, Donald, Shirkie, Johnny, Rab, Simon and Roughie for doing all the hard work.



Andy



Mark



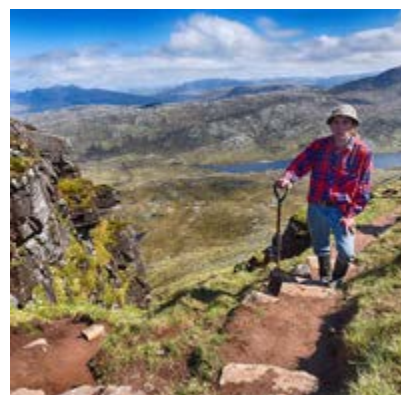
Scott



Alec



Donald



Johnny



Rab

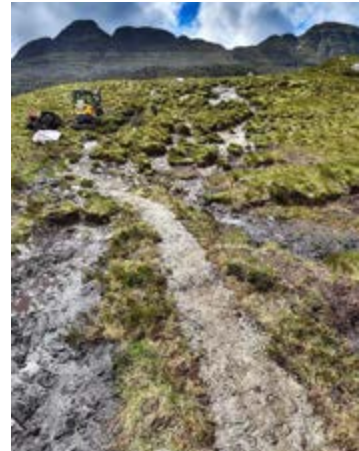


Chris Puddephatt



Chris Goodman

This page and opposite page, photos © Chris Puddephatt.





The CALL Partnership

The Coigach & Assynt Living Landscape Partnership Scheme is a Heritage Lottery Funded project comprising 14 Partner organisations, of which the Scottish Wildlife Trust is the lead partner. The Partnership comprises community land-owners, community interest groups, charitable land-owners, private land-owners and charitable membership organisations. Collectively these Partners are committed to delivering a Scheme comprising 28 individual projects over 5 years to September 2021.

The Assynt Foundation

Suilven is part of the Glencanisp Estate, which along with Drumrunie, was bought by Assynt Foundation, a charitable community company, in 2005. This was the first time that a community was granted the right to buy land under the Scottish Land Reform Act. Assynt Foundation aims to steward the land on behalf of local people and to provide environmental, social and economic benefits to the area.

The John Muir Trust

The Trust is a conservation charity dedicated to protecting and enhancing wild places. While no true wilderness exists in Scotland there are still spectacular landscapes free from large scale developments where people can go to enjoy and connect with nature. By protecting these places, working to restore their natural habitats and helping connect people with them the Trust aims to create healthier ecosystems where nature and people can flourish.

A huge thanks to all the partners and funders...



