

Path Report 26th September 2020

Wark – West Learmouth – Cornhill – Campfield - Wark

Having taken my eye off the ball in the last few months owing to Covid 19 restrictions and also not wanting to wade through overgrown paths during the summer, I thought I'd do an audit of the footpaths in the parish, starting with those included in our inaugural parish walk from July 2018 .

Starting from Wark, I followed the byway (BY 201/019) to West Learmouth Farm along the track to a metal field gate, then grass track to Tongueridge/Tree Burn (low at the time) and through a wooden gate and stile which are still in poor repair. There was evidence of use through the rough and overgrown section to the field sown with a potato crop. The plantation on the left had been felled, and a line of oak saplings planted on the north side of the hedge line. However, the correct route between the two hedges is overgrown, and instead the field margin on the south side of the hedge shows signs of use, and it was possible to walk through the long grass round the field edge, with a screen of mature pines and hawthorn covered with berries. The sloping area between the line of the correct route across the corner of the field (which had not been reinstated as the potatoes had not been harvested) and the field edge was planted with plants and flowers for wildlife. It was nice to see a mixed flock of greenfinch, chaffinch and goldfinch feeding on the seeds and berries. The field of rough grass between here and the railway was home to a large bull – luckily the animal was not present – the signs 'Beef Bull Keep Out' are still there (I have had to cut awkwardly through the trees to avoid him as he was blocking the gate). This heavy metal gate was difficult to negotiate and is not hinged or latched.

I then followed the track to West Learmouth Farm, turning left along the road and under the viaduct to the potato storage sheds. The footpath (210/026) runs between the shed and a row of mature trees to a fence and newly erected stile to the field - the step plank had come off and was placed as an aid to cross the muddy patch on the other side!

Lining up with the stile from the field, on the footpath (210/003) over the new stile in the hedge opposite I was glad to see evidence of use into the plantation of poplars, but this area between Duddo and Tree burn is very overgrown. The first part through long grass could be walked using vehicle tramlines, but towards the north-eastern end it was virtually impassable with chest-high tough semi-woody weed growth. The area was crossed by deer tracks - I startled one – and some hardy souls had attempted it; there were signs of use in the area by the new bridge across Tree Burn. But there were signs of much more use on the old permissive path round the field on the north side of the burn.

The Cornhill parish footpath over the bridge on the other side of Duddo Burn is well used, and I then walked the short distance on the road past Camphill to the railway bridge, noting the lovely oak tree that must be several hundred years old – somehow you take it for granted and don't notice it so much when driving past! Then down onto the line to meet the byway back to Wark.

Update 14th November 2020

At the junction where the byway to Wark crosses the railway line from Cornhill, farm vehicles had accessed the potato field for harvesting and ploughing leaving a very muddy track. The gates had been removed to facilitate access – hopefully their replacement will be an improvement on the last! The mud had deterred a couple of walkers from proceeding along the byway; they preferred to go along the railway line towards Sunilaws (I did tell them that access was OK round the field edge).

The mature horse chestnut trees by the footpath that passes the potato storage sheds beyond the viaduct have been cut down, and the fence removed, leaving the stile.

The path from the Cornhill to Wark road to the new bridge over Tree Burn is not easy to walk, albeit with lower vegetation – access is easier on the field/crop edge. There were several dog walkers here, positive evidence that the ‘permissive’ path continuing round the field edge is easier to walk and preferred to the very overgrown official footpath over the bridge.

Points

Footpath clearance – although welcome, irregular cutting by landowners/farmers to their own timetable is unsatisfactory. Can we drum up a volunteer group to clear on a regular basis? After all, this is done in other areas of the country.

People will always use the easier more accessible routes such as the railway line, rather than struggle on other paths.

What is the point of erecting new bridges and signposts (and at what cost) if the footpaths are inaccessible?

Footpaths are more important than ever now – not only with more people accessing the countryside during the pandemic, but also to provide more leisure facilities, such as well-maintained footpaths, with the increase in tourism over the last few years.