

The purpose of this guided walk was to draw people's attention to landscape features that indicate the ancient origin of a public right of way recorded on Northumberland's definitive map, which as it is a legal document, protects the public rights illustrated for future generations.

Just how ancient the particular right of way is which links Wooler to Kirknewton, that we were investigating, can't be told just by looking at it. Even with the help of nineteenth century maps and documents, we still can't tell when people first used it to carry their goods in their carts between those two settlements. But we can say that it existed at least as early as 1828 as it is shown on Greenwood's map of Northumberland. We can also say that it ceased to be 'customary' way and became a legally recorded route in 1867 as it was recorded as an awarded public highway in the local Inclosure Award of that date.

To get to a point where we could pick up this route, we needed first to walk up the track towards Torleehouse, currently recorded as public footpath 229/009. We battled against a cold wind up this modern track, dated by its first appearance on 20th century OS maps.

Eventually we reached the point where a 'restricted byway' crossed it, as indicated by the purple waymarks. Until only 3 years ago, they would have been yellow, indicating that Kirknewton parish council had recorded its status as public footpath in error in the 1950s parish survey.

At this point one could see a well defined grass track winding up hill through a gateway on its way to Wooler but we had come to look at the short section leading down to Kirknewton.

There was a wide lane about 25yds wide with a stout wall on one side and a deep ditch with the remains of wall footings on the other. Undoubtedly the ancient route will have passed down it and it probably would have provided shelter for drovers and their stock on the move through the area. Cattle from south west Scotland travelled this way to join the old turnpike, now the A697, which would have provided a route to the markets at Morpeth and Newcastle.

But to be part of the ancient route it would be necessary for there to be a gate at least 8 ft wide as required for Cartways by the 1835 Highways Act. These were found at either end, with fine stone gate posts still in place at the south end.

However that lovely lane is now blocked by gorse and fallen trees so we had to detour into an adjacent pasture. This is legal as the definitive route was blocked to even those on foot, let alone those on horseback or with a horse and cart (pony and trap). We guessed that this obstruction will have developed in the early 20th century as local transport became mechanised so the route of the current tarmac road to Kirknewton via Akeld provided a faster, if longer, route from Wooler. It is now up to the Northumberland National Park to clear it for use by all those who now have public rights, even if some of those rights have been in abeyance for many decades. Public rights do not disappear because the public are unable to exercise them. *'Once a highway, always a highway'* is the legal maxim, which protects those rights from long ago.

When we emerged at the northern end we were faced by an impassable gateway with a poorly drained surface which will be a challenge to restore. But in the meantime we were able to use stepping stones and a ladder stile to circumvent the obstacle. The final section took us across old pasture and along a well-defined hollow way which descended diagonally across the hillside to reach the lane to Kirknewton. This was not the direct route to the village but will have evolved to make it easier for those laden carts using this route in earlier centuries, whose weight will have worn away the ground to leave this distinctive feature.

We were not surprised to discover that a small building alongside this final lane is labelled 'smithy' on old OS maps. They provided an essential service and every small village and hamlet had one close to a busy route, as this one would have been. Inside one could see the old chimney and the surface across which the iron being used to make the horseshoes was placed, with room for the fire underneath. There was even an iron ring still on the wall to which the horse would have been tied.

There are a large number of these old features to be seen in the countryside which help one to understand the evolution of the rights of way and rural road network. It is worth opening one's eyes and becoming a 'landscape detective' as you enjoy your walk in the hills. You may even be able to help save an ancient route or forgotten rights from extinction in 2026, as is going to happen as the result of the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000.

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