

The Lemming Road

Mountain Rescue teams often exhort walkers to take a map and use it wisely. Sound advice; but, as with everything, the caveat is always - do so advisedly and **never** abandon common sense.

The cartography of UK mapping is second to none – the detail astounding, but sometimes there is simply too much. Walkers need enough information to navigate between A and B with safety, and in general our Outdoor Leisure maps at 1:25,000 or 1:50,000 are fine for this – except where the plotted information leads one into DANGER....

2019 started with two glorious days – cold and crystal-clear. By lunch time on the second, I was glad to escape work. Likewise, the article I'd promised to write for the Team's Annual Report, that too could wait another day – I was heading up the hill. Johnnies Wood, the steep east face of High Scawdell, Miners Crag and so to High Spy – and barely another soul – “Off -Piste” to Lobstone Band Door – I intended to descend via Low White Rake (LWR) to Grange and return to Rosthwaite via Hollows Farm and the banks of The Derwent where there'd recently been an otter sighting.

While traversing easy sections, I'd idly been thinking about this article: the wording, and graphics I would use in alerting readers to the suspected reasons surrounding three of our 2018 Callouts. There appeared to be a link between rescues # 66, 70, 72 – three similar rescues inside two weeks. And all apparently, resulting from walkers diligently following the same public Right of Way off High Spy onto the flanks of Nitting Haws. I thought I knew why. I wanted to avert more serious accidents. It was time to do some research.

During these incidents the casualties had complained about “losing the path” thereby getting into steep and rough terrain. In one incident our casualties had become disorientated and in the other two they'd fallen and sustained injuries. Correspondence with the recovering casualties confirmed that despite the extremely steep and craggy nature of the route - each had been trying to follow the delineated Right of Way. In both cases



Incident 70 - Hollows Farm

they blamed themselves for “missing a turn”. It was only small comfort to them when I informed them that in fact there was no “real” path at all! Let me explain.

Public Rights of Way (RoW) are often ancient. The “Rights” have existed for centuries, predating modern maps – and in many cases predate any maps at all. These rights were recorded in parish and manorial records and gave travellers and commoners leave of access to proceed unhindered across others’ lands. They allowed journeys between settlements, the transport of peat from moor to hearth; permitted small farmers to bring sheep down from the common to inbye closes and the like. As such, the routes described were often vague and indefinite... *“from the common of Scawdell to the village of Grange”*. Over time, successive advances in local government led to the development of “Definitive (ha !) Maps, where RoW were supposedly delineated more accurately. The Ordnance Survey (OS) was charged with depicting these RoW and chose dots or dashes – in red or green to do so. As every Geography student used to know, the key to understanding a map’s squiggles and hieroglyphs are given in the legend. Despite the fact that I’d often cut off the legend and butchered many an expensive map into a refolded and laminated, handy cag-pocket-sized, foul weather reference – I had learnt my symbols. I’d discovered the difference between a RoW and a FP, a Bridleway and a track. Perhaps map work is no longer taught so thoroughly.

Local Govt. reorganisation in the 1970s saw the last major review of these Rights of Way. Parish clerks, councillors etc were tasked with checking their accuracy. Real-time, in your hand, on-screen digital GPS mapping was still somewhere over a distant horizon. Many broad sweeps and strokes of the pen by sometimes disinterested authorities were passed and confirmed into legislation – the future variation of which would require a small army of clerks, committees and mountains of paper to revise.

Several years ago, Keswick MRT alerted the National Park Authority to a

number of dangerous examples where the route of a RoW traversed dangerous and potentially lethal ground. Some of these “routes” had already resulted in serious incidents. In our patch routes north-west from the summit



Incident 72 - Nitting Haws

The Lemming Road

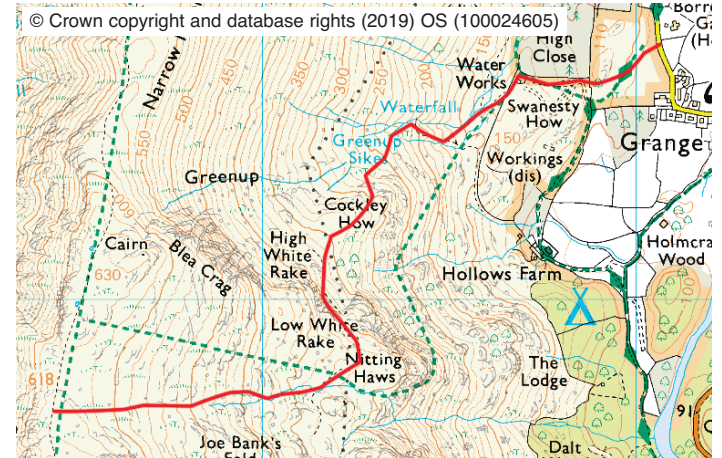
of Helvellyn Lower Man; north from Dale Head; down from Allen Crag Gill and hilariously, across Dock Tarn – were corrected. If you are nerdy about maps – try comparing the early series of the OS North West Lake District OL4 sheet with the most recent issue. Anyway, the opportunity to improve the route from High Spy to the valley had been missed. Luckily, until this year, there'd been few incidents there. Then, in the first two weeks of August – three similar callouts – what could have changed? I went to investigate.

The key to this particular route is in finding the top and bottom of a sloping ledge called Low White Rake (LWR). It's named on the 1:25k map and those with good eye sight will see a fine dashed grey line – depicting the obvious track on the ground. It's an interesting “trod” through steep ground, but slanting as it does, it flattens the gradient, and although slightly narrow in places – it is never scary or truly dangerous. It pops up just behind Nitting Haws and perhaps originated as a Shepherds' access path to the good grazing on the high common. Wainwright knew the route and calls it a drove road. However, the first thing I noted on exiting the rake was that the small cairn marking the “top of the descent” had tumbled into disrepair. Half an hour reciting the walkers' mantra “*yan on tan an' tan on yan*” saw an amateurish attempt at a sturdy cairn grow into a traffic cone of rhyolite. But other cairn building trolls had also been at work. A line of neat piles of stone had been erected away from where the traditional track veered northwards down the long-established line. These new cairns didn't lead to safety – they led to the edge! Along their line was an emerging path – bright green like a line mown through a shaggy lawn. A lemming's road.

Some well-intended yet misguided rambler had taken it upon themselves to ignore the wisdom of local shepherds and had left their own waymarks precisely along the erroneously delineated RoW. But why had so many chosen to slavishly follow this potential highway to heaven? Perhaps they were chanting another mantra – “*stick to the path*”. I wanted to scream wrong way, WRONG WAY. Instead I had almost as much fun demolishing

this pillock's handy work as I had building my own.

Following discussions with the Team Leader and a few preliminary telephone calls I had some correspondence with The Lake District Park Authority's Rights of Way Officer. I sent him this screen shot.



Green Dashed Lines = Public Right of Way.

Red Trace = GPS Track recording the route of the obvious track visible on the ground.

Critical Way Point is at 420m GR NY 2426 1684 – turn NNW not SSE.

I explained the problem; people were following this poorly drawn RoW into potentially lethal danger. Something should be done. The RoW officer declined my invitation to hike the route. He made sympathetic and appeasing comments but explained that the bureaucratic process and

budgetary constraints meant nothing was currently possible. We forwarded the correspondence we'd had from our casualties, but this too was to no avail. I resolved to write an article for our Report. Time passed. Life's other priorities shouldered in. Christmas came and went, and still I'd not written a word. Our editor emailed a last call for copy – New Year came, the sun was shining, and I again found other priorities – the fells were calling. Subconsciously I think I was drawn. Up to High Spy and down to the back of Nitting Haws.

From quarter of a mile off their red jackets blazed like beacons. Quarters the ground like hounds seeking a scent, the small group were scouting out a route. They'd broken stride, spread out, appeared to be indecisive. I willed them, turn north, north is the way; they headed south south east. Despite my summer cairn wrecking spree – they chose the "Lemmings' Road!"

I knew the route was bad – I'd scrambled up it in my younger days – I'd forgotten just how bad. I too became a lemming. I followed their red jackets – over the edge. In my defence I was proceeding with caution, knew I needed to take great care, *"look well to each step; and from the beginning think what maybe the end"* – Whymper's watch words ringing in my ears. Yet, eager to discuss their route choice and decision making, I followed.

Where the sensible route takes a 90° left, the prominent green RoW swings down and slightly right on the south side of the lovely lookout knoll that is Nitting Haws. It meets the edge, peers over, seems to hesitate, traverses a little further right to where Gate Gill begins its tumbling fall into the valley – then it too, this most stupid of RoW, takes a dive, a plunge through rocky steps and little slots. Vertiginous views of deep dank gully walls like sirens call. "Come..." Beware!

It only takes a few minutes to negotiate this initial drop off, and it was with some relief I caught up the group resting after the worst of the first descent. Two couples, and to my amazement a pappoose and cuddled babe. I'm sure she knew naught of this, her first mountain adventure, snuggled close

to mum who'd kept her safe. My own adrenaline still pumping, I perhaps greeted them with too much haste – my enquiries perhaps too challenging as I asked who their navigator was – I almost forgot to introduce myself and explain my credentials. But it was obvious they'd just been discussing their experience. Mr Navigator, looking somewhat abashed, produced his faithful android. Justly indignant at the suggestion he and his little group should not be there and defending his ability to follow the path, he showed me his smart phone screen. Sure enough, the location icon sat plumb on the map's green dashed line, bang on route!

They heard me out, as I urged them not to traverse the ridge northwards but to continue down to the campsite far below. Turning north across the ridge, parallel, but now much below LWR, would appear easy at first but leads to more crags and a morass of vegetation covered blocky scree. It would be better now the worst was over, to continue down. I left them still gathering their wits and by example walked out the safest route.

I hope I've not described an enticing adventure. It's by no means impossible, but there is just no way this RoW can be upheld as a safe or navigable way for walkers. It is intrinsically dangerous and if it becomes too popular will result in more accidents and put mountain rescue personal in danger going to assist.

I hope this tale of paths and maps is informative and prompts you to question where you go. The first rule of navigation is "observation." Trust your eyes and common sense. Look at alternative map providers like Harveys – whose leisure maps have simple cartography showing RoW less boldly and discernible tracks more clearly. Ask yourself, what do you want from maps – which format and scale work best for what you do? Don't rely on digital alone, phones sometimes fail when you need them most. Remember the Right Way is just occasionally Wrong.

Go where you will, but please don't take The Lemming Road.

Nuala Dowie