

The footpaths in Eaves Wood, Mytholm, Hebden Bridge

***Dedicating historic paths as rights of way: submission
by Hebden Bridge Walkers Action***



Summary

This submission to Calderdale MBC proposes that the council should designate a number of historic footpaths, including sets of carefully constructed flights of steps and wide woodland 'promenades' in Eaves Wood as public rights of way, and add them to the definitive map. The wood is in the ownership of Calderdale MBC itself.

This submission argues:

- There is ample evidence that the paths in Eaves Wood have been enjoyed freely by the public for very many years
- These paths would almost certainly be identified under forthcoming 'lost ways' research as potentially lost rights of way
- Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action believes that a formal claim, were one to be made, has a very strong likelihood of success
- Because of the considerable expenditure of officers' time and effort inherent in any formal claim, it would be preferable to fast-track these paths on to the footpath map, through voluntary dedication by Calderdale MBC, as landowner.

Background

The paths through Eaves Wood, in Heptonstall parish on the east flank of the Colden river valley, have long been enjoyed by local people. The elaborate sets of landscaped 'avenues', 'promenades' and steps through the woods are reminiscent of Victorian picturesque landscaping, although the origins of these works is not clear. Local stories are that the work of construction may have been carried out as an employment creation initiative, perhaps during the Great Cotton Famine (1862-4) or during the 1920s.

The woods, predominantly of beech trees, are beautiful in themselves, but the avenues of paths add to the interest and pleasure for walkers. This is a 'hidden gem' in the upper Calder valley. The status of the paths, at present unclear, needs to be clarified to ensure public enjoyment of the woods in perpetuity.

Eaves Wood footpaths and the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000

Under recent legislation, historic paths and tracks enjoyed by the public which are not currently on definitive maps must be claimed by 2026, after which the public use of these routes is lost for ever.

Natural England, and before it the Countryside Agency, has established a Discovering Lost Ways initiative and is employing consultants to undertake archive research work to identify potential paths which should be recognised as

rights of way (so-called 'lost ways'). This work is not expected to reach West Yorkshire for a considerable time. Independently, Calderdale MBC itself now has an officer in post whose work is to use old documentary evidence to identify possible 'lost ways'.

The voluntary sector is also engaged in this work. The Ramblers' Association nationally has launched a Forgotten Paths project. In Calderdale, Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action, in conjunction with Hebden Bridge Local History Society, also plans a long-term initiative identifying possible lost ways in the Hebden Bridge area. This was the theme of a workshop held at Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action's successful Walkers' Day event on February 18th, 2007.

The claims process

At present the mechanism for processing claims for lost ways remains that in force under the Highways Act 1980, requiring detailed documentary evidence (for example, old maps) and/or evidence of public usage.

Calderdale MBC currently has a backlog of some seventy claims outstanding, which is expected to take several years to clear.

Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action is convinced that the footpaths in Eaves Wood would be identified as potential lost ways when research work is undertaken in the Hebden Bridge area. It has already begun to build up a set of documentary evidence about these paths, and if the recommendations of this current submission are not accepted, it will proceed to seek additional evidence of usage and will enter a formal claim for these paths to be designated.

However, where landowners are willing to dedicate paths as rights of way voluntarily, the process is very much less time-consuming and convoluted.

Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action believes that there is ample evidence that the paths in Eaves Wood have been enjoyed freely by the public for very many years, and that a formal claim for footpath designation has a very strong likelihood of success. However, because of the considerable expenditure of officers' time and effort inherent in any formal claim (and the additional efforts of members of the community), it would be preferable if these paths were voluntarily dedicated as rights of way by Calderdale MBC, as landowner.

Implications of designation

Calderdale MBC, as the highway authority, acquires the responsibility for maintaining newly designated footpaths. In this instance, almost all the paths

through Eaves Wood are already in excellent condition. (The one exception, the southern 'loop', reference (g) below, is well-engineered and structurally in good condition, but is currently in places overgrown). Limited new signing might be necessary. Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action is not in favour of large-scale interpretation boards, etc, but believes that it might be appropriate to link designation of the paths with production of a leaflet about the woods.

Designation of Eaves Wood as access land

It is also possible for Calderdale MBC to consider designating the area of woodland at Eaves Wood in its ownership as access land, using the voluntary powers available under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. This step would be additional to that proposed in this submission. Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action would be happy to discuss this further with Calderdale MBC but recommends that initially the focus is kept to the paths and tracks.

More information

This submission has been written by Andrew Bibby, chair of Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action, c/o 2 Hebble End, Hebden Bridge, HX7 6HJ (01422 844026). Comprehensive information about Hebden Bridge Walkers Action can be found at www.hbwalkersaction.org.uk

Appendix

Details in full of the paths for which designation is sought.

Currently, two rights of way run the length of Eaves Wood, one at the top (where it forms part of the Calderdale Way) and one at the lower end of the wood (this is an ancient highway, shown on old maps as Old Gate).

The paths for which designation is sought make up a complex mesh of tracks and steps, but for convenience can be identified as follows.

a) A wide 'avenue' or 'promenade' which leaves the Old Gate footpath at approximately GR 984278. It runs at a gentle gradient in a broadly northerly direction, turns at a hair-pin, and continues in a south-easterly direction diagonally up the hillside (see photo below) to emerge close to the bottom of Hell Hole Rocks.



b) A path made up of several flights of small steps linked by much more level stretches which leaves this 'promenade' to the right almost immediately, to meet up with it again half way up the hillside, at what is here being called the 'main

junction'. This path appears to be shown on the 1851 Ordnance Survey map. The path is shown in the photo below.



c) A flight of small steps, with more level stretches, which leaves (b) shortly after it begins, and joins (a) close to the top of the wood, near Hell Hole Rocks. This path also appears to be shown on the 1851 OS map.

d) A long flight of small steps and more level stretches heading right through the wood from the Old Gate path (roughly at GR 983279). It begins opposite the ginnel between houses in the Eaves estate. It emerges on to the Calderdale Way just to the north of the path from Heptonstall village. It crosses (a) in two places, and meets path (b) at the 'main junction'. This path also appears to be shown on the 1851 OS map. Photo below.



(e) A long avenue which leaves the main 'promenade' at the 'main junction' and heads northwards up the hill, eventually meeting the Calderdale Way close to the lane from Slack Top to Lumb Bank (photo below).



f) A flight of steps which leaves (a) and meets up with (d) near the top of the wood. Photo below.



g) Two well-constructed parallel terraced 'promenades' at the south-west end of the woods owned by Calderdale MBC which meet up half-way up the hillside, creating an out-and-back loop. These paths are shown on the 1851 OS map. The paths are in places overgrown.