

## Parish Paths: Past & Present

Even a cursory glance at a large scale Ordnance Survey map reveals just how many paths and tracks crisscross the countryside, not just in Chalford but across the UK.

Footpaths are one of man's oldest inscriptions on the landscape; some significant enough to be visible from space even thousands of years ago. The 5000 year old Ridgeway, an early trading route, probably existed when England was still connected to continental Europe, and the Thames a tributary of the Rhine. The 3000 year old Cotswold Way was an essential connector to the many Hill Forts along the steep Cotswold edge, all facing foes coming up the River Severn and from Wales. Most tarmacked roads today first came into existence as footpaths.

Up to the mid 1800's footpaths were mainly used by local people, as it was rare for most people to travel for more than a day's walk from home. Indeed, there were laws preventing travel for greater distances, and from 1388 letters of passage were required for people wishing to go further, such as pilgrims, messengers, pedlars and drovers, with only the military, nobles, the gentry and major landowners exempt.

Leisure use is not entirely the new phenomena sometimes assumed, as some of the middle and upper classes from the late 18thC onwards were attracted to the countryside to see sites of antiquity, enjoy picturesque views and natural features such as waterfalls, cliffs and exposed rocks. (A fascinating account of the evolution of local paths can be found in *The Old Paths of Gloucestershire*, by Alan Pilbeam.)

Here in Chalford most of our paths date from the 17thC when our community first came into being. Bisley was a major centre of power and wealth and many paths from Chalford head straight there. In the valley, with the first houses built on the steep Rack Hill slope, daily access to them by narrow and steep paths was the only option and conveniently just a short walk to work in the mills in the valley. With the advent of the car some questioned whether these historic paths would remain relevant and needed. Fortunately the reforming post WW2 Government defined them as part of the highway network which means that they are now legally protected, and under the overall responsibility of Gloucestershire County Council (GCC).

Up to the 1990's there was a team of footpath inspectors based in Shire Hall, who checked every path in their patch, identified problems and repairs, and passed a list of jobs to the direct labour force who would do the work.

Today is a more complex scene. There is more involvement by parish councils, communities and volunteers. Money for materials is often from multiple sources. We are one of 56 parishes who share the services of a GCC footpath officer, who has a miniscule repairs budget (averaging just £200 per parish per year), with no time to inspect paths but still an essential source of expert advice and sometimes cash or spare materials.

That is why you may have noticed on Thursday mornings a band of local footpath volunteers working on our paths with shovels, loppers and wheelbarrows. Recent improvements across the 30 kms of parish paths include tackling muddy stretches by laying a hard stone surface, cutting back over growing vegetation, repairing flights of steps, building and repairing wooden retaining walls and hand rails, replacing stiles with kissing gates or self closing gates, saving adjacent walls from destruction by removing out of control ivy, and even filling the occasional pot hole with tarmac.

It's work without an end. And the value in free labour alone amounts to several thousand pounds a year, so a saving on everyone's council tax. For the future do keep these volunteers busy by reporting footpath problems you come across or make suggestions for improvement. Alternatively come along and join them so more can get done. Call or email the parish office (01453 887204 or [christine@chalford-glos.goc.uk](mailto:christine@chalford-glos.goc.uk))

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