

A GOOD IDEA OR A BAD IDEA, by Marian Bythell

Have you ever considered that what was thought as a good idea by one person could be considered a bad one by another?

Take for example the decision by authoritative bodies such as The National Trust or the Lake District National Park Authority to renovate paths in the Lake District.

We regularly walk from Grange in Borrowdale over the fells to Honister Slate Mine. This is a beautiful path through woodlands which ascends gradually and then steeply past Castle Crag. A stream runs delightfully between boulders, large and small along the path and when looking up as you ascend, is a lovely glittering sight of running water.

Over the years, due to erosion and the large numbers of walkers using the path, care needs to be taken either going up or coming down.

However, one year we visited we were perturbed to see that a man-made staircase of stones had been laid over a large area. When the moss gets slippery, more care is needed. This particular year in driving rain, we started to climb up the steep path. As some of the treads are particularly narrow, and for a woman I take a large size seven in boots, my foot only stepped on half a tread of rock. Each step had to be negotiated with fierce concentration as otherwise you would slip and fall. It was hard on the ankles and knees being much longer than the average home staircase but worst of all, you couldn't take in the view as you had to watch your feet!

As we got to Castle Crag, after about half an hour of arduous walking, we looked back as others - the elderly, families with young children, courting couples, staggered up. We were all dripping wet.

Whilst resting, I wondered what Wordsworth or Wainwright would have thought of this man-made effort – they deplored the huge numbers visiting “their” territory.

Suffice it to say that our return journey, much later on having walked to Honister Slate Mine and back, was worse.

There was no question of looking at the view during the descent; all eyes were on the various cut out narrow slabs of rock beneath our feet. And no handrail of course that you get on normal stairs. A lot of limestone rocks had jagged edges, beautiful in grey colour and texture but painful if you fell on them. Some stepped rocks were so close together you had to miss one or two out. It was useless hanging on to another person in case you both ended up with sore bottoms or legs.

The only way was to tread carefully in a zig zag fashion, some of the loose rubble skidding under your boots.

I know that something has to be done to stop erosion but in my mind stepped man-made paths are a bad idea and they look out of place in the countryside. There are scores of paths like these in the Lake District where man has taken over nature.

However, take another example of man's efforts. There is a large stretch of boardwalk between Manesty and Lodore over the bottom end of Derwentwater in Cumbria which prevents your feet getting wet over the marshy ground. Yes, a good idea but in certain places the boardwalk is covered in metal meshing and can be slippery in wet conditions. Boots kicked against it loosen the mesh creating holes and nasty falls could occur. The children love it of course and small “laybys” of extra planks on the wooden walkways allow dogs and people to stand aside as others pass. A

friendly way of saying “hello.” I welcomed the boardwalk at one time as muddy, marshy, wet areas became very difficult to negotiate over large areas and we used to take other tracks and long detours to overcome the muddy marshes. What I don’t like now is a new stretch of boardwalk. They have introduced a black walkway consisting of recycled material. It looks like tar, could be re-cycled car tyres or even plastic bags (there have been several suggestions from walkers we’ve talked to.) I don’t like the look of it. It is the sheer blackness. It seems out of keeping with the gentle area of land and water.

Yes, what seems to be a good idea to some people is a bad one for others, particularly me!

To come closer to home, that is my home, we regularly walk our lovely footpaths in the Cheshire countryside and in particular a stepped path, which incidentally is also man made but somehow looks natural, between hedged banks and leads to views over the Cheshire Plain. This we’ve traversed for thirty one years. Having reached a metal gate after a short steep ascent, you look back at breathtaking views. Unfortunately on one side, where the best views are, a wire fence has been erected to protect the walker from wandering cattle across the field. This seemed fair enough but now tall growing hedges along the entire length of the wire fence have been planted blocking views over the plain and our own village. We used to have fun trying to pinpoint our own home and neighbours. It is possible now to make out our house but as the hedges become taller, they will blot our view. We can only presume they were planted to promote wild life.

Once again, a good idea to some local authority but a bad idea for someone else – me. Summing up, perhaps I am just a grumpy old woman!