

PUCK'S GLEN

Accessibility Case Studies

There are two trails at this popular site in Argyll Forest Park, both graded "strenuous". The Eckford House Trail is a 2 ¼ mile (3.7 km) route, largely on forest roads, through forests with fine displays of rhododendron to viewpoints over the surrounding countryside. But the main attraction is the Puck's Glen Gorge Trail, 1 ¾ miles (2.8 km) long, that follows a burn up a spectacular rocky gorge. The path is often a narrow ledge in the moss-covered gorge wall; tree roots run across it in many places and there are several flights of rocky steps. It crosses the burn on numerous footbridges and passes close

to waterfalls and pools. From the top of the gorge, the trail joins the Eckford House Trail to return to the car park.

The glen has been a well-known beauty spot for many years. In the 1870s, sugar merchant, scientist and art-collector James Duncan, who owned the Benmore Estate, built the first formal path up the gorge. He spent a lot of money on the project, aiming to create a romantically wild experience for himself and his guests. Some of the original retaining walls are still there, defining the course of the burn.

MANAGEMENT AT PUCK'S GLEN

The site's character depends on the same experience that James Duncan wanted to create: a magical, enchanting place, with a sense of adventure as you explore the narrow, twisting path. It would be impossible to create an "easy" or even "moderate" grade trail in the gorge itself without destroying that essential character. It would also be prohibitively expensive, since trees would have to be cleared from steep, uneven ground where access is difficult, and long ramp sections cut into the gorge sides.

Although it's not possible to make trails like this fully accessible, we still aim to offer full physical access to some extent at each site, and to make sure we work towards the "least restrictive options" based on consultation, evidence and cost.

At Puck's Glen, the first part of the trail leads along the old road between Dunoon and Strachur, passing a number of log cabin-style holiday homes, before turning to wind up the gorge at a bridge. This section does offer access for visitors who are less mobile: it's level and firm, and from the bridge you can get a taste of the gorge's scenery. It's important that



Steep steps and narrow paths are part of the glen's essential atmosphere.

clear information about options like this is available off-site, such as on websites and in leaflets, as well as on any panels or other media on-site. With the right information, people can decide for themselves if they want to visit, and whether a trail is suitable for them.

After the bridge, the trail is managed to make sure that Puck's Glen retains its unique character while allowing people to enjoy it and be safe. That means taking a flexible approach to issues such as tree clearance, and can sometimes involve dealing with problems in unconventional ways. It also means balancing management effort with the available budget. The main focus is on providing a high quality experience along the promoted route in the lower section of the gorge, although an informal path continues further up the glen.



The first, easy access section of the trail leads to a bridge from where you can get a good impression of the glen, even if you can't go any further.





A stretch of the old Dunoon road offers a short, easy access option. A subtle chicane prevents access by vehicles.



Handrails are finished with wrought iron ends that are in keeping with the high quality environment.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Monitoring is a vital part of site management. A risk assessment is carried out every year on mature trees that overhang the log cabins along the first stretch of the trail. Each of them is marked, and GPS records of their location let a specialist arboriculturist keep track of their state and any branch removal that might be needed. The footbridges over the burn are inspected annually by a civil engineer.

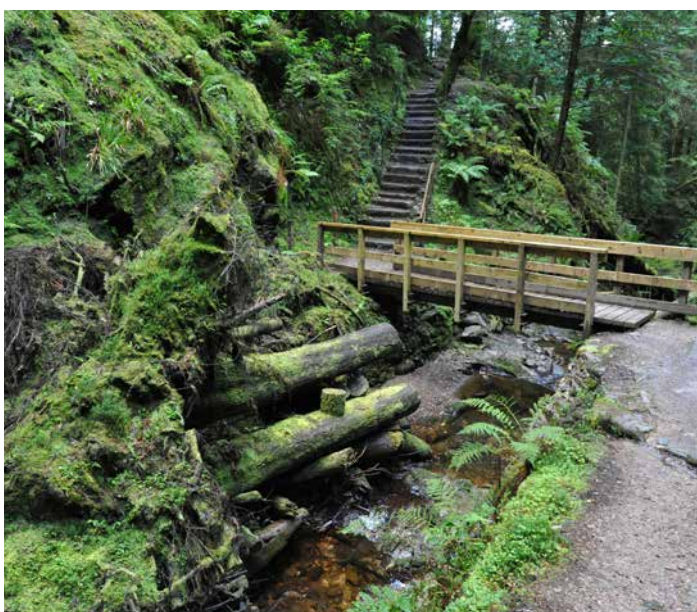
In addition to these formal checks, the entire trail is inspected every three months by Forest Enterprise Scotland staff. "We're always on the lookout for fallen trees that might block the water flow," says David Robertson, Recreation Manager for the Argyll Forest Park. "If the burn surges around them, it can damage the retaining walls or undercut the path."

But decisions about what to do after those inspections need a sensitive approach. The glen is full of trees that grow right on the edge of the gorge: in places it's difficult to know whether the gorge side is made from rock or tree roots. Some of these trees might well fall into the gorge at some point, but wherever possible they're left in place because clearing them would change the character of the place.

The retaining walls first built in the 19th century are repaired constantly. When small landslips occur, new walls are built using as much local stone as possible so the repair fits in.



Discrete handrails help visitors feel secure as they explore.



It's very difficult to remove large stumps and root plates, but if they're kept clear of the burn they can become part of the glen's character.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULTIES

Another issue is the challenge of how to deal with trees that fall naturally or have to be cut down. It's very difficult to get large chunks of timber out of the steep-sided gorge, so if possible the main stems are moved out of the way of the burn and left in place. As the trunks get covered in moss, they add to the atmosphere.

Sometimes unconventional methods are called for. A few years ago, a large tree fell into the gorge, leaving a thick trunk and a wide root plate that could potentially have blocked the burn. Before anything could be done, the root plate needed to be separated from the trunk, but it was impossible for a chain saw operator to get safe access to it. David explains how the problem was solved: "We have a good working relationship with the Army, and they help us out sometimes. They blew the root plate off the trunk with explosives, leaving us with pieces we could move into safe positions."

Forest Enterprise Scotland staff do most of the maintenance and construction work in the glen, but there are exceptions. In many places, a metal handrail runs along the path, creating a barrier on the edge of a steep drop, or giving a sense of security along steps or narrow sections. It's finished with attractive wrought iron end-pieces, made by a contractor, that turn the rail into a specially-tailored piece of furniture rather than a crude, standard safety item.



Small landslips are stabilised with walls built from local stone, so they blend in with their surroundings.



Large trees grow right against the edge of the gorge and the path. It can be hard to tell whether the gorge wall is made from rock or tree.



“If we took a more active approach to every possible risk in the glen, I believe it would be against the ethos of the place. Our work is about being sensitive to what’s here, and making it safe to enjoy without sanitising it.”

**David Robertson,
Recreation Manager**



KEY LEARNING POINTS

- Path management needs to be sensitive to the essential qualities of the site.
- Taking too strict an approach to potential risks can destroy the atmosphere that makes a place unique.
- Not all trails can or should be fully accessible. The goal is for the land manager to provide "least restrictive options" for everyone.
- Work towards the least restrictive option, based on consultation and evidence.
- Regular monitoring and inspection is an essential part of good management.
- Unexpected partners can help deal with difficult situations.
- Clear, accurate information is important in helping people decide whether to visit a site and how well they would be able to use it once there. Provide information in accessible formats, off-site and on-site, that allows people to decide for themselves.

Countryside for All

Standards for paths that will make the countryside accessible for all are published by the Fieldfare Trust. Developed through the BT Countryside for All project, the standards cover specifications for features such as surface, width, gradient and cross slope.

Because people expect different types of path in different countryside settings, the standards are designed to help you develop accessible paths that are appropriate and sympathetic to the location. Near towns and around intensively managed sites, for example, people expect better paths than they would in open country or wild land.

You'll find details of the standards on the Fieldfare Trust's website at www.fieldfare.org.uk. The first step is to assess the right setting for your site through a few simple questions that will help you place it in the "Urban and formal", "Urban fringe and managed" or "Rural and working landscape" category. You can then download detailed path specifications for the relevant category.

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