

Footpaths

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[From the editors: we have reposted this from the early days of the site last year, as there seems to be a theme developing in the site regarding landscape, moving through space, and the politics of embodying place....more to come]

Footpaths: In England and Wales the statutory definition of a footpath is a right of way over which the public have a right to pass and repass by foot only.

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The essential element of the footpath is the human interaction with it. Henri Lefebvre wrote of how social and mental activity embeds its network on the landscape and this is clearly evidenced in the historical use and pattern of footpaths which has changed from a mainly economic to a recreational usage. Once people used the local paths crossing fields and woods in order to walk to work, to shop, go to church or visit the pub. From the late eighteenth century, with the improvements in roads and transport, walking was increasingly viewed as a romantic pastime; its popularity influenced by poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge and writers such as Jane Austen whose novel Emma is interlaced with footpaths both literal and metaphorical.

But their use has also been one of a convoluted history between landholders and the landless. Footpaths are not the property of the underlying landholders yet their sites continue to be contested. For nearly 200 years certain landholders have denied or hidden access and, pressure groups and organisations such as the Ramblers have by campaigning and walking conserved the footpaths. Footpaths have become heritage sites; they are part of a cultural appreciation of landscapes often still aestheticized with Romantic notions of the picturesque where a sought terra incognita becomes a place made intimate by the act of walking the path. An individual may find solitude, to explore the places within as well as without. Other people relax and walk companionably, sharing their thoughts; some come to jog, or walk with their dogs. Such occasions

may lead to a sense of well-being and becoming entwined with place. They are a part of Paul Adams' continuum of light peripatetic to dark peripatetic; the latter being associated with hypersensitivity and self absorption where in walking the footpath one may experience walking on the margins, if not outside, of society.

Footpaths partake in Merleau-Ponty's "simultaneous patterning of body and world in emotion" (2002). Some footpaths are a way of holding the past; their way markers totem-like, rising in the landscape as Certeau ghosts (1998). Others are a source of storytelling, where footpaths subjectively read by the body and a heightened synaesthesia of the senses offer possible interpretations of human embodiment in the landscape, both past and present. For what is brought to the footpath, emotions, hopes, helplessness, may be transformed by the path's agency, its materiality and the rhythms induced when walking.

Additional Reading

- Adams, Paul C. (2001). 'Peripatetic Imagery and Peripatetic Sense of Place' in Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher and Karen E. Till (eds.) *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
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- Edensor, Tim (2000). 'Walking in the British Countryside: 'Reflexivity Embodied Practices and Ways to Escape'', *Body & Society* Vol. 6, Issue 3: 81-106.
- Jarvis, Robin (2000). *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
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- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (2005). *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge Classics.
- Tilley, Christopher (1994). *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments*. Oxford: Berg.