

A Footpath Pilgrims Progress September 2015

Introduction

This is the first of what I hope will be an occasional series aimed at people that have or intend to work on the Footpath Project under the auspices of the Friends of Mount Athos. Many of you, having been on the project in the past might be interested to hear of the progress that has been made and what is intended in the future.

What started in 2000 as a path clearing expedition has grown amazingly and now encompasses some 50km of footpath which is regularly cleared, to suite a fat monk on a donkey for those of you that remember the early days. The project also encompasses signage, footpath descriptions of over 200km and a very substantial mapping project. Each of these topics is covered later in more detail.

It has not been possible for the Prince of Wales to join us in recent years but he still takes a keen interest in progress and at a recent gathering at Highgrove, he recalled the "bacon" incident without prompting.

We have not openly circulated the email addresses for security reasons but should you wish to be put in touch with friends or acquaintances from the project, please get back to me. We would also like to encourage informal reunions. These already take place in the West Country and we would be please to help arrange more.

I have attached the current Footpath Condition List which is on the website www.athosfriends.org together with the current Footpath Descriptions. Do have a look as I am sure you will be impressed with the progress that has been made.

John Arnell <john@TheArnells.org>
September 2015



Progress this Year and Plans

FoMA – 2015 path-clearing pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain



Twenty FoMA members from 5 countries took part in the 2015 Footpaths Project pilgrimage between 8th and 24th May. We divided the group into four, and, as usual, tried to ensure that each person spent time in two different monasteries. The monasteries that welcomed us were Vatopedi, Hilandar, Zographou, Konstamonitou, Koutloumousiou, Dionysiou, Grigoriou, Pantokrator, and, for the first time, Great Lavra and Profitis Ilias.

Over the years, the project has added to the footpaths it describes and maintains, so we now have over 240km of described routes covering much of the Holy Mountain. Many of these are along roads and tracks, and there is some duplication within the various routes, so, fortunately, only about 50km needs regular clearing.

Work completed included clearing to a high standard those footpaths that get the most use, for instance Vatopedi to Zographou. Less used footpaths, such as Hilandar to Zographou, were checked and cleared sufficiently to allow pilgrims to pass easily. New signposts and way-marks were installed, and existing signposts checked. In addition members of the team helped the monasteries as requested, including clearing paths to cells, clearing an old vineyard, and offering a legal opinion on a contract.

We also tested the new map being prepared by Peter Howorth and will be supplying corrections and suggestions to him along with GPS tracks and other information.

It is encouraging to hear that the number of people using the paths continues to grow, albeit slowly, and to find that an increasing number of the monks are not only aware but also very supportive of our efforts.

The footpath descriptions are currently available in English and Greek, and there is clearly a demand for Russian, Serbian and Bulgarian translations. Hopefully we will be able to find volunteers to make these.

Thanks are due to many people and organisations. In no particular order, these are the Holy Epistasia for supporting the project, the monasteries that hosted teams, SETE for funding and arranging travel, and the path-clearers for hard work and good companionship. Particular thanks goes to Dimitris Bakalis for his firm and unstinting support.

For the future, there are three issues that need attention in order that the Footpaths Project continues successfully:

To widen the pool of volunteers to include fitter and younger members. Walking and working on the footpaths in the southern half of the Holy Mountain and on the remote section of the ridge path from Karyes to Esphigmenou is challenging, so needs a good level of fitness and stamina.

To find and encourage future team leaders. This year there were only 4 out of 20 members who had leadership skills and the necessary level of knowledge of the Holy Mountain. We have identified two potential future leaders within this year's team, but would like to have more.

To find and train replacements for David Bayne and Andrew Buchanan over the next two years. Both will continue to support and work for the project, but feel that their years of 'active service' are numbered.

Planning for the 2016 pilgrimage will start in November. At this stage the dates are uncertain due to Pascha being on 1st May 2016, and the possibility that space in the monasteries may be limited due to an expected influx of pilgrims and VIPs to celebrate 1000 years of Russian presence.

Overall the project is in good shape. Despite the amount of work needed on the paths, it still fulfils its other purpose of allowing participants to experience Orthodox monastic life, to share worship, and to build their knowledge and understanding of orthodoxy and the Holy Mountain.

Andrew Buchanan <andrew.buchanan@uwclub.net>
30th May 2015



An Update on planning for the FoMA Footpaths Project 2016

The 2016 path-clearing pilgrimage is likely to be from Saturday 28th May to Saturday 11th June, plus travel days at either end. We usually arrive on the Holy Mountain three weeks after orthodox Easter, but next year we'll be going a week later. This is to avoid clashing with the large number of pilgrims expected around 22nd May for the anniversary celebrations of 1,000 years of Russian presence on Athos.

Since returning from this year's trip, we've been taking stock of what has been achieved so far, and thinking about how the project might need to change in the coming years. There's no doubt that we have achieved a lot – a network of described and signed footpaths that allow pilgrims to walk safely between the monasteries. What is clear is that there are now few important paths that need re-opening, so much of our work has become, and will remain, maintenance rather than clearing. It's also become obvious that certain paths are used far more than others, so, with the monasteries, we're beginning to decide which paths should be maintained to a high standard, and which should be kept clear and easy to find.

As our network of paths has grown, one challenge we face is that working on a number of the newer ones involves walking significant distances in challenging terrain. For some of the more mature path-clearers, including me, this can be difficult, so we are keen to attract younger members to the team. If you know any younger men who you think might like to come path-clearing, please talk to them about the Footpaths Project.

We're aware that many FoMA members, especially younger ones, have family and work commitments that make it difficult to spend a full fortnight on the Holy Mountain. So, in 2016 we are going to offer a number of places for a single week instead of two weeks.

To make organisation and transport easier, we'd like to keep to the usual Sunday changeover day, so the single weeks would be Saturday 28th May – Sunday 5th June and Sunday 5th June – Saturday 11th June.

We hope that the same monasteries that welcomed us this year will have space for us in 2016. We also hope that the 2016 team will include many experienced 'footpath warriors' alongside newer recruits. There will certainly be plenty of work on the easier paths for older hands.

Planning for the 2016 will start in earnest at the beginning of November, so you can expect the call for the 2016 team to be emailed out by mid-November. God willing, I'll be leading the team again.

Andrew Buchanan <andrew.buchanan@uwclub.net>
31st August 2015



The Project to Map the Holy Mountain

Several years ago, the Footpath Project did investigate the possibility of a collaboration with a Greek company in the production of a new map as it was appreciated that this required considerable knowledge of the area and presence on the ground to enable the footpaths and roads to be tracked and added to the basic geography, something which the Footpath Project could offer. This initiative came to nothing.

The Map

In 2009, Peter Howorth, a New Zealander with some experience of mapping, joined the team. With the support and encouragement of the other team members, he started to pull together the GPS tracking data that had been collected on that and previous expeditions. Peter then began building a new map, using data from NASA, Ktimatologio, AIR-BUS, and on past maps which enabled him to lay down the contours and other features onto which the GPS and other data could be placed. Over 300 gps tracks have been collected by FoMA. This allowed the routes of the FoMA described footpaths to be clearly shown with way-marks indicating significant points along the routes. It must be emphasised that producing and developing the map has been and continues to be a very substantial task which involved Peter in a considerable amount of learning and financial investment, both in terms of equipment and supplies.

An early version of the map was produced for the team to trial in 2012. It was apparent that considerably more work was necessary to achieve an acceptable level of overall accuracy but those parts of the map covered by the footpaths teams were tested and refined. Further testing of an improved version took place during the 2013 Footpaths Expedition, as well as a set of maps of individual footpaths containing way-marks linked to the instructions contained in the Footpath Descriptions.

Work has since continued both to improve the accuracy of the map and to make it available in a range of languages.

I have attached a copy of one page from the current draft which we hope will be available in the coming months both as a 1:25,000 atlas together with a gazetteer and a 1:40,000 map

From Peter Howorth

In 2000 I was approached by a cousin of my father-in-law to draw some maps for the re-publication of his 1951 book of his wartime exploits - "Dare to be Free". This fellow, Sandy Thomas, had lied about his age, joined up, and was wounded and captured during the Battle of Crete. He subsequently escaped from a prison hospital in Thessaloniki, and walked to the Holy Mountain. He was sheltered there for some months until he was able to escape from there to Turkey.

The place fascinated me, and I discovered the Friends of Mount Athos, and determined to try and join the path-clearers.

David Bayne was on my first trip, and after learning what brought me, handed me a cd full of gps tracks, and suggested that a map was needed.

The maps I did for the book were simple tracings. I have since become the world's most inexperienced cartographer and have had great support from that community, particularly the Mountain Cartography Group of the International Cartographic Association.

The whole enterprise has now become a major involvement, with significant investment in software, printers and time; and great fun. I have met many amazing people both on and off the Mountain and consider myself blessed.

Peter Howorth <peterh@slingshot.co.nz>
August 2015

The Footpath Descriptions

FOLLOWING THE FOOTPATHS OF THE HOLY MOUNTAIN

Like almost every new member of the footpaths team, one of the first things that struck me when I first joined the expedition in 2006 was how few pilgrims were using the paths that we were so laboriously and lovingly clearing. It was later that year that I met with John Arnell to discuss what practical steps we might take to overcome this. This marked the start of two ongoing FoMA initiatives – the provision of signs and the creation of footpath descriptions.

Descriptions started in a small way during the expedition of May 2007. A few of us were given time off path-clearing to walk some of the more common paths around Vatopedi and Pantokrator armed with GPS handsets to measure the distances between key points. Indeed, I recall one relaxing day walking from Vatopedi to Esphigmenou and back while the rest of the team were slaving away clearing sections of the path I was walking.

We noted down the various directions we had to take along the way, using the format employed by travel companies that offer unaccompanied walking holidays (some of which we had been on in the past). Many of the results were fed into John Arnell's laptop during the trip; the rest were computerised once we got home. Given that each path has to be described in each direction, we ended up with some 24 descriptions of varying quality. Later that year, Bob Allison, FoMA's webmaster, put those in which we had reasonable confidence onto the FoMA website so that they were available to the world at large.

A similar process has continued each year since those early days. Gradually the number of descriptions has grown – following the May 2015 expedition there are now 76 descriptions for 38 paths, covering the full length of the peninsula. Each year, each monastery team is given a prioritised list of which paths to check and the opportunity to create new descriptions. Each year changes are needed whether as a result of winter storm damage or man-made developments such as new roads.



While the original descriptions were only in English, more recently, Dimitris Bakalis has translated them into Greek, as well as contributing a considerable number of additional descriptions of his own. The FoMA website now contains separate, but linked, footpath sections in both languages. While to start with Bob Allison put a great deal of work into developing the footpaths section and keeping it up to date, he has since subcontracted this work to Dimitris and me. Check out the latest information at www.athosfriends.org/footpaths/footpaths_chart/ or www.athosfriends.org/footpathsGR/footpaths_chartGR/

Is it all worthwhile? While still not huge, certainly the number of pilgrims using the footpaths has increased, though much of this is no doubt for other reasons. But we meet – or get messages from - lots of pilgrims who have used FoMA descriptions, and thank us for what we provide, and no doubt this helps spread the word. And generating and maintaining the descriptions has certainly been a worthwhile activity for me.

And what for the future? We are actively seeking to expand the number of languages, in particular Russian and East European, in order to cater for the increasing number of such pilgrims. Nicholas Fennell has generously translated some of the more important routes into Russian and these have been supplied to Vatopedi. It would be a much bigger commitment, however, for other languages to be maintained on the website. We are aiming to provide both GPS tracking and way-marked map extracts to the website for each path in due course.

I, for one, am enormously grateful to all those team members who each year carry out the vital task of checking the continued validity of each description and those, especially Dimitris, who contribute new routes. This needs to continue if the quality is to be maintained. But after 10 years, I do not expect to be part of the 2016 footpaths expedition so that someone now needs to be found to oversee this work on the ground. Who is prepared to volunteer?

David Bayne <david.Bayne3@BTInternet.com>
September 2015

An Advertising Feature

Holidays in the Pelion

Having heard of our great accomplishments, a group in the Pelion, engaged in a similar project have asked for volunteers to work on their kalderimi AND, you can take your wife/partner AND get a discount at the hotel. Contact;

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Reflections

FRIENDS OF MOUNT ATHOS
PATH-CLEARING PARTY, 2015-08-14

Although I have joined the last few Friends' Pilgrimages with immense enjoyment, this is the first year that I have made time to insert myself onto the Footpath Clearing Scheme. It had been a minor ambition of mine to do so before I became too old and enfeebled to contribute anything worthwhile, and I found myself amongst about twenty people from a huge variety of backgrounds, some young, some old, only one of whom I already knew, but all of whom I came to value as friends by the time we had finished our fortnight.

Those who could stride out, carrying their luggage on their backs, were separated from us at the very beginning, and seem to have cleared an enormous number of paths. I, however, was billeted at The Great and Holy Monastery of Vatopedi, where, along with one other, I was privileged to remain for the entire time. Most stayed there for the first week only, and were then replaced with a second group in order to give people the chance to see different monasteries. This was of no great concern to me, because although there are some which I have never visited on the seven times I have journeyed to Athos in the past.

I was delighted to be able to be at one where the buildings are so interesting, the architecture studied and worked on in such carefully considered campaigns of renovation and redecoration; where the relics of the saints and holy icons are so wonderful and the outstanding artistic treasures of the past are conserved and displayed impeccably. We were not there, of course, specifically to study any of this, but in the hours when we were not working or sleeping, it was inspiring to be worshipping in such traditional splendour, welcomed at all times by this extraordinary community of hospitable monks who reckon to feed 400 people each day. In the refectory, rebuilt in 1785 on its original site, we were eating from stone tables brought in the tenth century from the seventh-century monastery of the Studion in Constantinople, though long before that originating in Roman palaces, as witness the fact that hardly two matched each other. Of the 39 satellite chapels we saw, many were themselves of outstanding interest, and everywhere it was a joy to walk amongst the picturesque mixture of buildings, being able to browse in a really good bookshop, or to walk down to the arsenals and port.

Our day began before 6 a.m., when we got up and prepared for breakfast at 6.30 and departure by car at 7 to wherever we were due to begin our efforts that day. It was good to be out so early, when it was not too hot to work. We had breaks every 1½ hours or so, but by lunchtime it was already becoming uncomfortably warm for expending a lot of energy unless there were tree cover, and by the time we ground to a halt at some time between 2 and 3 p.m., most of us had definitely had enough for the day, just about finding energy for the walk back to base.

When we began the clearing of the footpaths, we tried to respect the flowering plants that some of us struggle so much to grow at home, but we soon became innured to the demolition of white and pink cistus or rock roses, sage and superb broom in full flower. We realised that if we did not cut back to leave a path about three feet wide, nature would soon return with renewed vigour. Often we had to be even more ruthless and remove most of a big bush, which then had to be thrown far enough away not to cause an even more impenetrable jungle for future path-clearers.

Soon, those with back problems learned to specialise in overhead work, cutting, mostly with loppers, all that overhung within reach, or wielding saws to remove trees that had fallen across the path or that threatened to do so. My speciality was the hook or sickle, an implement that fortunately did not seem to attract anyone else. But I use it habitually at home on grass banks all year round, so it was a natural choice, and I have learned to rest my left arm on my thigh whilst swinging it, thus avoiding too much back pain whilst being able to deal with most things at ground level. But one plant that was too tough to cut by this method if it had made a clump was what I have always known as butcher's broom, though apparently it is a member of the *Ruscus* family. It is found in really ancient woodland, which is why it is so prevalent in Athos, and is a botanical curiosity, as what appear to be leaves are flattened stems with tiny white flowers in the middle that eventually form large red berries. Though we tried to respect its antiquity, this too had to be brutally cut back in many places where it was encroaching on paths. On the other hand, a plant that I had no compunction whatever about annihilating was a spiny creeper and climber that forks in such a way that it springs whenever you try to cut it; for this the loppers were definitely more effective.

I want to pay tribute to the superbly considerate leadership and organisation of David Bayne and Andrew Buchanan, not only to me but to everyone each day. For me, this was particularly evident when I happened to mention how much I would like to revisit the Romanian kelli of St. George at Kolitsu or Colciu, on Vatopedi's land, having stayed there many times, 20 years and more ago. They made sure to arrange that this would happen, not once but twice, and between path-clearing, I was able to reflect, at the graves of Father Dionysios and Father John, on the inspiration that they had been to me in years gone by and on the legacy they had left behind of a household of monks so inviting that they had been allowed by Vatopedi to exceed the usual number of six. It was a real delight and privilege to be there again.

It was also interesting to see the changes since I had last visited in 1992. The awful scars of new roads that one had so much resented then have largely been very successfully absorbed into the landscape, in spite of the far greater usage of them by cars and trucks. One has to say that the availability of these roads has enabled a huge amount of restoration work to be carried out far more easily than would have been possible before, and the ability to travel more quickly has enabled monks to use time more efficiently in ways other than walking.

The new footpath maps being developed by Peter Howorth, the sign-posting and path descriptions are doing all that is possible to encourage pilgrims to walk the old paths, but the informality of the past has inevitably been partly lost. This is but a small price, I felt, to pay when one can see how splendidly Athos is thriving at present and how hopeful are the signs for the future, especially when they have made sure that relative prosperity has not been at the expense of religious observance in any way.

John McCormack <mrjam@cwgsy.net>
August 2015

THE WORLD BEYOND BRUSH CLEARING: OTHER ACTIVITIES FOR THE FoMA FOOTPATH WARRIORS

The primary work of the FoMA Footpath Warriors is, of course, work on the trails of the Holy Mountain. Trail clearing was the original task of the group, and it remains the main focus of our annual visits.

But activities during the 2015 season began to suggest some other possibilities as well. FoMA members arrive in Greece with a wide variety of ages, life experiences, and skills. Those too can be drawn upon to broaden the kinds of assistance we are able to offer the monasteries. And so during the course of this year's visit the members of our team found ourselves, sometimes willy-nilly, venturing into such other tasks as mapmaking, vineyard trimming, book editing, and providing advice on the basis of our professions back home. It occurred to several of us that work along these lines might be something that FoMA will want to consider building into future trips. There is something to be said for this. Whacking at the roots of tenacious mountain flora is all well and good, but it could be usefully leavened with other things from time to time.

We got a taste for that leavening at an early point in the trip, when we found ourselves recruited to clear away an old vineyard at Koutloumousiou, so that a new crop could be put on the land. This calls for a different and tidier sort of clearing. And it isn't nearly as easy as it sounds, by the way. Constant close decisions must be made. Some selected vines have to be singled out and saved, which means judgment calls, and the thicker parts of the severed vines have to be set aside for firewood, which means more judgment calls. This is not a job for amateurs. It is a job that was much appreciated by the monastery, however. The monk in charge of the vineyard project – Father Socrates – had been at a loss as to how he would get the work done, and this solved his problem. As another official at Koutloumousiou put it, "There are a lot of people out there who say they are our friends and supporters. But the Friends of Mount Athos are about the only ones who step up and actually do useful work."

There was also a cosmic justice in helping this particular monk. On another day our group had been checking out the fairly lengthy trail over to Philotheou. Exploring a possible alternative route on the way back, we had run into a dead end, found ourselves separated from the main trail by several hundred yards of down timber, missed our scheduled ride home, and were looking at the unwelcome prospect of a long walk back. But this was

Mount Athos, where things have a way of working out. Just as our prospects were looking distinctly fragile, a distant figure appeared on the trail below, and this turned out to be the good Father Socrates, who had decided to park the jeep and come looking for us. Work in the vineyard helped to balance that debt.

Another occasion involved quite a different kind of nonstandard work. Our team included Peter Howorth of New Zealand, who had recorded massive numbers of GPS waypoints during earlier visits. During the off-seasons he had assembled this information into a new and impressively detailed map of the Holy Mountain. This is probably destined to replace the classic Austrian topographic sheet compiled by Reinhold Zwirger – a much-admired map, but imperfect and increasingly outdated. Even in draft form, the new map proved valuable to the monks and monasteries. Peter offered it to Vatopedi, where it was gleefully accepted as an improved way of orienting the new pilgrims, and to the central administration in Karyes, which saw it as a better tool for planning.

A third nonstandard activity brought us into the world of copy-editing theology books for publication. Not a job, you might think, for a group of flora-whackers. But you would be wrong to think so. It turned out that the actual theological heavy lifting had already been completed. The relevant passage had been written out in English by Father Chrysostom, a senior monk at Koutloumousiou and a recognised authority on the issues involved. The problem was one of finding the right vernacular expression. His passage addressed the similarities in art and liturgy between Orthodox practice and the usages in early Irish Christianity. These are not topics where school English instruction is likely to have taught the relevant vocabulary. So what was wanted was a critical review and edit of the text, not being critical with regard to its substance, but rather to make sure that the written word was clear and smooth. And that is something that a FoMA team can surely provide.

A fourth category of nonstandard work involved many of the people in our group in giving advice on the basis of their professions back home. The monks have an uncanny ability to find out people's lines of work, and to draw on that where needed. So I found myself giving some suggestions on a question of American legal procedure. Harry Spry-Leverton was recruited to offer thoughts on techniques for managing one of the monastic libraries. Peter Howorth's practical skills were called upon in consultations about water and heating systems, and about the care and nurture of kiwi fruits. Roman Romansky was not called upon to perform plastic surgery, but would have done so cheerfully if the occasion had required it. (Peter might have profited from those attentions, but that's another story.)

Now, to repeat, these are no more than grace notes in the program. The main work of the Footpath Warriors is the work on the trails. But sometimes other tasks will come up that are valuable to the monasteries, and easy for us to perform. We should certainly remain alert for those opportunities.

Indeed, one such opportunity may involve non-standard work in the core area of trail maintenance itself. The Warriors might want to begin cultivating an additional set of skills – including signposting, stonework, and bridge-making – so as to begin maintaining a limited set of core trails to higher standards than now. We may be talking about five main routes of this kind – one along each coast, and three crossing trails at Hilandar, Karyes, and the desert tip of the peninsula.

This will address what is emerging as a vexing problem. Many of the present trails are only very lightly used, and they are used by Northern Europeans more than by native Greeks. But we could alter the configuration of the core trails to make them more appealing to local users. People unaccustomed to hiking may worry that they will lose the route, and so these routes could be marked with permanent, standardised blaze marks at very short intervals of a hundred yards or so. People with limited camping equipment may worry that a trail will peter out at some distant point, and so the core routes could be shown on all the commercial maps, with the assurance that they go through reliably to their destinations. People from the cities may worry that the route will be treacherous, difficult underfoot, or otherwise unattractive, and so the core routes could be physically upgraded to remove these concerns. These upgrading tasks could actually make for very satisfying work sessions, giving us something to report home with a special sense of accomplishment. For instance, putting in a bridge! Over a bottomless chasm! How cool is that?

To sum up . . . the work of the Footpath Warriors is certainly the work of trails. But our experience this past year has suggested that we might begin to broaden our idea of the kinds of work that are relevant to the trails task, both by aiding the monasteries on side projects and by making trail-walking attractive to a broader Greek public.

Neil Averitt <neil.averitt@gmail.com>
August 2015
