

# Right to ride?

What can we do to achieve and maintain the off-road access we all desire? H&R's Soraya Abdel-Hadi finds out

Off-road access for horses can be a controversial and complicated topic. As traffic continues to build on our roads, more and more horse owners are seeking safer traffic-free havens to ride in. The reality, however, is that many routes can only be reached by road and some are impassable. Riders also face opposition on routes from other users, who don't appreciate almost being mown down by riders taking a gentle canter, or edging around the poached ground that hooves inevitably create.

The good news is that there are dedicated bridleway and access groups across the country, determined to ensure we have plenty of off-road rides available into the future and that good relationships are fostered with land owners, councils and other route users. The excellent news is that there are plenty of ways for you to get involved in your area, too, to ensure we all have access in the future.

## Bridleway and access groups

The British Horse Society (BHS) has approximately 150 affiliated bridleways and rider access groups in the UK and Ireland. These groups are dedicated to promoting safe, accessible, off-road riding and the chances are there is one near you – visit [www.bhs.org.uk](http://www.bhs.org.uk) to find your closest group.

In the unlikely event there isn't a local group listed, why not consider starting your own? The BHS offers advice and support to its affiliated groups, so contact them to find out more.

## What do they do?

Access groups are involved in a range of activities tailored to the areas in which they are based. For example, a group in an agricultural area may be more involved in implementing permissive horse rides across private farmland, whereas a suburban group with fewer routes but heavy usage might be more concerned with maintaining existing paths.

Just a few things groups might be involved in are...

- ▶ Bridleway maintenance and clearance
- ▶ Negotiating permissive horse rides
- ▶ Raising funds for equine community access projects
- ▶ Lobbying for road signs and light-controlled horse crossings

We talked to Joanna Haward, former Chairman and active member of the Worplesdon and District Bridleways Association (WDBA) based in Surrey to find out how the group promotes access in their area and what you can do to get involved with access issues in your area. The WDBA has around 100 members.

## Funding projects

One of the benefits of having a local bridleway or access association is having a source of independent funding for access projects. However, it's important to remember that this funding doesn't just appear. For example, the

Active member of the WDBA Joanna Haward



## Where can I ride?

You can ride horses on public bridleways, restricted byways, byways open to all traffic, roads, permissive horse rides, some commons, some Forestry Commission land and some Ministry of Defence land (contact your local sites for information on permits) and paid-permit toll rides.



The WDBA organises fund-raising rides to raise money for their access work

Did you know?

► The width of bridleways and byways varies according to their history. However, the 1990 Rights of Way Act specifies widths for reinstatement of paths on arable land or in cases where there is no recorded width. A minimum of two metres is required for bridleways across a field and three metres along a field edge. Byways must be always be three metres wide.



Essential work funded by the WDBA on a bridleway at Sheets Heath, Brookwood...



...is now benefiting a variety of route users, including walkers

Toll rides

Paid-for toll rides are a good all-round solution for those involved. For example, those provided through TROT give landowners who allow routes across their land 70% of money raised from membership fees. The remaining 30% goes to TROT administration fees. This payment to landowners differentiates toll rides from permissive routes, where the landowner does not receive money for allowing access.

A warning for those with toll rides in their area – some routes have recently been closed due to a lack of uptake. If we want these routes to remain open, riders have to support the scheme.

WDBA applies for grants – some applications take several weeks for members to put together – and runs events.

► **Councils** Local councils will fund or part-fund projects, depending on how much money they have available and how great the need is.

► **Grants** There are a variety of different sources to which bridleway and access associations can apply for grants. The WDBA has received lottery funding, but other schemes, like Paths for Communities, offer funding for specific use. "Don't underestimate how long an application takes," says Joanna, "or think that applying is a guarantee of success. I also think you have an advantage if you are an organisation, rather than an individual, because often the bodies providing the funding like to see that you can manage money or have funds to contribute. That's one of the reasons why it can be beneficial to approach your local bridleways or access association – there is strength in numbers."

Bridleway groups work closely with highway authorities to get results for horse riders

► **Running events** Organising events has taken a more essential role in fundraising, as everyone is tightening their budgets. "Fund-raising events are very important," says Joanna. "Particularly in the current financial climate where competition for a reducing number of grants is fierce. We have run unaffiliated dressage competitions, lecture demos and fun rides including some of the routes we've done work on."

Bridleway maintenance

No matter what the surface, bridleways get worn with use and by the elements. Regular maintenance of paths is necessary to keep them passable. It is the responsibility of the landowner to keep public rights of way in adequate condition, but it can often be unclear whether this

is a private owner or the council. It is best to report any wear and tear which is affecting your use of the route to your local highways authority (usually the County Council, Unitary Authority or National Park Authority). They might not have the resources to address the problem straight away, but they will keep it on record. Ensure you report any issues even if you think someone else has reported them, too. Track maintenance may be prioritised according to those most in demand.

"We work very closely with our contact at Surrey County Council," says Joanna. "If it's a legal right of way you can't just go and put down a new surface – it has to be approved. We'll approach the Council with a route that we feel needs surfacing and ask if they think they will be able to fund it. In theory, every council should have a budget for access for horses, but in practice this is becoming tighter and tighter. Unfortunately, in the current climate with budgets being squeezed, the councils have less money to cover all their responsibilities.



"Quite often the Council will have to say, "No, not at the moment" or in some cases they will offer to fund part of the work if we put in funds, too. This is where bridleway groups really come in handy because we have our own funds which we can invest in local routes."

However, receiving council agreement is not the only approval necessary for re-surfacing work. "There is normally a council list of approved contractors and, in some cases, particular materials have to be used," says Joanna. "Some of our routes fall within areas categorised as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, so particular care has to be taken and rules have to be followed. When the Council is involved in providing funds we also have to provide quotes to them, so they can decide whether they think the amount is reasonable for the projected work."

Bridleway clearance

Routes which become impassable for any reason should be reported to the highways authority. This can include everything from intentional installation of locked gates and 'Beware of the Bull' signs to unnoticed 'dropped' gates and overgrown undergrowth. Remember, if gates have dropped or trees have fallen over, landowners and authorities may have simply not noticed.

"If it is a fallen tree," says Joanna, "we'd always



Working parties, like these from the WDBA, can be a quick and economical way to clear routes



Contractors hard at work on a lottery-funded WDBA route in Surrey

## National trails

National trails are long-distance routes for walking, cycling and horse riding in England and Wales. (The Scottish equivalents are 'long distance routes'.) They have been created by linking existing local footpaths, bridleways and minor roads, and creating new ones where there were gaps.

Two of the fifteen trails are suitable for horse riders. Funding comes from the Government through Natural England and Natural Resources Wales, but is supported by local highway authorities and other funding partners.

ask the Council if they can sort it out. They will contact the landowner and/or send a contractor to cut it up and remove it.

"Different councils have different systems but reporting a right of way obstruction in Surrey is very easy. They have an interactive map on their website where you can pinpoint exactly where the problem is and describe it in detail."

Depending on the situation, sometimes it is just better to get your hands dirty. "For paths that are very overgrown, we rally our members and organise working parties to clear them," explains Joanna. "This type of work is expensive for councils and you'll probably have to wait for something that could be achieved quite quickly and inexpensively with a group of volunteers."

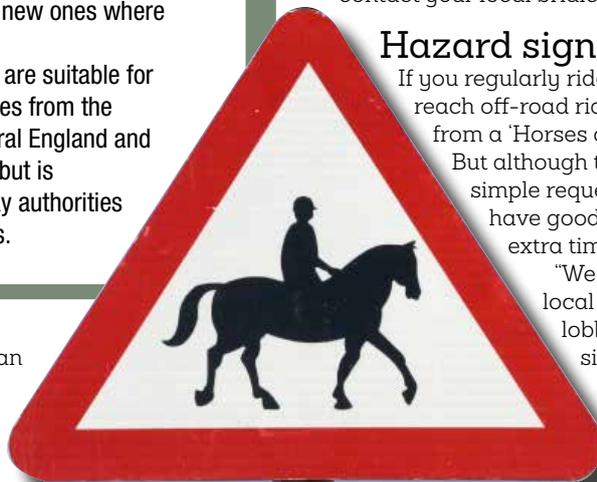
## Permissive horse rides

Not all riding routes are listed on the definitive map of public rights of way. Within your local area you may also have permissive horse rides. These routes are allowed by landowners but are not a right in law, so do not appear on maps. They can also be closed off at the discretion of the landowner. In areas with few, isolated bridleways, approaching landowners about permissive routes can help connect up routes and reduce road work.

It's worth noting that 'landowners' does not just

refer to farmers. "In Surrey, many of our permissive routes are on land managed by Surrey Wildlife Trust," says Joanna. "WDBA volunteers mark these routes using disk signs."

Finding permissive routes in your area can be a challenge if you are not involved in organising them. If you are lucky, you might hear about them through word of mouth or a local organisation might produce a map including them. If in doubt, contact your local bridleway or access group.



## Hazard signs

If you regularly ride on a busy road to reach off-road riding, you might benefit from a 'Horses crossing' warning sign.

But although this might sound like a simple request, your council might have good reasons for taking extra time to consider.

"We were involved with the local government in lobbying the council for a sign like this," says

Joanna. "It is surprising how much they cost – we're talking £1,000s once they

have checked the route to make sure it qualifies, had the sign made and then paid for installation. It's really not as simple as just putting a sign up!"

*Permissive paths can be the ideal solution to connect existing bridleways*

## For more information...

- ...about the **WDBA**, visit [www.wdba.org.uk](http://www.wdba.org.uk)
- ...your **nearest bridleway or access group**, visit [www.bhs.org.uk](http://www.bhs.org.uk)
- ...about **TROT toll rides**, visit [www.tollrides.org.uk](http://www.tollrides.org.uk)
- ...about **National Trails**, visit [www.nationaltrail.co.uk](http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk)
- ...about permits for your Forestry Commission land, visit [www.forestry.gov.uk](http://www.forestry.gov.uk)
- To view the **National Bridleway Network for Britain and Ireland**, visit [www.emagin.org](http://www.emagin.org)

## Did you know?

➤ Horse riders only have access to 22% of public rights of way. Horse-drawn vehicles have access to only 5%.



By working together, we can increase our off-road riding