

Advice on Places to ride and drive a horse in England and Wales

The law and management of public access rights vary widely between the four countries of the United Kingdom. Practical elements of the following advice apply in all countries but the legal requirements in Scotland and Northern Ireland differ from those in England and Wales.

More advice is available on bhs.org.uk/accessadvice.

IMPORTANT This guidance is general and does not aim to cover every variation in circumstances. Where it is being relied upon, The Society recommends seeking advice specific to the site.

Finding places to ride and carriage drive

If you move into a new area or acquire your first horse you will need to find where you can ride or drive safely, ideally away from motor traffic and roads.

You may also decide you want to become involved in improving safe equestrian access in your area, in which case do contact us so we can try to put you in touch with others locally.

There are three main sources of reliable information when looking for equestrian routes:

- A county council's 'Definitive Map of Public Rights of Way' (England and Wales only)
- Ordnance Survey 1:25,000 or 1:50,000 scale maps (England and Wales only)
- Your local BHS Affiliated Equestrian Access Groups

The primary places to ride are public rights of way: bridleways and byways. These are recorded on county councils' Definitive Maps and that data is passed to the Ordnance Survey and shown on its maps. Other places to ride are less easy to find and local Equestrian Access Groups may be able to help.

In Scotland, there is a general right of access to most land, so long as acting responsibly, with some 'Core Paths' which may be shown on Ordnance Survey maps. In Northern Ireland, there are very few public rights of access, so local knowledge, usually via council websites, will be important.

Because access in Scotland and Ireland are so different, this advice note applies primarily to England and Wales.

The Definitive Map

The Definitive Map and its accompanying Statement are the legal record of the position and status of public rights of way in England and Wales and are kept by highway authorities (county councils or unitary authorities). The map is available at local authority offices and can be viewed for free on request (you may need an appointment). Most authorities show the lines of bridleways and byways from their Definitive Map on a map

on their website, perhaps also showing minor unsurfaced roads, which can be valuable links for riders and carriage-drivers. It may say prominently "This is not the Definitive Map", because the actual Definitive Map as a legal document is a printed map, but for the purpose of finding where to ride or drive a horse, whatever map is on your council's website showing public rights of way is your best source (they may call it a 'working copy' or 'interactive map').

On the map you will be able to view whether a route is a footpath, bridleway, restricted byway or byway, and generally assess the public rights of way available to you in the area. They vary greatly: some areas have many, others none. You may find that a route you thought was a bridleway is not recorded as such. If that is the case, do investigate further as unrecorded rights could be lost forever (see bhs.org.uk/2026).

Ordnance Survey Maps

The 1:25,000 scale Ordnance Survey (OS) map (printed as the Explorer map with orange covers) is available in many places online, including Bing maps. They are the best for finding equestrian routes as they show field boundaries, so it is easier to see exactly where a route goes. 1:50,000 scale Landranger maps will show equestrian routes too, but in less detail. Ordnance Survey maps show rights of way data from the councils' Definitive Maps. Digital Ordnance Survey mapping is updated every six months but printed copies much less frequently, so always check with the highway authority for any changes which may have occurred.

You can view and print sections of maps online on many websites such as BHSaccess.org.uk Equestrian Mapping Project, Bing maps and others. Digital maps can be bought (or subscribed to) for use with GPS, smartphone or desktop applications.

Paper OS maps can be bought online through many websites, and at bookshops, stationers or outdoor pursuit shops. You can view local ones at many libraries.

You need to know:

- On which kinds of public rights of way you have a right to ride or drive; and
- Where else you are likely to be able to ride and how to find out about such places/routes.

Look at the key to see which line styles relate to your routes. On 1:25,000 maps, bridleways are long green dashes (footpaths are short ones), restricted byways are long green dashes with alternating half bars and byways open to all traffic are long dashes with crossbars. The same line styles are used on the 1:50,000 but appear pink.

PUBLIC RIGHTS OF WAY	OTHER PUBLIC ACCESS
 Footpath	 Other routes with public access (not normally shown in urban areas) The exact nature of the rights on these routes and the existence of any restrictions may be checked with the local highway authority. Alignments are based on the best information available.
 Bridleway	 Recreational route (◇ alternative route)
 Byway open to all traffic	 National Trail
 Restricted byway (not for use by mechanically propelled vehicles)	 Traffic-free cycle route
	  National cycle network route number – traffic free; on road
	 Permissive footpath } Footpaths and bridleways along which landowners have permitted public use but which are not rights of way. The agreement may be withdrawn.
	 Permissive bridleway }

Ordnance Survey 1:25k legend
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The diamond symbols and a named route on an OS map show a promoted route. Sixteen of them are 'national trails' as designated by law,¹ with specific management plans and funds. Other promoted routes are much more informal, often compiled by a local group, and with a much lower level of maintenance (if any!) and publicity. The rights on any section of such a route are those of the underlying right of way so, although the promoted route is most likely for walkers only, it may use bridleways and byways as well as footpaths. Riders still have a right on the bridleway or byway (and carriage-drivers on a byway), but be aware that there can be misunderstanding where walkers think horses should not be there because the route is promoted as a 'walk'. If you come across this, do tell the council so that they can clarify on signs where walkers should expect to see horses.

So you've found the routes — get your facts right...

Equestrians should be aware of the legal basis on which they are using any facility. The normal rules of courtesy and good behaviour should govern conduct at all times, but where provision has been specially made for equestrians by permission rather than by right, there may be additional rules which have to be obeyed, such as times of access, speed, specific tracks or areas.

'Right to roam'

There is a right of Open Access on foot ('right to roam') in England and Wales over designated access land only (usually upland or rough pasture, not farmland). Riders and carriage drivers do not have the 'right to roam'² with horses but can continue to cross such land, which is marked on recent OS maps, on bridleways, byways or unsurfaced roads and to exercise any other rights and concessions.

A 'right to roam' on horseback exists only on Dartmoor, The New Forest, and some commons in the London Boroughs and home counties.

Open Access Land can be subject to a Restriction Order for use on foot, perhaps to allow shooting or similar. Such a Restriction Order does not apply to any bridleway, byway or road across the land. It is not possible to close a public right of way for shooting or any other 'operation on the land', only the open access 'right to roam' on foot.

Where do you have the right to ride or drive?

- On all roads except motorways³
- On some classes of public rights of way, which are shown on the Definitive Map and Ordnance Survey maps. They are:

¹ National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949

² Except on designated land such as Dartmoor or the New Forest.

³ There may be a Traffic Regulation Order (TRO), permanent or temporary, that suspends your right to use a particular road. Temporary TROs are often used while roads and right of way are repaired. TROs preventing use with horsedrawn vehicles are unfortunately common, often because they have not been considered and default wording in an order will exclude them as well as motor vehicles, but sometimes it is so that appropriate barriers to motor vehicles can be installed. If such a barrier affects your use with a horsedrawn vehicle, always make the council aware. They must accommodate your use as it would be unreasonable to exclude you for the same reasons as the motorists (who may cause excessive damage).

- Bridleways – you can ride or lead a horse, walk or bicycle on a bridleway. Cyclists must, however, give way to riders and walkers. Motor vehicles driven by the public are not allowed on bridleways, nor are horse-drawn carriages, but may be allowed with the landowner's permission.
- Restricted byways – are open to all non-mechanically propelled traffic, that is, on foot, horse, cycle and with a horse-drawn carriage, but not with a motor vehicle (unless with permission).
- Byways open to all traffic – open to all users including motor vehicles.

Footpaths are for walkers only; there is no right to ride or drive on a footpath, but occasionally a footpath may have unrecorded higher rights, in which case you can use the higher rights if you know about them. It is also possible for a landowner to give permission for you to ride or drive a horse on a footpath but be aware that walkers will understandably not expect you to be there, so use with great care and consideration of the concession.

Byways (restricted and open to all traffic), bridleways and footpaths are collectively called public rights of way or minor highways (the term highway covers any public right of way from a motorway to a footpath, though most people will only think of it in relation to a main road). Footpaths and bridleways may collectively be called public paths.

On older Ordnance Survey maps you may see Roads Used as Public Paths instead of byways. The term caused confusion, so they were reclassified, many of them now Restricted Byways.

Farmers and adjacent house owners may have private rights of access with vehicles along any minor highway, such as the access road to a farm which is also a bridleway.

People in wheelchairs, manual or electric, are allowed to use all rights of way.

Very minor roads

Not all roads were surfaced with 'tarmac' or asphalt in the first half of the 20th century and some of these remain as stone, earth or grass tracks and are generally categorised by highway authorities as unclassified unsurfaced minor roads. They are sometimes called 'white roads' from the way they appeared on Ordnance Survey maps. Unclassified means they are not an A, B or C road. Highway authorities and users familiar with them may call them UCRs (Unclassified/ Unsealed/ Unsurfaced County Roads.)

Unclassified roads may be shown on the 1:25,000 Ordnance Survey map published since the 1990s with green dots as Other Routes with Public Access (ORPAs). In most cases you can ride, and drive a carriage, on a route shown as an ORPA, however, the rights over them are sometimes disputed and a highway authority may only declare them "at least a highway on foot" because they are uncertain. Unclassified roads vary from unsurfaced routes across fields to stony tracks or fully surfaced lanes. On some you may meet motorised vehicles. If a council does not declare such a route as an unclassified road, it may need investigation to ensure that the right to ride or drive will be protected and to clarify it for all users (see [bhs.org.uk/2026](https://www.bhs.org.uk/2026)).

Some commons

Some, but not all, commons have statutory provision for people to take air and exercise on horseback, depending on the Act of Parliament for the particular common. On some commons there may be a Scheme of Management which includes provision for ridden horses. If there are bylaws (which should be noted and

obeyed) they will be displayed on the common, otherwise seek information locally about what is allowed. The right of access for recreation is separate from your right to use of any bridleway, byway or road across the common.

‘Horse Rides’ in public open spaces

‘Horse Rides’ are designated under bylaws made under an Act of Parliament for the site, mostly the London metropolitan area. Often, such rides have been specially constructed for the purpose and are exclusive to riders (and drivers if carriage driving is permitted). Many were created to provide healthy exercise for people. Less commonly, access may be over a designated area rather than a route. Well-known examples are some of the Royal Parks, Epping Forest, and the Metropolitan Commons.

Horse Rides are not shown on Explorer maps and many of the Public Open Spaces may be too small to seem significant but still provide good lengths of riding or extra facilities such as manèges. These will be shown on maps at entrances or on information issued by the council. Use is usually subject to bylaws which should be studied before you use the facilities. The bylaws are posted at entrances but the relevant ones should be contained in any published information.

Concessionary or Permitted Routes and Access

Concessionary or permitted routes are where the landowner has given permission, rather than bridleways and byways where use by the public is by right. The landowners vary from private owners to a variety of public and semi-public bodies. Permission can be withdrawn at any time.

Use is open to all who know about the route or area. The use may be free or a charge is made. In some places, a permit may be required, with or without a charge.

Some permitted routes are long term and shown on Ordnance Survey maps. Others may be provided through government funded schemes on farmland, in which case you may only find about them locally or through Natural England or Natural Resources Wales.

Under the terms of concordats which the Society and BHS Cymru worked hard to gain, the Forestry Commission provides free equestrian access on its roads and tracks where it has no need to regulate access and it owns the land. On land it leases, or where the Commission considers it necessary to regulate use, it may require equestrians to pay fee for a permit, unless they are only using public rights of way, even though pedestrians and cyclists do not need a permit or pay a fee. The BHS continues to press the Forestry Commission to remove this discrimination.

Not all Forestry Commission woods are open to riders and you will need to check locally whether a permit is required.

Other bodies also operate permit systems

The BHS supports permit schemes only where there is absolutely no definitive or *de facto* right to ride and where they provide a useful addition to public rights for equestrians, both ridden and driven. The Society recognises that there are circumstances where a permit scheme may be an acceptable management tool and any access can be better than nothing. Permits are primarily a management tool for permitted access, often

used to control numbers or ensure good behaviour or facilitate communication, for example about which routes or areas may be used if they change frequently. Some are issued without charge.

Toll Rides

Toll rides are a subscription only for riders who pay into a money-raising scheme in return for a permit to ride on certain land or routes. The permits are usually annual ones, although some schemes provide visitors' permits. Toll rides can be the only option where there are few bridleways or where stabling is cut off from rights of way by busy roads.

So long as provision of new public rights of way is not prejudiced, toll rides can provide a useful supplement to public rights of way locally where definitive or permitted routes do not exist.

You can ride freely on bridleways and byways through areas which may be covered by permits or tolls for use of other routes but you should keep to the public bridleways or byways if you do not have a permit.

Country Parks

Country parks and land owned or administered by public authorities often have concessionary horse routes provided as additional facilities for local residents and visitors. The tracks may be exclusively for equestrians and specially constructed or shared with others. There may be a code of conduct or bylaws with which you should familiarise yourself, or restrictions on hours of use.

Cycle Routes

Many local authority owned cycle routes, particularly those on old railways, may be used by riders although this is often not advertised, simply because riders have been forgotten in the promotion of cycling and walking. Care must be taken not to damage the surface provided for cycles or to impede other users.

Many 'traffic-free cycle routes' are shown on OS maps with orange dots or you can find out about them from your local authority. This designation is an Ordnance Survey decision and does not mean the route is not open to riders. Where a promoted cycle route runs on a bridleway, riders and walkers still have priority over cyclists.

Beaches and estuaries

Many beaches are open to riders but this may be subject to local rules or bylaws limiting the hours or seasons when riding is allowed. See [bhs.org.uk/accessadvice](https://www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice) for more information on Riding on Beaches and Estuaries and a list of UK beaches which welcome horses (it also lists BHS approved establishments that offer riding on beaches). You are recommended to check with the local authority for more information or in case the rules have changed.

If you encounter a problem

If you encounter a problem, it should be reported to help other riders and drivers so that off-road routes are kept open and easy to use. If the problem is on a bridleway, byway or road, contact the rights of way department of the highway authority (the county council or unitary authority). Many authorities have problem-

reporting facilities on their websites and this can be the quickest way to make a report (see also [BHS advice](#) on Blocked and Difficult to Use Bridleways).

If the problem is on a site covered by bylaws, contact the organisation shown on notice boards.

Where you have obtained a permit or paid a 'toll', contact that office.

Join a BHS Affiliated Equestrian Access Group

The BHS has Equestrian Access Groups spread throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland and Riders Access Groups in Scotland, all of whom work to defend, extend and promote equestrian access in their areas. They are likely to have good knowledge of routes in the area they cover. You can find out if there is a group near you on bhs.org.uk or by contacting access@bhs.org.uk if you are interested in forming a group.

BHS Policy Statement on Use of Byways

The British Horse Society defends the appropriate use of byways by those who are legally entitled to use them. It does not support irresponsible and damaging use by any user, and may support the use of Traffic Regulation Orders to restrict use where appropriate to allow tracks time to recover or be repaired.

If this is a saved or printed copy, please check bhs.org.uk/accessadvice for the latest version (date top of page 2).