

Sharing Towpaths

A consultation on towpath use for the Canal and River Trust

Response of The British Horse Society

The Canal and River Trust (CRT) rightly recognise that so many more people could benefit from the calm that the water brings with 50% of the population of England and Wales living within 5 miles of a Trust waterway, and the British Horse Society maintains that towpaths should provide access for horse riders, as many already do without any problem. Statutory access for equestrians exists on canal towpaths in Scotland.

Horses were the primary users of canal towpaths in the past and should not be excluded now. CRT correctly states that towpaths should be free to access for all users who wish to walk, run, fish, cycle etc – the British Horse Society (The Society) maintains that the 'etc' needs to include horse riders.

Richard Benyon MP, Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries wrote to Anne Main MP in June 2011 concerning Alban Way, questioning why horse riders are not permitted to use it.

He urged all local authorities to allow horse riders to use cycle trails, routes and any other ways where it is in their power to do so, and to encourage that permission or dedication to happen where it is not in their power. In the Government's view, *"Unless there are good and specific reasons not to expressly allow horse riders to use such routes, local authorities should take steps to accommodate them. Local authorities should be making the most of their off-road networks through integration of use. Multi user routes have been shown to be readily adopted and well appreciated by local people. Where they are done well they bolster community cohesion and create a better understanding between users."*

Mr Benyon stated further that, *"Horseriders are particularly vulnerable road users, and cycle routes can provide appropriate and important opportunities to avoid busy roads. There is potential for conflict in any situation where people share a public space, but the possibility of conflict is not reason enough to disregard ridden access; actual conflict could be resolved and any misplaced concerns reduced over time."*

The Society maintains that the same principle should apply to towpaths.

The Society recognises that not every towpath may be suitable for horse riders but the majority are, and do not currently provide access for horse riders.

The Society is unaware of CRT, or its predecessor, ever contacting the Society concerning any issue of conflict. Report of study by University of Surrey on conflict on shared use routes [part 1](#) and [part 2](#) published by the

Countryside Agency. Although the report focuses on walkers and cyclists, riders are mentioned. The conclusion of the report is very useful to bear in mind:

Conclusion

'The results of the behavioural observation demonstrate that actual conflict is a rare occurrence. The questionnaire survey supported this and found that perceived conflict too was extremely low. Even when people recalled their route experience later, it was not seen as conflictual, although perceived conflict was recalled as higher than when in the route environment. It is only when people talk about conflict that the incidence, or assumed incidence of conflict escalates and appears to be more serious. Therefore, in the scenarios and focus groups, conflict emerged as a serious issue, although it was not considered a serious problem. We conclude, therefore, that the discussion and focussing of attention on conflict serves to escalate its perceived existence.'

There are many existing towpaths that are currently definitive bridleways or which are used by horse riders without any difficulty being caused to other users. Attached to this response are details of a number of towpaths that are currently used by horse riders.

.The length of the public right of way network in England currently amounts to 188,700km, consisting of 146,600km of footpaths, 32,400km of bridleways, 3,700km of byways and 6,000km of restricted byways. Horse riders therefore, currently have access to only 22% of public rights of way and horse-drawn vehicle drivers to only 5%. Many rights of way are now disconnected from each other because the roads that should connect them are no longer safe for equestrians to use because of the speed and volume of motorised traffic on them. This leaves many equestrians without a safe local route to use.

As many rights of way are now disconnected from each other equestrians are forced to use roads to connect them. However many are inaccessible because the roads that link them are no longer safe for equestrians to use because of the speed and volume of motorised traffic on them. This leaves many equestrians without a safe local route to use. Many towpaths could provide the necessary links to link up disjointed equestrian public rights of way.

The proposed Towpath Code needs to include reference to horse riders.

The Society is willing to work with CRT to assess the suitability of individual towpaths for horse riders so that access can be provided for them.

Some comments we have received from our members are:-

'The people we meet along the towpath includes boaters, walkers, families and cyclists - in the last 3 years no one has ever complained to me and if anything the comments are how nice it is to see the horses.'

'My friends and I often ride the Ashby de la Zouch Canal towpath from Conkers Waterside to the Donisthorpe basin. This is a very short stretch, about a mile, as it is not connected to the rest of the canal yet. It provides a circular route around Donisthorpe Woodland Park which connects to the Ashby Woulds multi-user Trail. OS Explorer 245 The National Forest.'

'I ride regularly on the canal towpaths in and around Rushall, Walsall. There is little off road riding in this area and the majority of roads are 'main' roads, therefore it is not pleasurable taking horse out but they need to be exercised. I have rarely had a problem with other users on the towpath, indeed, many people seem to enjoy seeing a horse close up. I always stop or ensure I am going slowly for pedestrians, and give them rights of way on narrower sections. Fishermen, on the whole, are very obliging in keeping their rods still whilst riding past, and are always thanked and pass the time of day with them. It would be tragic to lose this option as it is our only bit of 'riding in the countryside' in this area.'

Examples of Current Towpath Access for Horse Riders

Milton Keynes

There are quite a few rideable towpaths in the Milton Keynes area - under the A5 where access is limited by the enormous overbridge and alongside The Black Horse pub in Linford area and at Woolstone

Leeds to Liverpool

The Leeds to Liverpool canal which was opened up as a multi use track and has a large section which is a bridleway

Sussex

BW 806 + 809 Loxwood, West Sussex runs along the towpath of the Wey and Arun canal in Loxwood. Some 5+Km.

Surrey

Wey Navigation - BW 132 Dodds Lane goes over the bridge and the BW continues on the Tow path. BW 352 at Elmbridge which for some reason turns into FP393 south of Elmbridge. BW280a south of Utworth bridge runs alongside the canal at Garson to Mill bridge. South of Fastbridge BW 400 continues alongside the canal. The canal disappears through Firtree copse and when it appears again FP547 runs alongside and then disappears past the old lock house when it crosses Rosemary lane BW 417 runs on the line of the tow path.

Essex

On the Chelmer and Blackwater Canal in Essex. there is a section from Heybridge to Maldon that is a definitive bridleway over the towpath.

Burnley

Definitive bridleway on a tow path in Burnley

Kent

Public Bridleway HB83 at Hythe in Kent runs along the towpath of the Royal Military Canal, between the golf course and the canal. It was dedicated when the public bridleway along the Royal Military Road beyond the bank on the other side of the canal was given a firm surface for the benefit of cyclists, so that horse riders would still have a stretch to use which was soft.

<http://www.kent.gov.uk/KCC.ExploreKent.Web.Sites.Public/Default.aspx#?&lyrs=16&xmin=615908&xmax=618622&ymin=133905&ymin=135542> .

Manchester/Cheshire

Peak Forest Canal between Ashton Under Lyne and Whalley Bridge in the Manchester area and also the Macclesfield Canal from Marple through Disley and Adlington which is part of the Cheshire Ring.

The Bridgewater canal -a branch of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal.

Somerset

The tow paths on the Bridgewater and Taunton Canal. A stretch of the Tone from Ham to Creech St Michael.

Yorkshire

The canal [between Slaithwaite and Marsden](#) in West Yorkshire makes a useful link between the Pennine bridleway (Marsden to Wessenden Head) and the bridleways between Meltham and Slaithwaite (a route of about 13 miles round I think).

Shropshire

Adderley and Audlem - the Shropshire Union Canal.

The Llangollen Canal in the Ellesmere and Whitchurch areas.

The Shropshire Union canal from Hyde Mill Lane, up to the wharf.

The canal tow path from Trevor to Llangollen.

Leicestershire/Warwickshire

Market Bosworth, Leics/Warks –access to towpath at Shenton Station which is situated below Bosworth Battlefield.

Leicestershire/Derbyshire

Ashby Woulds Trail, Measham to Spring Cottage – access to towpath obtained at a few places along the Ashby Woulds Trail, particularly at Donisthorpe.

Cloud Trail – access to towpath obtained directly off Cloud Trail at Swarkestone, Derbys.

Leicestershire

Ashby de la Zouch Canal towpath from Conkers Waterside to the Donisthorpe basin.

Walsall

Canal towpaths in and around Rushall, Walsall.

Lancashire

Brookside, Bay Horse, Lancaster at grid ref:OL 41: 488528

The British Horse Society

1. The British Horse Society represents the interests of the 3.4 million people in the UK who ride or who drive horse-drawn vehicles. With the membership of its Affiliated Riding Clubs and Bridleway Groups, the BHS is the largest and most influential equestrian charity in the UK.

2. The equine industry is estimated to be worth £7 billion to the UK economy and to employ 220,000 – 270,000 people.

3. The Strategy for the Horse Industry in England and Wales, published in December 2005, was prepared by the British Horse Industry Confederation in partnership with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Welsh Assembly Government¹.

4. The Strategy includes the following aim:

Aim 5 'Increase access to off-road riding and carriage driving', including the encouragement and improvement of urban and suburban riding and carriage driving.

Dated 29 April 2014

¹ <http://www.bhic.co.uk/downloads/full-strategy-report.pdf>

