

ADVICE ON  
Specification for Bridges, Fords,  
Gradients and Steps

The  
British  
Horse  
Society



In providing specifications for equestrian ways and facilities, The British Horse Society considers all equestrian users, which may result in a high specification which might not be appropriate in all circumstances. The recommendations should be read with this in mind. If the specification seems inappropriate in a situation, the Society strongly advises consultation with its local representative to establish what may be acceptable at a particular site.

Bridge Specifications for Equestrian Use Over Watercourses (ditch, stream or river)						
Route Type	Span	Deck height	Width	Parapet height	Infill height	Kickboard/ Infill Uplift
Bridleway	< 3m	< 1m	2m			
Restricted Byway, Byway	< 3m	< 1m	3m*	1.2m*	0.6m	250mm
All routes	3–8m	< 1m		1.8m*		
All routes	< 8m	> 1m	4m no parapet 3m with parapet	1.2–1.8m*		
All routes	> 8m	> 1m	4m*	1.8m*		

  

Bridge Specifications for Equestrian Use Over Roads and Railways						
Route Type	Span	Deck height	Width	Parapet height	Infill height	Infill Uplift
Any route over road	Any	Any	Minimum 3m*	1.8m*	1m	25mm
Any route over railway					1.8m	Not applicable

Infill is solid panelling fixed to the parapet railings to obscure a horse's view of traffic or turbulent water passing beneath the bridge.

Uplift is the gap between deck and kickboard or infill.

Kickboards form a raised edge to the deck, preventing a foot sliding off the deck.

\* See notes below

## Parapets

Parapets or infill are not always required, or may be acceptable at a lower height, or desired at a greater height in some circumstances. This is relative to the local conditions – height of span, width and situation being bridged.

The desirable height of a parapet will be influenced by the likely proximity of a ridden horse to the parapet on a normal line of travel as well as the local conditions.

The Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (Department for Transport) says 1.8m if adjacent to the parapet but does not define 'adjacent'. For a bridge over a dual carriageway, the Society recommend a parapet height of 1.8m if the natural line of travel is within 2m of the parapet, and 1.5m height if more than 2m away, however, there will be sites where a lower height is acceptable, such as a single track accommodation bridge where an equestrian may take the centre line with low incidence of other users. Alternative measures on carriageway bridges with lower parapets may include warning motorists of oncoming traffic (horses) in the centre of the bridge (or 2m away from the parapet on a wider bridge).

Parapets or infill may not be practical on low spans over watercourses where flood potential could allow waterborne debris to collect and increase stress on the bridge.

Horses can be alarmed by traffic passing beneath them, whether it is on a navigable river, road or railway. Solid infill of parapets to obscure their view may be desirable in some situations.

Parapets on ramps parallel to a railway line or motorway should also have solid infill on the rail or road side of the ramp as for the bridge itself if possible.

Bridges over bogs should be of reasonable width, with non-slip surfaces and edge boards to reduce the risk of a horse slipping off the bridge and being stuck in the bog.

Parapets on bridges are usually intended to prevent a pedestrian or vehicle from leaving the bridge while on the deck. Parapets to provide equivalent protection to a rider would be over 2m high and are rarely practical or desirable therefore the height of any parapet on an equestrian route is likely to be a compromise and there is no single solution for all situations.

Where it is not practicable to meet the recommended standard on any bridge, mounting blocks at each end of a bridge would be welcomed by riders who choose to dismount and lead across the bridge (see BHS Advice on Mounting Blocks).

## Width and Sightlines

The specified widths are primarily for the comfort of users passing one another. If it is not practicable to provide the recommended width, mitigation may be required such as signs at each end giving priority to horses so that passing another user does not push horse and rider too close to a parapet. A bridge width of less than 3m may be insufficient to turn a horse safely.

Negotiating a gate requires ample manoeuvring space in line with the gate, as well as before and after it; 3m is required to allow the horse to be alongside the gate with 1m beyond the catch end. Therefore, gates should not be installed on bridges, including at the ends, because if a gate is at the end of a bridge, in one direction the horse will be negotiating the gate from the bridge, which is unlikely to have sufficient manoeuvring space. Having to tackle a gate head-on, rather than alongside, is contrary to BHS recommended practice because it increases risk for horse and rider.

Waiting areas should be at least 3m in width and length, 4m is preferable. The area should increase with the potential waiting period as horses may become restless, particularly if the environment is threatening.

Bridges carrying roads with high volumes of traffic should have a segregated marked route for riders.

There should be no bollards or other width limitations on the bridge or in the waiting area.

## Clearance

Where a canopy is provided to any bridge it should ideally have a height of 3.7m and a minimum of 3.4m. In exceptional circumstances a lower height may be acceptable for the horse to be led when mounting blocks are present. Advisory notices may be required if the low height is not obvious at a point where it is safe to dismount.

Overhanging vegetation should be clear of the bridge by 3m. Bridges overhung by trees may become slippery from vegetation or moss and greater attention will be needed to prevent slipping and rot.

## Structure and Surface

Live load 5kN/sq m (BS 5400), point load 8.12kN.

Structures should be stable.

Deck boards should be laid at right angles to the sides of the bridge. Ideally, decking should be substantial and non-echoing, without gaps in the decking through which the river, road or railway can be seen.

Surfaces of bridges should be non-slip.

Stone mastic asphalt should be avoided as it will require a grit dressing to make it non-slip.

Wood is slippery when wet but a wooden deck can be made non-slip with epoxy resin and bauxite grit as a liquid application or in attached strips or sheets. A quick and cheap solution on wood decks has been a generous scattering of sand. It will need replenishing but has been successful for months.

Wooden or recycled plastic struts may be fixed to slopes, but water and organic material may collect against them causing rot. This can be reduced by angling them to shed water and recycled plastic struts have been used successfully. Struts may become loose and their edges are vulnerable to wear as struck by hooves.

Rubber compounds as a deck coating have the advantage of deadening sound as well as providing a comfortable non-slip surface. Rubber may come as a liquid, in sheets or as recycled crumbs bound with resin or polymer. For a bridge surface, it need not be as thick as would be used elsewhere and final cost would be roughly double that of bitumen and grit. Both grit and rubber options may be used on a central 1m strip to reduce costs if necessary. People on bridges often walk by the parapet to look over, but riders and

carriage-drivers are more likely to use the centre of the deck.

Metal is noisy and alarming to horses so should be avoided. Non-slip surfacing also dulls noise, which may be preferable. Rubber mat surfaces have been successful in some cases.

## Other

There should be no barbed wire or electric wire on or adjacent to the bridge or waiting area.

Further technical information on bridge construction is available courtesy of the Scottish Access Technical Information Network [www.satintonline.org/satin/technical-information/bridges.html](http://www.satintonline.org/satin/technical-information/bridges.html)

## Fords

Fords are usually cheaper than bridges and may be appropriate where water in normal conditions is maximum depth of 0.5m. They are particularly suitable on less used routes. Environmental constraints, such as the work required to build the ford, the control of pollution and the watercourse profile may mean a proposal for a ford fails the impact assessment for watercourse consent.

Where a ford is deemed appropriate, the force of water flow in normal conditions should allow a horse to walk easily without being pushed off course.

The base of the ford within the watercourse must be firm, level, free from holes and non-slip. Often levelled bedrock or the natural bed of the watercourse will fit these criteria with little intervention. In other locations, ridged concrete or stone setts may be required.

Entry points must be firm and able to withstand fluctuating water levels and potential damage from horse use without erosion or poaching. Stone pitching may be necessary in some situations to protect the entry points.

Ideally, the gradient of the entry points should be no more than 1 in 12 although 1 in 10 may be acceptable if the bank is low. The entry points must shelve into the river – abrupt banks are not recommended because a horse would have to jump in or out with high potential for slipping or falling. This is likely to cause erosion of the bank or river bed. In a watercourse in a remote location it may be appropriate if the level of use will have negligible impact and if users are likely to have encountered equivalent terrain to reach the ford.

Poles showing the water depth should be provided if the bottom of the ford cannot be seen in normal conditions. Markers for the entry/exit points may be required if the crossing is greater than 4m between banks.

Where the ford is through a river which has a strong current at times, no sharp or dangerous objects should be close to the path on its downstream side.

Stepping stones or footbridges for pedestrians should always be on the upstream side of the equestrian crossing to ensure the horse is not swept towards any sharp edges or forced against the structure.

If a ford is being considered, then permission must be gained from the government agency responsible for watercourse protection prior to any work taking place.

## Irish Bridges or Irish Fords

A low water crossing or Irish bridge/Irish ford provides a dry crossing at normal water level but in high water conditions, water will flow over its surface forming a ford. Low water

crossings have no parapets or raised edges (which would impede flow) and are commonly constructed by large pipes (round or rectangular cross-section) laid adjacent to each other parallel to the flow with a concrete surface on top so the water flows through the pipes at normal levels and over the whole structure in high water forming a ford depth crossing.

A low water crossing can be a pragmatic solution where a bridge above flood height is too costly or impractical but a ford would be under too great a depth of water. Whether it is appropriate will depend on the nature of the watercourse. As with a wet ford, the surface should be firm and level with no holes. The concrete should be high specification and hard tamped to reduce chance of it being slippery. It should be at least 2 metres wide and 3 metres wide (to allow for passing or turning) if longer than 3 metres span.

Separate pipes are no longer considered to be good practice and may be refused for a new structure. A low water crossing can usually still be achieved with a single span rectangular section 'pipe' leaving the normal watercourse bed intact with unrestricted normal flow.

A low water crossing has an advantage over a ford in that earth and other contaminants are not taken into the watercourse during normal conditions.

## Gradients and Steps

Steep gradients are not a limiting factor for horse use and should be considered as for pedestrians where variation in experience and agility mean some people will choose to use certain steep routes or not. In natural terrain, the feasibility of any gradient is up to the judgement of the individual. Where use of a popular steep route is causing erosion which needs control, pitching and steps are feasible on a bridleway but greater space at any level will be required.

For general purposes of a built path, such as a ramp for a bridge, a gradient of 1 in 12 is the ideal maximum for ridden use. This does not apply to natural terrain where gradients of 1 in 3 or steeper are possible for some horses and riders. Account must be taken of the geographical features of the area and discussion between the local BHS Access and Bridleways Officer and highway authority is essential. Compromise may be possible where there are no alternatives, particularly with close attention to appropriate surfacing.

## Crossfall

Generally, a crossfall up to 1:10 is less likely to cause problems of slipping and erosion and is therefore acceptable, although this is dependent on drainage and soil type. Greater than 1:10 will need consideration of location, circumstances and likely use, particularly where this is a proposed diversion. Where crossfall is greater than desirable on a new route which offers an off-road alternative, this may be accepted, however, some earth-work to reduce the crossfall would likely be beneficial to reduce future maintenance.

## Steps

The dimensions suggested here assume that for steps to be considered, there are likely to be significant site constraints and that steps are a 'last resort'. Consideration should be given to the widths needed to safely pass other users and for if a horse should need to be turned while on the steps. Turning is likely to require a 3m x 3m area for safety. The ideal is therefore 2m wide with frequent passing or turning places but much will depend on the site, its level or use and locality.

Width ideally 2m or more, minimum 1.5m

Sight lines of at least 15m and passing places along the flight at no more than 15m intervals. Passing places should be at least 3m by 3m to allow a horse to be turned if necessary.

Treads should aim for the optimum length of 2m in locations likely to be well used by all abilities.

If insufficient space is available to gain required height then alternate shorter tread with 2m tread as follows:

- Minimum length 0.5m for one tread between 2m treads
- Minimum 1m length each for two treads between 2m treads
- Minimum 1.5m length each for three treads between 2m treads

Riser height optimum 150mm at sites well used by all abilities. If insufficient space is available to gain required height then alternate risers may be increased as follows:

- Maximum 200mm for maximum of three consecutive risers
- Maximum 300mm for maximum of two consecutive risers
- Maximum height 450mm at remote sites and only with a 2m tread below the 450mm riser

To increase height gain for length, treads may slope slightly towards the front.

The higher the riser, the deeper its supports need to be to stay firm. This may not be possible in some locations.

If it is necessary to have more than one flight with each flight turning back on the previous, the turning area should be 3m x 3m.

Some, but not all, horses can cope with shorter steps, particularly going uphill; therefore any reduction in this specification should only be with approval of the local BHS representative and in exceptional circumstances. Shorter or steeper steps must only be used where there is no option but to create a potentially one way (uphill) section with an alternative descent.

Note that particularly on steeper gradients, a horse may trot or canter up steps to maintain impulsion. This is partly because the sequence in which its legs are used makes it easier than in walk, so it is a natural response of the horse.

Mounting blocks will be welcome if the gradient is such that riders may feel safer leading rather than riding their horse.

Recommendations for a common backfilled timber frame construction are:

- Use hardwood for the frame, especially the riser, e.g. railway sleepers, rather than softwood which is more likely to splinter if caught by a horse's hoof.
- Ensure the supports for the risers are deep to avoid the riser being pushed forwards – the higher the riser, the greater the load against the riser may be (depending on the area of the tread).
- Consolidate the backfill thoroughly and ensure a good layer of fines. As with steps on a footway, erosion at the point of impact coming down and going up need extra attention to ensure hollows do not form with use. Impact increases with gradient so greater attention may be needed to construction and maintenance with steeper slopes.
- A horse's weight and point load is far greater than a human (live load 5kN/sq m



(BS 5400), point load 8.12kN).

- Provide for drainage and run-off to the side to avoid cascading down the steps.

If a handrail is desired for pedestrians, the available width for horses should be at least 2m otherwise there is a risk of the rider's foot or leg catching the handrail, potentially with serious injury. A handrail acts like a fence alongside the bridleway and such a situation would normally require at least 3m width to allow users to pass one another in comfort and to avoid a rider being too close to the fence (handrail). For only a couple of steps, the greater width may not be necessary but a longer flight with limited width may need passing places or open ground to one side of the steps without a handrail.

## Steps in upland or remote areas

On steep slopes, many horses will tend to descend partly sideways rather than straight, at a roughly 45° angle, and back legs are likely to slide which can cause erosion. It may sometimes be necessary to construct steps to reduce erosion.

Steps in remote areas or a more challenging environment may be very different from in a highly used area. In remote uplands, riders and horses are more likely to be able to cope with steep gradients and higher steps, as will occur naturally in terrain down to bedrock. When improving such a route or incorporating steps to reduce erosion, it is the length of a horse which is most commonly forgotten by those unfamiliar with horses and the fact that it has four feet to accommodate. The following are recommended:

- If possible, study how horses move on slopes and how much space they take up.
- Aim to produce a variety of heights and lengths, as would occur naturally in a large scale version of the stone pitching that is used on some upland paths.
- Step height should not exceed 450mm and this height should be occasional, not every step.
- A high riser must have a long tread below it as it will be most difficult to descend and a horse may try to jump it.
- Leave an area big enough for a horse to have all four feet on one level every several steps to provide relief from the strain of having front and back legs on different levels – this usually works well as the long tread below a high riser.

If this advice note is a printed copy, please check for the latest version on [www.bhs.org.uk/access-and-bridleways](http://www.bhs.org.uk/access-and-bridleways).

1/2017

### Access Department

The British Horse Society  
Abbey Park, Stareton  
Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2XZ  
Tel: 02476 840515 Fax: 02476 840501  
[www.bhs.org.uk](http://www.bhs.org.uk) email: [enquiries@bhs.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@bhs.org.uk)

This advice note applies to England and Wales. For information on Scotland, contact Helene Mauchlen, BHS National Manager Scotland, Woodburn, Crieff, Perthshire PH7 3RG  
Tel: 02476 840727 email: [helene.mauchlen@bhs.org.uk](mailto:helene.mauchlen@bhs.org.uk)

For information on Northern Ireland please contact Susan Spratt, BHS National Manager Ireland, Hawks Hill Cottage, 26 Portaferry Road, Greyabbey, Newtownards, Co. Down BT22 2RU  
Tel: 02476 840736 Mob: 07808 141079 email: [susan.spratt@bhs.org.uk](mailto:susan.spratt@bhs.org.uk)

The British Horse Society is a Registered Charity Nos. 210504 and SC038516

The  
British  
Horse  
Society