

ADVICE ON
Opening Gates

The
British
Horse
Society



The ability to open and close gates with ease is an important skill for both rider and horse and is highly recommended for hacking. The training for opening gates will help your horse's responsiveness generally and being a 'good gate opener' is a great credit to you and your horse. Hacking is a beneficial activity for horse and rider, improving the health and wellbeing of both, as well as providing opportunities for improving your bond with your horse.

The BHS has a video showing you the recommend method for opening a gate safely.

The 'heels to hinges' method to operate a gate on horseback

The method recommended by the Society for greatest safety is commonly called 'heels to hinges' because the horse is positioned facing away from the gate's hinges. It is considered to give riders most control during the manoeuvre and it is most likely to avoid tack being caught by the gate or latch.

The rider approaches the gate's hinges and turns to position the horse alongside the gate, 'heels to hinges', with the latch by the horse's shoulder and the horse's head and neck extending beyond the latch, parallel to the gate.



Gate opening away from the rider

- 1 With the horse standing parallel to the gate, heels to hinges, lean over to release the latch and push the gate open far enough to give a safe gap.
- 2 Back the horse far enough to bring his head into the opening, then turn and ride through the gap, bending your horse around your leg that is nearest the gate.
- 3 Turn round the end of the gate push the gate closed and secure the latch. Depending on the space, you may be able to do this positioned with the horse's head or heels to hinges.



Gate opening towards the rider

- 1 With the horse standing parallel to the gate, heels to hinges, lean over and open the latch, then move the horse sideways away from the gate while keeping one hand on the gate and drawing it with you.
- 2 Move forwards and turn round the end of the gate when the opening is wide enough.
- 3 Once through the gateway, you may be able to move your hand along the gate towards the hinges, drawing the gate closed then backing to secure the latch, or you may need to turn the horse heels to hinges parallel to the gate and then move sideways while drawing the gate closed.

Best practice is to keep a hand on the gate at all times to give greatest control over it. If the gate was pushed wide, or taken wide by its weight or the wind, then it takes much longer to ride after it and to close it so stock are more likely to escape. The uncontrolled swing could damage the gate and if the gate swings closed, it could hit the horse or rider's leg.

Many riders, especially with large horses, cannot keep hold of the gate. In this case, extra care is required, particularly where stock are present and the rider must be ready to prevent the gate swinging wide or closed. Only push or pull the gate as hard as necessary to create a safe gap, never 'fling' it wide.



Self-closing gates

Letting go of the gate to ride through the gap is not safe with gates that close quickly as the closing gap may cause the horse to panic or the horse or rider may be hit by the gate or the post. If the gate closes itself, you need to keep one hand on the gate to hold it open or push it again until your horse is clear. Always check that it has secured before riding away.

Check the closing speed of unfamiliar gates before letting your horse enter the gap, some get faster as they close. A gate closing on a horse is very dangerous. If you cannot reach to hold the gate open, you may be safer to dismount.

Two way opening gates

Two way opening gates give riders a choice of opening the gate towards or away from them. It is commonly assumed that riders will always open a gate away from them given that option but some riders find that they have more control moving the gate towards them, for example, if a horse tends to rush through a gap opening in front of it.

Where the heels to hinges method cannot be used

It may not be possible to use the heels to hinges method if there is no space for the horse's head and neck beyond the latch, or if there is not enough space to come alongside the gate.

Many horses and riders manage to negotiate gates with the horse's head over the gate, but it is less safe because riders will often need to swap hands so potentially losing control; there is greater risk of the reins or martingale being caught, and the gate or latch may hit the horse's head. Much depends on the latching mechanism – a latch that has to be held open while the gate clears it is more difficult to open when not parallel to the gate. Self-closing gates with a fast speed can be impossible with this method or take several attempts which is tedious and time-consuming and increases the risk of injury.

Mastering the heels to hinges method generally improves the chance of coping with a

gate where space is too tight because the horse is more responsive and the rider is more likely to retain control even in less than ideal conditions.

Training

The movements for 'doing' a gate may already be in your flatwork; if not your BHS instructor can help you with the turn on the forehand, leg yield and rein back. Opening gates can be a functional way of teaching your horse these movements. Your horse needs to be responsive to your legs and hands, and many riders use their voice too, e.g. 'One step' when asking the horse to take one more step nearer the latch, or 'Stand' if you have to use both hands for the gate.

Gate training is also an opportunity to improve your balance and independent movements so that you can lean over without your legs moving or pushing into your horse as that is likely to make him move away at the wrong moment. You can practise this off the horse, sitting on a wall or substantial saddle horse, as well as on the horse – touching your toes, his tail and poll without moving your legs – with a helper to give you feedback and make sure you are safe should your actions cause the horse to move.

If you do not have a gate available for practice, you can cover much of the skill on any flat ground with a handy post, such as a jump stand, lamp-post or tree and a fence or wall which you can stand alongside. Having someone on the ground to help at first can be useful.

Start by teaching your horse to stand still, with or without a hand on the reins. Having a horse who will stand for as long as you need is very helpful if you are fiddling with a latch. You can practise this at any time and place.

Teach your horse to come close alongside a fence or other structure and stand at a point.

Teach yourself to bend low over your horse's shoulder, between him and the fence, without him moving away.

Learn the turn on the forehand; then progress to turning one-handed while holding a post at normal hand height, then to turning while holding a post at gate height. Start with turning only one or two steps and progress to being able to turn full circle with one hand low on the post.

You also need to teach your horse to back and to move sideways. You can practise backing alongside the fence as you move your hand along the rail and moving sideways one-handed while leaning over, as if holding a gate.

See also BHS Advice Note on Gates and Vehicle Barriers

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