

THE 2026 TOOLKIT

Help us preserve
your equestrian routes

The
British
Horse
Society



The British Horse Society is committed to protecting and preserving the equestrian off-road network. However, there's only so much we and our volunteers can do – we need your help! Working together we can ensure that routes used by horses in the past are accurately recorded and reinstated as safe off-road routes to ride and carriage drive according to the evidence. To help you to help us save these routes, we've created this toolkit detailing how to go about getting them recorded to ensure that they won't be lost after 2026.

2026: Why is it important?

In 2000, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act was introduced. Section 53 of the Act provides for a 'cut-off date' in 2026, which means that many historic routes of use to horse riders and carriage drivers will be extinguished if they are not formally recorded as a bridleway or byway.

These unrecorded routes actually exist in law but are not on the modern legal register. They may have been temporarily lost to the public or they could be in everyday use, but if they are unregistered they are in danger of having their rights extinguished. Our aim is to safeguard them for public use so that equestrians today and in the future have safe off-road routes on which to ride and carriage drive.

Just because you currently ride on a route doesn't mean it's recorded and protected from extinguishment. That's a frightening thought as there are some areas with very few recorded routes and 2026 is closer than you think – we're already more than half way there. Using this toolkit you can

check that the routes that you currently enjoy riding are safe from closure, and you may even be able to save a route that you can't currently ride but would love to! Getting all the historic riding routes accurately recorded on the Definitive Map is the only way to ensure that they are safe for future generations.

So, now you know why it's important. It's time to begin saving your local routes!



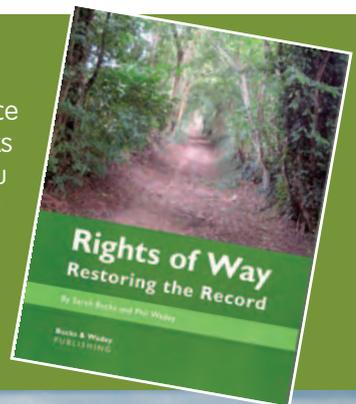
Step One: Getting Started

- Spend an evening with a friend checking your local OS map (Explorer is best). With a highlighter pen, mark on all the routes you've ever ridden.
- Make a list of the routes not already on the map as bridleways, restricted byways, byways open to all traffic (BOATs in the key of your map), or unclassified non-tarmac roads.

- Take photographs of the features of the routes that you think indicate that they were an old cart track or a bridleway, even if they're only used as a footpath today.
- Find some evidence to back up the existence of your route – your county record office is the best place to start. Make a note of anything you find, including the maps and documents not showing your routes.
- If you need help finding and gathering evidence at your local county record office, ask someone experienced in archive work to help you. Your BHS Regional or County Access and Bridleways Officer (RABO/CABO), an affiliated bridleways group or staff at the record office will all be able to help.
- Take your OS map, a notebook and a pencil. A digital camera may also be useful for photographing documents. Check with your record office whether you require a camera permit. They will guide you on how to obtain this if needed.
- Usually, you need to register as a reader. Your local office will guide you through the registration process but normally you need to take your driving licence or passport and a recent utility bill.

Hit the ground running

Give yourself a head start! Before you go to the record office read 'Rights of Way, Restoring the Record' by Sarah Bucks and Phil Wadey. Often referred to as the 'green book', you can purchase it from britishhorse.com or check your local library. You could also attend one of the BHS Access training days held locally around the country. To find out what's on in your local area, visit the BHS website, bhs.org.uk.



Step Two: The Maps

- Check to see if your unrecorded routes are on any of the 18th and 19th century county maps. If they are, check the key to see how they're described, checking them against other similar routes that you know have public rights today.
- Have a look at any early editions of OS maps. The most useful are the first edition 25", which has plot numbers – check these against the Books of Reference, where they exist. They may even say 'public road' – this is great evidence.
- Second edition 6" maps are useful for finding off-road routes (labelled FP or BR). BR is an indication that the route was once a recognised bridle road – a promising start, but more documentary evidence is needed.
- Always record the date, title, sheet number and scale of any map on which you find your route and you should also record the parish and township the route is in.

Time is precious

Locating your route on these maps means it physically existed in the past. If you can't find it on any of these maps, it may be best to look for a different route instead.

Step Three: Documentary Evidence

Gathering good documentary evidence is the key to proving that your route is a historic one that carries public rights.

The following list details the main documents that should be on your checklist. Some documents carry more weight when your final application gets assessed by your local highway authority (see the star system described in section 3.2 of the 'green book' for more details).

- **Inclosure Awards:** If your route is described as an awarded public carriageway, public bridle road or an 'ancient road or bridle road' and is shown on the plan, you're on to a winner!



- **Canal and Railway Plans:** If your route crosses a canal or railway and you find it described as a 'public road' in the Book of Reference, then this is good evidence.
- **Turnpike Plans:** These maps date from the early days of properly constructed roads (the stage coach era). If your route, or even just a spur leading from it, appears on these plans, then this is also good evidence.
- **Tithe Maps:** Roads, whether public or private, are shaded in brown. This is helpful but doesn't carry quite so much weight. Showing roads was not the purpose of Tithe Maps.
- **Finance Act 1910 maps and their field books:** The Act provided for land valuations to take place across the country. Deductions could be claimed by landowners where the land was

crossed by a public right of way – look for these in the field book. A public vehicular highway was left uncoloured as it had no development value so it appears on the map as a 'white road'.

There are other documents that can provide evidence to support your case. Some of these are held by your local authority (old highway records, for instance) and some are only available at The National Archives at Kew (OS boundary records and object names books). If you think you need to gather further evidence, you will find chapters on these and other documents in the 'green book'. Another great tip is to use the online catalogue, now available for all record offices. Put the nearest village in the search box and see what comes up.

Once you've gathered as much evidence as you can find, inform someone experienced in this sort of work. Your BHS RABO or CABO will help by assessing your evidence to see if it's sufficient and then guide you in the preparation and submission of your application. Don't rush. It's better to spend more time making your application as thorough as possible in order to have the best chance of having your route recorded!

Send your application to the relevant surveying authority either by recorded delivery or obtain a certificate of posting, and then be patient. The legal process takes a long time! If you have completed the research but don't want to send in the application, contact your local BHS Access and Bridleways Officer and they will help.

Thank you for helping to protect routes in your local area for yourself and future generations to enjoy. Now you have the toolkit, you have everything you need to begin. Good luck with your research.



Volunteers in your area

In excess of 230 BHS Access and Bridleways Officers volunteer around the country undertaking important work by representing the BHS on various levels, from campaigning for Rights of Way to ensuring routes are clear and safe for riders and carriage drivers. They will actively continue this work alongside researching and protecting routes for 2026. So please support them! If you'd like to get in touch with the volunteer group in your area, visit bhs.org.uk.

The British Horse Society

The British Horse Society is dedicated to improving the lives of horses and their safety as well as educating everyone from enthusiasts to riders and professionals to help them get the most out of their relationship with horses.

By offering world-class qualifications and an approvals system awarding quality instruction and care, a strong voice in access, safety and welfare issues, as well as support and guidance in all areas, it has allowed the BHS to become the largest and most influential equestrian charity in the UK.

You can become a member of the BHS

and join a thriving and dedicated community that supports horses, horse lovers and professionals through local events, campaigning and education. With more than 80,000 members enjoying personal benefits already, the BHS welcomes more people to support and join in order that it can continue working for a secure and brighter future for all horses.

Get in touch!

Please let us know of your success stories, or any experiences you have following the toolkit and researching your local paths – we would love to hear from you at access@bhs.org.uk.

Please join or donate today at bhs.org.uk

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For more information on The British Horse Society's rights of way work contact Access and Rights of Way Department,
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