

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 of them but the law in Scotland and Northern Ireland may differ from in England and Wales.

Riders and drivers of horses are referred to generically as equestrians.

More advice is available on www.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 strongly recommends seeking its advice specific to the site.

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Bridleways and byways are public rights of way—minor highways—which are important to equestrians (riders and carriage-drivers) for access away from motor traffic on roads.

Landholders are required by law to ensure public rights of way are open and useable but public paths through fields are a limitation on the use and value of land so some tolerance and consideration of land use by equestrians is helpful.

Antagonism from landholders towards users of public paths is often the result of ignorant or inconsiderate users who have left gates open, frightened animals or damaged crops.

Most land has to provide an income and on grassland, this is likely to involve unpenning livestock, whether the traditional cattle and sheep, or less common animals such as llamas, alpacas, deer, emu, ostrich, water buffalo. This may be intensive farming with high stocking levels or low levels of stock for conservation grazing.

Ponies are often used for conservation grazing in small herds, similar to on Dartmoor and the New Forest and some mountain areas in Wales, which have a long history of free-ranging herds of ponies under graziers' rights. The ponies are not wild; they are handled several times a year and breeding is closely controlled.

Keeping livestock, including horses, in or adjacent to fields with public bridleways or byways is legal, providing the animals have been assessed as posing no risk to path users.

Livestock can react adversely to public presence as a unique occurrence, even in a herd which is used to humans. The adverse reaction is likely to result from earlier stressors such as being corralled for treatment, moving field, or being chased by a dog or someone in a vehicle, which results in the animals being hyper-alert and quick to react to the next perceived threat. Stress is cumulative in animals as well as humans and can escalate responses. There have been incidents with tragic results, often without knowing why, because all animals are unpredictable—farmers handling their own stock every day have had accidents—so always be alert.

Some complaints from path users about livestock arise from animal behaviour which is not dangerous but is perceived as threatening, especially with curious young cattle.

If you are inexperienced with meeting livestock on rights of way, try to ride with someone who is more knowledgeable and whose horse is accustomed to the other animals until you are more confident in what to expect and how to act. Avoid groups larger than three or four as that could feel threatening to the livestock.

Carriage drivers are limited by needing more space and being less manoeuvrable than a ridden horse, so it is important that drivers have an able assistant when passing through livestock.

There are situations where it may *appear* that animals are kept in a field or gates are poorly maintained deliberately to deter use by the public. The highway authority (county council) has the power and the duty to take action to keep the right of way open and easy to use.

Animals making a route hazardous or difficult to pass can be a statutory nuisance under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and dangerous animals are dealt with by the Animals Act 1971. It may be necessary to fence the right of way so that it is free from the animals but that can result in it becoming overgrown because no longer grazed. Improvement of gates can be enforced under the Highways Act 1980.

Points to remember

Any animal with young may behave differently from usual and should be treated with extra caution as mothers may be more aggressive and highly protective of their young. They may perceive a threat in your presence or your actions which is not intended or obvious to you.

Breeding males (e.g. bull, ram, stallion) may be aggressive and protective of females in their herd.

Animals quickly sense distress and will respond accordingly. Keep calm; be purposeful, smooth and quiet in your movements; make your voice strong, calm and confident.

Frequent riding or driving through livestock usually means they react less because visitors are common and no longer interesting. They also become familiar to the visiting horses, so the horses are more likely to react calmly.

Young cattle and horses in groups may be boisterous, with 'mob mentality'. Be firmly assertive while alert to the situation escalating.

There are some important guidelines for equestrians passing through any livestock:

- Walk quietly through the field. If in company, keep voices quiet. Loud voices can make animals anxious.
- Do not drive through any field with livestock with a dog, unless it is lying down in the vehicle and under close control. Riders should not have a dog with them, and never where animals are present.

- Make sure the animals know you are there. Stop until they become aware of you, especially if they have young.
- Avoid coming between cows and calves; if your path may pass between them, stop until they are together, or take a route around them, continuing slowly.
- Be watchful and scan the field carefully. Check the direction of cows' attention.
- If animals are following you closely, turn your horse to face them; they are more likely to retreat. Shout or move towards them if necessary. You may need to do this repeatedly while crossing the field; keep calm all the time.
- If riding in a group or driving in convoy; keep together but not so close as to distress or excite the horses.
- If you have had a problem, mention it to the landholder if you know them and see if they have any advice. They are unlikely to be able to move stock out of fields with public rights of way, but other measures may be possible.
- Keep a record of any adverse reaction by livestock, and report to the county council if it is threatening. Helmet camera footage can be helpful.

Gates

Gates which are easy to use make a big difference to the risks of passing through stock fields. The landholder should maintain gates so they can be easily opened and closed from horseback for speed and ease of entering and leaving the field without risking stock escaping. If you know the landholder and a gate is a problem, it is worth letting them know why. If they are not a rider, they may not realise that a gate that is easily moved (including its latch) from horseback is much quicker to operate so there is lower risk to livestock as well as horse and rider.

It is in everyone's interests for animals to stay where they belong so making gates easy to negotiate by equestrians is important. Difficult gates should be reported to the highway authority (county council) so that they can be improved to avoid incidents. Action becomes more urgent where animals are present.

Gates on a deer farm need to be taller because of the ability of deer to jump. This should not affect equestrians as, like any gate on a bridleway or byway, they should be easy and convenient to open from horseback so the latch must be accessible. Their height makes deer gates much heavier and hanging posts are

often inadequate for them to open without grounding, which makes them an obstruction.

Passing through stock

Deviating from the line of a bridleway or byway may be desirable to avoid a group of animals, whether grazing, lying down or active. Being off the line of the right of way is trespass but the cattle are a temporary obstruction on the path, and you have a right to deviate far enough to avoid them. If they are lying down, there may not be space to be far enough away to avoid them getting up, so approach slowly and calmly, give them time to see you and they are likely to get up and move away. If they are scrambling up hurriedly, pause and allow them to move calmly before proceeding slowly. Be patient, give them time to move without distress.

Cattle and horses will react more to the unfamiliar in their fields so if equestrians become wary of using a route through stock and do so less and less, the situation may deteriorate as the livestock become less accustomed to rights of way users. In addition, the apprehension of the users tends to rise, which affects their horses and the stock and creates an escalating cycle. The answer may be to organise frequent small group rides through the fields accompanied by a horse and rider accustomed to livestock. It may be useful to do this in association with the farmer or landholder if possible. The sooner the animals are accustomed to strangers passing through their field, the less likely it is that incidents will occur.

If a problem with livestock is serious or you have not reached a satisfactory conclusion with the highway authority, contact your local BHS Access and Bridleways Officer, a volunteer, who may know if other equestrians have been having similar problems and will know the best way in your area to take the matter further. They may be able to resolve the matter with the owner (if known) or will contact the highway authority.

Cattle

Cattle are notoriously inquisitive creatures, and what may appear as aggression can be curiosity, especially if they are young or recently turned out or not handled frequently. Cattle are prey animals, like horses, and are not usually aggressive, unless they are cows protecting calves or a bull protecting his cows. Dairy cows

are handled several times a day and are of placid breeds so are least likely to be interested in you, unless they have a calf.

Cows with young will be protective and extra care will be required when passing through their field. Resting calves are often invisible in long grass while the mother joins others in the herd, perhaps many metres away, so scan the field carefully and be alert to a cow watching you, it is possible you could pass between her and her calf. Other cows in the herd would immediately join her to defend the calf; they are quick to act together. A farmer will not choose to put cows with young calves in a field with a right of way because of that risk but sometimes it is unavoidable so always be wary.

Bullocks and heifers may find visitors very interesting and exciting. A group of young cattle can become boisterous — think of how easily a group of excited teenagers can adopt mob mentality. The aim is to avoid this happening in the first place: be familiar, be quiet and boring.

Cattle are let out in the spring once the grass is high enough and will be particularly ebullient and curious at first. This may also be the case when they are first moved to new pasture. Passing through them calmly will ensure that they become used to horses. Think of cattle farms on your usual routes and consider the farming calendar — the first bright dry spring weather means cattle are likely to be turned out, even if temporarily. If you are aware that cattle are newly released, it may be sensible to avoid the route through them until they have settled.

Bulls

Section 59 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 makes it an offence, subject to important exceptions, for the occupier of a field crossed by a right of way to cause or allow a bull to be at large in it except for:

- a) bulls not more than ten months old; and
- b) bulls which are not of a recognised dairy breed and which are at large with cows or heifers.

Dairy breeds listed in the legislation are Ayrshire, British Friesian, British Holstein, Dairy Shorthorn, Guernsey, Jersey, Kerry. The list is out of date as several other dairy breeds are now common and can be more reactive.

Move towards cattle if you need to get them away from a gate or out of your way. You might extend your arms or a stick if it is safe to do so (mindful of the effect on your horse or companions!), and use your voice. Be firm and confident, but also calm; expect them to move and most likely they will.

If you are dismounted and you feel threatened by cattle, let the horse go, it can run much faster than you and the cattle and will draw the attention of the cattle from you.

The Health and Safety Executive produces guidance relating to cattle where there is public access. See [hse.gov.uk/pubns/ais17ew.pdf](https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/ais17ew.pdf)

Sheep

Always walk through fields of sheep unless they are distant enough to be undisturbed by you. Keep checking for reaction and slow down if you are disturbing them. Sheep can easily be panicked by visitors, particularly if moving faster than walk. Panic will cause them to run en masse into corners or bottlenecks, into fences or other situations where they may be injured as well as increase their distress. Be prepared to walk slowly, pause to allow them to get up and move away calmly, be patient.

This is particularly important when ewes are pregnant or have young lambs. Frightened ewes may abort if they are in lamb or stop providing milk or care if they have lambs at foot. Pregnancy is five months, but could be timed for lambing from December to April depending on the farm's system, so either local knowledge is needed, or treat sheep as vulnerable at any time.

Ewes with young lambs are particularly vulnerable to disturbance, especially on open land. Avoid any action that would cause the sheep to run as lambs may become separated from their mothers and it takes a lot of difficult work to pair them again, with a risk of mothers rejecting their lambs. This can be a great expense for farmers and will discourage provision of access for equestrians as well as impairing the reputation of all equestrians.

Take care at gates to ensure that sheep, especially lambs, do not dash through; this is most likely if they feel cornered or separated from the flock. Wait until they are well away from the gate before attempting to leave the field.

Rams do not normally react aggressively except to other rams unless cornered.

Pigs

Some horses are perturbed by pigs until they become accustomed to them. If you are near an outdoor pig farm, contact the farmer to find out if there is any way of familiarising your horse to the pigs in a safe environment before riding or driving through them. Pigs have poor eyesight and are slow moving so tend to quickly lose interest in users of a path near them.

Whether in an outdoor piggery or for conservation grazing purposes to control bracken, pigs are likely to be in penned to areas with electric fencing which should not cross the public right of way. If the fencing crosses the path, it is an obstruction, and you may need to involve your highway authority (county or unitary council) in having it removed or set further back from the bridleway or byway if the width left for the public right of way is too narrow.

Horses

Loose horses can be the biggest problem to equestrians. Some horses are more likely to be defensive of their field or their companions.

Most horses are accustomed to being handled, even semi-feral ponies will be gathered for management practices. As with cattle, acting confidently but quietly and firmly will achieve best results. Shouting, moving towards them forcefully, waving a whip and acting aggressively will deter most from taking too much interest in you (be mindful of the effect on your own horse or companions!). You may need to turn towards them repeatedly as you cross the field.

If enough equestrians cross the field often enough, the 'home' horses should become accustomed to the right of way users and become less interested. Until they become habituated, it is advisable to ride with someone else so that one rider can deter the horses while the other opens the gate. Carriage-drivers should always have a groom with them to assist.

The BHS strongly recommends against stallions being kept in fields through which rights of way pass (see [BHS Advice](#) on Stallions on land with equestrian access) but it is not prohibited and does occur in fields and open land. If you have a mare, be alert to her being in season and avoid routes near a stallion at that time. If a stallion is with mares, any strange horse may be at risk, male or female.

Other livestock

There are many other animals which may be farmed such as deer, goats, water buffalo, llamas, alpacas, ostriches, emus and geese. Donkeys may also be kept, usually domestically or for breeding. Any of these animals may also be kept on smallholdings, for domestic use or as pets. The latter can be more of a problem because they have no fear of humans or expect titbits so you may need to be particularly assertive.

Alternative routes

It is illegal to obstruct a public right of way, and an equestrian can rightly expect a right of way to always be available, but a farmer may offer an alternative route which is easier for the public, to avoid the animals, for everyone's safety. This is most likely for cattle or water buffalo.

Where a reasonable alternative route is provided, most equestrians will prefer to use it to avoid cattle or other horses. If it is inadequate for horses, a conversation with the farmer may be helpful, either directly if you are comfortable with that, or via the BHS, or the highway authority (county council).

Electric fencing

Electric fencing is commonly used to ensure security of grazing land. It should always be well clear of rights of way with careful provision at gates (see [BHS Advice](#) on Electric Fencing).

Summary

Livestock species are prey animals and likely to be deterred by confident, calm humans. All will require greater caution when they have young. Problems may be overcome by contacting the owner and arranging familiarisation days between the stock and several equestrians, if possible, starting with fewer animals which are less reactive and increasing their number if this is feasible. Increasing safety and avoiding incidents is very much in the interest of the farmer or owner as well as path users and an approach of cooperation is most likely to be successful. A local National Farmers Union representative may be able to help as increasing safety will reduce insurance liability.

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