

Advice on Riding or driving a horse through livestock



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 farm animals

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

Some bridleways and byways are lanes with hedges, walls or fences to each side—‘enclosed’; others are across agricultural land or heath, moor or forest land—‘unenclosed’.

Most land over which unenclosed bridleways and byways pass must provide an income, which may involve unpenned farm animals—livestock—usually cattle or sheep. This may be intensive farming with high stocking levels (lots of animals per hectare) or lower levels, sometimes for conservation grazing.

Keeping livestock, including horses, on land crossed by unenclosed public bridleways or byways is legal, providing the animals have been assessed as posing no risk to public path users.

Livestock and the public

Livestock can react adversely to public presence, even in a herd which is used to human activity. The reaction may result from earlier stressors such as being gathered for treatment, moving field, being chased by a dog or someone in a vehicle, or people passing through the field on a public bridleway, 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 response level. There have been incidents with tragic results, often without knowing why, so always be alert around cattle and horses.

Sometimes animal behaviour can seem threatening, especially with young cattle and horses, but can be the animals’ curiosity rather than aggression.

There are situations where it may *appear* that animals are kept in a field to deter use by the public. The highway authority (county council) has a duty 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 public right of way so that it is free from the animals but that can result in it being too narrow or becoming overgrown because no longer grazed and may not be practical for animal-keeping.

Gates

Gates which are easy to use make a big difference to the risks to equestrians 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 to reduce the risk of stock escaping.

If you know the landholder and a gate is a problem, it is worth letting them know why. They may not realise that a gate that is easily opened from the ground is not easy on horseback, or with less strength. Operating a well-functioning latch and gate from horseback is much quicker so there is lower risk to livestock as well as horse and rider or driver. 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 urgent where farm animals are present, to maintain stock security and because horse riders are safer mounted, so gates must be easily operable from horseback. The authority has powers to improve gates under the Highways Act 1980. The BHS can sometimes contribute towards improvement of gates on a popular bridleway or byway.

Passing through livestock

Do not ride or drive through livestock with a dog. Riders should not have a dog with them at any time but never where other animals are present.

Carriage drivers should always have a competent backstepper (assistant). Backsteppers are essential to open and close gates and prevent grazing animals escaping. The horse should be comfortable with farm animals in hand or ridden before being taken near them in harness.

There are some important guidelines about passing livestock in fields:

- Make sure the animals know you are there. Wait until they become aware of you, especially if they have young. Approach slowly.
- Avoid causing animals to run, it means they are distressed.
- Walk quietly through the field. Keep voices quiet. Loud voices can make animals anxious if they associate raised voices with disturbance.
- Avoid splitting the group, go round them. This causes less stress for the animals.
- Being off the line of the right of way to go round the animals is trespass but the animals 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, give them time to get up. If they are scrambling up hurriedly, stop; allow them to move calmly before continuing more slowly and keep pausing if necessary.
- Be patient, give them time to move without distress.

On open ground, the same principles apply, although the grazing animals are fewer so more spread out and have plenty of space. It is still important to move at a pace that does not cause them to run and to be alert to what they are doing.

Sheep and cattle are the most common livestock encountered. Less common farmed animals can be treated similarly depending on their relative size.

Sheep

Sheep are particularly vulnerable when pregnant or when feeding lambs. If distressed, they may abort if pregnant. If a flock with lambs scatters, the mothers may not find their lambs without a lot of hard work by the farmer.

Some flocks lamb early, some late, so always treat sheep as vulnerable and make sure they are not distressed by equestrians passing by.

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 all well away from the gate before attempting to leave the field.

Cattle

Cattle are bred for easy handling traits, so are not usually aggressive, unless they are cows protecting calves. 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. Bulls are less common than assumed, see [below](#), and will be most interested in their cows.

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

Someone on horseback is likely to be safer than on foot, because most ridden horses are bigger than cows, and cows know that horses can both bite and kick with strength greater than their own.

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.

When meeting cattle

- Aim to pass cows to your right. As they look at you, this means you are on their left, which helps them react more calmly because of the way their brains process anything unusual.
- They have a 'personal space' and a 'flight zone' like humans (and horses and sheep). Be aware of both if they are blocking your way forward.
- Avoid splitting a group, go round. If they are widely spread, so you have to pass with some to each side, be ready for those on one side to join the others. Pause to let them. Cows separated from the rest of the group may be hard to predict and could startle your horse with a sudden dash at close quarters.
- Cattle move closer together to meet a threat. The more space between them, the safer you are; if they cluster closely, you may be at higher risk.
- Scan all the animals in a group, a leader could be in the middle rather than the edge.
- Move to your right round the group by 'nudging' the group's space, giving them time and space to move away in their flight zone to your

left. You may need to advance a step and pause, then again. Patience is needed to give them time to assess you and move away calmly.

- If they don't give ground to a nudging move, or if they move closer together, retreat, as you may have gone too far into their space. Keep their flight zone available by giving them somewhere to go in front of them or to their right side.
- Avoid moving cows into a place where they will be more tightly packed and may feel trapped. If the field has a narrower section, and any of the cattle enter that section, it may be best to retreat until they have moved out of it.
- If your horse is used to cattle and cattle are following you closely across a field, especially nearing the gate, turn your horse to face them;¹ they are more likely to retreat. You may need to do this repeatedly and maybe move towards them. Unless they are in a tight bunch, their behaviour is likely because you are an exciting event rather than being aggressive.
- You might raise your arms to be a 'Big and Horned' threat, if it is safe to do so, mindful of the effect on your horse or companions (practise in safety at home!).
- Be alert to their behaviour, if they don't give ground, you must. Be sure they have space to move into away from you.
- Keep your exit route in mind.

Cows and calves

Cows with young will be protective and extra care will be required when passing through their field.

Avoid coming between cows and calves; if your path may pass between them, stop until they are together then go round, giving as much space as you can.

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 rapidly join her to defend the calf; they are quick to act together.

¹ This will depend on your horse's size, temperament and whether it is comfortable with cattle.

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.

Young cattle

Cattle are inquisitive, and what may appear as aggression can be curiosity, especially if they are young or recently turned out or not handled frequently.

Young cattle (bullocks and heifers) may find visitors interesting and exciting. A group of them can become boisterous and be infected with mob mentality. Aim to be familiar, quiet, slow and boring.

Springtime

Most farmed cattle will be housed in winter and are let out in the spring when the grass starts growing and may be easily excited at first, or when they are first moved to new pasture. Passing through them calmly will ensure that they become used to horses.

If there are cattle farms on your usual routes, consider the farming calendar; the first bright dry spring weather means cattle may 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.

Colours

Cattle's vision has fewer colours than humans and they are more likely to react to unusual high contrast than any colour. Whether hi-viz clothing or equipment is good or not has no answer because on many farms, workers wear hi-viz so the cows are used to it, and equestrians wearing hi-viz can make it easier for a farm worker to see them and advise if there could be a problem, e.g. with recently turned out young stock.

Bulls

Bulls should only be present where there is public access if they are with cows.

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. Farmers with bulls should be fully aware of the risks and unlikely to allow a bull near a route with public access.

Pigs

Some horses are perturbed by pigs until they become accustomed to them. If you are near an outdoor pig farm, consider contacting 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 have little interest in users of a path near them, but horses may need careful introduction to pigs.

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

Horses

Loose horses can be the biggest problem to equestrians. Most horses are accustomed to being handled, even semi-feral ponies will be gathered occasionally for their welfare. Shouting, moving towards them forcefully, perhaps waving a stick will deter most from taking too much interest in you (but 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 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 operates gates. If the grazing horses

continue to be a nuisance, you may need to involve the highway authority (county council).

Carriage-drivers should always have a backstepper (assistant) with them. The vehicle is likely to be unusual and may seem threatening to the loose horses so go slowly and be prepared to stop.

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, or used for conservation grazing, such as wild boar. If you find them on land with a public bridleway or byway and believe there is a problem, contact the highway authority with details.

Donkeys, alpacas, goats and geese are sometimes kept on smallholdings, for domestic use or as pets. Pets can be a problem if they have no respect of humans or expect titbits.

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.

Where a reasonable alternative route is provided, most equestrians will prefer to use it to avoid cattle or other horses even if less than ideal. If it is not adequate for use with horses, a conversation with the farmer may be helpful, if you are comfortable with that contact, if not, via BHS, or the highway authority (county council).

Habituation and control

Livestock must be expected on public rights of way. The horse rider or driver is responsible for ensuring that they and their horse have the skills and confidence, which may mean practice in a safe, controlled environment, such as on farms which offer 'experience days'.

Where horse and rider or driver are comfortable but there are problems because the livestock are not familiar with visitors, it may be helpful to contact the owner (via the county council or parish council if not known) and arrange familiarisation days between the stock and equestrians, if possible, starting with fewer animals which are less reactive and increasing their number if this is feasible.

Livestock which are used to humans and horses passing through will pass the 'It's ok' message to newer members of the herd. This applies equally to visiting horses. Increasing safety and avoiding incidents is 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.

Points to remember

- Don't cause sheep to run; they may be pregnant, or become separated from their lambs.
- Avoid splitting any group of animals: go round rather than through them.
- Don't pass between cows and their calves.
- The flight zone of cattle is important. Give them space to move away from your slow advance.
- Groups of young cattle may find visitors exciting, especially in spring.
- If you have had a problem, mention it to the landholder if you know them and see if they have any advice, or to the highway authority (rights of way service of county council). They are unlikely to be able to move stock out of fields with public rights of way, but other measures may be possible such as an alternative route or temporary fencing.

- Keep a record if you have felt threatened by cattle or horses (or other livestock), and report to the highway authority. Helmet camera footage can be helpful.

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