

# Advice on Gates on routes used by equestrians

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 countries but the legal requirements in Scotland and Northern Ireland may differ from those in England and Wales.

More advice is available on [www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice](http://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 recommends seeking advice specific to the site.

Gates are a barrier which can be a major hazard to riders and carriage-drivers and obstruct a public right of way because they are too difficult for those users to negotiate. Even the best gate which is easily operated in ideal conditions is still a potential hazard and always an inconvenience for equestrians. Non-riders tend not to realise that while pedestrians may barely interrupt their stride to negotiate a gate, a rider will take at least five times as long, even at the best gate and with a high skill level of horse and rider. The ideal for safety and convenience is that there should be no gates across a route. This is reflected in the British Standard 5709 for Gaps, Gates and Stiles.

The Equality Act 2010 and Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 also advocate use of the least restrictive option so as to inconvenience or obstruct the fewest users. The least restrictive option is a gap, with a gate used only where a gap is impractical. Equestrian users may have impaired mobility and a horse provides them with many health benefits of exercise and access to countryside. Gates can be limiting factors on the distance people can travel independently.

There are many situations where a gap would be practical but a gate remains, such as between arable fields or where there is no livestock. Any gate not currently required for the control of livestock could be removed or secured in its open position. This reduces wear on gates as well as improving the passage and safety of users. Tying back a gate in winter when stock are off the land is also beneficial in reducing footfall around the gateway when the ground is most vulnerable to poaching which can have a significant effect on ease of access and retention of vegetation. A horse having to manoeuvre to negotiate a closed gate will have many more footfalls, commonly turning tightly, so causing much more poaching than going straight through a gateway with the gate removed or tied back. If removed, a gate can be replaced in future if it is again required for the control of livestock.

Where a gate is necessary, it should be reasonably easy and convenient to use by equestrians as well as other users. A newly authorised gate should comply with the British Standard for Gaps Gates and Stiles. Regard should also be given to its site because although a gate itself may be sound or comply with the Standard, hazards in its site may make it an obstruction. It is vital for safety that the site has adequate manoeuvring space—commonly underestimated—and be clear of hazards such as uneven or sloping ground, holes, deep mud, overgrowth and barbed or electric wire. Gates

should be set back by 4m from the edge of a carriageway because of obvious dangers to users (and motorists) while equestrians negotiate the gate in either direction.

## BHS Priorities in Order of Preference

1. A gap at least 1.5m on a bridleway, 1.8m on a restricted byway, 3m on a byway<sup>1</sup>
2. A gate without self-closing mechanism
3. A self-closing gate only where required for essential livestock security with *at least eight seconds* closing speed from 90 degrees<sup>2</sup>

Essential livestock security is considered to be alongside a road or onto a track which is open to a road.

## Basic Requirements

Several factors reduce the risk, difficulty and inconvenience of gates for equestrians and the BHS considers that all gates used by riders should comply with the following basic requirements.

Gates should:

- Be openable with [one hand](#), ideally the same hand that also operates the latch
- Be operable while mounted with no need to lift or exert strength
- Have manoeuvring space of 4m by 4m at each side, including 1.2m beyond the latch in line with the gate and 6m length before and after the gate on a byway
- Have firm, level (i.e. not sloping in any direction), even ground with no vegetation overgrowth (from the surface, sides or overhanging) within the manoeuvring space
- Provide an opening of at least 1.5m on a bridleway, 3m on a byway
- Open to no less than 90 degrees
- Be set back from a road by 4m on a bridleway, 6m on a byway

## One and the same hand

At all times, a rider needs a hand for the horse, so has only one for the gate. Having to use both hands for the gate or one for the latch and one for the gate means that the rider has jeopardised

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<sup>1</sup> Unless subject to a traffic regulation order suspending the right for mechanically propelled four-wheeled vehicles, in which case 1.8m to accommodate horsedrawn vehicles may be accepted unless locally agreed by the council with equestrians that a 1.5m gap for ridden horses and a key or code lock for horse drivers.

<sup>2</sup> Gates must open to more than 90 degrees. The recommended minimum time may vary depending on the type of mechanism.

control of the horse. Swapping hands potentially loses control of the horse during the transition. Some latches may be operable with one hand, but require the other hand to be used at the same time to move the gate clear of it (e.g. gravity latch). This leaves no hand free to control the horse.

A spring bolt latch should be fitted with a rod as its lever extending above the top rail and should, if possible, be protected where it sticks out from the gate to avoid injury from it. Spring bolt latches without an extended lever are rarely possible to operate while mounted and can require considerable strength even on foot.

Double gates must have one gate firmly anchored so that the rider only has to move one gate. Both gates moving may produce an impossible situation for anyone alone especially in wind or where the gates will not stay in one position. While this situation may be possible to deal with on foot because you can keep hold of both gates, that is impossible when you need sufficient space to take a horse through, even if the rider has dismounted.

## Self-closing gates

Self-closing mechanisms can be very dangerous for riders. Having opened a gate, many riders will not be able to keep one hand on it to hold it open as they pass because they cannot reach or because to do so would compromise control of the horse. They have to swing the gate wide enough to let it go and ride through the gap.

This is not safe with gates that close quickly as the narrowing gap may cause the horse to panic or the horse or rider may be hit by the gate or the post. Serious injuries from these gates are common and the BHS strongly recommends against their use unless the closing speed is at least eight seconds from 90 degrees.

The risk at self-closing gates is much increased by additional hazards such as lack of space to manoeuvre, uneven ground, overgrowth, slope, deep mud or standing water. Where a site cannot meet the basic requirements (page 2), a self-closing gate should be avoided or removed.

Self-closing gates are commonly impossible to use when riding one horse and leading another or when leading more than one horse. A horse may be led when ridden by a novice, child or disabled rider. Bridleways, byways and roads include the right to lead a horse and to ride one horse and lead others. 'Riding and leading' has been a commonplace activity on the highway for as long as horses have been used as transport.

## New gates

A new gate may only be authorised by a highway authority under certain conditions, usually for the control of livestock. Highway authorities are strongly recommended to apply the British Standard 5709 and the basic requirements on page 2 if authorising a new gate.

All gates should be useable from horseback as a gate for which a rider must dismount may comprise an obstruction for someone with impaired mobility and at the least will be an gross inconvenience to equestrian users.

## Dismounting

Dismounting is not the answer to a gate that cannot be operated from horseback. Even on the ground, the rider needs one hand for the horse. It may not be safe or possible to tie the horse somewhere close, open the gate, untie the horse, move it through, tie it again, close the gate, untie the horse. Dismounting and mounting are potentially hazardous, especially with other factors such as boggy ground or livestock.

Mounting without a mounting block is not possible for many riders and is not recommended because of the strain it puts on the horse's back, the rider and the saddle. Many riders have impaired mobility and can enjoy the exercise of riding once in the saddle but have difficulty mounting. Having to dismount in order to open and close a gate is an inconvenience even if it is possible.

The Highways Act 1980 Section 146 states that a gate must "prevent unreasonable interference with the rights of the persons [using the right of way]".

Having to dismount and remount to open the gate means that the process takes very many times longer and substantially interferes with the passage of a rider. A mounted rider may take at least five times longer than a pedestrian to negotiate a gate, even if the gate is of high standard.

## Manoeuvring space

Sufficient manoeuvring space around the gate on firm, level (not sloping) ground is particularly important and emphasised in the British Standard.

The recommended safest method of opening a gate is to approach the gate from the hinge end and align the horse parallel to the gate facing away from the hinges with the latch approximately level with the horse's shoulder so that the rider can reach and operate it. This position requires space of 1.2m for the horse's head and neck beyond the latch in line with the gate. Space for the horse to approach the gate and turn to this position is required (see BHS Advice on Opening Gates).

This method (commonly called 'heels to hinges') is recommended because it substantially reduces the chance of the reins, bridle or martingale becoming caught on the gate or its latch, or of the horse's head being hit by the gate or latch (if the latter protrudes). It enables the rider to operate the gate one handed, using the same hand throughout and controlling the horse with the other hand, thus avoiding a possible loss of control of the horse or gate while the rider changes hands.

Allowance needs to be made for the space taken up by the gate as the rider pulls it open and by the horse as it reverses while the rider operates the gate, if opening towards them. Two or more horses

travelling together will need more space; normally a group of three horses should be allowed for, since a horse may become difficult to control if left alone while its companions move on.

Ideally, for safe and easy operation of a 1.5m bridle gate, a minimum clear manoeuvring space of 4m square should be provided before and after the gate, including space beyond the latch for the horse's head and neck, with an additional 4m length of waiting space if use by groups of horses is likely. For a longer gate the area on the opening side may need to be greater, depending on the length of the gate.

Riders of larger horses may not be able to operate a 1.5m bridlegate using the heels to hinges method because the length of the horse means the rider cannot keep a hand on the gate. The rider may have to approach diagonally, which makes the space required at the latch end particularly important, so that riders can position the horse beyond the latch so that they may reach the latch with the hand closest to the hinges.

Using methods other than heels to hinges to open a gate commonly have the horse approaching the gate at right angles and the rider operating the latch with the hand closest, which is then reliant on the gate remaining unlatched while manoeuvring the horse and pushing or pulling that gate wide with the other hand. Self-closing gates frequently defeat this method.

The need for manoeuvring space means that gates must not be placed where the available width is less than 3m such as on bridges, fenced bridleways or narrow lanes.

Gates beside roads should be set back to allow manoeuvring space off the carriageway and, ideally, the waiting space beside a road should be large enough for at least three horses to wait before or after passing through a gate, because a horse may become difficult to control if asked to wait on its own on one side of the road when its companions have crossed.

On a byway, the length from a road or other obstacle should be 6m to give space for a horse and carriage.

## Gate width

Some of the bridleway gates which cause problems or accidents for riders prove to be less than the statutory minimum width of 1.5m between the gateposts (Section 145 of the Highways Act 1980). The highway authority may exercise its statutory powers to require the width of a gate to be increased or for it to be removed.

A gate 1.5m to 1.8m is generally easier to handle than a longer field gate and its lighter weight will cause less load on the gate post so that it remains functional for longer and requires less maintenance through its life.

## Gate latches

Many latch designs are adequate and safe, although not all will be appropriate in every situation. The most universal is a spring latch, at mid height on the gate so giving greatest stock security, operated by an extended lever to the top of the gate, so most convenient for a rider. However, it needs an additional mechanism at the latch itself to be operable by someone on the ground and unable to use the extended lever. Some riders do not like extended levers because of the risk of reins or martingale being caught on them, therefore, in selecting the best latch, consideration should be given to the likely users.

The primary requirements are:

1. A latch release that can be operated with one hand, the same hand that will move the gate.
2. A latch that can be operated from horseback with the lever or latch on the top of the gate so the rider does not have to bend so low as to risk being unbalanced.
3. A latch that does not need much physical strength to operate as 75 per cent of riders are female, 34 per cent are children<sup>3</sup>; some have arthritic hands or other disabilities (Equality Act 2010). Consider a latch that could be operated by a twelve year old girl.

Latches should also:

- Be operable easily from either side of the gate.
- Have no protrusions or edges that can damage the side of the horse, the rider's leg or the saddle.
- Allow some leeway for the gatepost to move a little and for the rider to secure the latch quickly and easily.
- If the mechanism is within the space between the posts, posts should be further apart to ensure safety is not compromised.
- Avoid requiring movement in more than one direction. A handle that requires lifting as well as pulling or sliding sideways will be particularly difficult for riders who lack strength.

## Common gate latches in order of cost

- A chain or rope loop is simple, cheap and easily maintained, and works well providing movement in the posts does not cause it to become too tight. It is easier to use if the loop is stapled to the gate rather than loose or stapled to the post. It should not require untying or a link releasing as this will demand both hands (see [One and the same hand](#)).

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<sup>3</sup> BHS report Health Benefits of Riding 2010

- Hook and eye The hook should be at the top rail of the gate, no lower than the second rail, and the eye on the gatepost. Easy for riders to use and has proved stock proof for both cattle and sheep when installed on one-way gates up to 10 feet wide. A hook on a few links of chain provides flexibility which can reduce maintenance if posts shift.
- A triangular gravity latch commonly requires one hand to lift it and the other to move the gate free of it so is undesirable for equestrians as this means dropping the reins. If used, it should have an extended handle, or a length of chain or cord stapled to the top of the post, so that it can be operated from the top of the gate.
- A horizontal spring latch is commonly found on metal field gates. It **MUST HAVE** a lever (a rod attached perpendicular to the spring) extending above the top rail of gate. Without the extended lever, it can be very difficult for people with less strength even on foot, requiring both hands, and mostly impossible from horseback. A 'trombone' style rod bent over the top of the gate and down to the latch is less likely to catch reins. Retrofit kits are available to improve existing spring latches.

## Gates associated with railway crossings

To enable horses and riders or drivers to spend as little time within the railway boundaries as possible, gates should always open away from the railway, should be slowly self-closing and should have no latches.

If a latch is necessary to prevent livestock from straying onto the railway, the gate should be set back into the field leaving a 'corridor' at least 4m wide and 6m long on the railway side so that horses are well away from the railway line while operating the gate. On the principle of least restrictive option, fencing the livestock off the right of way should be considered first.

On railway crossings where there are latched vehicle gates with narrow pedestrian gates beside them, the Society strongly recommends that the pedestrian gates are replaced with bridle gates where riders are likely to wish to use the crossing. See BHS Advice on Level Crossings.

## Gates associated with cattle grids

See BHS Advice on Cattle Grids for legal requirements and the Society's recommendations on design. Key safety points are:

- The gate should always be hung with hinges closest to the grid so that the horse is as far from the grid as possible while the rider is operating the catch.
- There should be a fence separating the grid from the gate and its immediate approach so that a horse cannot step into the grid if startled while in the bypass.

All other requirements for gates in this Advice Note also apply.

## Further Information

BHS Advice on:

- Gate Installation
- Vehicle Barriers
- Opening Gates
- Mounting Blocks
- Cattle Grids
- Level Crossings

British Standard 5709:2018

Equality Act 2010

Dept of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs:

- 'Good practice guidance for local authorities on compliance with the Equality Act 2010'
  - Annex B page 10 paragraph B.7
  - Annex C page 14 paragraphs C6-C10
  - Annex D page 16 paragraph D.1
  - Annex E page 22 paragraph E.22
  - Annex G page 26 of 35 paragraphs G3-G4
- Circular 1/09 6.7-11 (England)
- Circular 5/93 (Wales)

Highways Act 1980 Section 145 – highway authority may require gate to be widened

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