

Advice on Hacking in England and Wales

The law and management of public access rights vary between the four countries of the United Kingdom. This advice note applies to England and Wales only. There is an equivalent factsheet for Scotland. www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice.

If this is a printed copy, please check the website to see if it is the latest version (date top of page 2).

In the wild, horses travel some twenty miles a day searching for their food. The modern horse does not have nearly so much exercise and, for most, it is probably in confined spaces but hacking out can be a very enjoyable experience for both the horse and rider, enriching the bond between them as they encounter new sights and sounds. Equally a nasty experience can dent the confidence of the horse or rider, so following this guide will help to make the experience a positive one.

Where to Ride

Most riders have to start their hacking by using a road with varying traffic densities so it is advisable to take the [BHS Ride Safe](#) training.

Next, check that you know what is required of you when hacking by reading *BHS Advice on Responsible riding and carriage driving* and on *Where to Ride* to work out where you can go; there may be more options than you know. Local advice might provide you with potential routes that do not appear on official sources, so joining a BHS [Equestrian Access Group](#) can be helpful for finding out about them.

You should only go where you have a right of way or where you personally, or all riders, have permission to ride (e.g. some Forestry Commission land) so the next step is to check your map reading.

Map Reading

Improving your map-reading skills will increase your hacking potential in most areas. Feeling comfortable with maps will help you to enjoy a far greater range of places to ride, to feel secure in knowing where you are in relation to the map, and how far you can go in how much time.

The Ordnance Survey produces superb maps and [excellent guides](#) on how to read them. The best for riders and carriage drivers is the 1:25,000 Explorer map (orange cover), which is available on

paper or for various GPS and smartphone apps. You can also see it online at www.bhsaccess.org.uk/dobbin and www.streetmap.co.uk.

Look on the map key and note the line styles for bridleways, byways ('restricted byway' and 'byway open to all traffic') and 'Other routes with public access' then look at the map in your area and find routes marked thus.

You will soon get used to spotting them. Some people like to highlight the useable routes in their area to make it easier to see at a glance. Many routes described in the key as 'Traffic-free cycle routes' are open to ridden horses though rarely carriages. There may be other places you can ride (depending on location), see the *BHS Advice on Where to Ride* for details.

Being ambitious and planning long rides is wonderful and a great winter fireside activity. Check your current routes on the map so that you have an idea how far you can go in the time you have available. Be cautious about distance in new terrain as route finding and checking means the ride will take longer. You may also encounter factors which slow you down, such as uneven ground where you have to pick your way or overgrown ways or a number of gates.

10 Key Tips

Before you take to the bridleways, byways and roads, there are ten things to do.

1. Make sure that your tack fits and is safe.
2. Your own clothes and boots are comfortable and suitable for the weather conditions.
3. Wear high-viz, ideally on both you and on the horse
4. Wear boots which are suitable for walking should it be necessary.
5. Carrying a whip is advised for various uses (assuming your horse is safe with you doing so).
6. Take a fully charged mobile phone and in an unfamiliar area take a map.
7. Tell somebody where you are going and roughly how long you think you will be out; consider using a tracking app so a nominated friend or partner knows where you are
8. Train your horse to open gates safely at home. Allow more time for a gated ride.
9. Train your horse to stand, so that if any difficulties arise you can deal with them while the horse is still.
10. It is advisable to have a headcollar under the bridle with a rope (looped and knotted (quick release) round the horse's neck, or attached to your saddle).

The importance of all these tips increases the further you are from home, the longer the ride and the more remote the terrain.

Tack which fits well for half an hour in the manège may not be so comfortable on a hot day after three hours in the saddle.

The weather can change considerably during a day, especially if your route goes from low ground to high or near the coast, and being cold or wet is uncomfortable and could be unsafe.

Hi-viz helps others to see you easily so that they can avoid you or slow down, or control dogs or children in plenty of time. In some areas hi-viz visible from above gives early warning to low flying pilots. It will also make you and your horse much more visible to searchers if you should have a fall or part company with your horse (e.g. lose hold while dismounted when the horse is startled). Different colours of hi-viz can be more visible in various circumstances so consider wearing more than one colour.

Dealing with difficulties, checking the map, taking a photograph or just admiring a view will be far more pleasure if your horse has been taught to stand and there are occasions when it may be helpful to have a headcollar and rope with you so you can leave your horse while you deal with a difficult gate or move a minor obstruction (or buy an ice cream!). Even close to home, an emergency may mean a headcollar and rope are useful. Your horse needs to be trained to stand tied by a rope (or ground tied).

Many helpful apps are available for smartphones, including Ordnance Survey maps, tracking so a friend knows your location, and What3Words which will give a more easily memorable location than a grid reference if you are reporting to emergency services. Some highway authorities have a website facility which allows you to report a problem on the spot with location and photographs.

Schooling

Whilst hacking you and your horse will come across a range of different experiences, so the more miles you ride, the better your horse will become at tackling strange situations. You will meet gates of varying difficulty to open and close, fords or large puddles; muddy, rocky or uneven going, as well as unusual noises, smells and animals. Once horses are relatively fit they can tackle most conditions and the likelihood of mud or rocky going causing injury is slight so long as your speed is appropriate for the conditions.

In difficult situations, it is particularly important to ride actively, keeping your horse well-balanced and listening to you. Paying attention to your flatwork at home can be very useful so that your horse responds to your aids irrespective of what is happening around, and of course, hacking is an excellent opportunity to school at the same time as enjoying the outdoors.

A 'go anywhere' horse with whom you have a solid trusting relationship will boost your confidence and enjoyment. A BHS coach will be able to help you build that relationship.

Gates

Being able to open and close gates safely and easily is a valuable skill and will add greatly to the enjoyment of a ride. Avoiding routes with gates will limit your options a lot in some areas and struggling with gates can take much pleasure from a ride, as well as increase the risk of injury to you or your horse, so training your horse to do gates safely is important.

See BHS Advice on Opening Gates and its [video](#).

A hunting crop can give you valuable extra reach to move and control the gate in some cases. If you do have to dismount make sure that your horse has been taught to stand whilst you remount, especially as you may not have an ideal mounting block and have to make do with whatever is available. You can teach your horse to stand while you climb a gate or fence to remount. This is a very useful skill in case it is your only option for remounting but there are many risks in doing so as a slip can result in a serious injury and it can damage a gate so is a last resort.

Hills

In the past when horses were beasts of burden they tackled nearly everything asked of them and this can be the same now, so long as they are fit enough and educated to carry you in balance. When riding up hill, lean forward to take the weight off your horse's hind legs, which are doing most of the work. When descending very steep hills, it is advisable to lean slightly back, moving your lower leg forward if necessary to help keep good balance with your horse.

Wherever possible ride straight up and down steep hills rather than diagonally across the gradient where your horse might slip sideways or you may find it harder to stay balanced. Steep hills do need fitness of both horse and rider as the tendency can be to 'crab' going downhill when horses are unfit.

Unfit riders are an additional strain on a horse in difficult conditions so give a thought to your own conditioning, especially core strength, which will aid your balance significantly.

Stock

Farm animals are not likely to hurt you or your horse but in some situations may feel intimidating so it is advisable to ride with a stick to be used against inquisitive cattle or horses (if your horse accepts that). See BHS Advice on Riding through Livestock and Horses.

Always walk through stock of any kind. Never ride between a calf and cows. You may need to deviate from the right of way to avoid cattle, especially if they have young calves.

People

You are an ambassador for all equestrians so remember that civility makes a big difference to whether riders are thought well of or not. A smile and cheerful greeting are a good start, with a thank you to any gate openers or other users keeping their dogs or children close, or to cyclists stopping for you, and to courteous motorists who pass wide and slow. Other users of roads and rights of way commonly think of riders as being miserable and rude. We can all help to change that view!

Many people are afraid of horses because they have no idea how horses will react or how to behave near them. If someone does act in a way that upsets your horse, or could upset another, if it is possible to take the opportunity to explain politely why an action was dangerous, it can help everyone (but a rant is more likely to be unhelpful!).

Cyclists are often unsure what to do and unfortunately tend to take the approach of passing as quickly and quietly as possible! Wherever you can, encourage cyclists to call out on approach from behind and to pass wide and slow.

If you are approached by an angry landowner, a smile can often diffuse the situation. Be sure of where the right of way lies and your right to be there but be prepared to apologise and remove yourself if you are shown to be wrong. Do not allow yourself to be bullied: if you are on the right of way, you have every right to be there. Educating yourself on rights of way law will give you confidence and abiding by the Countryside Code should keep you out of trouble. See BHS Advice on Avoiding Conflict.

Keep to the Path

A bridleway or a byway is a linear right of way, usually wide enough to allow two users to pass each other, and on a legally defined line. If you cannot see a beaten path, such as through a grass field, make sure you know where the 'line' is and keep to it, otherwise you are trespassing and could be sued for damages.

Always keep to the line of the public right of way (or permissive route) unless there is an obstruction (which may include cattle, especially cows with calves) on the route.

If riding in company, keep to a reasonable width where a route is not defined across fields or open land. Two horses abreast is reasonable, but spreading over several metres is not and can cause damage to the ground, conservation value plants, or crops..

Keep your speed appropriate to the ground conditions; horses' hooves quickly damage ground in wet conditions and make riders very unpopular. If possible, keep to one side of a way so that part of the surface is left unpoached for walkers or cyclists.

Remember that grass is still a crop; whether to graze or to harvest and it is important in a grass field to make sure you do not deviate from the right of way and cause more trampling than necessary. Also stubble may be undersown with the next crop, so do not treat it as an excuse for a gallop.

Access for horses away from motorised traffic is at a premium in most areas. Common reasons against equestrian routes being provided are poaching the ground or 'galloping all over the place'. Some riders wrongly assume that a bridleway through a field means you can go where you like but they are wrong. Know the law and do not abuse your rights or fail to consider others.

Why Make the Effort

Like all activities with horses, the most fulfilment when hacking is found when you have a well schooled horse. By taking the time and effort to school your horse to hack sensibly, you can derive hours of great satisfaction and enjoyment of the countryside. You will also have a much greater bond with your horse and you will be contributing to both his physical and mental welfare.

Further Reading

BHS Advice on ...

Responsible riding and carriage driving

Finding places to ride and carriage drive

Riding on beaches

Permissive routes

Hill and upland riding

Blocked and difficult to use bridleways and byways

Avoiding conflict

Level crossings

Stallions on bridleways

Riding through livestock and horses

www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice