

A plea from the Rights of Way Group

We all enjoy our lovely Chiltern countryside and many of us are regular users of the numerous footpaths, bridleways and other Rights of Way that cross it. The vast majority of users comply with the law and enjoy rights of way in a manner that does not diminish the pleasure and safety of others.

The Chiltern Society has several cycling groups, all of which respect other users and comply with the law. Likewise Chiltern Society walkers are similarly tolerant of responsible cyclists using legitimate routes. Unfortunately a number of recent instances suggest an increase in the number of those who sometimes don't, in particular cycling on footpaths – which is not legal unless there has been specific permission from the landowner – and

aggressive cycling on bridleways where cyclists should not race and should give way to pedestrians and horse riders. This article tries to explain the laws, and encourage responsible use by all.

Definitive Maps maintained by highways authorities show Rights of Way and their status (namely who has the right to use them), and form the basis of other maps such as those produced by the Ordnance Survey.

They differentiate between:

public footpaths with rights for pedestrians;










bridleways, where there are rights for horse and cycle riders as well as pedestrians

restricted byways and byways open to all traffic, where there are also rights for certain vehicles

other types of paths - tracks through woods and permissive paths which carry landowner defined allowances for their use.

Rights of Way summary

There are four types of Rights of Way (public paths) that are shown on maps and also as colour-coded arrows on signposts and way makers.

	OS Landranger 1:50000	OS Explorer 1:2500	Waymark	Access for*
Public footpath	-----	-----		 Walkers only
Public bridleway	-----	-----		 Walkers, cyclists and horse riders (<i>cyclists should give way</i>)
Restricted byway	-----	-----		 Walkers, cyclists, horse riders and carriage drivers (<i>Road Used as Public Path on older maps</i>)
Byway Open to All Traffic (BOAT)	+++++	+++++		 All traffic (<i>may only be suitable for off-road vehicles</i>)
National Trail, recreational route	◆◆◆	◆◆◆		Depends on path – often only suitable for walkers

*Access for disability vehicles in all cases

Considerate use of public paths by cyclists and others

Continued

Right of access for disability vehicles

There is quite properly a right of access for qualifying disability vehicles to paths in all these categories, but no guarantee that the surface of a path will be suitable for them.

Waymarking

Waymarking on the ground generally uses yellow arrows for public footpaths, blue for bridleways, and plum and red for the two categories of byway. Maps mark the difference in status in other ways. The table overleaf shows the general position in pictorial form.

National Trails, Long Distance and Recreational Routes

Routes shown on maps as a National Trail or Long Distance or Recreational Route does not define path status. Status is shown in the normal way and different parts may well have different status, so that riders for example may have the right to ride on certain sections but not others.

Acting responsibly to other Right of Way users

All categories of path user should be considerate to others. For example, the law requires cycle riders on bridleways to 'give way to pedestrians and horse riders'. Responsible pedestrians (especially in a large group) and horse riders often make things easy for cyclists

by letting them pass. But speed is a particular issue, whether runners, motorised disability vehicles, or horses, but particularly in the case of cyclists, who at times approach at speed in sizeable groups in an intimidating way. There have been cases of speeding cyclists shouting for pedestrians to get out of the way. This is unacceptable. All path users should ensure that their speed is safe, and when approaching more quickly, particularly from behind, give clear and polite warning, remembering that not all path users have good hearing or eyesight.

The law, apart from requiring cycle riders on bridleways to 'give way to pedestrians and horse riders' actually stipulates that cyclists on bridleways must not ride recklessly or without consideration for others. Pedestrians on footpaths should not need to beware of cycle or horse riders at all, of course, since riders do not have a right of access there.

Maintaining the condition of our Rights of Way

The condition of paths has a significant bearing on the pleasure involved in using them. Naturally enough the surface of bridleways is particularly prone to deterioration from churning by horse hooves, sometimes to the extent that they become almost impassable for pedestrians and cyclists. Anything horse riders can do to limit that deterioration, for example by keeping to one side of a path, is to be applauded. All users of paths should avoid leaving litter.

Working together with landowners

Ready cooperation from landowners is a significant factor in maintaining and improving the path network for the benefit of the public. That is far more likely to be forthcoming if the various categories of user stick to routes where they have acknowledged rights, don't stray from waymarked paths into private woodland, and respect land over which they are passing.

How to report an issue on a Rights of Way

On a somewhat different tack, it helps a great deal in seeking to improve the condition of the path network if anybody encountering a problem on a Right of Way, such as obstructions of one kind or another or inadequate waymarking, reports it. The way to do this is described in the final pages of every issue of Chiltern magazine or via 'Contact' on the Society's website. It helps even more if we can find volunteers willing to be either Path Representatives monitoring an agreed list of paths on a regular basis, or Area Secretaries representing the Society in all Rights of Way matters in one of the 20 or so areas in the Chilterns, or joining one of our three Path Maintenance Volunteer groups. If you feel you might be able to help in any capacity, please contact us via the website