



The future of cycling in the countryside

This paper argues that the current rights of way network could and should be developed in ways which would make it much more useful for cyclists. At present it does not adequately support the Government's policy to increase access and thereby raise levels of physical activity and reduce car use. It sets out the case for a review of the rights of way network so that it better meets the demands of the 21st century. It also suggests improvements to the information available to users.

Introduction

1. The English countryside is a powerful draw for a wide variety of cyclists. Rural roads and paths are used for sport, leisure, family outings and simply getting around. Current provision for cyclists caters for some groups better than others, and is uneven across the country. In the main, those who rarely venture off road are well served by the network of minor roads. The needs of much the largest group of cyclists, the family and leisure cyclists who rely on the network of bridleways, byways etc are less well served than they could be. For this reason, and because the deadline for Rights of Way Improvement Plans is approaching, this paper focuses on rights of way. For present purposes these are defined in the same way as for RoWIPs, and so include cycle paths, towpaths, forest tracks and other permissive routes.
2. The law which governs cycling access to rights of way dates from 1968 and essentially allows cyclists to go wherever horses may go. It was a pragmatic compromise born of a different age - an age when the number of bicycles designed for offroad use was zero. The number of offroad bicycles has since risen to something like 15 million and accounts for about 80 per cent of new bicycle sales. The Rough Stuff Fellowship, established in 1955, showed that the joys of cycling away from roads were not lost on hardy cyclists. But it was far from being the mass pursuit that it has become in the era of the mountain bike. Hitherto there has been no serious public debate and engagement about the needs of the offroad cyclist or the potential for developing the rights of way network so that it caters better for 21st century cyclists. Such debate could inform future development of the network itself and the legal framework which governs its use.
3. A law which allows bicycles to share only those rights of way available to horse riders would be fine if all bridleways and byways were suited to cycling and all footpaths were not. But this is very far from being the case. This paper does not address the specific requirements of more serious enthusiasts who number perhaps 150,000 and whose needs are largely met through specialist facilities. It is, rather, on the far more numerous leisure and family cyclists who rely on shared rights of way. Many of these paths have a wider purpose than recreation alone, important though that is. They take their place alongside the road network, the National Cycle Network and other cycle paths as part of the transport infrastructure, not least for those who live in rural areas. The importance of this role is underlined by the requirement on highways authorities to provide progress reports on their RoWIPs in the context of their Local Transport Plans.
4. In drawing up RoWIPs highway authorities are required to pay particular attention to the need for improved disabled access. In many cases the opportunity to upgrade paths to facilitate disabled access is being coupled with improved provision for cyclists. This is a very positive development but the way the issues are being tackled varies greatly: it is an

opportunity being seized in some areas but ignored in others.

5. Cyclists will continue to get a poor deal until some attempt is made to align legal rights with practical realities. The rights of way network is a key part of promoting health through exercise as well as the environmental gains that can flow from a switch from motor power to muscle power for transport. The way in which rights of way develop could greatly increase the contribution they make to the achievement of the Government's goals on activity and transport. The fact that so many people own bicycles and so few use them regularly points to substantial unmet demand. Those who own bicycles but rarely use them often cite the lack of availability of routes away from heavy traffic as reasons for not cycling more. Meeting this demand could bring real benefits to the rural economy thereby creating a virtuous circle of health, environmental and economic gain.

6. The National Cycle Network has proved successful in attracting both walkers and cyclists, now drawing more than 200 million users each year with about 40 per cent of journeys replacing car use. About one third of the network uses purpose built cycle paths while the rest mostly uses quiet roads. The value of the NCN would be enhanced by linking it to a more extensive network of traffic-free routes.

7. At present all cyclists and horse riders are concentrated on just 22 per cent of the PROW network, some of which is also shared with offroad motor vehicles and all of which is shared with walkers. (see breakdown at Annex A). The network which developed in the wake of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 Act depended on the attitudes of local authorities and the overall total of 22 per cent available to riders and cyclists masks wide variations between counties, ranging from 15 to 35 percent.

8. RA have set an excellent precedent in its approach to securing greater access for walkers. Over the years many objections were raised in an effort to prevent the extension of rights to walk in the countryside. Time has shown that fears were misplaced, and there is almost universal agreement that the benefits of opening up much more of the countryside for ramblers has far outweighed any difficulties. A similar philosophy should guide provision for cyclists.

9. Against this background, the following sections set out some of the issues which frustrate cyclists at the moment and seeks to open up discussion on how best to proceed by putting forward possible options. This is intended to open up debate on a topic of major and growing importance with a view to providing an informed and constructive input to future development of provision for cyclists.

The problems for cyclists

10. There are a number of problems which limit the value of the rights of way network for cycling – the first two in particular apply to equestrians equally and the third to walkers as well.

- Changing the status of any right of way is currently a lengthy and bureaucratic procedure. It is rarely worth the bother however compelling the case.
- Many bridleways do not connect with other bridleways and can be linked only by using busy roads.
- Major roads often create a serious barrier for cyclists wishing to continue their journey on the other side. (This is, of course, as much a problem for walkers and an even bigger problem for equestrians.)

- The fact that cyclists have a legal right to use bridleways does not carry with it any obligation on highway authorities to ensure that bridleways are usable by cyclists. Sometimes the nature of the track – eg deep sand - would make it prohibitively expensive to make it fit for cyclists. It does mean, though, that the proportion of rights of way actually available to cyclists is significantly less than the nominal amount.
- Many footpaths are eminently suited to cycling but may not legally be used. Some *are* nevertheless used, in the main without conflict or difficulty, but there is always the risk of civil action.
- Upgrading a footpath to cycle path status requires its removal from the definitive map and it is hardly surprising that the removal of this legal protection is resisted by ramblers. To cyclists, this anomaly exemplifies the way they are sidelined.
- The legal status of a right of way gives no indication to the individual cyclist whether a particular track will be usable *by them*, given the kind of cyclist they are and the kind of bicycle they have.
- Upgrading a footpath to bridleway status does not necessarily help cyclists, whereas allowing bicycles but not horses would not necessarily put riders at a disadvantage. Bridleways and footpaths sometimes provide alternative routes between A and B but the bridleway may be unusable by cyclists because of the impact of horses on the track, whereas the footpath may be broad and firm. (In such cases it makes sense to allow cyclists to share the footpath. Riders benefit too as, in practice, they then get the bridleway to themselves.)

Issues around shared use

11. Walkers are often apprehensive about sharing with cyclists though surveys have concluded suggest it is not a big problem in practice. However, a number of concerns remain and need to be addressed.

Path erosion

12. There is a widespread perception that bicycles cause significant damage to paths. The most rigorous studies, undertaken in the US, have concluded that cyclists generally cause no more erosion than walkers. However, practices such as locking the rear wheel can damage vulnerable surfaces and it is important that codes of practice covering all aspects of trail behaviour are effectively disseminated. Of course, more people – whether or not they are on bicycles - will mean more wear and tear on paths, but this is the price to be paid if the avowed aim of attracting more people to the countryside, and persuading more people to walk or cycle rather than drive, is to be achieved. Government targets seek to raise the proportion of people taking at least 30 minutes of exercise five times a week from 30 to 70 per cent by 2020. The implications for PROW maintenance will be an issue in this broader context.

Safety

13. Collisions between cyclists and other users appear to be rare though figures are hard to come by. It is important, though, that people *feel* safe as well as *being* safe. Someone overtaking pedestrians at speed may be perfectly confident that they are not endangering them, but those they are overtaking may be alarmed whether or not there are grounds for their alarm. Cyclists need to appreciate this and slow down accordingly. Again, this is a matter for codes of practice. In the main, horses are more spooked by bicycles than walkers are. By diluting the concentration of bicycles and horses on the same limited number of paths, the pressures of shared use would be eased. This spreading of the load

between more paths will become more of an issue if attempts to encourage people into the countryside prove successful.

Peace and tranquility

14. To some, the peace and solitude – the wilderness experience – is undermined by bicycles, which are regarded as intrusive. Wild and remote places have exactly the same attraction for many cyclists, with the sole exception that cyclists regard a bicycle as a quiet and efficient means of getting to such places rather than being out-of-place. For most people it is a purely personal issue, though for some a bicycle makes it possible to reach places that they could not reach on foot – various medical conditions which affect mobility enable people to continue cycling when walking any distance becomes difficult or impossible for them. However, many paths would always be off-limits, even if access were legal, for all but the occasional intrepid individual. One major change in recent years is the opening up of 8 per cent of the land area of England to walkers. The ability to get away from it all, to places where nobody but those on foot would venture, has been vastly increased.

Why not just remove the footpath/bridleway distinction?

15. Many footpaths are wider and have firmer surfaces than many bridleways and the distinction between the two is to some extent a legal rather than a physical one. However, many footpaths that cyclists could physically use could not be used by equestrians. Cyclists can, at a pinch, go almost anywhere that a walker can, even if it means carrying their bike – there is no equivalent option for equestrians. Erosion is an important issue too where horses are concerned. Whilst bicycles and boots cause similar damage, hooves can destroy surface vegetation and make a path difficult to use for both cyclists and walkers. It very much depends on the nature of the surface. So while many footpaths probably could be opened up for horses as well as cyclists, simple removal of the footpath/bridleway distinction would be very problematic.

Aligning legal rights with practical needs

16. Given that current arrangements for changing the designation of paths so as to allow bicycles is slow and bureaucratic, how could cyclists most readily be given access to those routes that are suitable for cycling?

The Scottish approach

17. In Scotland cyclists are legally permitted to go where walkers may go. The argument against such an approach is that many footpaths are unsuited to cycling. But the same applies in some degree to bridleways, where some are unsuited to cycling and cyclists sort out for themselves what is and what is not practicable. In 1968 a high proportion of bridleways were unsuitable for the bicycles of the time but there was no bar to giving legal rights. An even more telling example relates to byways open to all traffic: all traffic is *allowed* to use them but in practice few drivers either can or would wish to use them.

18. Shared use by cyclists and walkers is the preferred solution in many European countries. They see no logic in allowing cyclists to share only with riders, given that the needs of riders and cyclists differ in important respects (mainly that horses like softer surfaces). Of course, many bridleways serve all users well enough, even when they are not ideal. It is important to stress that cyclists enjoy the varied and rural nature of rights of

way and, with very limited exceptions, there is little appetite for transforming them into tarmac paths.

19. The lesson from Scotland – and indeed other countries - is that people are well able to make sensible decisions and that concerns about serious conflicts between cyclist and walkers have not so far materialised. The fact that cyclists in Scotland are legally allowed to ride over bog and heather does not mean that they attempt to do so. Similarly, many English footpaths would have no appeal for cyclists and, as in Scotland, they would not attempt to use them. The Scottish approach is not, of course, the only way to free up access but it has the merit of simplicity.

A middle way?

20. Another option would be to survey all paths against a set of criteria that would permit a more wholesale approach to upgrading of paths that pass agreed tests of suitability. As an example, the suitability of bridleways and byways for cycling was assessed on the basis on agreed criteria as part of the Rights of Way Condition Survey 2000. Although the criteria used in that context would not be appropriate for a scheme along the lines proposed, the basic approach could work.

Trail grading

21. Whatever paths cyclists *may* use, the ones that they *will wish* to use will depend in part on the nature of the particular path. Differences in the types of bicycle now in use is greater than ever – anything from road bikes with smooth, skinny tyres designed to be fast on tarmac, to sophisticated full-suspension mountain bikes able to cope with rough, steep terrain. Cyclists range from those who want an easy route to the shops to those who thrive on technical challenge. The basic information needs are very similar for cyclists and skiers. The difference is that skiers benefit from a universal grading system that gives them a broad indication of the level of difficulty of each piste wherever they ski.

22. Various schemes have been used by those putting recommended routes together, including Ordnance Survey, CTC and others, to provide an indication of the level of difficulty. For the most part these relate to circuits, and take account of distance as well as technical difficulty in determining the grade. What has not been attempted until now is to grade individual paths so that people can put together their own routes according to their own tastes and abilities. Surrey County Council (with backing from the Countryside Agency) has broken new ground by commissioning a map of the county which includes a grading scheme. By working with local cycling groups all of the county's bridleways are being graded. This provides a useful test of a methodology for gathering information about both on and offroad routes for cyclists and making the information available to anyone who wants it. In the future, the internet should provide a good means of providing information to anyone who wants it for all parts of the country, and perhaps for collating and updating details as well. CTC is exploring options.

23. It would be helpful if agreement could be reached and given formal recognition on a standard grading system, The hope is that this would be applied by National Park Authorities (who have already done work along these lines in some locations) mapmakers and others wanting to grade paths. Standardisation, on the lines of the skiing precedent, would make it easier for cyclists to find routes in different areas and for tourist offices and local businesses, for example cycle shops or hotels, to devise circuits for different kinds of cyclists. It might be possible to build on the National Route Evaluation and Classification

Scheme to take this forward. A proposed classification is at Annex B.

Signage

24. Many routes are extremely difficult to follow. Junctions of paths often have no signs at all, and where there are signs they are often broken, obscured or unclear. Vandalism is common. Sometimes signs are simply wrong – for example bridleways signed as footpaths or vice versa. The problem of poor signage is not universal but the variability in itself makes it hard for those using the network to know what they are in for. It is also virtually impossible in some areas for users to know the legal status of the right of way they are using.

25. The question of signs is not specific to cycling so is not considered in detail here. But it does affect cyclists, with the particular point that, whereas walkers can legally go anywhere, it is hard for even the most law-abiding cyclists to keep within the law when paths are unsigned or wrongly signed.

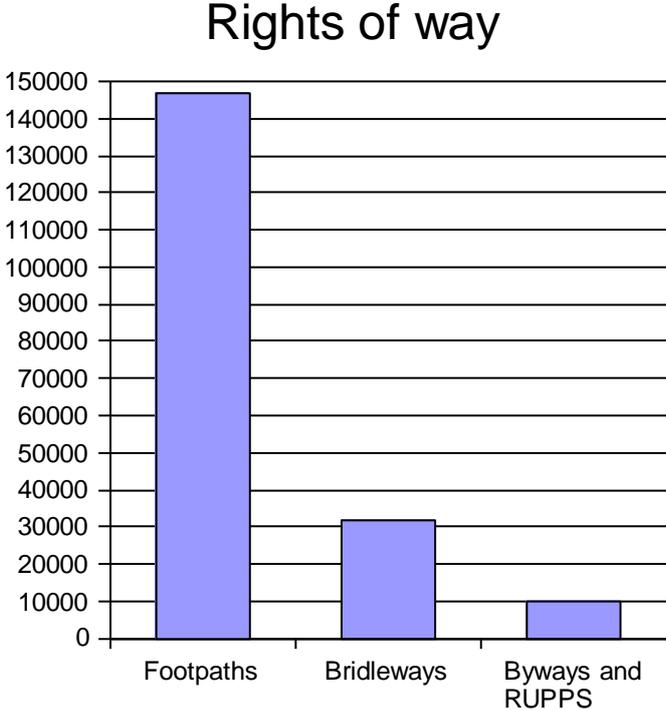
Suggestions for taking things forward

26. This paper has identified the need to take a fresh look at the rights of way network so that it better meets the current and future demands of all users. Proposals which are designed to help any one group of users are best developed by careful consultation with others who share rights of way with them. With this in mind, some steps are suggested.

- Stakeholders to identify how rights of way could and should be used to improve access to the countryside for their group. This should include an assessment of current barriers to wider use..
- Stakeholders to consult each other to identify shared goals and respective concerns.
- NCAF to discuss further and seek consensus on which to advise CA/NE.

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This chart shows the number of kilometres of rights of way of different types.



Proposed grading scheme

GREEN Very easy – suitable for young families and generally rideable on road bikes. Reasonably firm tracks and gentle gradients.

BLUE Straightforward – may have moderate hills and loose surfaces but no major challenges. May be narrow.

RED Moderate – may be fairly rough, muddy or sandy. Often hilly. For reasonably fit and proficient riders, but nothing too challenging.

BLACK Difficult – surfaces may include rocks, roots, deep mud or sand, streams, etc. Hills may be steep. For experienced offroad cyclists.

XXXX for trails that are unrideable – eg deep sand.