

## Towpaths, canals and rivers

### THIS BRIEFING COVERS

Towpath and riverside cycling; optimising the benefits; mixing with other users; codes of conduct; permits and charges; infrastructure and surfaces; case studies.

### HEADLINE MESSAGES

- Opening up towpaths and riverside paths for cycling enhances the network of motor traffic-free routes for commuting, recreation and other purposes.
- Some walkers and other users are concerned about sharing paths with cyclists, but codes of conduct on responsible cycling, together with good design, help promote harmony.

### KEY FACTS

- In England and Wales, there is no general statutory right of way over towpaths along navigable rivers or canals, but a number are public bridleways or footpaths, and others have local rights. In Scotland, cyclists have access to rivers, lochs and reservoirs, provided they respect the *Outdoor Access Code*.
- Cycling is, in any case, largely welcomed alongside the canals and rivers managed by the Canal and River Trust (England and Wales) and by Scottish Canals.
- 50% of the British population lives within five miles of a towpath or river.
- The Canal and River Trust cares for around 2,000 miles of waterways in England & Wales, while Scottish Canals looks after around 137 linear miles in Scotland.

### Cycling UK VIEW

- Riverside and canal towpaths are a valuable motor traffic-free facility both for utility and recreational cycling, and national and local government should view them as an important part of the strategic transport network.
- Codes of conduct help promote courtesy and understanding between users.
- There is little evidence to support the view that cycling on towpaths creates excessive hazards to walkers or to cyclists themselves.
- All towpaths should remain open to cyclists along their entire length, unless there are insuperable safety issues that can only be avoided with restrictions.
- There should be no need to apply for a permit or be charged for cycling along a towpath. Cycling UK therefore strongly welcomes the Canal and River Trust's decision to allow considerate cycling along most of the length of its towpaths, without the need for permits.
- To help facilitate cycling, towpaths and river paths should have good surfacing and drainage.
- There is little evidence to support the view that cycling is any more damaging to towpaths or river paths than walking.



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### 1. Cycling on towpaths: legalities and regulations

- In England and Wales, there is no general statutory right of way over towpaths that lie along navigable rivers or canals, but a number do have public bridleway and footpath status and others have local rights. In Scotland, the *Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003* allows people to access rivers, lochs and reservoirs, provided they respect the *Outdoor Access Code*.<sup>1</sup>
- The Canal and River Trust (England and Wales) does not require cyclists to have a permit to ride on its towpaths, and under the Scottish access legislation mentioned above, it is permissible to cycle responsibly along by the canals and rivers in Scotland.

### 2. Optimising the benefits of towpath cycling

**Cycling UK view:** Cycling UK welcomes the decision by the Canal and River Trust to allow considerate cyclists to ride along most of the length of its towpaths. These routes are a valuable motor traffic-free facility both for utility and recreational cycling, and national and local government should view them as an important part of the strategic transport network.

Nearly 50% of the British population lives within five miles of a towpath or river. The Canal and River Trust cares for around 2,000 miles of them in England & Wales; and Scottish Canals around 137 linear miles in Scotland.<sup>2</sup>

Towpaths often form important sections of urban cycling networks for local utility travel, e.g. in Birmingham, where the canal runs close to the University; and in Woking, where upgrading a section of the Basingstoke Canal has linked schools and neighbourhoods to the town centre.<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, recreational cyclists also enjoy riding on towpaths, e.g. the long distance Kennet and Avon Canal that forms part of a route linking London and the Bristol Channel. Extensive sections of it are level, wide, flat and suitable for cyclists of all ages and abilities.<sup>4</sup>

Cycling UK believes that it is important for local authorities to consider their towpath networks when developing their Rights of Way Improvement Plans (RoWIPs), and in any other plans aiming to increase the opportunities for sustainable travel.

For more on RoWIPs see Cycling UK's briefing:

[www.cyclinguk.org/campaigning/views-and-briefings/rights-of-way-improvement-plans-england-wales](http://www.cyclinguk.org/campaigning/views-and-briefings/rights-of-way-improvement-plans-england-wales)

*"Today our inland waterways are treasured for many different reasons unimagined by their original architects. They play a vital role in our leisure, recreation, health and well-being. They are precious habitats for wildlife; attractive places to visit for boaters, anglers, walkers and cyclists".*

Forward to DEFRA's *A New Era for the Waterways* (2011).

[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/82262/A-New-Era-for-the-Waterways-FINAL.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/82262/A-New-Era-for-the-Waterways-FINAL.pdf)



In 1997, Cycling UK and British Waterways (BW, predecessor of the Canal and River Trust and Scottish Canals) issued a *Statement of Joint Commitment*, in which both organisations recognised the importance of developing canal towpaths as motor vehicle-free corridors and set out how BW and Cycling UK aspired to work in partnership to achieve it. This included:

- Seeking clear government recognition of the strategic value of the towpath network and targeted funding from them to develop and maintain it;
- Establishing criteria for identifying parts of the network with the greatest strategic transport value; and assessing the network in accordance with it;
- Encouraging local authorities to develop the network in their areas.

### 3. Mixing with other users, codes of conduct, permits and charges

#### Cycling UK view:

- Codes of conduct help promote courtesy and understanding between users.
- There is little evidence to support the view that cycling on towpaths creates excessive hazards to walkers or cyclists themselves.
- All towpaths should remain open to cyclists along their entire length, unless there are insuperable safety issues that can only be avoided with restrictions.
- There should be no need to apply for a permit or be charged for cycling along a towpath. Cycling UK therefore strongly welcomes the Trust's decision to allow cyclists to use its towpaths without permits.

Towpaths are, of course, shared by a range of users - walkers, anglers, and boaters. Research shows that cyclists and walkers are able to mix happily on off-road routes and that conflict is more perceived than real.<sup>5</sup> Conflict is rare, but if it does happen, insufficient width and poor maintenance are important factors. On towpaths in particular, problems can occur if they are heavily used, especially in urban areas and during fishing matches.

Towpaths and bridleways have much in common - both may have sections that are difficult to negotiate on a cycle. There are nearly 18,000 miles of bridleways, and despite similarly poor sightlines and surfaces, the number of recorded cycle-related falls or collisions on them is extremely low.



**Codes of conduct** are the best way to promote courtesy and understanding between users. The Canal and River Trust, for instance, advises all users to share the space, keep speeds down and to give pedestrians priority.<sup>6</sup>

**Permits:** until the Canal and River Trust succeeded BW in 2012, cyclists needed permits to use towpaths to signify that they accepted a *Waterways Code* and would not cycle where they were not permitted to do so. Cyclists who infringed the rules could have their permits withdrawn. The Trust, however, has revoked this ruling, a move that Cycling UK believes is highly beneficial for cycling.

Given the environmental and health benefits of cycling and the importance of making it as accessible to everyone as possible, no charges should be made for riding along towpaths.

*"Taking to the towpaths on two wheels is a great way to get some exercise and with thousands of miles of fairly level, traffic-free towpaths, you can enjoy them whatever your age or cycling ability."*

Canal & River Trust. <http://canalrivertrust.org.uk/see-and-do/cycling>

#### 4. Infrastructure / surfaces

**Cycling UK view:**

- To help facilitate cycling, towpaths should have good surfacing and drainage.
- There is little evidence to support the view that cycling is any more damaging to towpaths than walking.

Towpath condition varies from tarmac urban stretches to muddy single tracks. Even so, it helps enormously if every effort is made to upgrade and maintain towpaths that are regularly used by cyclists, or could, potentially, attract regular use.<sup>7</sup> It is equally helpful to keep routes that are only lightly used by cyclists well-drained, and to make sure that they do not become unsafe due to inadequate maintenance. As modern off-road cycles can cope with most conditions, however, there is no need to ban cyclists because of deep sand or mud along a route.

**Note:** Sustrans, who help develop towpaths as cycle routes, publish technical guidelines for traffic-free routes at: [www.sustrans.org.uk/our-services/what-we-do/route-design-and-construction/route-design-resources/designing-traffic-free](http://www.sustrans.org.uk/our-services/what-we-do/route-design-and-construction/route-design-resources/designing-traffic-free)

**Surface damage:** Very little research has been done on the impact of cycle tyres on towpaths or, indeed, on how much damage mountain biking causes to trails in general as compared with walking. Good management, of course, helps prevent and deal with any problems that do arise.



## CASE STUDIES:

**Sale-Stretford Bridgewater Canal:** an upgrade of a two-mile section of towpath along the Bridgewater Canal in SW Manchester saw a 380% increase in cycling trips over a year, with the vast majority of new users cycling or walking to work, school or the shops. The work was carried out in partnership with The Peel Group and Trafford Council, as part of Sustrans' national Connect2 programme.

[www.trafford.gov.uk/residents/leisure-and-lifestyle/sport-and-leisure/cycling/bridgewater-way.aspx](http://www.trafford.gov.uk/residents/leisure-and-lifestyle/sport-and-leisure/cycling/bridgewater-way.aspx)

**Basingstoke Canal:** Woking in Surrey was awarded Cycle Town status by Cycling England in June 2008 and some of the £1.8M funding was spent on improving 11km of local towpath. The path has been upgraded with a new stone base and surface finish and there are new links to schools and neighbourhoods. The route now forms part of the National Cycle Network 221.

[www.cyclewoking.org.uk/aboutus/cyclewokingupdate#basingstoke\\_canal](http://www.cyclewoking.org.uk/aboutus/cyclewokingupdate#basingstoke_canal)

**Union Canal, Scotland:** some sections of the towpath have been upgraded to tarmac, and this has resulted in a significant increase in footfall. On one section, subtle, colourful solar lights have been installed along the edges of the path, to guide users at night.

[www.scottishcanals.co.uk/canals/union-canal/](http://www.scottishcanals.co.uk/canals/union-canal/)

## WEBSITES

- <http://canalrivertrust.org.uk/see-and-do/cycling>
- [www.scottishcanals.co.uk/things-to-do/cycling](http://www.scottishcanals.co.uk/things-to-do/cycling)

<sup>1</sup> For more on Scottish access legislation see Cycling UK's briefing *The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code*. [www.cyclinguk.org/campaigning/views-and-briefings/scotlands-land-reform-act-2003-and-outdoor-access-code](http://www.cyclinguk.org/campaigning/views-and-briefings/scotlands-land-reform-act-2003-and-outdoor-access-code)

<sup>2</sup> <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/enjoy-the-waterways> / <https://www.scottishcanals.co.uk/corporate/facts-and-figures/fast-facts/>

<sup>3</sup> See [www.cyclewoking.org.uk/aboutus/cyclewokingupdate#basingstoke\\_canal](http://www.cyclewoking.org.uk/aboutus/cyclewokingupdate#basingstoke_canal)

<sup>4</sup> See Sustrans/British Waterways guide to the route

<http://canalrivertrust.org.uk/canals-and-rivers/kennet-and-avon-canal>

<sup>5</sup> Countryside Agency. *How people interact on off-road routes: phase II*. CA report CRN69, 2003.

<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/65057>

<sup>6</sup> <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/about-us/our-campaigns/share-the-space-our-towpath-code>

<sup>7</sup> See Cycling England's advice note (C.02) for a guidance on the optimum surfaces for cycling.

[www.ciltuk.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/The%20Hub/Design%20Toolkit/C02\\_Design\\_portfolio\\_surfaces.pdf](http://www.ciltuk.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/The%20Hub/Design%20Toolkit/C02_Design_portfolio_surfaces.pdf)