



This hollow way near Devil's Punch Bowl, Surrey, is centuries old

Feature

MISSING LINKS

Our off-road cycling network is riven by dead ends and tarmac diversions. It's time to join the dots, says **Sophie Gordon**

Recently I found myself riding along an ancient hollow way, a sunken lane slowly etched into existence by people walking to church, taking animals to market, or riding to town. It was a reminder that the paths and tracks that crisscross Britain have evolved over time to match the journeys people wanted to make. Some have fallen into disuse and become overgrown; others have grown in importance and become roads.

The growth of traffic on rural roads nowadays means that we value our off-road routes even more. But all too often it can be difficult to link them up. That's why Cycling UK wants to create a vision for what a connected off-road network could look like, by identifying the missing links on the map and seeking to connect them so our off-road paths can serve the needs of people today.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Just 22% of England's rights of way network is open to cyclists and horse riders, and 85% of respondents to our Rides of Way survey said this makes it hard to put together routes.

Cycling UK member Dan Smith from Chippenham describes why having more off-road routes available



SOPHIE GORDON

Cycling UK campaigns officer
Sophie is happiest getting lost discovering new routes while cycling or trail running

means so much to him: "I'm 62 years old and recently retired. Unfortunately I have arthritis in my knees, which limits me to walking a maximum of five miles on the flat. Fortunately I can ride all day off-road without discomfort, and that allows me access to the countryside I love.

"It's therefore frustrating that in England it is strictly limited where I can go. Even where there is bridleway access to an area of countryside, there is rarely a complete, circular route available, as often part of the route is designated as footpath only."

Our missing links map reveals so many more stories: the old railway line from Whitchurch to Chester, which would avoid intimidating hills; a footpath that connects three dead-end bridleways in the North Pennines; a forest track outside Bristol that would enable families to cycle to nearby parkland.

Our network of paths, tracks and trails has huge potential for traffic-free cycling, both to connect towns and villages and for exploring further afield.

ENGLAND LAGS BEHIND

If the Government and councils in England are serious about creating a 'golden age' for cycling, making better use of existing off-road routes is a solution that mustn't be overlooked.

Cycling UK’s off-road adviser Kieran Foster explains: “Rural rights of way serve a wide variety of purposes. Depending on the location, they can be commuter routes to the train station, leisure routes for weekend horse riders, walkers and mountain bikers, or routes for children to get to school. If we are to encourage people to connect with the countryside, farming and nature, then we need a network that better reflects the needs of society for today and tomorrow, not for a hundred years ago.”

We’re not suggesting that all footpaths are suitable for cycling. Yet with over 92,000 miles of them in England, there are many that are. They could link up the disjointed bridleway network. This isn’t about hard-surfacing our countryside paths, but giving cyclists, horse riders and other users more options for where they can go.

The Scottish Government recognised this back in 2003 with the Land Reform (Scotland) Act, which provides a right of responsible access for the public to most land and inland water, so long as they adhere to the Outdoor Access Code. After years of campaigning by Cycling UK, OpenMTB, and other outdoor organisations, the Welsh Government has seen the benefits and is drafting legislation to make more rights of way multi-use.

England is lagging behind, with local authorities upgrading less than one right of way per year on average. We need to show that the public wants to see a more proactive approach.

HIGHLIGHTING MISSING LINKS

Local authorities produce cycling and walking plans, as well as plans to improve off-road rights of way. But these plans are often created by separate teams within the council and aren’t connected. On the ground, it doesn’t make much sense. That route you’d like to ride on – is it a right of way, a permissive path, or an unsurfaced road? And how do you know who to contact about it?

Cycling UK wants to gather all your suggestions on one map, where you can pinpoint your gaps in the network and ask your council to include them in their future plans.

Robin Tutchings, rights of way officer at Wirral Council, says the missing links map has been a useful tool: “I’m involved quite closely with developing plans for cycling and walking routes, as there is a lot of overlap. We have quite a few rights of way in the area which would link well with existing cycle routes, so the Cycling UK map has been helpful to see which routes residents would find useful and feed them into the work we are already doing to improve the network.”

It would be great if all local authorities worked in this holistic way, but that’s not always the case. Rights of way and access teams have often been under-resourced for years, and may understandably say they don’t have the capacity to instigate



Top: Lambley Viaduct is ideal for walkers and cyclists – except one end has been fenced off
Bottom: Good relationships with other trail users improve our prospects for better access

additional changes. So after adding routes to the map, how do we move things forward?

THE WAY AHEAD

“There are various mechanisms to formalise cycle access for a route,” Kieran Foster explains. “This can be a permanent change to the legal right of way status, or permissive arrangements which are more flexible but the access is less secure.

“If there’s a path that you and others have been riding on for 20 years or more, it can be claimed as a bridleway. You can also apply to have it upgraded based on historic evidence from old maps – but this has to be done by the cut-off date of 2026.

“Creating relationships with land managers is key, to prove that cyclists and mountain bikers care about the places they ride, and to make the case for increasing access. Ultimately, the process is far too complex and needs simplifying nationally. Until then, local advocacy can build connections and get some of these routes opened up.”

Cycling UK is producing guidance outlining the ways that cycling access can be improved and how to encourage responsible access. If you want to get involved it’s always easier to team up with others, so see if there is a cycling or mountain biking advocacy group in your area, or ask to join your Local Access Forum. Get started by adding your routes to the map at cyclinguk.org/missinglinks. ●

On the map

Over 4,600 missing link routes have already been added to the map. You can add your suggestions online at cyclinguk.org/missinglinks.

Councils aren’t automatically notified

when new routes are added, so it’s important to then use our email tool to ask your local authority to look at the map and include these routes in their future plans.

There are lots of ways

you can get involved in starting to connect these routes. To find out more, have a look at Cycling UK’s off-road campaigning resources: cyclinguk.org/article/campaigning-road-issues.

