

The law and management of public access rights vary widely between the four countries of the United Kingdom. Practical elements of the following advice apply in all countries but the legal requirements in Scotland and Northern Ireland may differ from those in England and Wales.

More advice is available on [www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice](http://www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice).

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Equestrianism is a popular and healthy activity for people of all ages from extreme sports like horse-boarding, through racing, polo and eventing, to TREC, dressage and hacking on rural bridleways. It is a diverse and family-friendly activity and equestrian sports are among the few where men and women compete on an equal basis.

Whether purely for recreation or when riding or driving professionally, equestrians may use public rights of way (including roads) and open spaces, and may rely on them as the only place they may ride or drive. Routes free from motorised traffic are preferable, for safety and for freedom from noise and pollution, providing a healthy respite for body and mind (see Health Benefits of Riding below).

Horse activities engage a high proportion of people with disabilities, women participants and participants over the age of 45. Nearly 40% of those taking part do not participate in other forms of physical activity. All these factors are very important in recognising that equestrianism is vital to the health of a significant section of the population which is known to be at risk.

Equine and equestrian businesses include riding schools and coaches, livery yards, competition yards, trekking centres, breeders, trainers, welfare charities, veterinary services, farriers, feed merchants, tack, equipment and clothing manufacturers and retailers, shows and event services.

The British Horse Society has over 123,000 members, 70 Equestrian Access Groups and 268 volunteer Access and Bridleways Officers (October 2019).

## BETA figures

The British Equestrian Trade Association (BETA) represents more than 800 member companies. The most recent BETA National Equestrian Survey (2023) indicated:

- £6,887 per horse to the economy
- £5 billion economic value of the equestrian sector
- 726,000 horses in Britain
- 1.8 million regular riders of 3 million total
- Lack of access to horses and riding facilities is a barrier for 22% of lapsed riders returnin
- 67% of riders identify as female

## Road Incidents

The BHS considers horse-related traffic incidents to be significantly under reported, to it, to the police or any other body. This view is supported by the Hospital Episode Statistics (NHS Digital) in 2015-16 which reported 4,094 episodes requiring treatment in hospital for 'animal-rider or occupant animal-drawn vehicle injured in transport accident', compared with a fraction of that reported to the BHS.

In 2023, Road Traffic Incidents reported on BHS [horseaccidents.org.uk](https://horseaccidents.org.uk) included:

- 3,383 road incidents involving horses
- 66 horses died
- 86 horses injured
- 3 people died
- 94 people injured

85% of incidents occurred because a driver passed too close or too fast

The cost of fatal road traffic collisions in 2020 was £3.5 billion. Even slight incidents have a high individual cost based on medical, police, insurance, lost output and 'human' (distress, suffering, pain) costs. There are then secondary costs to other people affected by a road traffic incident, for whom the consequence of delays could be considerable.

A figure for an equine casualty is not available, but is likely to over £1,000 accounting only for transport and disposal of a dead horse, quite likely significantly more, depending on location. Replacement for the majority of horses is likely to be several thousand pounds. For some horses there may be lost output in terms of stud fees or prize money. In UK law a horse is property, not a sentient being, but most horse owners will attribute the equivalent of human cost (distress, suffering, pain) as well as veterinary and insurance costs and lost benefits of ownership.

## Public Bridleways and Byways

England has 117,250 miles of recorded public rights of way, of which only 22% are bridleway or byway (available to riders), 5% byway (also available to carriage-drivers).

Wales has 20,500 miles of recorded public rights of way, 21% bridleway or byway, 6% byway.

Many of these paths are unusable on horseback because isolated by busy roads or truncated by development or a failure to record a through route. Others are unavailable through obstruction, loss to erosion or lack of maintenance. Some areas may have a network of bridleways or byways, other areas have none at all, including the whole of adjacent parishes, meaning that riders may have no off-road access for a ten mile radius or more, and carriage-drivers may have nothing within tens of miles.

## Health Benefits of Riding

The BHS commissioned research into the physical health, psychological and wellbeing benefits of recreational horse riding in the United Kingdom which was published in 2010. It assessed riding as a moderate intensity exercise and examined the frequency with which individuals take part. Reliable evidence indicates that physical exercise produces wellbeing benefits linked to social interaction and changes in mood, anxiety, self-esteem and other personal emotions.

The report is available on [www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice](http://www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice) under Other publications.

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