



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 THURSDAY 26 DECEMBER

Government steps in to save historic rights of way from being lost to the nation

- Boxing Day rambles have a brighter future as government secures future of thousands of miles of unrecorded rights of way
- 2031 cut-off date for recording historic rights of way to be removed
- Decade of renewal will see millions enjoy nature as government creates nine new river walks and three national forests

The Boxing Day ramble, a favourite Christmas pastime beloved by millions, now faces a brighter future as the government has announced today (26 December) its plans to repeal the 2031 cut-off date for recording historic rights of way.

England has thousands of miles of unrecorded rights of way which are well used by walkers, cyclists and equestrians, but aren't officially recorded or protected.

These paths are some of the oldest inscriptions on our landscapes – a tangible record of people's movements over the centuries, with many paths and roads we use today dating back hundreds or thousands of years. For many walkers, the knowledge that you're on an ancient path trodden by generations of our ancestors is one of walking's great pleasures.

However, local authorities have struggled under the burden of recording historic rights of way, which are estimated to stretch over 40,000 miles, by the 2031 cut-off date introduced by the last government. The government's move to reverse that decision means these paths will no longer be lost to the public.

A healthy and thriving natural environment which everyone can access is a critical part of delivering long-term sustainable change across the country. Boosting access to nature will also help drive economic growth in rural communities, as part of the government's Plan for Change.

Minister for Access, Baroness Hayman said:

“Our countryside and green spaces are a source of great national pride, but too many people across the country are left without access to the great outdoors.

“These well-trodden routes, many of which have been in place for hundreds of years, are a part of our shared heritage and it is critical that we bring forward these measures to protect their long-term future.

“This is only the beginning to our plans to increase access to our great countryside as part of a decade of national renewal. This Government will plant 3 new National Forests and create 9 new National Rivers Walks for families to enjoy for the generations to come.”

Under the changes, local authorities will have the required time to assess whether paths meet the requirements to be added to the “definitive map”. This is the legal record of public rights of way and was established by the Atlee government when they passed the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 75 years ago this month.

Once a right of way has been established the relevant local authority will then be legally responsible for maintaining them along with the appropriate landowner. This will ensure paths are maintained properly allowing more people to experience the benefits of spending time in the outdoors.

Marian Spain, Chief Executive of Natural England said:

“Our centuries-old network of walking and riding routes are a wonderful way for people to enjoy our beautiful countryside and wildlife. Access to the outdoors makes a huge contribution to the quality of our lives and our wellbeing, with ever growing evidence of how vital contact with nature is for our physical and mental health.

“Giving local authorities time to take proper account of the interests of all parties when considering these historical routes is vital if we are to add to that legacy and enable future generations to enjoy being outdoors.”

Ross Maloney, Chief Executive of the Ramblers said:

“The Government’s decision to end the threat to thousands of miles of historic rights of way in England is a fantastic step forward in making sure everyone can enjoy the benefits of walking in nature.

“Not only are these paths an integral part of our shared heritage, but they will also have a critical role to play in the future by helping people live healthier, happier lives.”

The announcement today follows on from earlier action in the month to mark the 75th anniversary of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, which included announcing strengthened powers for our National Parks and National Landscapes so that can deliver more for nature and people.

Notes to editors:

The cut-off date will be repealed by the government when parliamentary time allows

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