

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 of them 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.

IMPORTANT This guidance is general and does not aim to cover every variation in circumstances. Where it is being relied upon, The Society strongly recommends seeking its advice specific to the site.

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There is no equivalent term to 'hacking' for driving a horse, although principles are the same, so here 'hacking' means riding or driving a horse in places with equestrian access – roads, byways, bridleways (ridden horses only), some commons, beaches and designated areas with equestrian access.

In the wild, horses may travel miles a day searching for their food. The domestic horse has little exercise by comparison, and in confined spaces, but hacking can be a very enjoyable experience for both the horse and rider/driver, enriching the bond between them as they encounter new sights and sounds. Equally, a nasty experience can dent the confidence of both, so following this guide will help to make the experience a positive one.

Where to ride or drive

Most equestrians start their hack by using a road, so it is advisable to take the BHS Ride Safe training.

Next, check that you know what is required of you when hacking by reading *BHS Advice on Responsible riding and carriage driving* and on *Where to ride or drive a horse* ([bhs.org.uk/accessadvice](https://www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice)) to work out where you can go; there may be more options than you know. Local advice might provide you with potential routes that do not appear on official sources, so joining a BHS Equestrian Access Group can be helpful for finding out about them.

You should only go where you have a right of way or where you personally, or all riders, have permission to ride (e.g. some Forestry Commission land) so the next step is to check your map reading. Permitted access for all driven horses is rare, although it may occasionally occur for individuals or a local group, on a specific landholding.

Map reading

Improving your map-reading skills will increase your hacking potential in most areas. Feeling comfortable with maps will help you to enjoy a far greater range of places to ride or drive, to feel secure in knowing where you are in relation to the map, and how far you can go in how much time.

The Ordnance Survey produces superb maps and excellent guides on how to read them. The best for riders and drivers is the 1:25,000 Explorer map (orange cover), which is available on paper or as digital downloads for various apps to use with a smartphone. You can also see it online on many websites, including Bing Maps.

Look on the map key and note the line styles for bridleways, byways ('restricted byway' and 'byway open to all traffic') and 'Other routes with public access' then look at the map in your area and find routes marked with those green dashed or dotted lines. It may take a bit of practice to recognise them instantly.

Some people like to highlight the useable routes in their area to make it easier to see them. Many routes described in the key as 'Traffic-free cycle routes' are open to ridden horses though rarely driven horses. There may be other places you can ride (depending on location), see the *BHS Advice on Where to ride and drive* for details (www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice).

Being ambitious and planning long routes is wonderful and a great winter fireside activity. Check your current routes on the map so that you have an idea how far you can go in the time you have available. Be cautious about distance in new terrain as route finding and checking means the route will take longer. You may also encounter factors which slow you down, such as ground where you must pick your way slowly, or overgrown ways, or several gates.

10 key tips

Before you set out, there are ten things to do.

1. Make sure that your tack or harness fits and is safe.
2. Your own clothes and boots are comfortable and suitable for the weather conditions.
3. Wear high-viz, ideally on both you and on the horse
4. Wear boots which are suitable for walking should it be necessary.
5. Carrying a whip is advised for various uses (assuming your horse is safe with you doing so).
6. Take a fully charged mobile phone and, in an unfamiliar area, take a map.
7. Tell somebody where you are going and how long you think you will be out; consider using a tracking app so a nominated person knows your location.
8. Train your horse to open gates safely. Allow more time for a gated ride.
9. Train your horse to stand, so that if any difficulties arise you can deal with them while your horse is still.
10. It is advisable to have a headcollar under the bridle with a rope (looped and knotted (quick release) round the horse's neck, or attached to your saddle), or a hacking bridle which has a ring for a rope on the noseband

The importance of all these tips increases the further you are from home, the longer the route and the more remote the terrain.

Tack or harness which fits well for half an hour in the manège may not be so comfortable on a warm day after three hours in the saddle or shafts.

The weather can change during a day, especially if your route goes from low ground to high or near the coast. Being cold or wet is uncomfortable and could affect your safety, for instance, if reins slip in your wet hands.

Hi-viz helps others to see you easily so that they can avoid you or slow down, or control dogs or children in plenty of time. In areas with air traffic, hi-viz visible from above gives early warning to low flying pilots. It will also make you and your horse more visible to searchers if you should fall or lose contact with your horse (e.g. horse startled while you are dismounted). Different colours of hi-viz can be more visible in various circumstances so consider wearing more than one colour.

Dealing with difficulties, checking the map, taking a photograph or just admiring a view will be more pleasure if your horse has been taught to stand and there are occasions

when it may be helpful to have a headcollar and rope with you so you can leave your horse while you deal with a difficult gate or move a minor obstruction (or buy an ice cream!). Even close to home, an emergency may mean a headcollar and rope are useful. Your horse needs to be trained to stand tied by a rope (or ground tied).

Many helpful apps are available for smartphones, including Ordnance Survey maps, tracking so a friend knows your location, and What3Words which will give a more easily memorable location than a grid reference if you are reporting to emergency services. Some highway authorities have a website facility which allows you to report a problem on the spot with location and photographs (see www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice on *Blocked and difficult to use routes*).

Schooling

Whilst hacking, you and your horse will come across a range of different experiences, so the more miles you ride or drive, the better your horse will become at tackling strange situations. You will meet gates of varying difficulty to open and close, fords or large puddles; muddy, rocky or uneven going, as well as unusual noises, smells and animals. Once horses are fit, they can tackle most conditions and the likelihood of mud or rocky going causing injury is reduced when your speed is appropriate for the conditions.

In difficult situations, it is particularly important to ride or drive actively, keeping your horse well-balanced and listening. Flatwork at home can be useful to ensure your horse responds to your aids irrespective of what is happening around, and of course, hacking is an excellent opportunity to school at the same time as enjoying the outdoors.

A 'go anywhere' horse with whom you have a solid trusting relationship will boost your confidence and enjoyment. A BHS coach will be able to help you build that relationship.

Gates

Being able to open and close gates safely and easily from horseback is a valuable skill and will add to the enjoyment of a ride. Avoiding routes with gates will limit your options a lot in some areas and struggling with gates can take much pleasure from a ride, as well as increase the risk of injury to you or your horse, so training your horse to do gates safely is important. Maintenance of gates on rights of way by the landholder can be poor and difficult gates should be reported to the highway authority (county council).

See *BHS Advice on opening gates* (www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice) and its [video](#).

A hunting crop can give you valuable extra reach to move and control the gate in some cases. If you do have to dismount, make sure that your horse has been taught to stand whilst you remount, especially as you may not have an ideal mounting block and must make do with whatever is available. You can teach your horse to stand while you climb a

gate or fence to remount. This is a useful skill in case it is your only option for remounting, but a slip can result in a serious injury, and it can damage a gate so should be a last resort. A rider should not have to dismount for a gate on a bridleway or byway as they are public rights of way *riding or leading a horse*, therefore, it is reasonable to expect a gate to be easily openable from horseback.

Hills

When horses were beasts of burden, they tackled everything asked of them and this can be the same now, so long as they are fit enough and taught to carry a rider in balance. When riding up hill, a horse's hind legs are doing most of the work, so a rider should lean forward to take the weight off. When descending very steep hills, it is advisable to lean slightly back. In both situations, ride actively to keep the horse in good balance. A tired or unfit horse – or rider! – will make hard work of an incline.

Ride or drive straight up and down steep hills rather than diagonally across the gradient where your horse might slip sideways, or you may find it harder to stay balanced. The tendency of an unfit horse can be to 'crab' sideways downhill, which can result in injury, so fitness is important for hills.

Unfit riders are a strain on a horse in difficult conditions so consider rider fitness, especially core strength, as well as a horse's condition because it will aid balance of both horse and rider significantly.

Fitness and balance of driver and groom are also important when driving a horse in challenging terrain.

Livestock

Farm animals are not likely to hurt you or your horse but may feel intimidating. See BHS Advice on *Riding through livestock and horses*.

Always walk near grazing animals of any kind. You may need to deviate from the right of way to avoid cattle.

People

You are an ambassador for all equestrians so remember that civility makes a big difference to whether riders are thought well of or not. A smile and cheerful greeting are a good start, with a thank you to any gate openers or other users keeping their dogs or children close, or to cyclists stopping for you, and to courteous motorists who pass wide and slow. Other users of roads and rights of way commonly think of riders as being 'stuck up' and rude. Every equestrian can help to change that view!

Many people are afraid of horses because they have no idea how horses will react or how to behave near them. If someone does act in a way that upsets your horse, or could upset another, if it is possible to take the opportunity to explain politely why an action was dangerous, it can help everyone (but a rant will not be as helpful!).

Cyclists are often unsure what to do and tend to take the approach of passing as quickly and quietly as possible! Wherever you can, encourage cyclists to call out on approach from behind and to pass wide and slow. Be alert to your horse's ears being focussed to your rear, and check what is there, a call and short conversation, can reassure your horse that the approaching 'threat' is a friendly human.

If you are approached by an angry landowner, a smile can often diffuse the situation. Be sure of where the right of way lies and your right to be there but be prepared to apologise and remove yourself if you are shown to be wrong. Do not allow yourself to be bullied: if you are on the right of way, you have every right to be there. Educating yourself on rights of way law will give you confidence and abiding by the Countryside Code should keep you out of trouble. See BHS Advice on *Avoiding conflict*.

Keep to the right of way

A bridleway or a byway is a linear right of way, usually wide enough to allow two users to pass each other, and on a legally defined line. If a beaten path is not obvious, such as through a field, make sure you know the 'line' of the right of way and use that line, otherwise you are trespassing and could be sued for damage.

If there is an obstruction (which may include cattle, especially cows with calves) on the route, you may deviate around the obstruction (by as little as possible).

Some users wrongly assume that an open bridleway or byway through a field means they can go where they like but no, the right of way is strictly the line on the map. Know the law and do not abuse your rights or fail to consider the landholder.

Grass is a crop, whether to graze or to harvest, so keep to the right of way and minimise trampling.

Post-harvest stubble of grains such as wheat or barley may be undersown with the next crop. This is increasingly likely as farmers avoid the cost and impact of ploughing, so do not treat stubble as an excuse for a gallop which would damage the next crop.

If riding or driving in company, keep to a reasonable width where a route is not enclosed by hedges, fences or walls. Two ridden horses abreast is reasonable, but spreading over several metres is not and can cause damage to the ground, conservation value plants, or crops. Driven horses should be in single file though there are rare byways where two vehicles abreast may be practical if there are no other users, but as it takes time to bring one outfit behind the other, single file is recommended unless a little-used route.

Keep your speed appropriate to the ground conditions; horses' hooves quickly damage ground in wet conditions and make equestrians unpopular. If possible, keep to one side of a way so that part of the surface is left unpoached for walkers or cyclists.

Access for horses away from motorised traffic is at a premium in most areas. Common reasons against equestrian routes being provided are poaching the ground or 'galloping all over the place'.

Further reading

[BHS Advice](#) on ...

- Responsible riding and carriage driving
- Finding places to ride or drive a horse
- Riding on beaches
- Permitted routes
- Hill and upland riding
- Blocked and difficult to use bridleways and byways
- Riding through livestock and horses
- Avoiding conflict
- Stallions on routes used by equestrians

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