



MID COTSWOLD TRACKS & TRAILS GROUP

Helping to improve our tracks and trails ... from this generation to the next ...

1st May 2014

Canal and River Trust : Response to your consultation document Sharing Towpaths.

Mid Cotswold Tracks and Trails Group is based in Gloucestershire and our aims are:

- 1 To improve and expand the tracks and trails network (bridleways, byways, unsurfaced roads and other off-road routes open to horse riders) to enable horses to be ridden off road in safety.
- 2 To develop new links and create additional multi-use routes to benefit horse riding.
- 3 To promote safer conditions for horse riders on roads.
- 4 To promote use of local riding routes and facilities to promote sustainable tourism. This may include the publication of maps and guides.
- 5 To establish good relations with local authorities, landowners and other user groups, such as walkers, cyclists, disabled, trail riders and carriage drivers, in order to achieve the above.
- 6 To provide assistance in maintaining existing tracks and trails.

The routes available for horse riders in our area that do not involve tracts on fast main roads are diminishing all the time. We feel strongly that any possibility of accessing (and in some areas re-accessing) quieter routes is very important and should be encouraged.

There is a national drive for health and well-being, but in many instances it feels as though the walkers, cyclists and others are being particularly positively targetted, often at the expense of the horse riders. There is a perception among our horse riders that we are subject to "horseist" discrimination, which is galling where no statistics exist to support the inequalities we are subject to.

Some of our members have told us that they used to ride parts of the Gloucester/Sharpness canal in the past but were stopped some years ago. They note that while they, as local people quietly enjoying their own village, have had routes taken away from them, a cycle hire business has been permitted, which they feel is encouraging visitors to use the paths in their place. Whilst tourism and the economy have a role to play, we feel it should not be to the detriment of access for those who live locally.

We are told that parts of the areas they rode were from The Cambridge Arms to Tudor Patch, and on down to Purton and back round a circuit through Gossington lanes. This is no longer available to horse riders. Here are two more comments from local riders "A/ways

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used to ride from Fretherne Bridge to Splatt Bridge. It makes a great loop to then ride back down the green in Frampton on Severn. Also the paths between Fretherne and Saul Bridge were always used by local riders about 10 years ago - was a real shame when they were made inaccessible.” and “I used to ride them years ago - great to get off road & would love to be able to ride along them again in the future - I rode from Frampton to Slimbridge as a teenager to attend the show several years running & the same from Frampton to Castle bridge to attend Hardwicke Show.”

Coincidentally, we have recently been asked by a local rider if it might be possible to re-open this route along the canal from Cambridge Arms to Frampton to access circuits that are only available at the moment if you ride up the A38 ... again, the A38 was ridden in the 1980s but you would need nerves of steel to even think of it now.

Our area also has the Stroudwater canal which is in the process of a massive re-opening and improvement scheme. This will eventually go from the Sharpness canal, through Stonehouse and Stroud and out to Sapperton and right across to Lechlade. There are several areas that would be useful as off road circuit links right across this whole route, and we have a rider from this area who states *“When I was younger I used to ride along Chalford towpaths. They were built for horses back in the day, and they should still be allowed to use them now too”*.

We believe that all user groups should be treated equally in the first instance i.e. all groups should be included unless there is a specific, and statistically provable, reason why they should be excluded. We see few instances where it would be suitable to cycle but not suitable to ride a horse. If cyclists, walkers, and anglers are expected to co-exist at the moment, why should horse riders not be invited to enjoy their local canal too ?

The discriminatory attitude to horses has been prevalent in other areas in the past. Horse riders have had to fight to be offered the same access rights as other groups on Forestry Commission land, and we are also still fighting for equal access to many ex-railway lines and “cycle” routes across the country.

The Trails Trust in their report on Multi-user Trails say:

“Results of all the research and experience are consistent and show that:

- Public perception of risk of accident or conflict on multi-user paths is rarely based upon facts.*
- Risk of accident or conflict on multi-user paths is minimal and statistically insignificant.*
- The main (although minimal) cause of conflict/accident is cyclists speeding too fast and close to walkers.*

Such issues can be addressed by:

- Choice of surface – e.g. avoiding tarmac which encourages speeding cyclists*
- Education – A Code of Use alerting the public to other users’ needs.”*

It is our riders’ experience that horses on a trail can actually slow the speed of cyclists to the advantage of walkers or disabled users.

For all the above reasons of equality of opportunity and access; benefits for general health and well being; preservation or restoration of ancient rights; and proven practicality; we would wish to see the majority of towpaths opened to horse use - with restrictions only where particularly necessary, for example where a path is too narrow for two horses to pass or very low bridges.

Pat Harris (MCTTG Chair)