

## West Somerset and Exmoor Bridleways Association Report to members, August 2009

This is a report to our members on what we have been doing in the last year.

*Please note that our AGM will be held in October at the Memorial Hall, Wheddon Cross. More details soon.*

### 1. Basic business

*We have been conducting our day to day business as follows:*

- reported bridleway faults through the reporting system and liaison with rangers, thanks to our network of area representatives
- dealt with bridleway diversions, thanks to Alison Kent and area representatives
- liaised with the highways authority on slippery roads and road surfaces
- produced our website, thanks to Fiona Monaghan
- produced posters to advertise ourselves and seek new members, thanks to Dee Binnie
- taken out our own rides, Chris Binnie's three day rides and Sam Westmacott's Coleridge Way rides, which were a great success

### 2. Website

*The website is well worth a visit at [www.westsomersetbridleways.org.uk](http://www.westsomersetbridleways.org.uk). It contains, among many other things, information about ride routes, events and bridleway hazards. The site now has a small ads section, so if you want to sell something, please let Fiona know at [fiona@exmooraccountancy.co.uk](mailto:fiona@exmooraccountancy.co.uk). She would also like to put up on the web the location of permitted bridleways, which are not marked on the OS map, so if you know of any in your area, please tell her.*

### 3. Gate latches

*We are to be consulted by the National Park Authority on gate latches, a subject dear to many of us. Please can you let me know your views at [katharine.mckenzie@btinternet.com](mailto:katharine.mckenzie@btinternet.com). There is a latch testing area on the bridleway near Court Farm at Exford.*

### 4. Motor traffic on bridleways, restricted byways

*Chris Binnie has been working to ensure that motorised vehicles do not use restricted byways, as this is now illegal. He has also been keeping an eye on legal developments to ensure that we are ready to respond, should claims be made to change the present position.*

### 5. BHS campaigns

*We have been in contact with the British Horse Society on their campaigns, which include increasing the bridleway network, road safety for riders, dangers to riders from low flying aircraft, beach access for horses and a move by the Forestry Commission to require riders to pay to ride in their woods. You can become involved in consultations and petitions through the BHS on line.*

### 6. Relationship with Exmoor Shoots

*There has been concern about the safety of horses and riders during the shooting season, as horses can be startled by sudden noise and activity on or near bridleways. We endeavoured to take this forward with the help of the National Park Authority.*

Dee Binnie and Sam Westmascott put together a presentation which Sam delivered at the annual meeting between the shoots and the Exmoor National Park Authority at Exmoor House in February 2009. This went over well. The outcome was a general informal view that area representatives should

approach the owners of land where shooting took place and/or gamekeepers, with a view to establishing informal communication before the next shooting season, so riders can find out where and when shoots are operating. The shoots' own code of conduct says that such communication should be established. This should help both riders and shoots, as it is in both their interests to avoid each other. In addition, Emma Jobin has offered to give a demonstration on training horses to deal with shooting activity.

## **7. New bridleways and Rights of Way Improvement Plan**

*We are always interested in increasing the bridleway network, especially where it allows riders to avoid dangerous roads and to join up unconnected rides. We have been following this up with the National Park Authority and with other local bridleway associations, which are applying to record new bridleways in their areas.*

If a path has been used by horse riders for a continuous period of 20 years at any time between now and 1189, without explicit permission but without hindrance, it is a bridleway. Claims to rectify the definitive map, either by showing completely new bridleways or by upgrading footpaths to bridleways, are made in Somerset to Somerset County Council using their own forms. Evidence might be produced from witnesses or from documents such as old maps, parish records and deeds. In Devon, the local authority will be dealing with each region in turn, the part of Devon covered by us being reached in 2011.

Of the 230 suggestions for new bridleways in our local Rights of Way Improvement plan, about half are eligible for claims. However Somerset County Council has a backlog of around 150 bridleway applications with another 100 coming up, and it can only deal with some 16 a year. Claims are prioritised by Somerset County Council on criteria such as safety (avoiding roads) and joining up routes. We have to make a decision about whether or not to pursue these new claims, as they may upset landowners. The committee suggested a target whereby each area representative might aim to get one new bridleway route through each year, in consultation with landowners and the National Park Authority. There is a time limit on the right to make a claim.

Meanwhile Abbie Keeper at the National Park Authority is working on the Rights of Way Improvement Plan. She has prioritised three routes on an initial scoring system. She intends to ask the landowners if the routes could be dedicated as bridleways. If not, she would investigate the possibility of a permitted route and then the possibility of a claim. She hopes to achieve three new bridleway routes by the end of the financial year. However the National Park Authority clearly has difficult resource issues.

Money is available under the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme for a landowner who enters into a ten year agreement for a permitted bridleway. No money is available for definitive bridleways. Thus permitted bridleways are more attractive to landowners. Permitted bridleways are for ten years only and permission can be withdrawn at any time. In the case of permitted bridleways, landowners may stipulate that there should be no use by bicycles or by commercial organisations such as riding schools.

## **8. Keeping horses in the Park**

*The committee has been liaising with the National Park Authority about keeping horses in the Park, mindful of the issues that arose last year in the New Forest. There are more and more horses in the National Park, yet it is not clear that the Park Authority is keen on this trend.*

The current law is that planning permission is needed to keep a horse rather than merely to graze it. This permission might be needed when horses are kept on less than 2.5 acres per horse or when they are kept in a building such as a barn which is classified as being for agricultural use. However the National Park Authority do not generally raise this as an issue, since most horses in the National Park are well kept in a manner sympathetic to the National Park environment. However in some cases there are problems. For example, a field may be bought by someone to keep horses at some distance from home.

He or she might keep too many horses for the amount of land and put up shelters that had not been granted planning permission. In such a case the Park Authority would take action.

We met David Wyborn and Emma Dennis of the National Park Authority (who spoke at our last AGM) to discuss keeping horses in the Park. They told us that draft national best practice guidance has been issued for final review and they are awaiting its official release. The publication is *Horse Pasture Management - A guide to Good Practice*, supported by the Environment Agency, Defra, Natural England and SEEDA. We were not given the chance to look at this. A group has been established by the South West Protected Landscapes Forum to develop a guidance document specifically for the south west, which will target horse keepers, especially those new to land management, and will cover:

- The importance of high quality landscapes to the south west region
- The landscape considerations of keeping horses
- The planning context for horse keeping
- Good practice examples of horse keeping
- Where to go for more information and advice

It is expected that this guidance will be available in December 2009. We have no opportunity to comment on the draft.

## **9. Officers**

Unfortunately after sixteen months in as Chairman of the Association, I am going to retire as I cannot give the job the time it deserves. The issues above are all important for riders on Exmoor, and are particularly so at a time when resource constraints mean that the National Park cannot make our problems a priority. I hope another Chairman can soon be found. We are also in need of a secretary, and a volunteer would be very welcome.

My thanks to all our members for their support over the last year.

Kate McKenzie  
26 August 2009