

ADVICE ON  
Hacking

The  
British  
Horse  
Society



**In the wild, horses travel some 20 miles a day searching for their food. The modern horse does not have nearly so much exercise and, for most, it is probably in confined spaces, but hacking out can be a very enjoyable experience for both the horse and rider, enriching the bond between them as they encounter new sights and sounds. Equally, a nasty experience can dent the confidence of the horse or rider, so following this guide will help to make the experience a positive one.**

## Where to Ride

Most riders have to start their hacking by using a road with varying traffic densities so it is advisable to take the BHS Riding and Road Safety Test.

Next, check that you know what is required of you when hacking by reading 'BHS Advice on Responsible Riding and Carriage Driving' and then see 'BHS Advice on Where to Ride' 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 (some Forestry Commission land for instance) so the next step is to check your map reading.



## 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, 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 carriage drivers is the 1:25,000 Explorer map (orange cover), which is available on paper or for various GPS and smartphone apps. You can also see it online at [www.streetmap.co.uk](http://www.streetmap.co.uk) and [www.magic.gov.uk](http://www.magic.gov.uk).

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 thus.

You will soon get used to spotting them. Some people like to highlight the useable routes in their area to make it easier to see at a glance. There may also be permissive bridleways marked and many routes described in the key as 'Traffic-free cycle routes' are open to horses, though rarely carriages. There may be other places you can ride (depending on location), see the advice note on 'Where to Ride' for details.

Being ambitious and planning long rides 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 ride will take longer. You may also encounter factors which slow you down, such as uneven ground where you have to pick your way, overgrown ways or a number of gates.

## 10 Key Tips

Before you take to the bridleways, byways and roads, there are ten things to do:

- 1 Make sure that your tack fits and is safe
- 2 Your own clothes and boots should be comfortable and suitable for the weather conditions
- 3 Wear hi-viz, ideally on both you and on the horse, which could be seen from above as well as from all angles from other people on the ways
- 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 phone and, in unknown territory, take a map
- 7 Tell somebody where you are going and roughly how long you think you will be out
- 8 Train your horse to open gates safely at home; 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 the horse is still
- 10 If you are riding in unknown territory, 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)

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

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

The weather can change considerably during a day, especially if your route goes from low ground to high or near the coast, and being cold or wet is uncomfortable and could be unsafe.

Hi-viz helps others to see you easily so that they can avoid you, or control dogs or children in plenty of time. In some areas hi-viz visible from above gives early warning to low flying pilots and if you should have an accident, it will make you and your horse much more visible to searchers.

Dealing with difficulties, checking the map, taking a photograph or just admiring a view will be far more pleasurable 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).



## Schooling

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

In difficult situations, it is particularly important to ride actively, keeping your horse well-balanced and listening to you. Paying attention to your flatwork at home can be very useful so that 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 instructor will be able to help you build that relationship.

## Gates

Being able to open and close gates safely and easily is a very useful skill and will add greatly to the enjoyment of a ride. Avoiding routes with gates will limit your options greatly in some areas and struggling with gates can take the 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. See 'BHS Advice on Opening Gates' and video. Having a hunting crop can give you 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 while you remount, especially as you may not have an ideal mounting block and have to make do with whatever is available.



## Hills

In the past when horses were beasts of burden they tackled nearly everything asked of them and this can be the same now, so long as they are fit enough and educated to carry you in balance. When riding uphill, lean forward to take the weight off your horse's 'engine', his hind legs. While descending very steep hills, it is advisable to move your lower legs forward and lean slightly back to avoid tipping forward.

Wherever possible ride 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. Steep hills do need fitness as the tendency can be to 'crab' going downhill when horses are unfit.

## Stock

Farm animals are not likely to hurt you or your horse but in some situations may feel intimidating so it is advisable to ride with a stick, preferably a hunting whip with long thong, to be used against inquisitive cattle or horses (if your horse accepts that). See 'BHS Advice on Riding through Livestock and Horses'.

Always walk through stock of any kind. Never ride between a calf and cows. You may need to deviate from the right of way to ride round cattle, especially if they have young calves.



## 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.

Many people 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 is more likely to be unhelpful!).

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, whatever the landowner or farmer might say. See 'BHS Advice on Confrontation'.

## Keep to the Path

A bridleway or a byway is a linear right, usually wide enough to allow two users to pass each other, and on a legally defined line. If you cannot see a beaten path, such as through a grass field, make sure you know where the 'line' is and keep to it, otherwise you are trespassing and could be sued for damages.

Always keep to the line of the public right of way (or permissive route) unless there is an obstruction (which may include cattle, especially cows with calves) on the route.

Keep your speed appropriate to the ground conditions; horses' hooves quickly damage ground in wet conditions and make horses very unpopular. If possible, keep to one side of a way so that part of the surface is left unpoached for walkers or cyclists. Remember that grass is still a crop; whether to graze or to harvest and it is important in a grass field to make sure you do not deviate from the right of way.

Access for horses away from motorised traffic is at a premium in most areas. Common reasons against equestrian routes are poaching the ground or 'galloping all over the place'. Some riders assume that a bridleway through a field means you can go where you like but they are wrong. Know the law and do not abuse your rights or fail to consider others.

## Why make the effort?

Like all activities with horses, the most fulfilment when hacking is found when you have a well schooled horse. By taking the time and effort to school your horse to hack sensibly, you can derive hours of great satisfaction and enjoyment of the countryside. You will also have a much greater bond with your horse and you will be contributing to both his physical and mental welfare.

Further Reading:

- Responsible riding and carriage driving
- Finding places to ride and carriage drive
- Riding on beaches
- Permissive routes
- Hill and upland riding
- Blocked and difficult to use bridleways and byways
- Dealing with confrontation
- Level crossings
- Stallions on bridleways
- Riding through livestock and horses



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