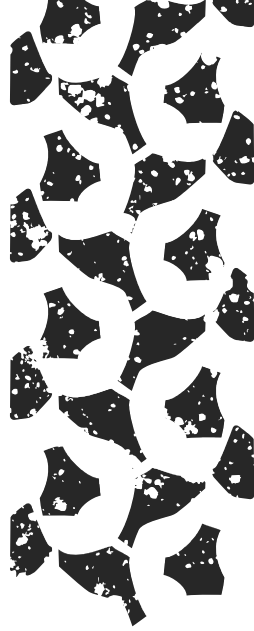


**FEATURE**  
*Off-road  
access*

The Long Mynd in Shropshire, which rises to 500m, is crisscrossed with bridleways. This is The Batch, above All Stretton







WORDS COLIN PALMER

# STOPPED IN OUR TRACKS?

Off-road access for UK cyclists seems stymied everywhere except Scotland. CTC off-road adviser **Colin Palmer** has some suggestions

**M**ountain biking is either a brilliant recreation that enables all ages to enjoy tranquil (or technical) countryside trails or an invention of the devil that destroys the environment, terrorises decent folk and scatters farm stock, depending who you talk to.

There would be little doubt about the views of media, landowners and walkers back in the early 1990s, when mountain bikers first started exploring the countryside in numbers. In the 20 years since, mountain biking has matured and it is generally accepted as a good thing.

Despite this, provision falls very short of demand. Look at the access opportunities in England and Wales in 1992 and compare with the situation in 2012 (see 'Track Changes', overleaf). There are two very positive outcomes: the development of Forestry Commission trails, particularly suited to the active mountain biker; and the more family-orientated rail-trails both within and outside of the National Cycle Network.

On the other hand, despite sales of over 40

million mountain bikes in the last two decades, the overall increase of the trail network available for their use has increased at best by a bare 6%.

## NETWORK ANALYSIS

Estimates calculated by IMBA-UK ([imba.org.uk](http://imba.org.uk)) suggest that in 2005, there were around 80 million mountain bike rides in the UK. Yet the majority of these rides were undertaken by a minority of enthusiasts, with families in particular failing take their bikes off-road regularly.

A closer look at the available off-road network indicates why this should be. The publicly maintainable bridleway, byway, restricted byway and 'white road' network available for cyclists is reasonably extensive, but it's also fragmented so it's difficult to plan circular rides. These rights of way don't often start or end in urban areas, and some run over soft surfaces such as farmed fields, which can make them hard to ride outside the summer. The experienced mountain biker will overlook many of these shortcomings; the family group will find most of these public trails unsuitable. >



➤ Rail-trails and canal towpaths are popular with the less adventurous off-road cyclist, in part because they share a key characteristic: they're flat. Most rail-trails offer excellent cycling opportunities. Half of the canal towpath network is denied to us, however, and the poor surfaces on some of those that we can use may make cycling difficult. Aside from that, much of the towpath network is a delight to cycle on. With the management of the canals moving from British Waterways to the Canal and Rivers Trust, we hope that opportunities for cycling will take a big step forward.

The Forestry Commission is to be congratulated on being the only agency or major landowner to rise to the challenge of meeting the needs of off-road cyclists. From small beginnings catering for enthusiasts at Coed y Brenin in North Wales, now every Forestry Commission district has a selection of singletrack trails. In addition, all freehold forest stoned tracks are available for less challenging rides, and a number of family-specific routes are also provided.

Outside of the Forestry Commission, landowners and land managers have been deafeningly unenthusiastic about encouraging informal mountain biking, with only two significant facilities in England and Wales: the Crown Forest at Swinley near Bracknell, and UPMTillhill Forestry's centre at Llandegla.

**“OUTSIDE OF THE FORESTRY COMMISSION, LANDOWNERS HAVE BEEN UNENTHUSIASTIC”**

**Above Left to right**  
Cyclepaths along old railway routes, such as the Mawddach Trail, are ideal for families. Cyclists and horse riders share trails – but not always. Purpose-built MTB tracks like The Marin Trail in Gwydyr Forest have transformed the off-road landscape. The Ridgeway, an ancient road with limited vehicle access

While the National Trust has policies that should favour cycling, this has not so far resulted in any significant packages of trails. And the Woodland Trust also seems to prefer the bike be left at the entry gate.

#### REMOVING CYCLISTS' CHAINS

Ministers have not been persuaded to include cyclists in contemporary countryside access initiatives. Access Land was dedicated for walkers only following the 2000 Countryside Act, while more recently the English coastal access provisions of the Marine Act excluded cycling from the process. Both acts advised cyclists to negotiate with landowners for similar provision. To date, no landowner has dedicated any cycle access under the 2000 Countryside Act provisions.

The Coalition Government does seem to have accepted that there is a need for a more flexible approach, and the Paths for Communities scheme, announced by the Chancellor in his autumn statement, does prioritise the development of multi-user paths for equestrians, walkers and cyclists. The scheme has a budget of just £2m, so its scope will be restricted.

Outside of the public domain, there is virtually no off-road cycling available. While we might justifiably feel that provision has failed to catch up with demand for off-road cycling trails in England and Wales, consider the lot of our compatriots in Northern Ireland. They have no rights of way and precious little permissive access. And unlike our own Forestry Commission, the Northern Ireland Forest Service seems suspicious of mountain biking and allows very little use of its tracks and trails – although it is talking to mountain bike representatives. For more information on cycling off-road in Northern Ireland,





visit [countryside.com/projects/present](http://countryside.com/projects/present) and click on Mountain Biking, and also Multi Use.

### SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE

So is the UK really a bit of a backwater for mountain biking? Not a bit of it. Head north and there's a mountain biker's paradise: Scotland. Scotland has embraced mountain biking. Forestry Commission Scotland's highly successful 7Stanes MTB centres are backed up with an array of other Forestry Commission and private forest cycle centres and routes.

Scotland also has some of the best countryside access policies anywhere in Europe. The 2003 Land Reform Act gave statutory access for cyclists, walkers and equestrians to most land, including pretty well all paths and tracks, and encompasses woodlands, mountain and moorland.

The deal is that you have to be responsible, respecting people's privacy by avoiding gardens and farmyards, and avoiding farm crops, livestock, and sensitive situations such as deer stalking. Full details can be found in the Scottish Access Code: [outdooraccess-scotland.com](http://outdooraccess-scotland.com). Click on 'Enjoying Scotland's outdoors responsibly'.

There are some rights of way in Scotland. These are limited in number and are of less relevance following the new legislation. Of much more relevance is the rapidly developing Core Paths network, where local authorities are signing and promoting selected routes particularly suitable for walkers, cyclists or equestrians.

### EUROPEAN WINNERS AND LOSERS

Elsewhere in much of Europe the picture can also be pretty positive. One of my favourite destinations

## TRACK CHANGES

How off-road access in England and Wales has altered in 20 years.

	1992 MILEAGE	2012 MILEAGE	COMMENTS
<b>FULL ACCESS FOR CYCLISTS</b>			
Bridleways/bridlepaths	18,000*	20,000	Cyclists must give way to walkers & equestrians
Restricted Byways (were RUPPs)	4,000*	3,700	Cannot be ploughed
Byways (open to all traffic)	2,000*	2,300	Shared with motorised vehicles
'White' roads**	8,100*	8,100*	Generally unsealed
Forestry Commission stoned tracks	9,100	9,100	Permit systems withdrawn late 1980s
Forestry Commission cycle trails	0**	1,370	Development started in 1995
<b>RESTRICTED ACCESS FOR CYCLISTS</b>			
Cycle trails in 'private' woodlands	0	50	Very little cycle access
Canal Towpaths	2,200	2,200	Only 1,100 miles open to cyclists
Rail=trails & cycle tracks	300	850	Mostly on the National Cycle Network
Other	Minimal	Minimal	e.g. National Trust, Defence Estates, Country Parks
<b>NO LEGAL ACCESS FOR CYCLISTS</b>			
Footpaths	93,000*	91,000	Very little cycle access
Open access hills & moorland	0?	0?	Opened to walkers by statute in 2000

\* Countryside Commission estimates from the early 1990s. Possibly not entirely accurate, with the 'white road' figure likely to be a substantial over-estimate. \*\* White roads are so called as they are depicted in white on Ordnance Survey Maps. Where they have public access, Ordnance Survey overlay them with large dots, classifying them as 'other roads with public access'. They can also be called 'unsurfaced unclassified county roads' (UCCRs), or 'green lanes', as they often have grassy surfaces





## “CYCLISTS IN ENGLAND AND WALES COULD ASPIRE TO A VERSION OF SCOTTISH ACCESS”

› is the Suisse Normande in France. Less than an hour from the ferry, it is a huge area of deep-sided valleys bisected by the River Orne, with 500 miles of waymarked mountain bike trails. This is exceptional, but generally in France, if there is a trail and no locked gate, then you will just be regarded as normal traffic by landowners and residents alike.

Scandinavia is similarly cycle friendly, particularly Norway where the right to cycle mirrors that of Scotland. Although Sweden, Denmark and Finland have little specific legislative access protection, this is compensated for by extensive networks of cyclepaths, and a cultural inclination towards access. As landholdings and land management policies change, this is coming under increasing pressure.

In Spain and Spanish territories, changes in private ownership are leading to the closure of many trails, not only to cyclists but to walkers also. This is also replicated in much of Eastern Europe, where trails are being closed to the public in countries such as Hungary and the Czech Republic.

Rather oddly, these pressures seem to have had the reverse effect in Switzerland. Many communes have negotiated permissive mountain bike trails with local landowners.

### OPENING UP ENGLAND & WALES

Scottish legislation has demonstrated that it is possible to provide universal, responsible public access to the countryside without undermining landowner interests. However, the landowning lobby appears to be more persuasive in Westminster than Edinburgh; a direct import of Scottish Access is unlikely.

Cyclists in England and Wales could aspire to a modified version of Scottish Access. If adopted, it could result in around an extra 100,000 miles of trail available to cyclists by:

- opening the tracks and trails of Open Access land to cyclists;
- reclassifying the rights of way network into just two categories: restricted byways, for cyclists, equestrians and walkers; and byways, for all users (including motorised).

The Scottish concept, requiring the user to ascertain what is or is not suitable, would apply. Importing



### PUBLIC RIGHTS OF WAY

These are specific classifications of paths maintained by Highway Authorities and shown on a document called the definitive map. We've shown here how they appear on an Ordnance Survey Landranger map.

**Footpath:** On foot only (but you may push your bike).

**Bridleway:** For walkers, equestrians and cyclists

**Restricted Byway:** For walkers, equestrians, cyclists and horse drawn vehicles. Used to be called Road Used as a Public Path (RUPP)

**Byway Open to all Traffic:** For all users including motorised traffic.

**'White' roads:** Generally considered to be open to all users, but some highway authorities consider that they have proven rights for walkers only.

**Cycle track:** Two types, one alongside (mostly urban) roads, and not always shown on OS maps, and secondly, converted railway tracks.

the Scottish Core Path concept would provide certainty of suitability on selected routes.

### CHASING TRAILS

So how do we improve off-road access? There is no easy answer to this one, but by briefly analysing the current trail network some options do emerge.

CTC is talking to all the major players at national level to find ways of increasing access to rights of way, woodland, towpaths, National Trust land and other major landholding organisations. While this can create a helpful national policy, it is often communication at local level that puts new trails on the ground. One person really can make a difference. Maybe that's you?

To learn more about campaigning, or to liaise with or learn from other local campaigners, visit [ctc.org.uk/righttoride](http://ctc.org.uk/righttoride).

Here are some suggestions on what you could do.

#### Local Rights of Way

Campaigning at local level can improve your trail network but you have to be persistent.

- Get involved with your Local Access Forum and press for an improved bridleway network.
- Work with other cyclists to survey your local bridleway and byway network with the aim of identifying key gaps, and potential for promoting circular rides.
- Discuss the potential for work parties to improve routes with other cyclists and rights of way staff
- Get involved with the definitive map process, and respond to any map modification orders that would change the status of bridleways, and public paths orders that would divert bridleways.
- Lobby MPs and local councillors to give priority to





the funding and improvement of multi-user trails.  
**More information:** [naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/enjoying/accessforums/](http://naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/enjoying/accessforums/)

■ **Forestry Commission**

The Independent Forestry Panel is currently developing recommendations on future forest policy in England, and CTC has been closely involved in the process.

- CTC wants all current cycle access to be protected by dedication to mirror the security of access enjoyed by walkers.
- Discuss with your local Forestry recreation manager how to open new trails and jump parks.

**More information:** [forestry.gov.uk/mtbengland](http://forestry.gov.uk/mtbengland) (change to '/mtbwales' or '/mtbscotland' as appropriate)

■ **Non-Forestry Commission Woodland**

CTC has identified a number of categories of woodland ownership where informal cycle access might be considered. These include:

- The National Forest (near Corby).
- Community Forests (there are 13 of these in England and Wales).
- Local Authority owned woodlands.
- Private estates with visitor centres (e.g. Swinley near Bracknell and Drumlanrig near Dumfries).
- Woodlands owned by utility companies (mostly water companies).
- Woodlands overseen by forest management companies as investment vehicles (e.g. Llandegla).
- Woodlands in royal estates. The Duchy of Cornwall has a good access record over its land.
- Are there similar woodlands near you with a good trail network? Identify the manager and get talking.

**More information:** [communityforest.org.uk](http://communityforest.org.uk)

■ **Towpaths**

In April 2012, British Waterways will morph into The Canals and River Trust charity.

- Apply for a position on the new regional Waterway Partnerships management committees to defend the case for improved cycle access to towpaths.

**More information:** [waterscape.com/things-to-do/cycling](http://waterscape.com/things-to-do/cycling)

■ **National Trust**

National Trust policy encourages responsible cycling on its estate. However, the decision to permit cycling is made at a local level by each property or regional manager. To date, with the exception of Clumber Park in Sherwood, this has not been forthcoming.

- If your local National Trust has suitable trails, then make an appointment to discuss opening them to off-road cyclists.

**More information:** [nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/activities/cycling/](http://nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/activities/cycling/)

■ **Defence Estates**

Working with Defence Estates is a bit of a rollercoaster. Each new access initiative, such as the excellent 40-mile Sennybridge bridleway and the new Castlemartin bridleway, seems to be accompanied by restrictions elsewhere. Of course, the prime purpose of the estate is for military training, but Ministry Of Defence policy is to permit access wherever possible.

- Get in touch with your local Defence Estates manager and explore the potential for greater cycle access.

**More information:** [tinyurl.com/7ap7f4u](http://tinyurl.com/7ap7f4u)

With vision and perseverance, it is possible to gain new off-road access for cyclists. 🚴

**Above Left to right**  
 A branch of the Sarn Helen, an old Roman road, between Dolwyddelan and Capel Curig. Bridleways are generally signed but there's no guarantee what the riding surface will be like. Stoned tracks through forests provide non-technical off-road riding