

Rights of Way in the Chilterns

The Chilterns is a nationally significant landscape, particularly the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. AONBs were not created for the benefit of those fortunate enough to live in them. They tend to represent areas where opportunities for extensive outdoor recreation are lacking. **AONBs were created to meet the demands for recreation and quiet enjoyment of the countryside.**

An essential feature of the Chilterns landscape is its spiders web of Rights of Way (RoW). They provide routes for short circular walks of 2 or 3 miles, or more; for longer walks between settlements or stations of 8 to 10 miles; and they link into regional routes such as the South Bucks way and national routes such as the Ridgeway and Midshires Way. The quiet lanes and bridleways have been used as the framework for the Chilterns Cycleway, a 170 mile long circular route round the Chilterns AONB. The network of footpaths, bridleways and peaceful lanes is an essential characteristic of this area. They are used by walkers, cyclists, joggers and horse-riders – local residents and visitors – and for every day access as well as leisure.

The aims of the Chilterns Conservation Board, as laid down by Parliament, include **promoting awareness and enjoyment of the Chilterns**. The Board's work in taking advantage of its RoW network to increase the accessibility of the Chilterns to an growing and widening range of people is conspicuous by its success. Initiatives include 'Miles without Stiles' - launched in Chesham in 2005 and aimed at people unable to manage stiles, such as the less mobile or families with small children - and the Chilterns Cycleway, launched by racing driver Mark Webber in 2010 which has resulted in a noticeable increase in visitor numbers and tourism and bike-related businesses. Recent developments include the launch of the Chilterns Tourism Network in October 2012 and the Chilterns Sustainable Tourism Project, funded by the Department for Transport, which has identified Amersham, Chesham, Great Missenden and the surrounding area as a hub for the development of initiatives aimed at increasing the number of cycling trips and holidays in the area as part of the Government's Sustainable Tourism Initiative – see below.

Why are AONBs important?

In 2010 **David Cameron MP**, now Prime Minister, wrote:

*'Conservatives believe that **Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) are vitally important, not only for conserving some of the UK's most beautiful environmental assets, but also for unlocking the value in our national landscape. At a time when UK biodiversity is in decline, we need AONBs to help us protect and enhance our habitat and safeguard wildlife. We recognise that they are uniquely places to provide both effective management of important areas of habitat and also proper delivery of initiatives and targeted local funding.***

Under any future Conservative Government, AONBs will have a critical role to play to ensure that our most important landscapes can continue to thrive and be enjoyed by future generations.'

Education and awareness of the natural environment

The 2012 **Natural Environment White Paper**, 'The Natural Choice: securing the

value of nature' described AONBs, with National Parks, as '*a rich and diverse set of national treasures*'. Launching 'The Natural Choice', Environment Secretary Caroline Spelman said:

'The natural environment matters to us all – not just because it makes us feel good when we stumble across a bluebell wood or spot a pair of goldfinches, but because we are now all able to see the terrible price we would pay if we lost what we have or neglected to care for it. Nature belongs to us all, and we've all got a vested interest in protecting it.

A key role of AONBs is to provide people with the opportunity, not just of outdoor recreation, exercise and enjoyment, but to become more aware of the natural environment in which we all depend. The RoW are essential to this.

Health and well-being

The Natural Environment White Paper, above, explicitly recognises the importance of the natural environment to people's health and well-being:

1.26 Human wellbeing is intimately connected with our natural environment.

Evidence from the NEA supports what many feel instinctively: regular opportunities to experience nature have positive impacts on mental and physical health, learning and relationships between neighbours. Nature can benefit us at all stages in our lives:

1.27 Contact with nature can help us to get a better start in life – and to get on in life. There is a wide range of evidence showing that contact with nature enhances children's education, personal and social skills, health and wellbeing, leading to the development of responsible citizens..

1.28 There is increasing interest in the impact of outdoor environments on health and wellbeing. Several reviews, including Sir Michael Marmot's independent review of health inequalities, *Fair Society, Healthy Lives*,¹² point to the potential of natural environments to improve mental and physical health.'

The Natural Environment White paper also recognises the value of access to the countryside and seeks to encourage it. Paragraph 4.33 states that '***Clear, well-maintained paths and bridleways are important to give people access to the natural environment and can be enjoyed by cyclists, walkers and horse riders.***'

In other words it explicitly recognises the importance of well maintained RoW networks.

Economic significance of AONBs

Tourism is a crucially important industry for the UK economy – it is the third biggest export earner, foreign and domestic tourism is worth £115 billion a year and it employs 2.6 million people – is it accounts for around 9% of the British economy. According to the Government website, *VisitBritain*, 'Crucially, against the backdrop of a slow recovery from recession, tourism is growing faster than other economic sectors.' The White Paper is linked to the National Ecosystem Assessment which shows the strong economic arguments for valuing, safeguarding and enhancing the natural environment. The Natural Environment White Paper explicitly recognises the importance of AONBs and the amenities they provide to their economies. It points out that tourism initiatives such as new cycling and walking routes 'can have a significant positive impact on the local economy'. This has proved to be the case with the Chilterns Cycleway, whose users spend an average of £71 each a day when they come to stay. The income generated by visitors is worth contribute nearly £471.6 million to the economy of the Chilterns AONB area. In the Chilterns District Council area tourism accounted for over 3,000 jobs, over 9%, according to the most recent figures.

The importance of walking and riding for tourists is shown by the figures for Activities published by VisitEngland. Over a quarter of those making short trips in 2011 went for a walk – 17.2 million trips included a short walk of up to 2 miles (NB ‘centre-based’ walks in towns and cities are listed separately); 11 million trips were long walks or rambles. A further 1.3 million short trips took the form of a cycle ride. On longer holidays 23% of people had a short walk, 16.5% went on a long walk or ramble and 2.3% cycled. Walks are one of the three most mentioned activities in the VisitBritain surveys.

Contributing to the Government’s Sustainable Tourism agenda

VisitEngland, formerly the English Tourist Board, has recently begun a three year programme, *Growing Tourism Locally*, which aims ‘to inspire Britons to take more holidays at home, boosting local economies through growth in visitor spend, resulting in the creation of 9,100 indirect jobs’. Mid-term results show that it is being successful in meeting its targets with an additional £100 million spend this year. The development of the Chilterns Cycleway and the Chilterns Tourism Network mean that the Chilterns, including the central Chilterns area, are contributing to this growth by enhancing RoW and raising awareness of the facilities on offer to those seeking to get out into the countryside.

VisitEngland, has taken a lead in terms of developing a framework and strategy for a comprehensive treatment of sustainable tourism as part of the VisitEngland Strategic Framework and ‘action plans’. One of the nine action plans developed to take forward the VE Strategic Framework relates to sustainable tourism and is being developed through the Sustainable Tourism Action Group or STAG, led by VisitEngland. The vision for STAG is to “grow tourism responsibly in a finite world, creating resilience and prosperity for all”. As part of this programme the Department for Transport recently announced the ‘Chilterns Sustainable Tourism Gateways Projects’. This is intended to build on the success of the Chilterns Cycleway. Over £800,000 is to be invested in measures and initiatives to promote cycling and walking in the Chilterns, using the extensive network of Rights of Way. Developments are to be focused on three ‘hubs’. The Amersham, Chesham and Great Missenden area has been identified as one of the ‘hubs’ – precisely the area whose Rights of Way will be affected by HS2.

Access to walks and riding routes in the Chilterns AONB

The Chilterns is the nearest AONB to London – it is less than an hour by train to Great Missenden – and is also close to urban centres such as Luton and Dunstable, Slough and growing towns such as Milton Keynes and Aylesbury. The central Chilterns area, from Wendover along the Misbourne Valley to the Chalfonts, is easily accessible by public transport and car. There were over 55 million visitors to the Chilterns AONB in 2007 and the number has increased since then. Thousands of visitors come to the central Chilterns, the area around Amersham, Chesham, Great Missenden and Wendover. Some come to visit specific attractions such as Wendover Woods, the Dahl Museum in Great Missenden and the Chilterns Open Air Museum and Milton’s Cottage in the Chalfonts. Many more come to enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of the countryside. People coming by train from London can walk out of any central Chilterns station and find themselves in open countryside or ancient woodland within an hour of leaving Marylebone.

There are numerous published walks using paths running through this area, from 2 mile circular walks from pubs contained in ‘Pub Walks in the Chilterns’ to longer local walks

including those in recent 'Suffragette Walks' book and long distance walks such as the Chiltern Link, the South Bucks Way and the Midshires Trail. Local walking groups include the Ramblers, Simply Walks and groups for 20-30 year olds and over 40s. Walks in the area are listed on various websites, including *Time Out* and *Sanoodi*; also the Chilterns Conservation Board's website whose interactive map of walks and rides attracts 8,000 hits a month, even during a summer like this one.

Rights of Way - General Concerns

Local people have considerable concerns relating to Rights of Way in the Chilterns, as follows:

They are concerned that Rights of Way shall be recognised as an important resource in the Misbourne Valley, at the heart of the Chilterns AONB, since

- Rights of Way here are easily accessible by public and private transport.
- There are nearby agglomerations, such as London, Luton and Slough. The AONB is intended to provide facilities for recreation and quiet enjoyment for their residents, among others.
- Use of Rights of Way is free, educational and health-promoting.
- The Rights of Way directly affected by the route of HS2 lead to a network of RoW spreading out from both sides of the route. Severance of individual RoW will lead to the reduction in use of many, including those forming both circular and longer distance routes; and hence a widespread loss of amenity.

Construction

There is considerable concern about the potential for HS2 to have serious adverse effects on Rights of Way during the construction phase. Since this will last for years, if HS2 goes ahead it is imperative that maintaining the Rights of Way and quiet lanes network and preserving that their character, including peace and tranquillity, is central to construction phase planning.

If HS2 has a serious impact on Rights of Way in the area this will contribute significantly to the negative socio-economic impacts of the scheme.

Operation

1. As noted, the concern is not simply with intersected rights of way. The effect is much wider leading to a swathe of what would become largely disused rights of way if those on the HS2 route were severed. How far away from the HS2 route would the blight on rights of way extend?
2. Concern over loss of reputation of the Misbourne Valley as a place to pursue leisure pursuits such as walking and cycling.
3. Concerns over loss of landscape features and features rich in biodiversity that currently form boundaries to rights of way. Such features potentially include hedgerows, truly ancient, valuable and potentially interesting trees (Defra), historic coppiced hedges, and earth banks on either side of sunken rights of way that form historic boundaries.
4. Concerns over the replacement of landscape features and features rich in biodiversity that currently form boundaries to rights of way with fences and hedges with limited biodiversity.
5. Concerns over the effect of HS2 on long distance trails of national and regional

importance.

6. Concerns over the impact on viewpoints located on rights of way – where should trees be planted near the route to hide it?
7. Concerns over impacts on cyclists, walkers and horse-riders during operation.
8. Concerns over the potential re-routing of intersected rights of way to make them parallel to the HS2 route - clearly bad practice.
9. Concerns over the potential re-routing of rights of way onto roads that would go under or over HS2. What would be the appearance of the road bridges/viaducts that walkers, cyclists and horse-riders might use?
8. Concerns over the effect of possible severance and disuse of rights of way on the future of cycle/walking events currently held virtually every weekend at Great Missenden and Wendover.
9. Concerns over the effect on tourism if Rights of Way were severed during construction and operation.
15. Concerns over the cumulative impact of HS2 on:
 - Tourism from severance and disuse of rights of way.
 - Tourism from despoliation of landscape.
 - Trade through actual and perceived inconvenience in accessing retail and catering outlets in villages including Great Missenden and Wendover. This includes trade from visitors to the AONB.
 - Trade to hotels and bed and breakfast businesses.
 - Weekend cycle events and cycle clubs' choice of location for events.

Aims of discussion with HS2 Ltd

- To ensure that no right of way is permanently severed (ie for more than 6 months)
- To ensure that rights of way retain their integrity - ie they are not combined and they are not re-routed over road bridges. Any diversions should not exceed 6 months
- To ensure the tranquility of rights of way through effective mitigation, e.g. properly designed and locally appropriate noise barriers, effective visual screening
- To ensure that adverse impacts on the health of people using rights of way, e.g. from air pollution resulting from dust generated during construction, are avoided
- To ensure proper compensation for householders whose property value is affected by the loss of amenity because of impacts on adjacent footpaths.

Supporting evidence

Map of local paths affected by HS2, showing published walks along them.

Written description of each path describing its route, characteristics and users

List of published Chilterns walks and rides in leaflets, books and on websites and samples of leaflets and route descriptions...