

ESSEX BRIDLEWAYS ASSOCIATION

Life is full of ups and downs, steps forward and steps back again, and I think it is fair to say that we experienced one of those steps backwards just recently, when our Development Officer put the case for horse riders at the planning committee convened to discuss the ECC (Minerals and Waste) application to create 23 km of permissive path on Wallasea Island, purely for cyclists and pedestrians. The exclusion of equestrians was supported and justified by councillors present on the grounds of potential conflict between users! This seems totally weird and pretty bonkers to me, since I think we all understood via ECC and in fact all of U.K. led by Highways England, that the new Accessibility Strategy would create an inclusive and integrated network for all vulnerable road users, including cyclists, walkers **and** equestrians. Government policy remains as one of shared use on cycle/multi-user paths; the mix of users seen to have the potential to encourage more care by all users. Sometimes it would be easy to throw in the towel and give up – but no, happily EBA and the BHS are made of sterner stuff, and we will continue to campaign for as long as it takes to create a comprehensive, safe and user-friendly network of routes for all to enjoy.

Back to happier things, I am pleased to say that there are masses of things ongoing which we hope will ultimately lead to better and safer off road opportunities for our Essex Riders. In Maldon, the new Local Plan has been approved and adopted, incorporating the new requirement for equestrian access; in North Weald further development of an existing golf course is planned, so we have emphasised the necessity to safeguard existing bridleway access, hopefully with additional enhancements. Major developments and road schemes are all opportunities to improve and extend our bridleway network, and I know that around Essex, we will be taking every chance to make the case for equestrian access.

The BHS have reported great success in their first Ride Out UK Month, with many events celebrating the joys of hacking out, whilst raising awareness of the importance of safe off-road riding. Apart from the publicity benefits, the fundraising associated with pleasure rides etc., contributes to the BHS Paths for Communities Fund which is available to assist with funding bridleway projects. As I mentioned recently, EBA successfully applied for funds to help with our own contribution to the cost of repair of a route in Weald Park, Brentwood, which had become impassable due to waterlogging. Much appreciated!

I know I mentioned the National Trust involvement in the BHS Ride Out UK Month, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland, but I was delighted to see, following on from that, two of our leading lights in EBA reporting on a ride at NT Ickworth estate in Suffolk. Understandably they loved the ride in “amazing grounds with fabulous views”. Keep up the good work National Trust!

Another ongoing saga is the planned closure of many rail crossings by Network Rail. We had been led to believe this would involve rather more footpaths, with determined efforts being made to maintain or re-route bridleway crossings. Just last week I was walking in the Billericay area, and used a bridleway route running northwards from the A129 through to Mountnessing Hall, involving a rail crossing along its route. I am not happy to report that the gates either side of the railway crossing have been padlocked closed due to “maintenance”! I imagine this has been the case for some while since the bridleway on the Billericay side was very overgrown and narrow, partially impassable, and if someone should venture down there on horseback goodness knows how they would be able to turn round and retrace their steps! I hope the locals are aware of this closure.

Lastly this month, I was very pleased to read that a particularly nasty driver who had thoroughly intimidated two riders, sounding his horn and revving his engine, and behaving in an extremely threatening manner, has been rewarded for his efforts with six months' imprisonment. Local police in Warwickshire commented that this was "an excellent result for a particularly nasty rural issue". It is such a shame that this sort of action should be necessary at all.

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www.essexbridleways.co.uk.