

Who's allowed on the leafy lanes?

By *Margaret Smith*

REPORTER Margaret Smith explores the great outdoors as a passenger in a Range Rover as she investigates why some walkers want 4x4 vehicles and motorbikes banned from trails in the Chilterns countryside

WALKERS who want motorbikes and 4x4s banned from the green lanes of the Chilterns have a fight on their hands. Trail riders say they are members of a persecuted minority with right on their side.

Arguments started when the Trail Riders Federation, a national group of motorcyclists, and the Bucks Rights of Way Users Group (Browse) started a campaign to get green lanes in the county correctly classified.

If they are Byways Open to All Traffic (BOATS) they should appear as such on the map.

Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (the Crow Act), people have until 2026 to get these routes classified.

After that rights will be extinguished. Buckinghamshire County Council has already received 20 applications.

Faced with the prospect of motorbikers and off-road vehicles travelling peaceful lanes, people have made speeches, handed in petitions and written to the government.

But the bikers and off-road drivers says they are responsible people whose hobby happens to be driving and who have the right to use the trails.

Julian Poulter took me for a 33-mile two-and-a-half hour trip in his red Range Rover. He is a member of Browse and of Glass, the Green Lanes Association.

Our average speed was 13mph and that included about half of the journey on asphalted roads, where the vehicle got up to 30mph in some stretches. Elsewhere the maximum was often not much more than two or three mph.

Julian has been green lane driving for the past three years, having given up an earlier attempt because of the aggravation he suffered from other walkers. He enjoys the driving, exploring, seeing the countryside from a different angle, getting into remote places and plotting routes. Our route is shown on his GPS system, so unlike walkers he can't get lost, though he might get stuck in the mud or because of the low speed be unable to move forward over a boulder. He carries winching gear to get him out of trouble.

Our route was along along C roads, roads used as public paths, unclassified unmetalled roads and BOATS. I soon lost track of which was which. Part of the journey was along the Ridgeway, which is all these in some parts and bridleway in others.

Some routes were 60 feet wide, some narrow and overgrown, some deeply rutted and some gravelled.

Julian says if vehicles did not use some of these lanes, they could become completely overgrown and impassible for everyone.

Using a Range Rover is certainly a different way of seeing the countryside and Julian maintains you are more likely to see, and less likely to scare, the wildlife, because the vehicle can be used as a hide.

During our trip it became obvious that there was a lot of misinformation about.

One notice warned "Bridleway ahead. Closed to motorised vehicles", when the road ahead was open and led to both a lane that we could use and the bridleway that we could not.

We also came across a track where the path had been blocked, though vehicles had the right to use it.

As far as the law is concerned the problem is simple. If it was a road once, vehicles have the right to use it, even though when it was created the internal combustion engine had not been invented.

In Bucks there are 135 roads called "unclassified unmetalled roads". They appear on the county council's list of streets and do not need to be shown on the county's definitive map, which records rights of way, footpaths and bridleways. However some do appear on the map marked as bridleways. The campaign wants the correct status recorded.

Members of Buckinghamshire County Council's Rights Of Way Committee will have to make the decisions. County footpath officer Ian Burgess warned councillors that If the lanes were historically used by carts and horses, they could now be used by vehicles with engines and if they unjustly refused a classification, there could be a costly public inquiry.



Trail riders come across various different attempts to keep them off public land

But most tracks are footpaths. Browse says there are 100,000 miles of public rights of way in the UK, all of which walkers can use. About 20 per cent of the rights of way are bridleways and only about four per cent of rights of way are open to vehicles.

In Bucks, if the 20 claims put forward are agreed, there will be 53 rights of way where vehicles can be used, from a total of 4,836.

I also met John, a motorcyclist and member of the Trail Riders Federation, who agreed there had been complaints about motorbikes on the Ridgeway but said the bikers who were using it as a race track were probably illegal scramblers.

"If you are a member of the Trail Riders Fellowship you are only going at 10 to 15 mph. The fellowship are ramblers on wheels. But we don't go out in large groups."

Both men said they didn't want special tracks created for them to ride, any more than walkers would want to trek round and round a circuit.

Julian has already talked to the Chilterns Conference, is meeting Margaret Freeman this week and talking to the council's environmental committee later this month.

"We don't want to cause trouble. We are talking about a sensible way forward that doesn't cause problems. But we are sticking to our guns."

"People are getting themselves worked up over something that is a non-event. We think the countryside is big enough for everyone. There should be more tolerance from others."

Lanes up for change

AMONG the applications for lanes to be reclassified as BOATS is the bridleway through Angling Spring Wood in Great Missenden, Mapridge Lane Great Missenden and three paths in Little Missenden; Toby's Lane, Featherbed Lane and Kingstreet Lane.

There are applications for Bottom Lane, Trapps Lane and Bunns Lane in Chesham, and in Latimer, Ashley Green, Cholesbury cum St Leonards, Great Kimble and Ellesborough.

Missenden county councillor Mike Colston said the routes might have been used by vehicles in the 1930s. "But vehicles now are very different from what they were then."

"The Countryside Act was the Government saying 'we want to encourage people to use the countryside'. I don't think they envisaged that the result would be to open the countryside to the road lobbyists."

1:03pm Friday 14th November 2003