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Equestrian Access

The aim of this Information Sheet is to convey the general principles relating to equestrian access.

Introduction

Many people involved in the design and management of outdoor access feel they lack the required knowledge or confidence to deal adequately with equestrian access.

Riders are no different to walkers and cyclists. They vary considerably in their interests, needs and preferences. As with other users, the access provider should aim to provide a variety of routes, surfaces and experiences, and to take into account the needs, aspirations and constraints of all users.

There is no substitute for first-hand experience – by far the best way of appreciating the needs of horses and riders is to try for yourself from the saddle. Local riding schools, horse access groups or BHS volunteers will usually arrange for access providers to get on a horse and experience for themselves the thrills and frustrations of equestrian access. Remember that local riders and horse-owners will often be willing to help plan and implement routes.

Understanding horses, riders and their needs

The average weight of a horse is 500kg, and average size of a horse's hoof varies from 110mm to 250mm diameter. Depending on pace, only two hooves may be in ground contact simultaneously, hence a considerable weight is concentrated on a very small area. Because of this, one of the greatest risks for horses is boggy ground where they may get stuck and holes in which they may strain or break a leg. Either can have fatal consequences.

Minimum height of a mounted rider is 2.55m above ground level. Overhanging branches and any other obstructions should be cleared to a minimum of 3m (preferably 3.7m) on all riding routes.

Horses require a minimum 2.9m diameter turning space. It is particularly important to 'design in' this space by the sides of gates. At gated junctions between paths and vehicular roads, always ensure the gate is set well back to give sufficient manoeuvring space away from the carriageway.

Adequate turning space and safe loading/unloading areas are essential where parking is provided

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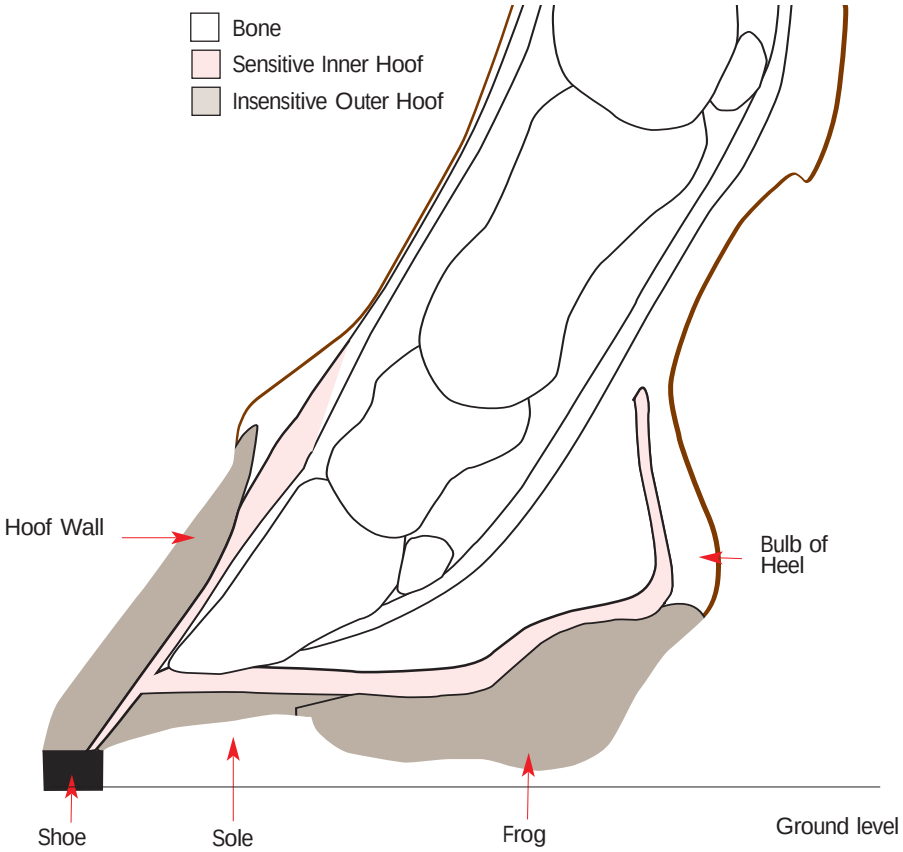
Paths from a horse's perspective

for horse boxes/trailers.
A simple knowledge of the anatomy of the horse's feet and legs provides an insight into the implications of path surfacing. The horse's foot comprises an insensitive outer layer of horny tissue, which surrounds and

Structure of the horse's hoof

Cross section through hoof showing sensitive and insensitive areas



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Paths from a horse's perspective cont.

protects sensitive inner structures.
The unshod surface of the hoof comprises the sole, the hoof wall, and the central "frog", which helps absorb concussion and pump blood through the hoof.
The sole is derived from the very sensitive membrane that covers the pedal bone, and although it may appear hard, it is in fact relatively thin and easily bruised.

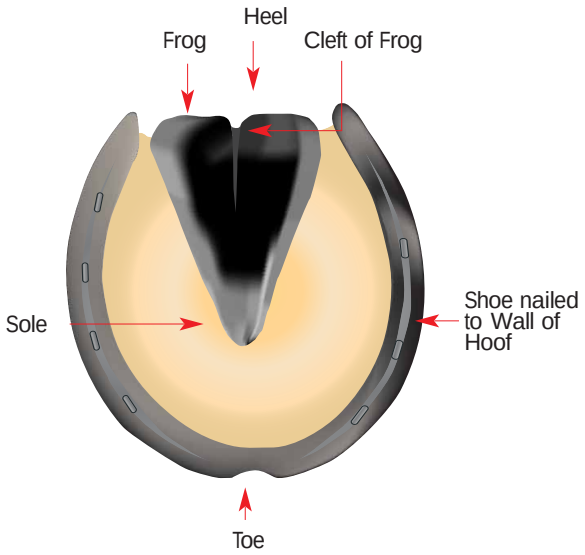
Most horses in regular work are shod with metal shoes, which are designed to protect the hoof wall (the main bearing surface) from excessive wear,

Path surfaces

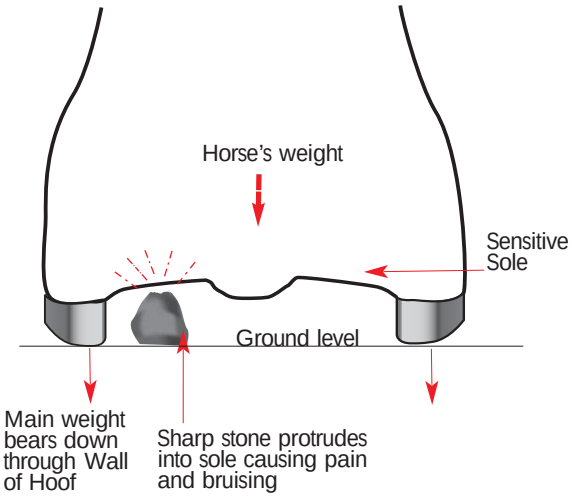
and to evenly spread the load of horse and rider around the hoof wall.
On flat, compacted surfaces, the naturally arched sole will not come into contact with the path. However, on unconsolidated surfaces, sharp stones may
protrude into and bruise the sole, causing lameness. Similarly loose stones, even small pea gravel, may become wedged in the hoof, exerting painful pressure on the underlying tissues each time the horse bears weight on the hoof. Infection and swelling within the hoof resulting from stone punctures can cause serious problems.

The level of concussion to both the hoof and horse's legs increases with the hardness of the surface, and with the speed at which the horse is moving. Trotting or cantering on tarmac or hard tracks will soon lame a horse by placing strain on the legs, potentially resulting in permanent impairment. Grass tracks, which provide ideal fast going for much of the year, can bake sufficiently hard in dry weather to restrict horses to a walk.

Underside of the hoof



Cross section through hoof showing potential pressure and damage from sharp stones



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Paths from a rider's perspective

Depending on time of year and ground conditions, every surface can present problems or opportunities.
The basic functions of path surfacing for horses are the same as those for any other users: to facilitate travel, to protect the site and to contribute to the user's enjoyment while travelling.

Paths should be safe by being relatively non-slip and with a firm base.

Paths should have a comfortable surface for the horse, which avoids the risk of bruising the sole of the hoof.

Paths should offer scope for a range of pace. Some riders may only want to walk (e.g. inexperienced riders or unfit horses). Most riders, however, look for the opportunity to trot, canter and occasionally gallop. Hard surfacing to improve the surface for other users, or to restrict the pace of horses, may prompt riders to look for alternative paths in the vicinity for faster riding.
The most popular types of paths for horse-riders, in descending order of preference, are as follows:

- Short, firm, well-drained turf.
- Vegetated paths on firm base such as grassed over forest roads or disused railway tracks stripped of ballast to expose consolidated ash solum.
- Paths where the natural vegetation is protected or reinforced by some type of surfacing.
- Constructed paths with firm, non-slip surface.

Acknowledgement and Further Information
This Information Sheet is based on a detailed, technical Factsheet covering path construction and surfacing; gates; and bridges, water and road crossings prepared by the British Horse Society in conjunction with the Paths for All Partnership and Scottish Natural Heritage. It is available from the British Horse Society, the Paths for All Partnership's web site or from its office in Alloa.