

The Condition of Unsealed Roads in Slaley Forest

A Report by the Byways & Bridleways Trust

This report is based on observations and photographs taken on Sunday 18 March 2007. Present were: Norman Canham, Alan Kind & Ken Lord. The weather was a mix of sunshine and heavy sleet showers,

following a lengthy period of sustained rainfall. This sketch map indicates the various unsealed roads to the west of Baybridge Road, and uses red marks to identify problem points.



[Alan Kind writes] We arranged to meet at Ladycross at 11:00. When I arrived, I first stopped at Ladycross itself – the junction of Ginglehaugh Road and Baybridge Road. I saw these two unlicensed ‘scramblers’ driving up and down GR. I also saw a quad in the distance. The car belonged to a dog walker.

I then drove over the brow of the hill (southwards) to where KL & NC were parked. As we put our gear on a group of four vehicles came past, heading south: a trail bike with a numberplate, a long-distance-trials-type sidecar outfit – again apparently legal, with two large-capacity ‘race’ quads, one with a number plate, and one without. We later observed the sidecar’s tyre pattern (a narrow rib) on the worst part of GR, so it is reasonable to believe that this group came up GR from the west.



We walked west along the 'forest road' section of GR. We met a 4x4 coming towards us, apparently out of the forest's central area – i.e. not the bad section of GR – and this was being driven by a boy clearly well under licence age.



We next arrived at the point on GR where the well-made forest road kicks left (south-west) and GR itself continues, hemmed-in by trees. This is the start of the stretch marked 'A' on the sketch map.

By way of history, all three walkers in this survey have known GR since at least 1979, and have used it many times on foot, mountain bike, and trail bike (motorcycle). In general it has always been usable, with patches getting a bit boggy after prolonged rain, but these recover in drier weather. It was once badly gouged by logging traffic (8-10 years ago?) and it is now, and always has been, very deprived of 'sun and wind' by the stands (almost a canopy) of tall pines, and there is a lot of self-seed and surface vegetation. In general, the passage of motor cycles kept an adequate narrow track available for all other users. 4x4 vehicles were never observed, but may have been users.



The current condition is very bad for most of the downhill (going west) stretch, as far as the junction with The Shire Road. It is clear from the wheel marks that 4x4 vehicles have had a major impact on the 'clear' central strip, with motor cycles going ever-wider in an attempt to get around. There are also places where it is clear that motor cycles are going into the central forest. The tracks suggest that this is not in seeking a 'bypass', but in using the forest as a riding area.

As of 18 March 2007, the condition of stretch 'A' is appalling. It is difficult to walk, and effectively impassable for pedal cycles, horses, and motors with 'reasonable' tyres. Years of experience suggests that it will dry out, but without some work would remain rutted.

Past investigations suggest that this stretch has been roughly metalled (stoned) at some time, but that there is centuries of detritus on the top now.





We turned north off Ginglehaugh Road, on to The Shire Road. The condition of this is excellent – witnessed by this carload of walkers, which had driven down half a mile or so from the junction with the blacktopped road to Whitley Chapel. We continued on to the acute ‘Y’ junction with the Low Lead Road, where we turned back towards the west. The condition here is poor due to overgrowth and fallen trees (example in photograph).



Further along the LLR, at stretch ‘B’ on the sketch map, there are two patches of very soft ground with some motorcycle wheel tracks clearly visible. Both areas are where water is streaming across the road. At the first (northerly) place there is a footbridge and a rudimentary ford – clearly this is normally wet to a degree.



At the other place (in the photograph below), quite close to the junction with GR, there is a long wet slough, with water visibly pouring in from the slightly higher wooded area. The hollowway of the track is simply forming a sump for surface drainage.



We next walked back (east) up GR, then turned right (south) along The Shire Road, which hugs the edge of the forest. We kept to the edge of the forest, leaving TSR and continuing along Blanchland Road. We found two wet areas at points 'C' and 'D' on the sketch map. At one, adjacent to a big windblown tree with an exposed root, the water was streaming on to the road (and fell) from inside the forest at a colossal rate. It was running in rivulets into, down, and through the worn track. There were tyre marks clearly visible here, but the ground was a soft bog even where tyres had not passed.



Historically, this stretch has been kept passable for cycles and horses by the passage of (sufficient) trail bikes. There has been the occasional mark, but nothing that does not dry out readily. If this use did not happen, the voracious heather hereabouts would soon choke the road completely.





We next arrived at the field gate at the west edge of stretch 'E' on the sketch map. This is about 30 yards north of where Long Edge Road actually enters the forest from Blanchland Road (GR 944541), but by agreement with Forest Enterprise, this is where the

public has entered the forest, until the line of LER is reinstated and made usable. There is a footpath running straight ahead from the camera (on the gate top), and plainly logging operations have adversely impacted this.



Where Long Edge Road approaches Baybridge Road, FE has put in a new length of causewayed road, leading to a (locked) gate on to the fell at around GR 953546. This looks to be intended to provide the proper alignment of LER, which leaves the forest for a short distance, before dog-leg crossing Baybridge Road. This gate appears to be in the wrong place – too far east.



Conclusions.

The bad stretch 'A' on Ginglehaugh Road is a real mess. On 15 March, the Byways and Bridleways Trust wrote to Northumberland County Council suggesting that a temporary traffic regulation order should be used straight away, and that this be followed-up by considered and appropriate management. On 29 March, NCC issued a consultation on the use of 'voluntary restraint'.

Further onsite observations indicate continued 4x4 use of stretch 'A', which remains (as at 16 April) in very poor condition, plus a considerable amount of 'illegal' (i.e. unregistered) motorcycling, on and off the unclassified roads and BOATs. Meanwhile, two weeks of dry weather has started to ameliorate the boggy patches elsewhere.

This is a multi-faceted issue. The level of motor use and its impact seems to have been largely sustainable for upward of 28 years (to personal knowledge). It is demonstrably the impact of 4x4s on stretch 'A', after prolonged rain, which has led to the current state. Meanwhile the nuisance of illegal motorcycling continues, with no visible, or reported police presence whatsoever. Contrast this to the response of the police when complaints are made about motor cycles using rights of way on the adjacent shooting moors – then the response is rapid and firm. There should be a police crackdown on the illegal driving.

Stretch 'A' on Ginglehaugh Road needs some basic drainage work, and proper exposure to sun and wind. It might also need a permanent management regime limiting some types of use after wet weather (as, for example, the 'reactive TRO' on Ermine Street, Goose Green, Hertfordshire). With the nature of the illegal use in the area, voluntary restraint alone will not deliver.

This translates to:

1. Put a temporary traffic regulation order on the bad part of Ginglehaugh Road immediately.
2. Northumberland County Council should work with Northumbria Police to crack down on the continuing and very visible level of illegal motorcycling in Slaley Forest – but the primary responsibility here rests with the police.
3. Initiate a 'Forest-wide Management Plan' involving all the main parties. This Plan to concentrate on restoring a sustainable balance of use by basic repair (sun & wind, drainage, and a bit of selective fill) coupled with appropriate regulation where necessary
4. Continue monitoring and adapt the policies adopted accordingly.

Alan Kind, 21 April 2007.