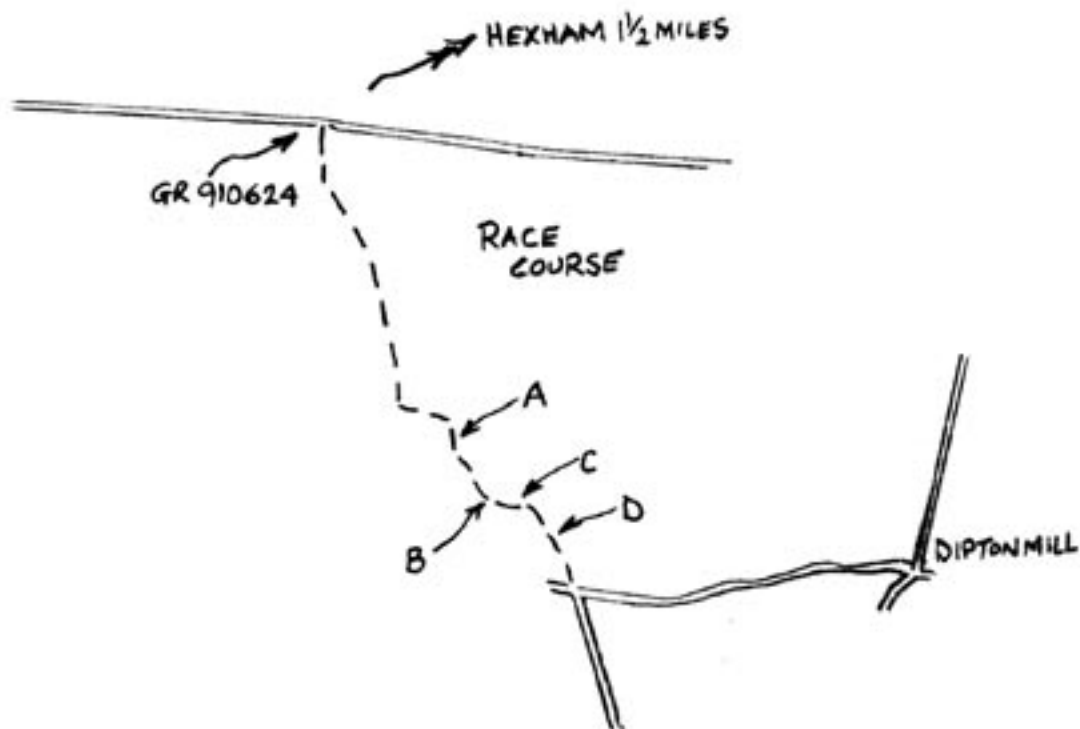


The Condition of 'The Racecourse Road'

A Report by the Byways & Bridleways Trust

'The Racecourse Road' is the name given by users to the through-route formed by Bridleway 12, Hexham Town, and Footpath 13, Hexhamshire Low Quarter. This report is based on observations and photographs taken on Friday 20 April 2007. Present were: Norman

Canham, Ken Canham, Andy Staley & Alan Kind. The weather was dry and bright, following a fortnight of dry weather. This sketch map indicates the route and identifies particular points referred to in the text.



Three of the four people engaged in this survey have known and used The Racecourse Road on foot, and with pedal cycles and motorcycles, for about 27 years, and the other for much of that time. In that time the route has also been used by horse riders and walkers, although it is not a particularly busy road, probably due to its location and lack of links. In that time, the condition of the route has remained largely the same: north of point 'B' (the ford) it is a well-defined track, and to the south it is an inclosed lane.

The condition has changed significantly in one stretch, marked as point 'A'. This is a steep descent (going southwards) and has been eroded by water-flow into a deep and narrow holloway for around 100 yards. This is not caused by vehicles – there were no marks, or tracks, and the relatively regular profile of the holloway indicates the smoothing effect of water. This erosion is now significantly worse than five or ten years ago. There is no sign of repairs, nor of any works to divert flooding surface water.

The photograph to the right is looking uphill (northwards) at point 'A'.



The photograph to the right is above point 'A', looking downhill (south). There were the marks of one horse on the climb. Pedal cycles could descend this (it would take a very fit and skilled cyclist to climb it) but could not meet and pass walkers or riders without someone climbing out of the holloway on to the banks.



The photograph below is part of the zig-zag at the foot of section 'A'. The route here is bedrock, and apart from the smoothing of centuries of traffic, there is no sign at all of user impact.



Top right: The ford at point 'B', looking south. This is a properly engineered vehicular ford, so presumably the traffic using it came from, or continued to, the north? The footbridge also suggests significant pedestrian use of the road at some time. The bridge handrail is badly loose and this could result in serious injury.



Centre right: Climbing up the steep bank at point 'C', southwards. This section is also at least part bed-rock. It needs a small amount of remedial work, and some attention to drainage.



Bottom right: Walking southwards at point 'D'. This section is a classic walled, grass-on-stone lane. It can plainly carry its traffic without undue impact.



Conclusions.

Northumberland County Council 'is minded to make a permanent traffic regulation order' on The Racecourse Road. This is, it says, because:

Increased use by trail bikes would increase the danger to other persons or traffic using the route within the woodland area.

Byway status will result in a significant increase in use by trail bikes which will impact negatively on the character of the way which is especially suitable for people on horseback and on foot.

Byway status and consequent increased use will have a negative impact on the amenities of the woodland area.

The route could be damaged by increased use by trail bikes.

Comments:

The downhill section in the woods is badly eroded by passage of surface water, not by the trail bikes (and other traffic) that already use the road. This section is already out of repair for non-motor traffic. The need here is for some diversionary drainage work and refill. These works would obviate most of any perceived future 'dangers'.

Byway status has not led to increased use on other routes in Northumberland. Even in nearby Slaley Forest (subject of another recent BBT report) the problems are essentially illegal motorcycling (i.e. people who are not lawful byway users, and/or who are driving all through the forest area) and 4x4 use in and after prolonged wet weather. Legal trail bike use has not noticeably changed. The same is true of other byways in the Tyne Valley area.

Taken to its logical extreme, this argument can be applied to every road and its environs. The occasional trail bike passing along this route is not exactly going to bring chaos and destruction to the many acres of woodland.

Roads do get worn by users. Roads also get worn by neglect and natural forces. There is also the counter-balance that a sustainable quantity of vehicular traffic keeps a route more passable for other users. This is hardly a rational argument to apply a permanent and total TRO on all motor vehicular traffic.

Finding a balanced solution:

This route is, for most of its length, no better or worse than most other unsealed ancient highways in the area. It has one stretch (point 'A' on the map) that has become badly water-eroded to the point where it constrains all traffic into the holloway. This must be repaired anyway – BOAT status or no – and, once done, use of the route by motor cycles is not likely to be excessive, nor inherently dangerous to other users. The Trust exhorts Northumberland County Council to engage all interested parties to draft a simple management plan to effect repairs and consider what levels of traffic management and regulation need to be applied in order to achieve sustainable use of the route by as many types of reasonable user as circumstances allow.