

An Historic Route in old Westmorland

Ride it only with great care and never in wet conditions.

History

In the upper valley of the river Lune there remains part of a pre-turnpike (pre-1761) direct route linking the market town of Kirkby Stephen and the mineral deposits of adjacent Stainmore with Orton village¹. Orton was first granted a market charter in the reign of Edward I and licensed for fairs by Oliver Cromwell in 1658. The route in question followed, as far as possible, higher ridge ground above the valley floor, and avoiding passing through intervening villages where possible.

Avoidance of villages by through-routes was usual in the times when parishes were responsible for road maintenance in order that wear and tear on roads in villages was minimised and through-routes were 'out of sight and out of mind'. 'Local' roads crossed the valley to individual settlements using bridges which quarter sessions records indicate to be regularly out of repair and consequently best avoided where possible.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries up to 50% of Westmorland County's budget was spent on bridge repairs. At a time in history when parishes were responsible for the upkeep of the roads (and were regularly not very good at it) it was important that roads did not cross the territory of more parishes than was necessary. The more parishes that a road crossed the greater the chance that obstacles or poor road conditions would be met with.

Historians record the importance of wool to Kirkby Stephen and minerals to Stainmore in the hinterland of Kirkby Stephen. This route was important for the transport of these goods to the seaports of West Cumberland. In the 16th – 19th centuries transport of goods, especially heavy minerals, was mainly by water due to the difficulties encountered on many of the roads that were in bad condition and ill-maintained.

Transport problems in the area began to be addressed in the mid 18th century when Lord Lonsdale (major landowner in the region) began drafting plans for a turnpike which would eventually in 1761 improve communications in the upper Lune Valley of Westmorland, and aid the transport of his goods to his ports on the west coast of Cumberland. Sketch plans from 1750 showing initial proposals for a turnpike to improve the existing road are in the Lowther Manuscripts deposited in Carlisle Records Office. The Jefferies map of 1771 shows a turnpike through the upper Lune valley. The development of a road from first idea, through survey to completion was much swifter in the late 18th century than it is today.

Geology

This historic route crosses exposed limestone heath moorland degrading to grassy heath and mat-grass. Approximately one-third of the route crosses a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and the remaining two thirds of the route mark the boundary of the SSSI. Next to the route is Sunbiggin Tarn which is considered unique in northern England due to its diverse range of scarce and common waders and

¹ The seven routes that converge on Orton show clearly that it was once of place of some importance: Dr Paul Hindle, *Roads and Trackways of the Lake District* (1984)

wildfowl. Consequently, the area is very vulnerable to damage by aggressive or careless use of motorcycles or 4x4s.

After consultation with user and local interests during 2005, English Nature and Cumbria County Council's (CCC) highways and ecological staff a proposal was drawn up to erect a predominantly wooden platform or deck, measuring approximately 7 metres by 3 metres, over the site of the original ford (at Mereslack). The Mereslack platform was erected in early February 2006.

A full environmental impact assessment (EIA) advised that:

- there would be instant loss of mat-grass and hard rush vegetation where the supporting struts of the new structure were inserted into the ground.
- despite the fact that the platform would be raised 0.3 metres off the ground it would create a large degree of shadowing also resulting loss of vegetation. However, the authors anticipated that due to the type of vegetation that may be lost and the relatively small total surface area, the final long-term adverse impact on the flora and associated insects would be minimal.
- the authors concluded that the minor loss of vegetation and habitat caused by the platform would be at least compensated for by the disturbance prevented by users being discouraged from diverting from the route into the SSSI.

In parallel with this research, and in anticipation of possible changes in patterns of use that may require further management, CCC liaised with local landowners and tenants to implement a volunteer-conducted programme of fixed-point photography along the length of the route. The quarterly photographic record commenced almost a year prior to the installation of the platform and will continue into the future.

Sensitivity

This is a wetland area, and despite the wooden deck protecting the wettest part of the route, many sections are extremely sensitive to use during and after wet weather. Even a carefully ridden motorcycle will seriously harm in such conditions and due to the narrowness of sections the route should not be attempted by modern 4x4 vehicles. Studies have shown that carelessly removed vegetation and turf in this exposed area takes over two years to regenerate ... if it is not disturbed again.

Always take great care, and if at all in doubt please take the decision to not use the route. The accompanying photo shows the considerable impact of use in wet conditions even when trying hard to tread lightly.

The route was finally confirmed Byway Open To All Traffic Status in December 2004, and did not have a Traffic Restriction Order applied on the basis that riders and drivers could be trusted to exercise their rights in an environmentally sustainable way; so if you use, but do not abuse.





So far Cumbria County Council has adopted an open-minded attitude towards trail riding in the county. The Lake District National Park Authority, in association with local trail bike and 4x4 users, took a lead in managing the activity in the most sensitive areas of the county. However, sensitive Cumbria does not stop at the national park boundary and it has to be expected that any inappropriate over-spill activity in the wider Cumbria will also be 'managed' by others if we cannot effectively manage the impact of our activity ourselves. The Cumbria Local Access Forum has a Mechanically Propelled Vehicles working group.

It's clear that in mid-November 2007, four or six bikes that crossed this route around that time were ridden with quite a lot of care. They stayed on the route (mainly) and on the grass-covered stretches there is little or no sign of heavy throttle use or stripped turf; though the bikes with motocross tyres moved more turf than those on trials tyres. However, on Friday 16th and Saturday 17th November there was very heavy rain in the area, the ground was waterlogged, and there were large areas of standing water. The trail-route crosses a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), mainly related to wading and water bird species; so you can tell that it's a wet area at the best of times. In these conditions careful riding across this site was not enough. Perhaps riders should have decided to not ride this route at all.

If we do not regulate ourselves in such obviously damaging conditions, then others will.

In the days when these roads were used for purposes other than recreation; let's say in 1800, users with horses and carts depended on them for day to day use and the commerce that took place at that time. In wet weather they did not use them at all. Of if they did, they did what they could to repair the impact they had on them ... or the chances are they did not get through the next week. In wet weather we do not need to use these sensitive wet routes either. This route cuts the corner between two equally pleasant (in some aspects more pleasant) single-track tarmac roads. The track is a fine ride in good weather, but should not be ridden by anyone with a care for old roads in the wet conditions of this weekend.

A volunteer walked this track in mid-November who took these pictures. Some of the wheel ruts made just a few hours earlier were running in water and being eroded even though the bikes were long gone. In some places instead of water running down the run-off drains it had been diverted onto the track by the wheel ruts. The old-guys in 1800 with the horses and carts would have leaped off the cart, shovel in hand, to ensure that run-off drain were still clear after their wheels had passed by.

This old road has a fine history. If you know it then I guess you will take care of it and do not ride it in inappropriate conditions. If you do not know the history of it, and do not appreciate the wildlife surrounding it, then maybe you do not realise the care it needs.

But please have a care, or this will be one more route that no one will be able to ride at any time .