

Case Study: Managing Equestrian Access on the Leys Estate, Banchory

Access Issue/s

Positively influencing equestrian access users

Key Facts

Landowner: Leys Estate

Location: Banchory, Aberdeenshire

Main People Involved: Thys Simpson, Countryside Ranger, Leys Estate and Ailsa McIntosh, Livery Yard Proprietor and tenant of the Leys Estate



Inspiration

1. Dealing with equestrian pressure
2. To assist one tenant (with a view to helping others in future) with the viability of her business venture which relies on access rights for equestrians, while ensuring that other tenants, or estate forestry and game activities, are not disadvantaged.

Achievements

Several specialised equestrian routes

Improved communication; better understanding of each others needs; good neighbour relations.

Leys Estate comprises approx.3000 hectares to the east side of Banchory in Aberdeenshire. Most of the estate's landholding is let to farming tenants and other rural businesses. Some commercial and amenity forestry and some game interests (some let) including fishing.

Ailsa McIntosh tenants a small livery yard from the Estate. As with most livery businesses, the land Ailsa rents, while being adequate to keep the horses she has, is not extensive enough to provide riders with an interesting and diverse

range of exercise routes. Neighbouring farmers were reluctant to encourage horse riding on their land fearing gates might be left open, ground would be churned up or the riders would go through crops or into livestock fields at inappropriate times of the year. Ailsa's clients were therefore either restricted to her land or needed to use relatively busy and fast rural roads to exercise their horses.

Good riding routes will often be a key attraction when horse owners are deciding where to keep their horses. Riding on busy roads has safety concerns, is not a particularly pleasant experience for horse or rider and also limits the amount and type of exercise a horse receives.

Thys Simpson, Countryside Ranger with Leys Estate started to work with Ailsa in June 2003 to see if anything could be done to improve the riding opportunities for her clients and thus help keep Ailsa's business attractive to existing and new clients. The Estate was prepared to make some investment to ensure that a good tenant's business succeeded and they were therefore retained whilst trying to minimise impact on other estate activities at the same time.

The first steps involved:-

- Identifying potentially suitable initial routes starting and ending at the livery where possible
- Agreeing some simple and sensible "rules" which the riders would be asked to abide by
- Agreeing that the riders would help with some of the route maintenance tasks

The "rules" which riders are asked to follow:-

- Wear reflectors to aid visibility
- Make a point of acknowledging the farmer/estate worker when you see him/her.
- Spread the pressure across the routes available

The Estate were prepared to do some initial route creation work which involved cutting back some low branches and vegetation where needed, clearing windfall, pegging out the route until it became established by use, draining some particularly wet patches of ground and removing some trees from the edge of a woodland strip to allow the track to dry up and more light to come in. The Estate also agreed that they would fit "trombone" handles to the gates which the riders would encounter on the routes. Fitting the trombone handles meant that the riders could open and close the gates without needing to dismount from their horses, adding an additional level of attraction to the routes.

A proposal on the basis of the above was discussed and agreed with the tenants involved and the initial routes were in place by September 2003.

The routes are now well established through regular use, they work well without conflict occurring and are largely self-maintaining. The Estate carries out a route walk every 6 months and does some maintenance work approximately once a year when required; this would extend to removing a fallen tree and so on. As initially agreed the riders themselves help with smaller maintenance tasks such as litter picking and removing stones and fallen branches.

The routes are not signposted so there is no suggestion that the routes are only for use by horse riders or that the riders are restricted to these routes. The routes are "learned" by new riders by tagging along with the livery owner or fellow livery tenant. The Estate and tenant farmer recognise that since 2005 the riders' have access rights under Part 1 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 and this means that they cannot impose such a restriction. However, by making the routes particularly attractive to the riders (drying up wetter areas, providing a range of routes of varying length, providing easily managed gates and so on) and by getting the riders to invest some of their time in the maintenance of the routes, they have ensured that they will be most likely places for the riders to use.

Thys Simpson points out that the biggest investment for the Estate in the project was his time spent initially communicating with the parties involved. Putting effort in at the beginning has paid dividends with an arrangement that is now largely self-sustaining.

An additional route was added in 2006 and another tenant offering livery joined the Estate in 2008. In October 2009 a route linking the second tenant to the first was completed.

The approach taken by Leys Estate is particularly suitable for managing equestrian access, since horseriders do the bulk of their riding locally and will often keep their horses together at a local livery yard or yards. It is therefore much easier to communicate with horse riders as a collective group than is the case with some other types of access-takers. Leys Estate was prepared to invest some time and money in route creation for the longer-term benefits to them of sustaining one of their tenancies. It will not always be the case that a landowner who is trying to successfully manage equestrian access will have the same incentive to invest in access routes. Nevertheless if funding can be found where required or riders are prepared to invest some of their time in route creation and maintenance, the approach adopted by Leys Estate would work well for others.