



**Malvern Hills Trust**

## **Wild Trails on the Malvern Hills**



**A report on the 'off-piste' cycling trails of the Northern and Central Hills.  
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## About this report

This report has been produced as part of the Malverns by Mountain Bike campaign to help mountain bikers and cyclists on the Hills and Commons make the right choices to help look after this special landscape.

A survey of wild trails on the Malvern Hills was undertaken by a student from Natural England. The reports of trails were compiled, mapped and this report was put together by MHT staff.

With hundreds of thousands of visitors to the Malvern Hills each year, the Trust undertakes various campaigns relating to different recreational users e.g. dog walking, cycling, horse riding, to help conserve the landscape both now and in the future.

## Introduction to cycling access

Cycling/mountain biking on the Malvern Hills is a popular visitor activity and numbers of visitors undertaking this activity have increased year on year.

### Cycling access

Cycling is welcome on the bridleways of the Malvern Hills. This access is granted under the standard [Public Rights of Way Act](#) and in the Malvern Hills Trust (MHT) byelaws.

The Trust also has the power to grant cycle access on paths and as part of the Malverns by Mountain Bike campaign, permissive cycling access has been granted on a number of footpaths. More information can be found [here](#).

Maps of the bridleways and permissive paths on the Malvern Hills and Commons are available from the following places:

Malvern Hills Trust map and guide – [online and print](#)

Malvern Hills Trust information Boards – on location

Worcestershire County Council countryside access map – [online](#)

Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 190 – [online and print](#)

### Malverns by Mountain Bike

Since 2016, the Malvern Hills Trust have been working on a [Malverns by Mountain Bike](#) campaign to encourage responsible cycling on the Hills and Commons. The focus of this project has been to provide information for cycling visitors on where to cycle as well as positive promotion of the activity. The project also raises awareness about the importance of protecting the landscape and the damage that can be caused by unlawful cycling activities, such as the creation of wild trails.

### Cycling Code

To protect the Malvern Hills landscape and to encourage the shared use of this landscape for all visitors MHT asks those cycling on the Hills and Commons to abide by the following Code of Conduct:

- Please leave no trace or trail. Leave things as you find them, and please take litter home with you.
- Plan your route so that you avoid riding tracks where cycling is not permitted. The Malvern Hills are a shared landscape with many types of users, please help to make them a place that everyone can enjoy.
- Please help us prevent new tracks from forming by not cutting through vegetation or travelling over grassy areas. Creating new tracks leads to a number of issues including rain water channelling which further damages important archaeology, protected habitats and established paths further down slope.
- Please don't construct jumps. Digging or moving earth can have a detrimental effect on the wildlife of the area. As the majority of the Hills and Commons are designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, these activities are an offence for which you could be prosecuted.

- Please be mindful of livestock and give animals chance to move out of the way. Much of the Hills are registered Common Land and you should expect to see livestock anywhere at any time.
- Always give way to horse riders, walkers and runners who are likely to be travelling at a slower speed than you. Avoid surprising other visitors to the Hills by calling out or use a bell, but give them time to gather up small children or dogs.
- Be particularly careful at junctions and blind bends where other visitors may be out of sight.

Similar [codes of conduct](#) exist for other recreation activities to help provide visitors information on how to enjoy the Hills and Commons whilst reducing their impact.

## **Wild Trails**

Wild trails are classified as those that do not follow bridleways or footpaths but are a newly created trails by mountain bikers. Wild trails can be created through frequent use by riders or 'built' by purposefully excavating routes, removing trees or by creating jumps and other features.

They were identified as an issue by staff and visitors to the Hills during the Malverns by Mountain Bike campaign.

By their nature, wild trails are illegal routes and are a breach of MHT byelaws as cycling is only permitted on bridleways and permissive paths but they also can cause damage to the sensitive and special Malvern Hills landscape and increase the risks of injury to other visitors.

The issues caused by wild trails and the method by which MHT will close the trails have been described in this report.



## Problem of 'wild trails'

### Damage to SSSI

Much of the main Malvern Hills are designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) by Natural England for their nationally important habitats, species and geology. One of the most sensitive features of the SSSI is the short acid grassland on the upper slopes of the Hills.

As wild trails become established the frequent use of the trail erodes away the grassland (designated feature) and damages it. Causing damage to a SSSI is a criminal offence.

Natural England will take [enforcement action](#) on individuals or land managers who:

- intentionally or recklessly damage the SSSI
- destroy any of the features of special interest
- disturb wildlife for which the site was notified
- carry out listed operations without consent

The acid grassland can take a long time to recover following disturbance or damage due to the nature of the species present.



Cycling damage to acid grassland habitat on a wild trail. Malvern Hills.

### Damage to archaeology

There are three Scheduled Monuments on the Malvern Hills – British Camp, Shire Ditch, and the Tumuli at Pinnacle Hill.

Listed as nationally important archaeological sites by Historic England, damage wild trails can cause irreversible damage to these historical features. This damage through erosion can be classed as a [Heritage Crime](#).

## Damage to MHT land and breach of byelaws

Frequent use of routes can lead to erosion which causes damage to MHT land. In addition, there are instances with trees have been cut to clear routes or to provide material to construct jumps and edging for corners. Earthworks have also been undertaken to create jumps, a breach of MHT byelaws

*2a) No unauthorised person shall remove or displace any turf, stone gravel, sand, clay, geological samples or other substances on or from the Hills or cut remove or displace or wilfully injure any tree, turf, gorse, heather, timber, shrub or brushwood growing thereon, or dig in or upon the Hills, or use or operate a metal or mineral detector or any device for locating objects below ground level.*



Trees cut to create cycling jumps on a wild trail. Malvern Hills.



## Damage to existing paths

Where wild trails cross exiting paths (both rights of way and desire lines made by walkers who have a right of access) damage can be caused by the washing out of material down the gully formed by cycling access. This often results in a fan of material washing out onto the path, creating an uneven and narrow section of useable path.

Where a wild trail leaves a path and heads straight down the hillside, this can cause the erosion of downslope edge of the path which narrows width of the existing path for all users.

In some cases, illegal wild trails are damaging the bridleways and permissive cycle paths thus reducing opportunities for legitimate cycling access.



Path damage caused by wild trails to legitimate paths. Left – path cut away at the entrance to a trail. Right – fanned material at trail exit. Malvern Hills.



## Water erosion

Once a trail has become more established this often results in a deep gully and a funnel for water. In poor weather rainwater will take this route which can further exacerbate the erosion of SSSI features, archaeology or paths.

## Livestock

The Malvern Hills and Commons are grazed by cattle and sheep to conserve the open habitats. They are essential in conserving the protected archaeology and nationally important open habitats.

To concentrate the grazing on the Hills, the livestock are held within electric fenced enclosures which rotate around the landscape. Where the electric fenced compartments meet legitimate paths, gates are provided for visitors to allow continued access. It is the nature of wild trails that they do not follow the existing path network so established routes may be intersected by electric fencing. If this is broken by cyclists to facilitate illegal access, sheep and cattle can escape and may be endangered by wandering towards roads. This result in additional time having to be spent by graziers repairing the fencing.



Wild trail crossing an electric fence. Grazier has made fence as visible as possible to stop people cycling through it. Malvern Hills.



## Safety of riders

MHT has a duty of care to all visitors. This includes those that might be carrying out activities in contravention of the byelaws or the Malvern Hills Acts. Due to the nature of wild trails, they are most often organically created and have not been properly assessed from a risk or safety perspective.

Dangers that riders may experience by using wild trails includes:

- Steep and uneven terrain
- Built features (jumps, cambers, edges) which are not formally built/engineered or monitored
- Unsuitable entry/exit points on the trails e.g. paths / road where collisions with other visitors may occur.
- Unexpectedly encountering land management works by staff or contractors e.g. tree felling
- Collision with temporary electric livestock fencing



Steep exit to a trail opposite the jacket onto a path immediately above the highway. Malvern Hills

## Safety of other visitors

With over 1 million visits per year, the Malvern Hills are an extremely popular and busy landscape.

In any environment where there are a large number of users undertaking a variety of activities, the likelihood of injury increases e.g. mountain bikers travel at higher speeds than walkers which can increase the severity of injury to the slower party.

Wild trails often begin and end on permitted, formal paths and may also cross paths where other visitors travel. At these points there is an increased risk of a

collision between cyclists using the wild trails, and walkers, cyclists and horse riders that may be using these legitimate paths.

The majority of wild trails on the Malvern Hills are on steep slopes and riders are likely to be travelling at higher speeds, making it more difficult to stop and increasing the chances of more serious injuries to walkers should a collision occur. Wild trails are often complex in nature with blind bends which makes it difficult for riders to see other visitors ahead of them.

Walkers and horse riders have a right of access on land under the jurisdiction of the Trust. Other users may be unaware that they're crossing or walking near to a wild trail and are not expecting cyclists off the legitimate cycling paths. This lack of expectation of meeting other visitors could increase the chance of injury as visitors are not prepared to react.



Steep trail exit onto a legitimate path. Malvern Hills.



## Assessing wild trails

MHT's duty to protect and conserve the important features of the Hills and Commons and a duty of care to protect visitors means that, in the majority of circumstances, wild trails should be closed.

To determine whether a wild trail should be closed or not, MHT uses an established assessment method from the [Forestry Commission](#).

The Forestry Commission is an organisation which manages land in a similar way to MHT which makes it a good comparison and basis for MHT's management of wild trails.

### Process

Using the guidance from the Forestry Commission the following process is used for assessing and closing wild trails:

**Identify** – Locate and record wild trails on the Hills. This can be carried out by MHT staff either through formal site visits to locate routes or by recording those identified on visits for other purposes. The wild trails included in this report were undertaken by a student from Natural England as part of a specific project.

Any wild trails reported by members of the public will be visited by a member of staff. A report of the route will be made (including location, length, built features, damage to important features, safety issues).

**Prioritise** – Identify high priority routes using the Forestry Commission's flow chart (image 1 below) and the route reports. Those trails of high priority are those in need of more urgent closure. For example, high priority routes may be recorded as one of the following:

- Causing significant damage to Site of Special Scientific Interest designated features (e.g. acid grassland)
- Causing damage to irreplaceable and nationally important archaeology (e.g. British Camp)
- In a location where the route endangers mountain bikers (e.g. trail ending near a road)
- In a location where likelihood of collision/injury to other users (e.g. crosses a busy legitimate path)

**Signpost** – Install notices at the beginning and part way down the trail to alert users to the imminent closure of the trail. The notice period should be no less than 1 week to ensure that riders using the trail are aware that built features and route of trail will be destroyed. This is for the safety of riders so that they are forewarned that the trails no longer exist.



Signposted trail. Malvern Hills.

**Alert clubs** – Local mountain biking clubs and cycling contacts are to be alerted to make them aware of the planned closure. This will help riders recognise the issues relating to wild trails and will allow riders to be alerted that the trails no longer exist, for the safety of riders.

**Close** – Staff will close the wild trail by removing and destroying built features and where appropriate, placing barriers or obstructions at the beginning of the route to discourage access.

**Monitor** – Staff will continue to monitor trails following their closure to ensure that the use of the trails has stopped. If trails are repaired by riders, staff will continue to destroy features and will again signpost routes to reiterate the closure.



## Your management options

### A. Adopt and inspect:

There are four approaches to management that you might take. Note that monitoring over time may highlight a change and any decision may have to be reviewed.

The site should be adopted and monitored as a formal recreation facility in line with guidance in **OGS 42 Managing Recreation**. This would mean you would need to ensure that FC construction standards are met and inspection regimes are at regular intervals (a frequency of every 3 months is suggested). In addition, each visit should be recorded and notes / photographs kept of any actions, maintenance and work completed.

It might be necessary to facilitate the relocation of some wild trail developments to more acceptable sites to minimise continuing wild build activities and management conflicts.

This is likely to be a much bigger and longer-term project and in the meantime, you should implement an interim action plan from one of these options.

### B. Intervene and make safe (then tolerate and monitor or adopt):

The construction of features might need to be challenged if you and / or FC experts feel that standards are not acceptable. Speak to your Recreation lead for details of both District and national colleagues who can help you with this assessment.

### C. Tolerate and monitor:

This option is potentially applicable where other

legitimate users of the public Forest Estate are not at risk from the development of wild trails or desire lines. In this case, riders are generally understood to have accepted the inherent risks of their own activity.

### D. Closure and removal:

In this scenario the risks to both the land manager / owner, riders and general visitors are considered to be too great. Your actions will need to be swift, and you may need line manager approval depending on the level of resources required.

Ensure that you photograph all the features before you remove them and keep them on record for a minimum of six years.

For more information, see our guide to de-commissioning trails / facilities. You will find this guide on the Safety Health and Environment - visitor safety page of the intranet or click **De-commissioning trails** for direct link.

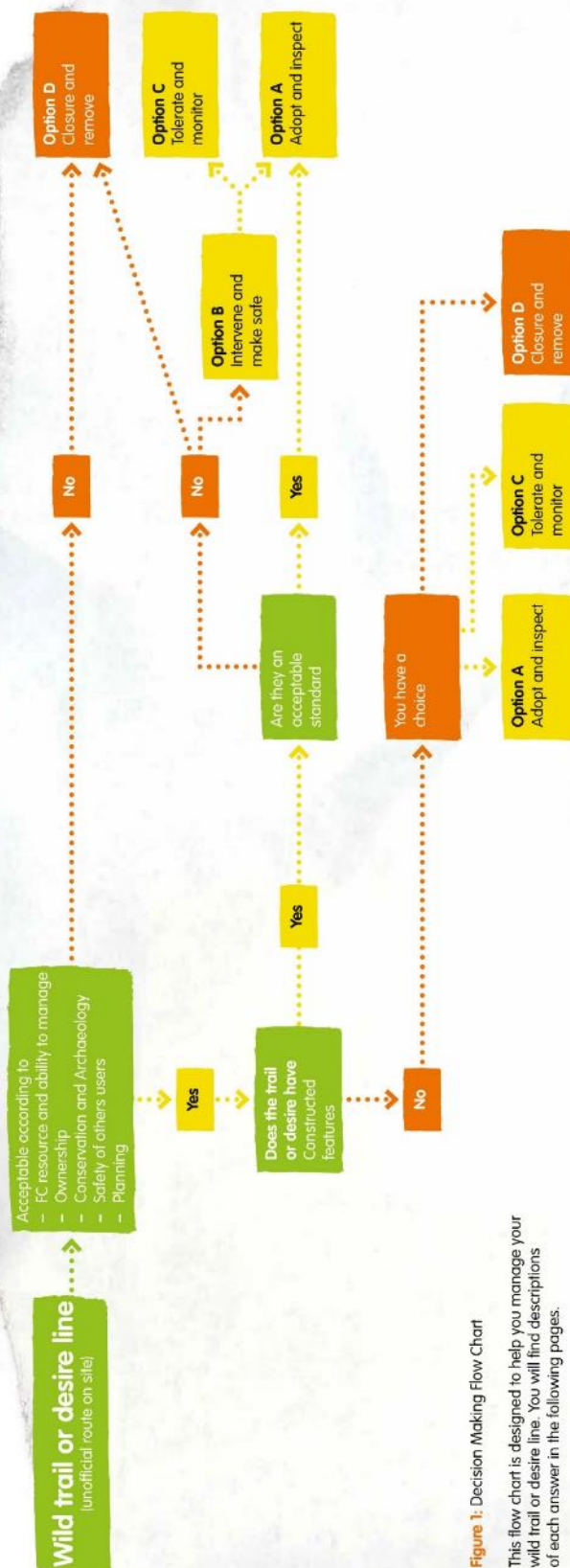


Figure 1: Decision Making Flow Chart

This flow chart is designed to help you manage your wild trail or desire line. You will find descriptions of each answer in the following pages.