

The law and management of public access rights vary widely between the four countries of the United Kingdom. Practical elements of the following advice apply in all of them but the legal requirements in Scotland and Northern Ireland may differ from those in England and Wales.

More advice is available on www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice.

IMPORTANT This guidance is general and does not aim to cover every variation in circumstances. Where it is being relied upon, The Society strongly recommends seeking its advice specific to the site.

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The ability to open and close gates with ease is an important skill for both rider and horse and is highly recommended for riding out (hacking). The training for opening gates will help a horse's responsiveness generally and being a 'good gate opener' is a great credit to their rider. Hacking is a beneficial activity for horse and rider, improving the health and wellbeing of both, as well as providing opportunities for strengthening their bond.

The BHS has a [video](#) showing the recommended method for opening a gate safely using the 'heels-to-hinges' method to operate a gate from horseback

Heels-to-hinges method

The Society's method of opening and negotiating a gate while mounted for which is recommended for greatest safety is commonly called 'heels-to-hinges' because the horse is positioned parallel to the gate and facing away from the gate's hinges. It will usually give riders most control during the manoeuvre and avoid tack being caught by the gate or latch.



The rider approaches the gate's hinges and turns alongside the gate and continues parallel to the gate until the latch is by the horse's shoulder with the horse's head and neck extending beyond the latch (see photo page 1).

Gate opening away from the rider

1. With the horse standing parallel to the gate, heels-to-hinges, the rider should lean over to release the latch and push the gate open far enough to give a safe gap.
2. Back the horse far enough to bring their head into the opening, then turn and ride through the gap.
3. Turn round the open end of the gate to push the gate closed and secure the latch. Depending on the space, it may be possible to do this with the horse's head or heels towards the hinges.

Gate opening towards the rider

1. With the horse standing parallel to the gate, heels-to-hinges, the rider should lean over to release the latch, then move the horse sideways away from the gate while keeping one hand on the gate and drawing it towards the horse.
2. When the opening is wide enough, move forwards and turn round the end of the gate.
3. Once through the gap, the rider may be able to move their hand along the gate towards the hinges, drawing the gate closed then backing to secure the latch, or may need to turn the horse heels-to-hinges parallel to the gate and then move sideways while drawing the gate closed.

With either method, best practice is to always keep a hand on the gate to prevent it closing, or opening wide. If the gate is pushed wide, or taken wide by its weight or the wind, then it takes much longer to ride after it and to close it so animals in a field are more likely to escape or create a hazard at the gateway. The uncontrolled swing could damage the gate and if the gate swings closed, it could hit the horse or rider's leg.

Keeping one hand on the gate while passing through to prevent it closing, or to keep pushing it away to maintain a safe gap, is necessary for many gates, and self-closing gates, some heavily weighted to force fast closing speed, are increasingly common.

Many riders, especially with large horses, cannot keep hold of the gate. In this case, extra care is required, particularly where animals are present, and the rider must be ready to prevent the gate swinging wide or closed. Only push or pull the gate as hard as necessary to create a safe gap, never swing it wide open as it may rebound too fast to avoid.

Self-closing gates

Letting go of the gate to ride through the gap is not safe with gates that close quickly as the closing gap may cause the horse to panic or the horse or rider may be hit by the gate or the post. If the gate closes itself, keep one hand on the gate to hold it open or push it again until the horse is clear. Always check that it has secured before riding away.

Check the closing speed of unfamiliar gates before letting a horse enter the gap, some get faster as they close. A gate closing on a horse is very dangerous. If you cannot reach to hold the gate open, you may be safer to dismount, however, if you are forced to dismount, or the gate's closing speed is hazardous, it should be reported to the council (highway authority) as unacceptable because not every rider will be able to dismount or will have the strength to maintain a safe gap while riding through.

Two-way opening gates

Two-way opening gates give riders a choice of opening the gate towards or away from them. It is commonly assumed that riders will always open a gate away from them given that option, but some riders find that they have more control moving the gate towards them, for example, if a horse tends to rush through a gap opening in front of them.

Where the heels-to-hinges method cannot be used

It may not be possible to use the heels-to-hinges method if there is no space for the horse's head and neck beyond the latch, or if there is not enough space to come alongside the gate.

Many horses and riders manage to negotiate gates with the horse's head over the gate, but it is less safe because riders may have to swap hands, potentially losing control; there is greater risk of the reins or martingale being caught, and the gate or latch may hit the horse's head. Much depends on the latching mechanism—a latch that must be held open while the gate clears it is more difficult to open when not parallel to the gate. Self-closing gates with a fast speed can be impossible with this method or take several attempts which is tedious and time-consuming and increases the risk of injury.

Mastering the heels-to-hinges method improves the chance of coping with a gate where space is too tight because the horse is more responsive, and the rider is more likely to retain control even in less than ideal conditions.

Training

The movements for opening a gate using the heels-to-hinges method may already be in a rider's frequent training of their horse. If not, a BHS coach can help with the turn on the forehand, leg yield and rein back movements needed for the manoeuvre. Opening gates can be a functional way of teaching a horse these movements. A horse needs to be responsive to the rider's legs and hands, and many riders use their voice too, e.g. 'One step' when asking the horse to take one more step nearer the latch, or 'Stand' when both hands are needed.

Training to open gates is also an opportunity to improve a rider's balance and independent movements so that they can lean over without their legs moving or pushing into their horse, as that is likely to make it move away at the wrong moment.

All core muscle strength exercises are good for being stable, for a rider being able to lean their torso without affecting their legs. Practising off the horse is possible by sitting on a wall or substantial saddle horse — touching a rider's toes and where the horse's tail and poll would be, all without the rider moving their legs or pressing into the horse. A helper can place hands on the rider's leg to check pressure or change and provide feedback. Core strength and balance in this manoeuvre will also help keep a rider safe should the horse to move unexpectedly as leaning over to a gate latch or to catch, hold or push a gate puts a rider in a vulnerable position.

If a gate is not available for practising, much of the skill can be covered on any flat ground with a handy post, such as a jump stand, lamp-post or tree, and a fence or wall to stand alongside while practising leaning over or down. Having someone on the ground to help at first can be useful.

Teaching a horse to stand still, with or without a hand on the reins, is a good first stage. Having a horse who will stand for as long as needed is helpful in many situations that arise when hacking, and particularly when the rider is struggling with an awkward latch or having to lift a gate (neither of which should be necessary but do frequently occur).

Standing can be practised anywhere at any time, on the ground or in the saddle, and when mounted, aiming for a horse to stand still even if the rider is shifting position.

Useful moves to practise

- Riding close alongside a fence or other structure to stand at a particular point.
- Bending low over the horse's shoulder, between horse and fence, without the horse moving away.
- Having the horse move backwards, and sideways.
- Backing alongside the fence while moving a hand along the rail and moving sideways one-handed while leaning over, as if holding a gate.
- Turning on the forehand; then progress to turning one-handed while holding a post at normal hand height, then to turning while holding a post at gate height. Start with turning only one or two steps and progress to being able to turn full circle with one hand on a gate-height post.

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