



IWA Towpaths Policy

Vision: IWA's vision is for a growing network of waterway towpaths to provide local amenity benefits plus safe, accessible routes for all users, maximising the benefits of this valuable national heritage for present and future generations.

This document sets out IWA's Towpath policies and associated good practice guidelines for all aspects of towpaths including: provision, maintenance, restoration, access, uses, and avoidance of conflict between users.



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Policy Statements

Our Policy Statements on Towpaths are listed below:

- IWA will work constructively with any relevant party to help navigation authorities develop and maintain a suitable set of standards for the provision and maintenance of towpaths, with the aim of maximising the benefits of this valuable heritage for a wide variety of users.
- IWA's technical standards for towpaths are defined in its 'Technical Restoration Handbook' and 'Practical Restoration Handbook' (see Further Information section below). In addition, IWA's standards for the dimensions of towpaths are defined in the "1.2 Dimensions" section below.
- The towpath is often the first opportunity for restoration of a waterway. When formally established, towpaths should be regularly maintained in accordance with this policy.
- The majority of canal towpaths should continue to be permissive footpaths without being public rights of way. On rivers, however, local authorities should be encouraged to designate riverside paths as rights of way.
- Working with disability action groups, IWA will support measures to provide and improve general access to and from towpaths and promote the provision of suitable access points and additional facilities at key locations.
- IWA will continue to support shared use of towpaths and will consider proposals to introduce new activities in the light of their impact on the overall waterway environment and their effect on existing activities.
- All towpath users should ensure that their activities do not compromise the safety or enjoyment of other users.
- IWA will encourage the provision of mooring rings and bollards to limit bank damage at frequently used mooring sites. Mooring rings or bollards as appropriate should always be provided on hard-edged surfaces.
- IWA promotes good practice in the use of bicycles on towpaths through publishing advice for cyclists on its website, to raise awareness and improve the safety of both cyclists and others using the towpath.
- All signage giving directional information about nearby locations should state distances rather than the time needed to reach the location, for the benefit of all users.
- IWA will support the use of a horse to tow a boat, on suitable paths.
- IWA will support responsible horse riding on towpaths that are also designated as bridleways.
- IWA will continue to support byelaws or regulations prohibiting access to unauthorised motor vehicles and motorcycles.

1. IWA Towpaths Good Practice Guidelines

The following sections provide IWA's guidance on good towpath practices for Provision, Dimensions, Surfaces, Materials, Bank Protection, Moorings, Vegetation Management, Boundaries, Maintenance, Restoration, Rights of Way, Access, Wheelchair Access, Shared Use, Dogs, Angling, Cycling, Horse Towing, Horse Riding and Motor Vehicles.

1.1. Provision

1.1.1 IWA will continue to encourage the provision of paths alongside rivers and other navigations where there are none at present. Where a waterway didn't historically have a towpath, such as on some drains and rivers, new paths along the bank should be encouraged wherever possible, to allow access to that waterway by a wider range of users. Existing, new or restored waterways and associated structures should have full towpath provision. Towpaths currently impassable should be reinstated. A no-path standard is not acceptable, except through built structures such as tunnels where they were not originally provided.

1.1.2 The towpath should be continuous alongside the waterway where practicable, except where historically there was a ferry across the channel. Where such ferries no longer exist, the navigation authority will be encouraged to provide a bridge linking the disconnected sections or, where the "line change" is short, establish a new linking path. Where a towpath route is not obvious it should be clearly signed. In particular, walking routes over tunnels should be clearly signed and well maintained.

1.1.3 As a minimum, towpaths should be maintained or restored to their original condition. Where today's traffic and type of use prove damaging, consideration should be given to upgrading the path, such upgrades being sympathetic to both the navigation and the location.

1.2. Dimensions

1.2.1 Where possible, the width of the towpath, from canal edge to boundary fence, should be at least 2 metres. The minimum standard for urban and heavily used rural towpaths should be 1.8 metres. As an absolute minimum the width of the walking surface should not be less than 1 metre. Busy urban areas need special attention to ensure sufficient space at the water's edge to allow boat handling and angling without danger to or from passing cyclists or other users.

1.2.2 The minimum headroom above the towpath should be 2.5 metres, though a reduced headroom of 2.2 metres is acceptable under bridges. An overhead clearance of 2.5 metres from vegetation should be maintained for the full width of the towpath.

1.2.3 The waterway channel should not be narrowed in order to provide a wider towpath, unless this is done to retrieve the original dimensions or in specific circumstances where it is agreed that there is overall benefit and navigation will not be adversely affected.

1.3. Surface

1.3.1 The surface should be even and free-draining. The waterway edge should be free from holes and substantial tree, shrub or other tall weed growth. The appropriate surface material depends on location and use and should be carefully chosen. Surfaces should be non-slip in wet weather.

1.3.2 In urban areas towpaths should be constructed of brick, stone setts, ash or crushed stone. The latter should be graded to dust and rolled to prevent stones becoming loose and causing a potential source of danger to people, animals and boats. (Note: “graded to dust” or “water bound macadam” or “rolled hoggin” are terms used to describe a progressively graded stone mix that consolidates when rolled.) The process of installing hard-edged surfaces should always include provision of mooring rings wherever mooring was previously possible.

1.3.3 Shredded wood is not usually suitable as a towpath surface, except where correctly utilised to assist drainage in cuttings and wet areas.

1.3.4 Setts must not be removed where they are a heritage feature.

1.3.5 In rural areas with grassed paths a minimum width of 1 metre should be kept close mown as a walking surface, leaving a soft vegetative strip to the canal edge. To encourage the growth of more diverse and less vigorous wild plants, the vegetative strip should be treated like a meadow, being cut to about 0.5 metres, twice a year. The walking surface should be higher than the vegetative strip to prevent ponding. The IWA Vegetation Management Policy defines requirements in more detail.

1.3.6 In areas where the towpath is continually wet, such as in cuttings, a French drain should be laid along the base of the cutting on the non-canal side of the towpath to intercept the run-off and direct the water under the path into the canal.

1.3.7 The surface of a towpath should be maintained at a minimum height of 0.3 metres above the weir crest level for that pound.

1.4. Materials

1.4.1 IWA will campaign for the adoption of work practice, materials and furnishings that are sympathetic to the historic environment into which they are incorporated. All works must have due regard for heritage issues rather than using a “uniform navigation authority style” and should be carried out using traditional materials as far as possible.

1.4.2 IWA will support the use of appropriate recycled materials for towpath repairs and reinstatements where they do not compromise the historic environment or quality of the work.

1.5. Bank Protection

1.5.1 Stone or similar towpath edges should be repaired before bank erosion caused by boat wash or land settlement becomes a serious problem. Surface potholes should be filled at the earliest opportunity.

1.5.2 As a less intrusive alternative to plain piling, IWA recommends the use of piles driven to water level and then topped with natural or manufactured stone, or soft edging, up to towpath level. This is more aesthetically pleasing than plain piling and improves access for wildlife to and from the water. Soft edging to towpath walls may also be appropriate.

1.5.3 Piling or other bank protection should be completed from sound structure to sound structure or bank wall to bank wall. Piling with open unprotected ends (especially short sections) is more prone to wash damage and subsequent bank erosion. This becomes a hazard to towpath users and makes future maintenance more difficult and expensive.

1.5.4 Pile tops should never protrude above towpath level. They should always be fully driven or cut level. New sheet piling must always be back-filled and levelled to the top edge of the pile as soon as possible. Tieback rods and back-piles must be completely covered.

1.5.5 In rural areas, where dredged material is deposited on top of the existing towpath surface, or new piling is back-filled, levelling should follow, after allowing sufficient time for settlement to take place, before the towpath is seeded with suitable grass.

1.6. Mooring

1.6.1 At official mooring or landing places and at lock sides, priority must be given to boaters. Towpaths should be routed to keep towpath users away from boat operations.

1.6.2 Mooring rings and bollards should be placed away from the towpath so that they are not an obstruction to towpath users. They should be placed in such a way that mooring ropes are well away from, and do not cross, the towpath.

1.6.3 Even when placed away from the towpath mooring rings and bollards should be painted white or another prominent colour so that towpath users can easily see them.

1.6.4 Recessed rings are a safer option than bollards at a jetty or path-side mooring, since they do not present as great a trip hazard to pedestrians.

1.6.5 Where a new towpath surface is being installed it is recommended that mooring rings or bollards are installed rather than relying on boaters using mooring pins. Even when there is soft ground between the towpath and the navigation then mooring rings or bollards are a preferred method of mooring.

1.6.6 IWA recommends that moorings that rely on boaters using mooring pins should ensure that there is sufficient soft ground between the towpath and the navigation so that mooring pins are not a hazard to towpath users. Mooring pins can damage the canal bank, whilst exposed pin tops can be a hazard to people and animals.

1.6.7 At designated and other regularly used moorings (for shops, pubs etc.) and at locks or moveable bridge landing points, the grass should be regularly mown to the water's edge.

1.6.8 Cables laid under the towpath should always be at a depth which does not preclude the use of mooring spikes or pins. If there is any risk of injury from mooring pins penetrating cables, mooring rings or bollards must be provided. After cable laying, IWA encourages upgrading of towpaths rather than just reinstatement.

1.6.9 When moored, boaters should be aware of the possible impact of their activities on others using the towpath. Belongings should be kept on the boat rather than overspilling onto the towpath, and it should not be used as a base for repairs with powered equipment.

See also IWA's environmental guidance for boaters: <https://waterways.org.uk/about-us/library/briefing-note-environmental-guidance-for-boaters>
and IWA's Mooring Policy on Navigable Waterways:
<https://waterways.org.uk/about-us/library/moorings-on-navigable-waterways>

1.7. Vegetation Management

IWA's policy on the management of vegetation, including points relating to towpaths, is set out in the IWA Vegetation Management Policy -
<https://waterways.org.uk/about-us/library/vegetation-management-policy>

1.8. Boundaries

1.8.1 Historic boundary hedges should not be removed.

1.8.2 Hedges between the towpath and adjacent land should, ideally, be laid and new plantings inserted into depleted sections. Saplings of suitable tree species growing in the hedge should be protected and allowed to reach maturity where appropriate.

1.8.3 Where hedges are not being allowed to grow for the purposes of hedge-laying, and excluding specimen or single trees, towpath boundary hedges should be regularly cut so that views are not obscured.

1.8.4 Where the boundary of the towpath is a fence or wall it should be maintained using original materials and method of construction.

1.8.5 The use of electric fences adjacent to towpaths is to be discouraged. Where present, they must be adequately signed and installed to approved standards.

1.8.6 The use of barbed or razor wire at a level of under 2.5 metres is banned alongside public footpaths. IWA believes such a ban should also apply to towpaths. Low-level barbed or razor wire should not be used in a new fence and should be removed from existing fences.

1.8.7 Fencing between waterways and towpaths is not normally acceptable for boater safety, heritage and aesthetic reasons. However, permanent or temporary fences are acceptable where there is a significant risk of pedestrians falling from the path and if that fall is likely to result in an injury e.g. at side weirs, feeder bridges, aqueducts, tunnels and bank collapses. Any permanent fences or railings should be smooth-topped and taken down to ground level at an angle to reduce the risk of ropes snagging. Railings close to or on lock copings are inappropriate as they hinder both lock operation and rescue in the event of an accident. Where there is a proven case for railings or fences, installation must be subjected to a safety assessment looking at both land-side public safety and the safety of boat crews. IWA's Operability of Locks and Moveable Bridges Policy provides definitive policy guidance in this area - <https://waterways.org.uk/about-us/library/locks-and-moveable-bridges-policy>

1.9. Maintenance

1.9.1 IWA will continue to support all navigation authorities to maintain their towpaths to a high standard.

1.9.2 Where a durable surface, such as brick or crushed stone, has been laid, it must be reinstated as soon as possible after disturbance by maintenance works.

1.9.3 Bricks and other debris from maintenance work, dredging, cable laying etc. must not be dumped onto the land-side boundary of a towpath, into the hedge bottom or into the waterway channel.

1.9.4 Audits of reinstatement work after towpath maintenance or engineering is a useful way of monitoring and ensuring quality of work, in the same way that audits are conducted for maintenance work in the highway as provided in the New Roads and Street Works Acts that contractors will be used to.

1.10. Restoration

1.10.1. When formally established, towpaths should be regularly maintained in accordance with this policy. The towpath is often the first opportunity that restoration organisations have to promote their scheme to the public, local authorities and funding agencies.

1.10.2 Information or interpretation boards should be suitably placed so as not to create obstructions to other users by those who may wish to stop and read them; and they should be kept clean and their content up to date.

1.10.3 If during restoration work a section of towpath must be temporarily closed, the closure should be prominently advertised at each end and, where possible, an alternative route around the closure should be signposted.

1.10.4 If paths are permissive and go through third-party land, the consent of the landowner is advised to promote good relations between the user, owner and promoter.

1.11. Rights of Way

1.11.1 On rivers, local authorities should be encouraged to designate riverside paths as rights of way. The majority of canal towpaths should continue to be permissive footpaths without being public rights of way.

1.11.2 IWA will support the adoption of certain towpaths as public rights of way where, in the Association's opinion, the public interest is better served, without compromising the waterway environment nor the interests of those using the waterway. A condition for IWA's support is that the local authority should be willing and able to take financial responsibility for any upgrade required, together with the ongoing additional maintenance and servicing that results from increased public use of the towpath.

1.11.3 Where not a public right of way, towpaths should be registered with the local authority as permissive paths.

1.11.4 IWA encourages the inclusion of both urban and rural towpaths in recreational maps prepared by local authorities and outside agencies.

1.12. Access

1.12.1 IWA opposes the permanent fencing off or other obstruction of access to or along any towpath except where this is necessary to ensure public safety. Temporary fencing may need to be installed to protect the public and workforce where there is a failure of the path and where repairs or other works are being carried out, and in such cases a signed diversion should be provided. Fences across towpaths or onto the off-side should not hang over the water's edge. Security can be maintained by a short length of fence along the water's edge making a T-shape

in plan. Temporary fencing and signs should be removed at the end of the work programme.

1.12.2 Cross-towpath fences should have gates as well as stiles to permit fullest access. Stiles alone will restrict access for wheelchair users.

1.12.3 Access should be available at road bridges and other points as appropriate. Preferably, access should be on the level, or by ramp not exceeding a slope of 8% (approx. 1 in 12), although acceptable access has been provided on slopes up to 12.5% (1 in 8). If security for animals is needed, a self-closing gate at least 1 metre wide (to accommodate wheelchairs) should be provided and maintained. Where the difference in level between the towpath and road is too great and the space to provide a ramp insufficient, steps should be constructed. Handrails should be provided on exposed edges of ramps or steps.

1.12.4 Where a road runs alongside a canal it may be possible to provide access at more convenient points than bridges, where access is on the level. Wheelchair access may be better at road level rather than at bridges, where ramps could be visually obtrusive.

1.12.5 The need for towpath users to cross busy roads should be avoided. IWA supports, in principle, schemes to provide pedestrian underpasses or bridges at appropriate locations.

1.13. Wheelchair Access

1.13.1 Obligations are placed on navigation authorities by the Equalities Act 2010. The Act recognises that there are circumstances where the modification of structures is neither reasonable nor practical. IWA recognises that wheelchair users may not have access to all towpaths.

1.13.2 Working with disability action groups, IWA will support measures to provide and improve general access to and from towpaths and promote the provision of suitable access points and additional facilities at key locations.

1.13.3 Navigation authorities should clearly sign all paths that are suitable for use by wheelchair users or conversely sign those that are unsuitable for wheelchairs. A map or directory of paths and places having access suitable for wheelchairs should be published.

1.13.4 IWA recommends the use of signage compatible with the National Accessible Scheme, a voluntary scheme for tourism providers which is administered by Visit England.

1.13.5 Where, in the past, navigational authorities installed barriers and chicanes it is now generally accepted that these can restrict legitimate access for some and introduce unintended consequences. **It is IWA policy that such existing restrictions should be reviewed and removed wherever possible**, this includes access to towpaths from third party land. Where no other practical solution can be found all security/safety barriers on paths designated for use by wheelchair users should incorporate a gate of sufficient width to allow the passage of a wheelchair (at least 1 metre wide and 1.6 metres overhead clearance). The gate should be opened and re-locked by a key, available on application to the navigation authority by persons who have a disability.

1.14. Shared Use

1.14.1 IWA will continue to support shared use of towpaths and will consider proposals to introduce new activities in the light of their impact on the overall waterway environment and their effect on existing activities.

1.14.2 The wide variety of paths and users means that it is important for all towpath users to understand the needs of others and ensure that their activities do not compromise the safety or enjoyment of other users.

1.14.3 All users should take notice of any signage and advice from the relevant navigation authority or landowner.

1.15. Dogs

1.15.1 Dog owners should be aware of the potential issues and consider keeping dogs on a lead. Incidents of intimidation and even attacks by dogs have been reported, with dogs often behaving in a spirit of defending their owners on a long narrow path with widely separated exits.

1.15.2 IWA will encourage navigation authorities and local authorities to apply for and take powers under the Dogs (Fouling of Land) Act 1996 that could make it an offence for owners to allow their dog's excrement to remain on any part of the towpath or its verges. The fouling by dogs of open spaces accessible to the public is a significant health hazard. Because of the increased restrictions in other public areas, towpaths often have a higher density of fouling than the average public park. IWA will encourage owners to remove their dog's or horse's excrement and dispose of it at a place where it will not give rise to a public nuisance or health hazard.

1.15.3 Litter and dog dirt bins should be placed at intervals on the hedge or boundary side of urban and other well-used towpaths and should be regularly emptied and serviced.

1.16. Angling

1.16.1 All anglers' tackle should be kept clear of the walking surface of the towpath. A towpath is a walkway, and anglers should always be aware that people might be passing behind them. This is especially important when casting. Poles should never be pulled back across the walking surface, so causing a hazard to other users.

1.16.2 At official mooring sites and landing places, anglers should give way to boat crews wishing to land or moor. The byelaws of some navigation authorities forbid fishing at such locations.

1.17. Cycling

1.17.1 The bicycle is a long-established aspect of canal navigation when used as an aid to boating. Riding to and from locks can assist in minimising the use of water and reduction of delays. A bicycle is also a useful means of getting help in emergency situations.

In addition to cycling alongside boating, pressure has been increasing for new or continuing use of towpaths as cycle routes. The need for cycle routes away from road traffic to meet the requirements of the Road Traffic Reduction Act 1997, the introduction of all-terrain leisure cycles and the work of Sustrans have all been contributory factors.

IWA considers positive management of the use of bicycles, including legal electrically assisted bicycles, to be the best approach to this increasing demand. IWA promotes good practice in cycling on towpaths through publishing advice for cyclists on its website, to raise awareness and improve the safety of both cyclists and others using the towpath. Commuter and recreational cycling should be supported, in places where the safety of the rider can be assured and it does not compromise the safety and enjoyment of other users.

IWA realises that many towpaths are still unrideable and therefore welcomes commitment by navigation authorities to seek and use non-navigation budget funding for the improvement of such paths. Navigation authorities should be encouraged to compile and publish accurate and consistent lists of towpaths in their jurisdiction that are suitable for cycling.

1.17.2 Navigation authority staff should enforce byelaws and rules relating to cycling.

1.17.3 IWA supports recreational cycling on suitable towpaths by individuals, families and small groups. Cyclists must take particular care when passing walkers and anglers, and be prepared to dismount at any time.

1.17.4 There is no specific speed limit for cycling, but cyclists must cede priority to other users and have a duty of care to those users.

1.17.5 Time trials and races are not appropriate on towpaths and should not be permitted.

1.17.6 All signage giving directional information about nearby locations should state distances and not the time taken to reach the location.

1.17.7 It is advisable for pedal cycles using towpaths to have a bell or horn, which should be used to warn other users of their approach, and lights should be fitted and used at night. It is good and common practice for cyclists to use their bell before navigating a bridge hole where there is restricted visibility.

1.18. Horse Towing

1.18.1 Horse towing is no longer practical in many places. However, canal and river towpaths should be maintained in a suitable condition for occasional use for the passage of horses and boat towlines.

1.18.2 Where horse towing of boats is practical and does not substantially interfere with mooring and other uses, navigation authorities should encourage towing using a horse and assist individuals or organisations planning horse-drawn journeys.

1.18.3 Areas where horse towing regularly takes place should be marked with information notices or signposting. Crews of other boats should, where possible, avoid mooring in these areas.

1.18.4 To avoid the snagging of towlines, trees and shrubs should be removed from the area between the walking surface and the channel.

1.18.5 Barriers and other calming measures should include a convenient means for the horse and towline to pass through. Wherever possible barriers should be at locations where it is normal for the horse to pause (examples: at locks or moving bridges).

1.19. Horse Riding

1.19.1 Horses should not be ridden on towpaths except where the towpath is also a bridleway.

1.19.2 Where horse riding is permitted, there should be notices warning of the need for extra awareness and care. Where a path has shared use, horses should not proceed faster than at walking pace.

1.20. Motor Vehicles

1.20.1 The only motorised vehicles permitted on towpaths should be those authorised for use by the employees or contractors of the navigation authority, those having rights of access to property, and mobility scooters or electric wheelchairs used by disabled persons. These vehicles should only be used where the towpaths are suitable. Otherwise, motor vehicles of all types, including electric scooters and powered skateboards, should be banned from towpaths.

1.20.2 The unauthorised riding of motorcycles along towpaths is a public danger, due to their weight and speed. Determined offenders often force their way through or around physical barriers. IWA will support navigation authorities in the prosecution of offenders.

2. Guidance for Campaigning

IWA Branches, along with other parts of IWA and other relevant organisations, are encouraged to monitor navigation authorities' plans for towpath changes to encourage adoption of IWA policy and guidance. It is also encouraged for Branches to monitor planning applications for any properties adjacent to towpaths to ensure free and easy access along the towpath is maintained.

3. Further Information

This policy and guidance document should be read in conjunction with the following documents:

- Technical Restoration Handbook - https://waterways.org.uk/restoration_hub/advice-support/technical-toolkit/technical-restoration-handbook
- Practical Restoration Handbook - https://waterways.org.uk/restoration_hub/advice-support/practical-toolkit-introduction/practical-restoration-handbook
- IWA's environmental guidance for boaters: <https://waterways.org.uk/about-us/library/briefing-note-environmental-guidance-for-boaters>
- IWA's Mooring Policy on Navigable Waterways: <https://waterways.org.uk/about-us/library/moorings-on-navigable-waterways>
- IWA Vegetation Management Policy - <https://waterways.org.uk/about-us/library/vegetation-management-policy>
- IWA's Operability of Locks and Moveable Bridges Policy provides definitive policy guidance in this area - <https://waterways.org.uk/about-us/library/locks-and-moveable-bridges-policy>