

IWA Briefing Note

Cycling on Towpaths

This briefing note sets out The Inland Waterways Association's views on the use of towpaths for cycling.

IWA acknowledges the wider benefits of encouraging more of the population to cycle for recreational and transport purposes. The use of bicycles on towpaths is long established, and using a bicycle to ride to and from locks can minimise use of water and reduce delays and can also be a useful means of getting help in emergency situations.

In recent years the introduction of all terrain leisure cycles and the introduction of long distance cycling routes have created increased demand for new or continuing use of towpaths as cycle routes. While waterway towpaths can seem like a safer place than the roads for cycling, there are different and sometimes unexpected hazards that cyclists need to be aware of.

IWA supports sedate cycling on suitable towpaths by individuals, families and small groups. Commuter and recreational cycling should only take place where the safety of the rider can be assured and it does not compromise the safety and enjoyment of other users. Although there is no specific speed limit for cyclists on waterway towpaths, cyclists should slow down and consider all other users of the towpath. Cyclists must take particular care when passing walkers and anglers, and be prepared to dismount. In busy locations cyclists may find it quicker to use the nearest road as an alternative route.



Photo: A recent announcement from The Department of Transport will see £2.5 million spent on a rural section of the towpath of the Caldon Canal between Hazelhurst and Stockton Brook. Part of the Pedal Peak scheme, the aim is to increase cycling routes in and out of the Peak District. This section of towpath would not otherwise have been subject to any improvements, despite works being carried out in adjacent areas, such as recent works through Cheddleton, shown here, as part of the Churnet Valley Living Landscape Partnership, which has seen improvements to the towpath which will benefit all users.

Funding and promoting good practice

IWA welcomes funding that is sometimes available to navigation authorities for improving towpaths for cycling. This funding enables towpaths to be improved for all users, not just cyclists, and is usually money that wouldn't be available otherwise. It is IWA's view, however, that when towpaths see improvements which enable people to cycle at faster speeds, navigation authorities should do all they can to ensure that cyclists follow good practice. Improvements funded primarily to enhance towpaths for cycling should not be detrimental to their heritage or environmental assets.

IWA will also promote good practice through publishing advice and an IWA code for cyclists on its website and a campaign to encourage cyclists to follow the code. IWA's Cycling Code is designed to raise awareness and improve the safety of both the cyclists themselves and others using the towpath.

IWA's Cycling Code

- SLOW DOWN when approaching anglers, towpath walkers and other towpath users, especially family groups and disabled people or those with reduced mobility, and be prepared to dismount or wait for people to get out of your way.
- ALWAYS have a bell or horn fitted to your cycle and ALWAYS use it when approaching other users of the towpath.
- BE PREPARED to dismount when local signs or common sense indicate that you should, for example at congested locations and under low, narrow or blind bridges
- BE CONSIDERATE to all other users of the towpath. Pedestrians have priority. Be particularly aware of boat crews operating locks or bridges or stepping off a boat onto the towpath.
- SLOW DOWN when approaching bridges, locks and other structures, especially when there is a blind bend and you cannot see who or what is ahead of you, and be prepared to stop.
- BE AWARE that very occasionally a towpath crosses a road, for example when there is no room under a road bridge for a towpath. Be prepared to stop and be aware of fast moving traffic on busy main roads.
- WATCH OUT for hazards on the towpath such as ropes from boats, mooring stakes and bollards. Allow anglers time to move their tackle before you try to pass.
- If cycling at night have lights fitted to your cycle and use them.
- Wearing headphones can limit communication between cyclist and other users. For this reason it is not recommended.
- AVOID cycling in large groups or having races with fellow cyclists – the towpaths are not an appropriate place for this.
- BE FRIENDLY to other waterway users. The towpaths are there for everyone to enjoy.

Additional advice for cyclists can be found on the IWA website:
<https://www.waterways.org.uk/waterways/activities/cycling/cycling>

More detailed guidance can be found in IWA's Policy on Towing Paths, one of a series of IWA Policy documents that can be found on IWA's website:
https://www.waterways.org.uk/information/policy_documents/towing_paths