Advice on

# Hitching rails on equestrian routes

The British Horse Society

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.

## Contents



# Hitching rails

Hitching rails are beneficial for tying a horse for a short period while out and about so that a rider or carriage-driver may be free to unsaddle the horse or visit a shop, café or toilets. Hitching rails can be very welcome at rest stops or view points along bridleways and byways or where there are facilities for visitors.

The most important qualities of a hitching rail constructed for horse use are:

1. Strong enough to hold a 1 tonne horse
2. Safe construction with no sharp edges or projections
3. Durable construction for long life and low maintenance

A startled horse may pull back hard while hitched. If the rail breaks, the horse will panic more and bolt, probably with half the hitching rail bouncing along with it, apparently in pursuit, which will terrify the horse further, and serious injury to the horse and potentially damage to anything in its path is likely. It is obviously therefore important that a rail is robustly constructed and well maintained.

Equestrians are recommended to always tie a horse with either a rope that will break if necessary (some are designed with a weak point) or to a piece of string tied to the hitching rail, rather than with a strong rope directly to a hitching rail. The purpose of the string or weak point is that it will break or can be easily cut rather than the horse break its neck or the hitching rail.

## Construction

- Hitching rails may be built of metal pipe or wood, or a combination. Standard scaffolding tube is strong enough. Wood must not splinter or be brittle so substantial timber as used for telegraph poles or railway sleepers is ideal.
- Posts must be well anchored, deeply enough to remain stable after heavy rain, frost heave or drying by sun, whatever the soil type. Bedding them in concrete is recommended with regard to the effect of water and rust or rot on the components.
- The horizontal bar should be at a horse’s chest height so around 1.2m and of a length to accommodate more than one horse, so at least 3m. Rails longer than 3m may need an additional central post. Even horses that are well known to each other will usually be hitched at least 1.5m apart to give riders space to move between two horses.
- A hitching rail should be simple with only one horizontal bar. Additional rails add the risk of a horse putting a leg through a space and being trapped or injured.
- Both posts and rail must be free from sharp edges or any projections. Fixings should be recessed so they cannot snag a rope or cause an injury.

- It is best if the rail does not protrude much beyond an end post to avoid injury if the horse moves parallel to the rail and beyond the post.
- If using wood, check that preservatives are non-toxic to animals. Some horses will try to bite or lick wood (using 150mm diameter poles helps discourage this).

## Location

The hitching rail must be erected in a safe location. It should have flat level ground, free of tree roots or rocks to avoid tripping by horse or rider. It should also be clear of objects and clear of structures such as trees, cliffs, picnic tables or fences for at least three metres each side of the rail (assuming it is intended to hitch horses to both sides).

The surface should be free-draining to avoid puddling but should ideally not be hard surfaced, as horses may slip. A rail where there is natural grass growth will always be appreciated for grazing.

Hitching rails should be erected in a location which provides a clear view of the horses from nearby facilities or viewpoints because even though an equestrian is unlikely to leave a horse unaccompanied, they will want to keep checking to that all is well.

The area under the rail within reach of a horse should be free of toxic vegetation. The most toxic plants are yew, privet and rhododendron. Most likely to grow in this situation are ragwort, foxglove, buttercups and nightshade. They are not likely to be eaten in sufficient quantity while hitched but should be removed to avoid concerns. Use of herbicide should be avoided.

## Separation

The hitching rail and the area used by horses tied to the rail should be clear of nearby routes, people or traffic for the safety of the horses and any passer-by.

Allow 3m alongside the rail for horses and another 3m beyond so that people can give the horses a wide berth. If the rail is positioned so that horses may be hitched to either side, then that space is required to both sides.

This space should be allowed at both ends of the rail as well as a horse may not stay at right angles to the rail, it may move sideways to look in all directions.

A rail near a path well used by horses should be positioned well away from the trail if possible so that a hitched horse is not disturbed by others passing. 15m from a trail or car park where horses might be unloaded is reasonable.

At busy sites, the hitching rail might be installed inside a fenced area or corral and away from an area that may have unsupervised children.

## Multiple hitching rails

At a busy site, perhaps one well used by trekking centres, multiple hitching rails may be useful. It is recommended that they are at least 10m apart to give adequate separation between rows of horses and to allow their riders or drivers room to safely walk behind and around horses.

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