

## Out and about in the countryside

For the last year we have all been encouraged to get fresh air and exercise in order to keep fit, to have a purpose while the pandemic has been – and still is – affecting our lives and therefore to have a better feeling about life – in jargon ‘health and wellbeing’.

Most landowners, farmers and managers have witnessed and welcomed the increase of the use of the footpaths and bridleways across their properties. There are organisations which promote access to the countryside such as AONBs, National Parks and World Heritage Sites which promote walking, riding, cycling and appreciation of the landscape, wildlife and cultural heritage.

Part of this access has to be respect for those assets and for the people who manage them.

Unfortunately there have been incidences where animals have been harmed by being fed inappropriate food – such as horses on special diets being given – even other horse food – by well-meaning people. There have been deaths of animals through this which have left their owners heartbroken.

Also there is danger in feeding outdoor pigs anything at all – there could be an outbreak of Swine Fever if someone gives a pig a ham sandwich. It has happened – do we want that to happen again?

The message is –

Get out and enjoy – and think about the countryside as if it is your own garden.

The land though which you walk belongs to real people who have to make a real living and provide food for the country.

Please stay on the Rights of Way and do not walk along strips of grass beside hedgerows because they look inviting. They will be there for a purpose – to promote biodiversity – for example habitats and feed for pollinators, soil enhancers, ground nesting birds and wild flowers.

Not all grassland is open access – much of it is there to provide current fodder for animals and at times in the year is cut for hay and silage for winter feed for livestock. It needs to be left undisturbed for harvesting – like peas and beans do for your own table.

Leave all animals alone – if there are lambs lying quietly do not pick them up. They have been ‘parked’ by their Mums and their whereabouts known. Sheep are far wiser than their reputation which goes about!

When among cattle, which should be calm if you are on a RoW, it can be sensible to let a dog off the lead if the cattle get excitable. Cattle are accustomed to people but find that they like to investigate dogs! In such cases walk around the animals but do not threaten them - you might have to briefly leave the marked path for a while.

If you are taking dogs with you please also take 'poo bags'. Dog faeces can cause serious disease in cattle, sheep and horses. Collect poo and take it away. It is the dog owner who is responsible, just as in their own garden.

Dogs should be under close control at all times - which is within 5 metres or so and not ranging over acres of land unless you have specific permission from the landowner. If your dog will not stay close by off the lead, re-lead it, please.

A last message to dog owners - please ensure your dog is properly vaccinated and wormed - yes, it is expensive but the damage unhealthy animals can do to other animals and humans is huge.

On general countryside matters - please leave gates as you find them, do not leave litter (can you imagine the agony of a sheep which had eaten a sandwich wrapper?), please do not park anywhere in gateways and do not light fires or use disposable barbecues anywhere - you might be damaging the landscape everyone wishes to enjoy.

Everyone who manages and works in the countryside knows that in general visitors are responsible people but occasionally things go a bit wrong and then it is horrible for everyone. It is tough for everyone at the moment and the healthier everyone can stay the better - with due consideration for all involved.