

Miles of Stiles

When we moved to the countryside we thought how wonderful it was going to be to take our German Shepherd on lots of lovely cross country walks through the beautiful rolling fields. But alas, all there seems to be for miles around are stiles. Miles of stiles!

Obviously if we had a smaller breed dog that wouldn't be a problem as I could either lift her up and carry her over the stile, or she could squeeze through a gap underneath, but with a rather large Shepherd (just big boned, not fat!) it's just an impossibility. I can't lift her up without my entire spine contracting in on itself, and she can't squeeze through the gaps without learning the art of contortion; and it was hard enough just teaching her to sit! So instead this sadly means a lot of walks being cut short, which goes down like a lead balloon with my furry friend.

So what do you do as an owner of a large breed dog? Do you take the law into your own hands and go out with bolt cutters to open up a gap in the fence? Maybe bring a saw out with you to hack away part of the stile? Or do you just sigh, apologise to your dog and then walk back the way you've just come from? I've personally always opted for the third choice, mainly due to the fact that I don't own a pair of bolt cutters! I am of course joking and wouldn't recommend trying to chop your way through any fencing, as not only is it illegal, it's also...well...stupid.

What you can do is to try contacting the local council, Ramblers Association or Bridleway Association to see if there's anything they can do. It might be possible to get in touch with the landowners directly to ask them to alter access to their fields, especially if it's supposed to be for public access. In fact, if a public access point is padlocked, the landowners are then breaking the law themselves.

'All well and good' you say, but how long will it take the authorities or associations to do anything when they have other priorities? Good question. And how likely is it for a landowner to take on the request of just one person with a larger than average dog? Well, if you don't ask, you don't get, so I decided to find out.

I started by ringing my local council who in turn put me in touch with the Transport for Buckinghamshire Department, who couldn't have been nicer. The man I spoke to had never dealt

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with a request like mine before, but he took all my relevant details without laughing and then asked me which public access way in particular I was looking to have changed.

“No idea” I told him, “but it runs from just down the road from my house, up a hill, and then we reach a point with a stile so I can’t actually tell you where it finishes.”

He did a bit of data research while I was on the phone and it turned out that the footpath in question was Number 7 out of 44 in the surrounding area. Unfortunately there’s no way that the general public can look these numbers up themselves, but apparently some of the stiles do have numbers discretely written on them, so you can investigate.

Anyway, I now had a reference number which allowed me to track the progress of my enquiry. Stage 1 is “Tell Us”, Stage 2 is “Reported”, Stage 3 is “Investigated” and Stage 4 is “Concluded”. Unfortunately after 28 days of waiting I had to chase my request, only to receive a fairly immediate email with a mystery Stage 5 saying “Resolved”. They thanked me for my report, said they had fully assessed it and identified no issues. Don't you just love a standard email. Another phone call led me to a helpful staff member who put me in touch with a local rambling association that runs a volunteer group called ‘Donate a Gate’. I emailed them immediately.

This group have installed 125 gates, getting rid of the same number of problematic stiles, which is wonderful news not only for dog owners but also members of the public with limiting disabilities. Several Rambler Associations offer these donate a gate schemes, but they are unfortunately few and far between. Otherwise it’s down to the local authority to assist landowners with improvements to their footpath furniture.

If you are lucky enough to live near one of these organisations, it could well be worth setting up a group to show that there are others in the area that it’s affecting. Maybe all the large breed dog owners in the area, who are agreeable, could club together and pay for a gate or a dog friendly stile to be fitted in place of the problematic one. This particular association asks for £250 to pay for the gate, which is an entirely reasonable amount for a group to contribute to. That amount even includes an optional inscribed plaque to be attached to the gate, which is a lovely touch. The Association then arranges to remove the stile and replace with the brand new gate.

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Do be aware that even though you may have paid for the gate, it doesn't give you any rights of ownership, and that maintenance is still the responsibility of the landowner. The local council will still need to agree to the change, and of course you must make sure you get the landowners permission also, as it probably wont go down too well if you just surprise them with it.

So there you have it, and if all that sounds like hard work, you can adopt the solution that we've mainly adhered to so far. Muttering under our breath, shrugging our shoulders and just trying another walk. My dog doesn't seem to mind too much as she normally gets a gravy bone in compensation.