

The riding preferences of mountain bikers in England and Wales, and the implications for improving public rights of way networks and wider access to the countryside

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Mountain Bike Choices

Matt Fitzgerald gives an overview of the findings of his recent research project investigating the riding preferences of mountain bikers in England and Wales, and the implications these have for improving public rights of way networks and wider access to the countryside for mountain biking.

The research project was completed as part of a MSc in Public Rights of Way and Countryside Access Management dissertation through Sheffield Hallam University, under the supervision of Lynn Crowe, Professor of Environmental Management at Sheffield Hallam, and course leader for the MSc in Public Rights of Way and Countryside Access Management.

Introduction

It is difficult to put an exact figure on the number of mountain bikers there are in Britain or the number of mountain bike rides that take place, but the growth of the activity in recent years would suggest that mountain bikers are becoming an increasingly common countryside user, and subsequently, public rights of way managers should be considering their needs. Shoard (1997) has stated that cycle ownership in the UK increased from 11 million in 1985 to over 20 million in 1995 and that two thirds of cycles sold are mountain bikes. More recently it has been estimated that there are now 13 million mountain bike owners (Palmer, 2011). Despite this, mountain bikers in England and Wales are restricted to only a small proportion of the total publicly accessible land and routes that are available to walkers. Recent proliferation of purpose built mountain bike trail centres have created new options for mountain biking, but this research has shown that these facilities provide a different opportunity, purpose, and type of riding from the public rights of way (PROW) network and furthermore investigated what mountain bikers would like to see in terms of the future improvement of PROW and wider access to the countryside for mountain biking.

Data Collection

631 questionnaires were completed by mountain bikers through an online survey and additionally through 'in the field' collection at trail centres in North Yorkshire, Gwynedd,

and Kent. Respondents were required to give some generic information about themselves in order to aid analysis (e.g. gender, age group, home postcode, number of years mountain biking, level of experience) and were also asked about their general riding habits.

Respondents who had experience of riding on both PROW and at trail centres were then asked whether or not they agreed or disagreed with a number of different statements focusing on comparing mountain biking at trail centres with PROW. They were also given the opportunity to add comments throughout the questionnaire in order that qualitative data could be collected and a more detailed insight into respondents' opinions and experiences gained.

The sample size gathered was robust and the geographical spread of respondents very good, with nothing to suggest that any large parts of England and Wales were under represented. Weaknesses in the sample included a shortage of younger mountain bikers and respondents who have only ever ridden at trail centres.

General Findings

Do mountain bikers' opinions, riding preferences and riding habits vary according to their experience, age or gender?

The research has discovered that age and experience does have an influence on mountain bikers' opinions, riding preferences and riding habits, but gender did not really reveal any patterns with male and female mountain bikers showing similar opinions throughout the research. Generally speaking, younger mountain bikers were more likely to state that they didn't find riding PROW challenging enough, and that they would rather see more trail centres than an improved PROW network. Less experienced riders also preferred trail centres over PROW, and were more likely to state that they would like to see improved waymarking on PROW. Additionally, they were more positive about the idea of PROW being graded according to level of difficulty, in a similar way to purpose built trails.

Do mountain bikers have a preference to ride at trail centres or on PROW?

The majority of mountain bikers make use of both trail centres and PROW for their mountain biking, but in general they are considered to fill different sorts of needs and purposes. Whilst the majority of respondents did not have a preference for either location, of those mountain bikers who do, PROW are more popular than trail centres, although generally younger riders and also beginners have a preference for trail centres. Older and more experienced riders have a preference for PROW which they feel offer a greater variety of riding and scenery, and are accessible to more people. For many, PROW fill the majority of their riding time and trail centres are used less frequently, sometimes forming part of a special trip or holiday.

Does the way in which mountain bikers reach the start of their rides have any implications for the way future opportunities for mountain biking should be developed (e.g. to reduce reliance on private cars and integrate trail centres with PROW networks)?

A striking difference between the way mountain bikers normally reach the start of their rides at trail centres and on PROW was discovered. Over 90% of respondents travel by car to reach a ride at a trail centre whereas over 60% of respondents access a ride on PROW by cycling from home (Fig. 1 and 2). This emphasises the importance of the PROW network for providing sustainable leisure cycling. Further to this, 68% of respondents agreed that trail centres would benefit from being better integrated with the PROW network.

Fig. 1 Graph displaying the results of the question "How do you normally get to the start of a ride at a trail centre?" (Total number of respondents = 544)

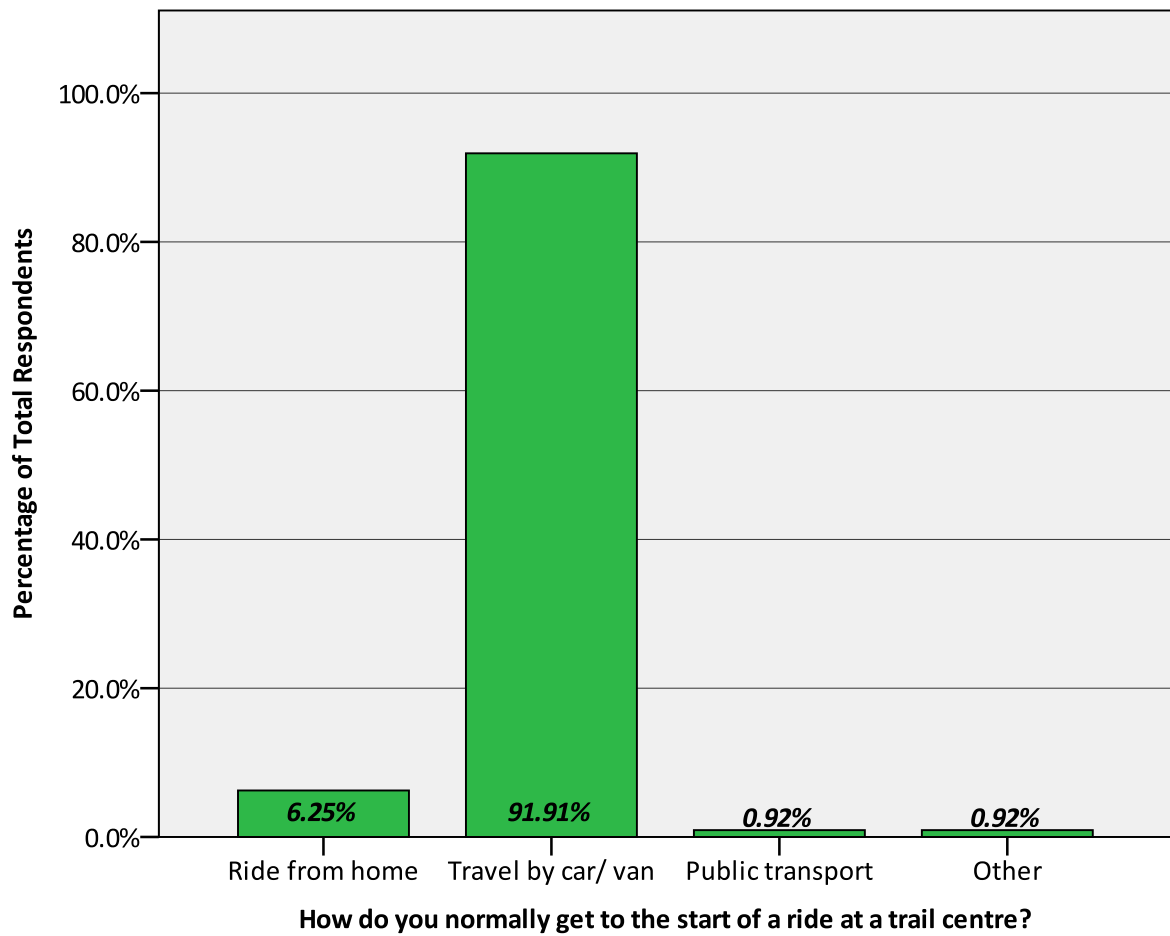
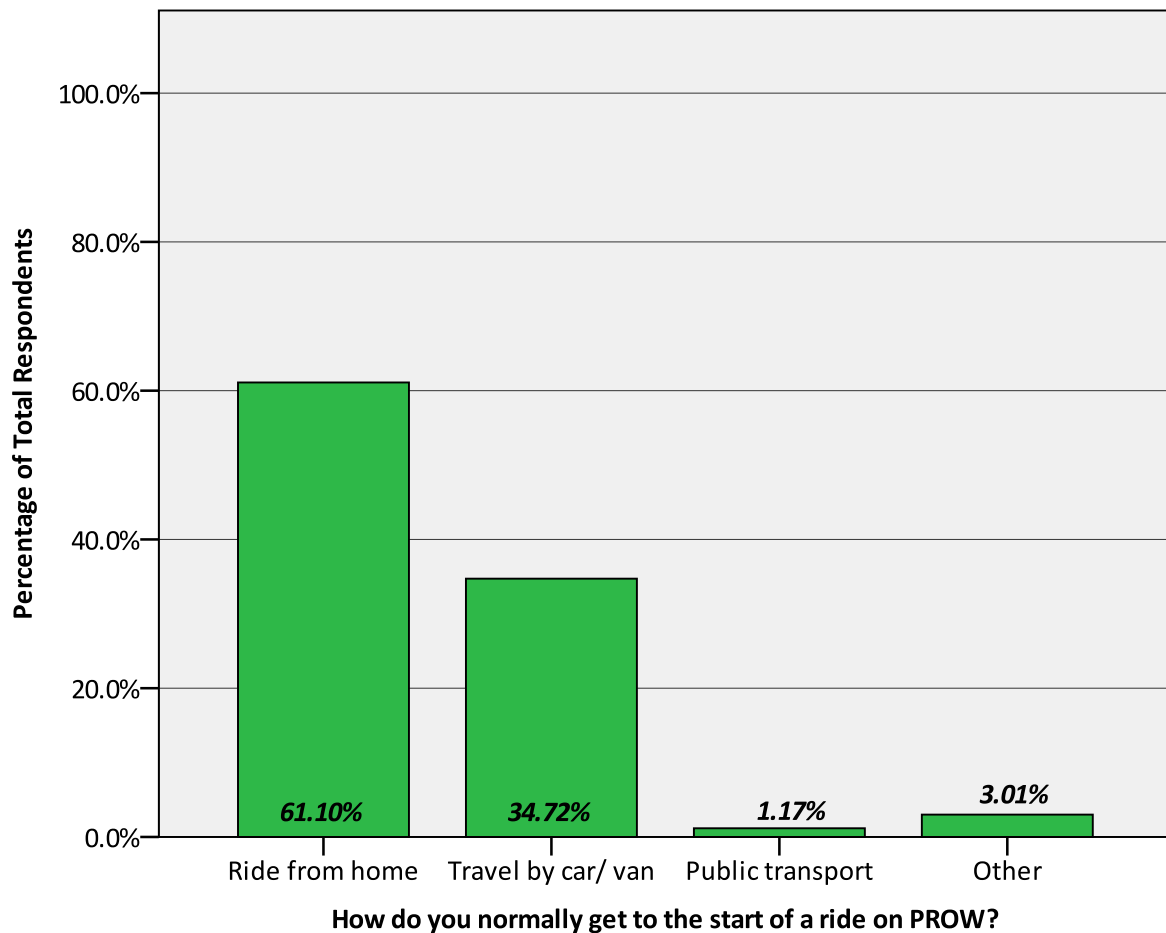


Fig. 2 Graph displaying the results of the question "How do you normally get to the start of a ride on PROW?" (Total number of respondents = 599)



Do mountain bikers ever incorporate the wider PROW network into a ride at a trail centre or are they treated as two distinct choices of riding?

Generally speaking PROW and trail centres are considered to be two different choices of riding for mountain bikers, but this does not stop more experienced riders from integrating the two when possible to give themselves the best options for routes. This is normally done in order to make a ride longer and more challenging - it is less popular with beginners. The fact that many respondents had never tried this despite them using both trail centres and PROW separately suggests that improved integration could be a boon to improving wider access to the countryside for mountain biking. The majority of respondents agreed that this would not only offer a better choice of routes but in certain circumstances could potentially

offer a more sustainable solution for mountain bikers to access trail centres – enabling more people to ride to trail centres rather than driving to them.

Is there a shortage of locations available for legitimate mountain biking in England and Wales?

As part of the questionnaire respondents were asked how their time mountain biking was divided between using PROW, trail centres and 'other' locations. Results indicated that in general the use of trail centres is less frequent than the use of PROW, and 'other' locations are used the least. Respondents were also given the option to specify the 'other' locations at which they ride. This question was optional in case respondents did not wish to disclose this information. Despite this, 60 respondents openly stated that they use public footpaths, there were 19 mentions of 'private land' used specifically as part of organised events or with permission, but another 67 mentions of 'private land' without mention of permission. Many respondents described using local riding spots that included woodland, disused quarries and mining areas, and even industrial wasteland not necessarily sanctioned for legitimate use. Additionally, there was mention of the use of paths that are marked on Ordnance Survey maps but not adopted as PROW. These comments suggested from the outset that despite the recent proliferation of trail centres, it is likely that there are still inadequate locations available for legitimate mountain biking.

Are mountain bikers passionate about improving their access to the countryside or are they content with what is already on offer?

Despite their reputation for being under represented in campaigns for countryside access, the research has illustrated that mountain bikers are in fact very passionate about their rights to access in the countryside. Extensive qualitative information volunteered by respondents throughout the questionnaires emphasised this. The statistics gathered on respondents' opinions on whether or not mountain bikers have enough PROW available to them and whether they should have the right to use public footpaths were areas of the survey where there was a striking consensus (Fig. 3 and 4).

Fig. 3 Graph displaying respondents' opinions of the statement "There aren't enough PROW available for mountain bikers" (Total number of respondents = 565)

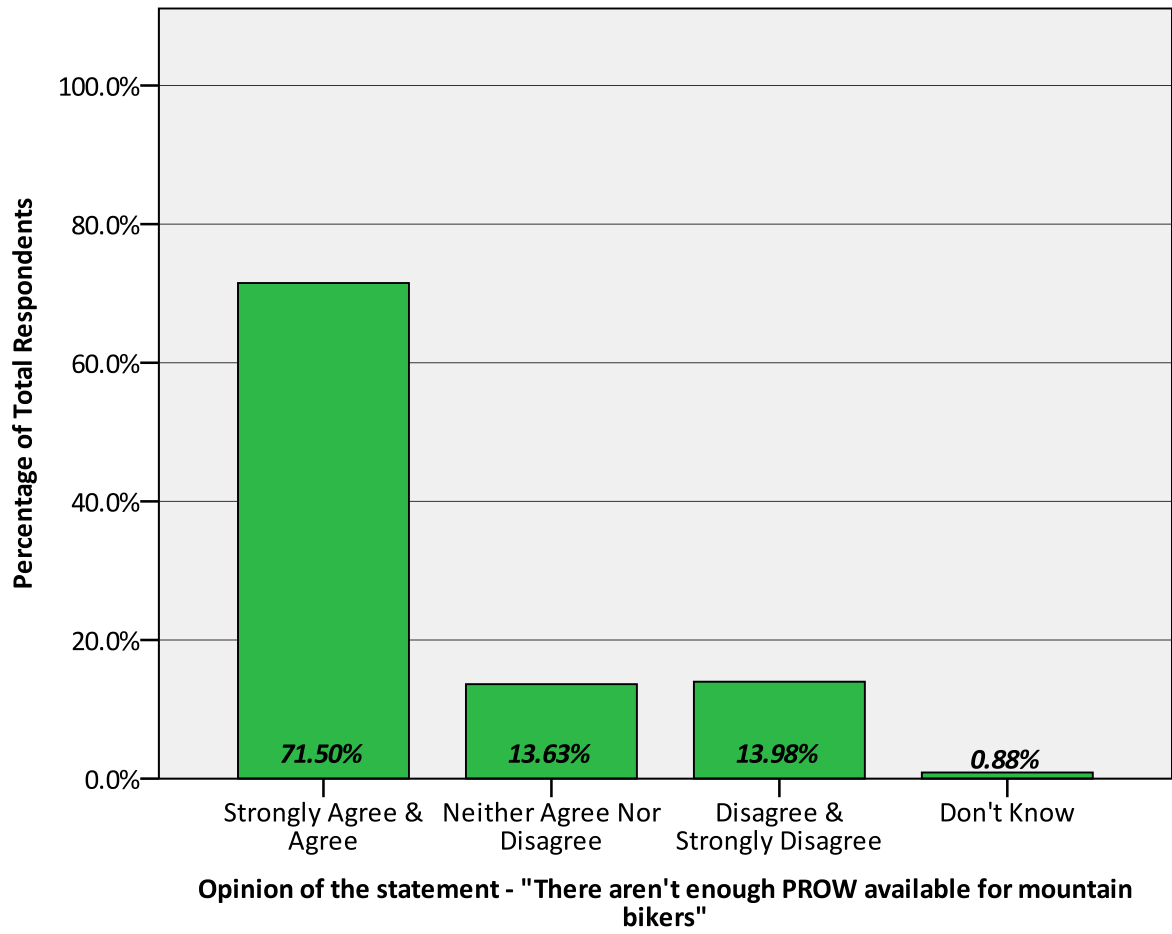
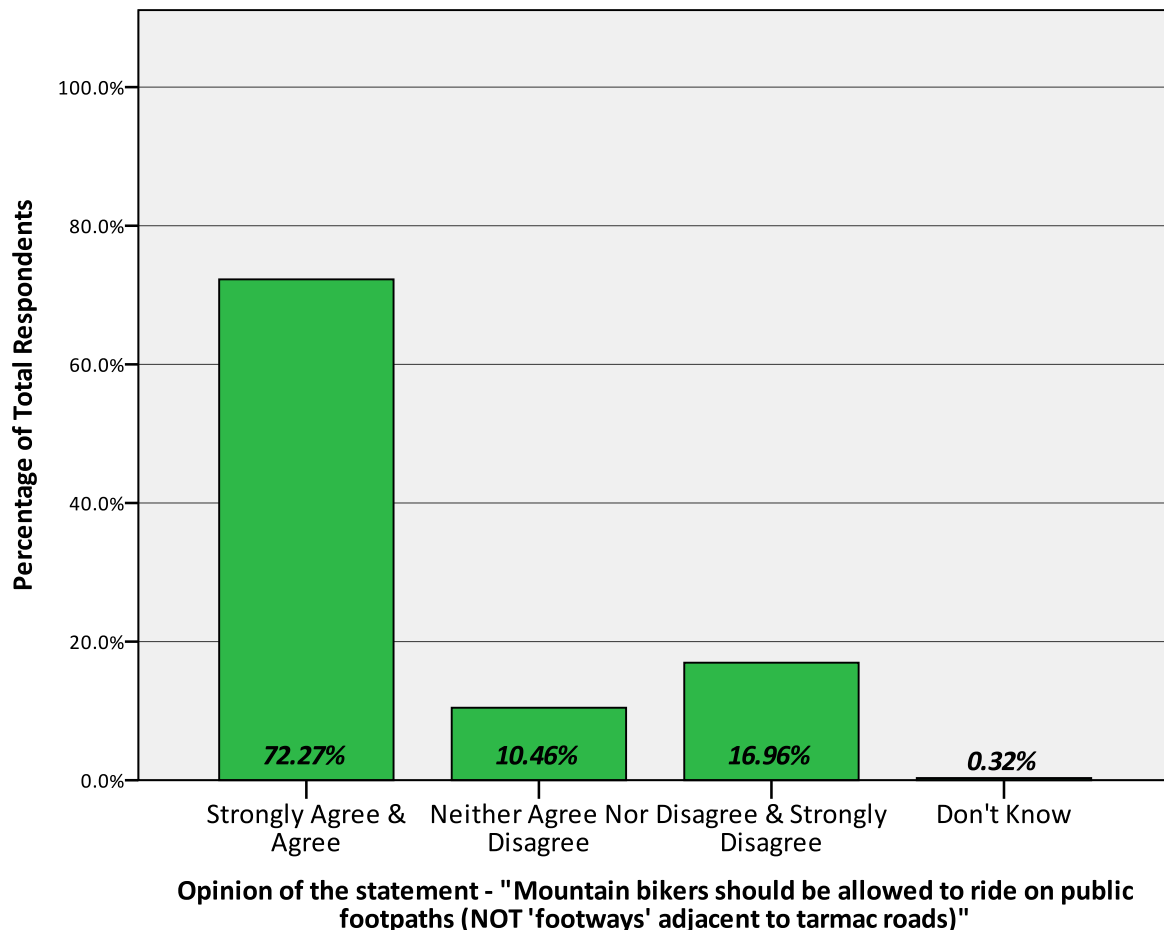


Fig. 4 Graph displaying respondents' opinions of the statement "Mountain bikers should be allowed to ride on public footpaths (NOT 'footways' adjacent to tarmac roads)" (Total number of respondents = 631)



What do mountain bikers see as a priority for the future of mountain bike access?

Directly linking with the answer to the previous question, mountain bikers clearly see a move in the direction of the Scottish access system as the priority for future access for mountain biking in England and Wales - this or a review of the PROW system that would give them greater access through increasing the number of public footpaths upgraded to bridleways or allowing cyclists to use public footpaths at their own discretion of suitability. Trail centres clearly have their place but an increased ability for mountain bikers to have greater access throughout the countryside in general would be of more benefit to a larger number of cyclists. More than half of the respondents disagreed when asked if they would rather have more trail centres than an improved PROW network, but if future purpose built

facilities could be developed in areas that are in close proximity to large areas of population this would benefit many in terms of improving accessibility.

What should the priorities be for countryside access managers in order to improve the current PROW network for mountain biking?

Respondents were asked to give their opinions on a variety of statements aimed at highlighting how riding at trail centres compares to PROW and what the main issues with the current PROW network are. The majority of statements provoked a very mixed reaction from respondents and the overall lack of consensus makes it difficult to state with certainty which initiatives would be of benefit to the majority of mountain bikers. Suggestions such as improved waymarking, reducing the number of gates, and the removal of obstructions from PROW were generally met with agreement - but not entirely across the board. Improving integration with trail centres was considered to be of more importance, together with the upgrading of footpaths that provide vital links (such as those that enable cyclists to avoid using main roads), and extending bridleways that currently change into footpaths at parish boundaries. The research has therefore highlighted that the main complaints amongst mountain bikers are not the usual perennial problems with PROW (e.g. obstructions) but rather the fragmented nature of the available network, and the fact that cyclists are restricted to bridleways when it is felt that so many footpaths would be perfectly suitable for cycling. Many mountain bikers are not concerned by the nature of some paths that other users may consider problematic because they relish the challenging and difficult terrain that PROW can offer. Indeed, some maintenance techniques that have been employed to improve routes have in certain cases frustrated mountain bikers – throughout the comments made by respondents the issue of 'over-sanitisation' of paths has been highlighted, where 'improvements' have removed the challenge, fun and enjoyment of certain off-road routes.

Conclusions and Further Research

In order to develop the research further, focus groups looking more specifically into the detail of some of the issues highlighted by respondents could be of benefit. An example of a problem raised by many respondents is the issue of 'over-sanitisation' of routes through maintenance techniques used by PROW managers. What exactly do mountain bikers mean when they refer to 'over-sanitisation', and what techniques could be employed to overcome this issue? Research into case studies of where this has occurred might enlighten PROW managers to not forget about mountain bikers' needs when seeking improvements on bridleways for walkers and equestrians. In some circumstances it may be that PROW managers could benefit from trying to engage with local mountain bikers more when carrying out PROW maintenance that will have an impact on mountain biking.

The main issue that this research has confirmed for mountain biking in England and Wales with regard to PROW is simply the fact that there aren't enough legitimate PROW available, and secondly that the designation of footpaths and bridleways are from a mountain biker's perspective arbitrary, and do not meet the requirements of today's off-road cyclists. It has been argued that this problem is in part responsible for why many mountain bikers do not respect where they do and do not have a right to ride. The consensus amongst respondents is that the situation would be vastly improved if cyclists were either given the right to use public footpaths, or if a significant number of suitable footpaths could be upgraded in status to allow cycle access. Further research is therefore needed into how landowners, walkers and others affected by such a change would react to this suggestion. Research into how different countryside user groups and landowners manage with the Scottish access system could be useful.

There is no doubt that the advent of purpose built trail centres have done great things for British mountain biking - offering more choice of locations to ride and giving more people access to the sport. It can be argued that some people who would not have been prepared to try mountain biking on PROW have been introduced to the sport through trail centres with their graded routes and bike hire facilities. Unfortunately, according to some respondents this has caused conflict with traditionalists who believe that there is now a new

generation of trail centre riders who would not be able to ride on PROW with the necessary courtesy and responsibility. Other sources of conflict amongst mountain bikers include the use of public footpaths and 'cheeky trails'. It seems there are different schools of thought amongst mountain bikers on the best way to approach access issues for mountain biking. Put simply there are those that choose to ride where they want, or feel is appropriate regardless of rights, and those that stick rigidly to only the routes where they have a right to be. The first school of thought would be that trespass is the method by which rights are gained and recorded and should therefore be encouraged. To quote one of the survey's respondents - '*We need our Kinder Scout*'. The second school of thought is that if mountain bikers are going to be taken seriously in a future debate about increasing their access to the countryside, they need to be able to show that they are already responsible users of the outdoors.

References

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