

The Hartslock Bridleway and its slippery slope

The Hartslock bridleway is an attractive footpath connecting Whitchurch with Hartslock Woods and Goring and is used both by local residents and by Thames Path walkers. Historically, it was part of an ancient packhorse trail known as **The Tuddingway**. This trail followed the course of the river Thames from Reading through Mapledurham to Whitchurch and on to Goring and Crowmarsh Gifford, linking with wharfs in each riverside community. There is a 13th century document from Crowmarsh which indicates its existence at that time.

An article by Pat Preece, published in *Oxfordshire Local History* in 2006, describes the Tuddingway's route and its history. It suggests that **Tudda** was the name of a local tribal chief and that the **'ing'** denoted territory under his control (as in Goring or Reading). As **'way'** derives from 'weg', a Saxon origin is likely. The article explains how counting the number of hedge species along the Tuddingway helped to confirm the route and its date.

The slippery slope

In March 2011 a steeply sloping part of the bridleway at the western end of our Whitchurch parish suddenly became difficult to negotiate after a decision by the county authority to remove timber steps that had deteriorated. What was left behind, soon to become known as the slippery slope, led to injuries and caused walkers, cyclists and riders to avoid the area. An energetic local campaign for restoration of the steps began, which eventually resulted in the installation by Oxfordshire County Council of a new and better set of steps in August 2012.



The campaign to restore safe conditions was led by Eric Hartley (right), Whitchurch resident and retired safety officer, who communicated tirelessly with no fewer than 13 national and county officials over a 16 month period. His file of emails on the subject gradually swelled to more than 200 pages. Eric's account of the events follows.



The saga of the steps

In 1993 someone (probably within the then Countryside Commission) decided that the slope leading into Hartslock Wood (within the Whitchurch boundary) would be more easily traversed if a series of steps was introduced. The existing scrub access was cleared away and the new steps were welcomed by walkers and horse riders alike. It may be that this decision was taken and funding provided for this section as part of setting up one of our long distance National Trails - the Thames Path. In 1996 the bridleway became part of the Thames Path. Since then this has brought an ever increasing number of visiting walkers to and through the village.

Over the years the condition of the steps deteriorated, there was much more use of the route by cyclists and some complaint by the British Horse Society. In July 2010 two Officers from OCC's Countryside Services (who had taken over responsibility for the Path's maintenance), together with one officer from National Trails, took the decision to remove them. However, it wasn't until March 2011, after an accident, that they authorised the summary removal of the steps. They did this without determining how the steps were to be replaced and without giving us prior notice of their intent (as required by their own Code of Practice). They have since told us that the previous steps could not be repaired or modified because they were not in line with current legislation.

Suddenly our local population found themselves denied their previous access. Since that time the Parish Council and many other interested parties have pressed to have their ancient right of way restored. Many of our visiting walkers found themselves faced with a previously unannounced and unexpected situation on what is otherwise, throughout, a long distance trail for all levels of walkers.

The surface was regraded twice but in the absence of an adequate foothold or handhold many walkers could not use this section of the path. Many horse riders also considered the slope and its surface too dangerous and they too ceased to use it. Long distance cyclists were warned that this section was to be considered out of use for essential maintenance but no such warning or information was given to the long distance walkers or horse riders. Information notices and warning signs were eventually placed at the head and bottom of the slope at our insistence.

Correspondence with OCC Countryside Services, National Trails and Natural England was frequent and almost continuous for 16 months and we received numerous replies indicating a speedy resolution to the problem. We informed them of the need to replace



the steps and to provide a handrail and that the surface they had provided was unsuitable. At long last, they too realised that they had created a problem rather than solved one.

Following another more serious accident, new steps (72 of them) and a smart handrail have now been installed (August 2012) and should serve well for many years to come. Once again we have a safe means of access to Hartslock Woods and beyond and our section of this ancient route is now restored.

Eric Hartley

Naming the steps

A competition was held at the Whitchurch fete in September 2012 to name the new steps. The name selected was: **The Hartley Steps.**

Richard Wingfield, 1.10.12