Historic Rights of Way Project – Guidance for Volunteers
Stage 1: Identifying Potential Routes

Thank you for volunteering to help British Canoeing research potential water-side rights of way. It is important such routes are identified, researched and claimed before the cut off date in 2026 – otherwise they could be lost forever.

This guide is intended to help you understand how to look for and log potentially lost routes. Our online project pages for this Historic Rights of Way project also have links to a variety of resources and training tools – and we'll keep you updated as we learn of any new resources too. Please always feel free to contact us for any advice or help with the rivers you are researching.

This guide is split into the following sections:
1. The River Sections
2. The Online Reporting Tool
3. Overview of Information Sources
4. Spotters Guide
5. Glossary of Terms

1 – The Sections of River

In order to ensure a systematic approach to assessing our rivers, lakes and other waterbodies for potentially lost Rights of Way (RoW) we are asking each volunteer to research a section of river approximately 10 miles in length. Each will have a code (e.g. TRT004 for a section on the River Trent) which we'll pass on to volunteers.

It is important that, for each source of information used research is conducted systematically along the river, to avoid missing any potential routes.

We recommend starting upstream, working downstream, and then repeating this for each new source of information. Each river section will have a code (e.g. a section of the Severn might be SVN012). This code will be used to record any potential routes, to help us ensure each one is followed up effectively.

2 – The Online Reporting tool

We have prepared an online form to help you report any potential Historic Routes to us. You can find this on the [Historic Rights of Way section of our website](.).[1]

For Stage 1 this contains the following questions to complete:
- River Section – the code for your allocated river section (e.g. TYN001)
- Route Code – an identifier for the potential route (e.g. TYN001-001)
- Type of Route – some basic idea of what type of route this is – from current use to historic footpath
- Historic Use – the likely past use of the route – e.g. a ford or a ferry point
- 10 Digit Grid Reference – This allows us to accurately pinpoint the route. You can get a 10 digit code from the following website - http://gridreferencefinder.com/
- Details – Give us as much as you can!

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[1] https://www.britishcanoeing.org.uk/guidance-resources/waterways-environment/projects/historic-footpaths/get-involved

We recommend working through all of the sources outlined below first – use a spreadsheet or notepad to jot down each potential access point / path / route. You may find more information in the rest of your research to add to it. Then, once you have been through all of these sources add each point to the Online Reporting Tool.

Hopefully the information in this guide will give you all the information you need to fill in this form – but please don't hesitate to contact us via access@britishcanoeing.org.uk if you have any questions.

3 – Overview of Information Sources

There are a range of resources that should prove useful in finding out more about your river section, especially:
- Library of Scotland Online Mapping – great source of historic maps
- Modern Ordnance Survey maps
- Definitive Maps
- Web Searches
- PaddlePoints
- Local knowledge and information

3.1 Library of Scotland Online Mapping

Ironically, considering this project is looking at rivers and waterbodies in England and Wales, one of the best online sources of information is the National Library of Scotland! They have been digitising historic Ordnance Survey maps, with the following being the most useful to researchers looking at potentially missing routes:
- Ordnance Survey 25 Inch, 1841-1952 – click here to view[2]
  (Currently only limited coverage, but improving day-by-day, with Southern England and the English Midlands having the best coverage)
- Ordnance Survey Maps – 6 in 1842-1952 – click here to view[3]
- Ordnance Survey, 1:25,000 - 1937-1961 – click to view[4]
- Ordnance Survey, One-inch Revised new series, 1892-1908 - click to view[5]

When using these maps we recommend:
- Using either the 'seamless zoomable layer' option (especially if you have the relevant modern OS map to hand) or the 'zoomable layer side-by-side' option
- Starting at one end of your river section and working along it from end to end. If the maps shown above are all available in your area work through each one individually, rather than mixing and matching as you go – for each of the maps start at one end and work through before moving to the next map.
- Don't forget backwaters of rivers! Any places where people could launch are needed, so consider all branches of a river.
- Don't look at tributaries – these will become their own sections.
- Compare the route to the relevant Online Definitive Map (see below) to see if they appear on them, and what obvious differences there are

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[2] http://maps.nls.uk/os/25inch-england-and-wales/index.html
[3] http://maps.nls.uk/os/6inch-england-and-wales/index.html
[4] http://maps.nls.uk/os/25k-gb-1937-61/index.html
[5] http://maps.nls.uk/os/one-inch-rev-new-series/index.html

Be Sure to Record (see the Spotter's Guide below for examples):
- *All paths and tracks that appear to either run to or along the water's edge;*
- *All ferries and fords marked on the maps;*
- *Any other points you suspect maybe relevant – for example wharfs, bridges, roads*
- *If in doubt – record it!*

3.2 Modern Ordnance Survey Maps

The current OS maps can be a great resource for comparing against historic maps (such as those listed above) and/or against Online Definitive Maps. They can also help:
- identify possible locations along the waterside where missing routes might be; or
- help us assess whether current footpaths may be extended to match their historic routes.

Examine the OS map for your area, and see if any Footpaths or Bridleways that come to odd dead-ends, or head to the river but don't reappear at the other side. These may be worth extra checking to see if they have been only partially recorded. If you can't find any record of a missing route / partial route from the historic mapping or through historic records, still record it on the Online Reporting Tool so that we can potential flag it to other local groups.

Be Sure to Record:
- *Any riverside path or bridleway on the current OS maps;*
- *Any Rights of Way that appear to stop randomly – for example in a field close to a river. These are often under-record Rights of Way that could have crossed the river.*
- *Any bridge or ford marked on the current mapping – these may be the site of ancient fording points too*

3.4 Definitive Maps

The only legally Definitive Maps of Rights of Way are held at local council offices. You can see these in person, but sometimes you need to book in advance. However, nearly all councils have an Online Definitive Map. These are **not** legally definitive – only the copy at County Hall is required by law to be 'definitive'. They are however likely to be the most definitive you can access via the internet – so we recommend them for aiding your research.

You can find your local council's Online Definitive map through their countryside and rights of way webpages. Many councils use http://www.rowmaps.com, so try there first!

Compare any potentially routes you identify from the mapping sources above to the Online Definitive Map. How well do they match up? Still record any route you see, even if it is on the Online definitive Map – we still need to check they touch the water's edge, or fiond out more about their width for example.

Be Sure to Record:
- *Any riverside path or bridleway on the current OS maps;*
- *Any Rights of Way that appear to stop randomly – for example in a field close to a river. These are often under-record Rights of Way that could have crossed the river.*
- *Any bridge or ford marked on the current mapping – these may be the site of ancient fording points too*

3.5 Web Searches

When you have been through each of the mapping sources above we recommend a quick web search for the points you have identified. Some of these will yield local history and information that adds to the claim for a Right of Way – particularly for old ferries and ford. Often you'll find photos and supporting information.

This information is unlikely to make a claim for a Right of Way 100% certain – but it will help us greatly in considering the strongest candidates for further research at Stage 2.

3.6 PaddlePoints

Log any access point currently listed on PaddlePoints (www.paddlepoints.net). This will be useful context for prioritising routes to claim – and they could have gained Public Rights in themselves too.

3.7 Local Knowledge and Information

Local knowledge will help you find out more about how and where the river is used and accessed – log all the points you hear about. Local paddlers may also know about the history of the area, for example knowing more about old fords or paths. Use as many resources as you can to gain local knowledge, especially:
- Input from local paddlers about the sites they use;
- Contacting local clubs, centres or activity providers;
- Forums like Song of the Paddle or UKRGB;
- Sites like Paddle Points or Rainchasers;
- Taking a trip along the river!

Be Sure to Record:
- *Any point on the river bank that is currently used for accessing the water;*
- *Details of whether this access is formal (e.g. permitted by the landowner) or informal*

4 - A Spotter's Guide

The images below should give a good idea of the types of potential routes we need logging for Stage 1 of the Historic Rights of Way project. However, if in doubt - log it! We can always filter and/or prioritise routes for further investigation in later stages of the project.

These examples are mostly from one section of river, roughly from Weston-on-Trent to Trent Lock on (surprise!) the River Trent.

If you have any questions about this guide or the project in general don't hesitate to contact us at: access@britishcanoeing.org.uk or via 0300 0119 500.

Most of the images used from historic mapping are from the Library of Scotland's archive of Ordnance Survey 25 Inch, 1841-1952 maps[6]. These are the best sources to use if possible. We've tried to include examples from other maps for comparison too.

The captions for the photos show which maps they are taken from – use the links above to find them online.

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[6] Accessed from - http://maps.nls.uk/os/25inch-england-and-wales/index.html.

- Historic Ferry Route:
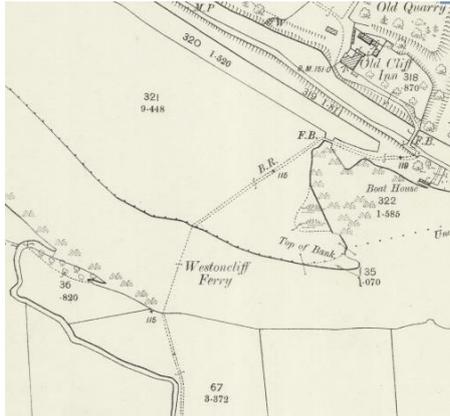
Ordnance Survey 25 Inch, 1841-1952

This image (left) shows a ferry is marked on this historic map (at SK 39267 27238[7]). *Always enter a record for ferries!* We would need to follow up such routes even where they appear correct on the current maps.

However… as this extract from the Online Definitive Map shows, the route is not adequately logged. The Bridleway (Green) ends partway to the river.
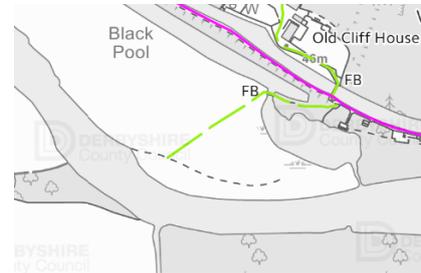

Online Definitive Map

All the information we gather on routes like this at Stage 1 will help us prioritise the next stage of research. So where a ferry is identified check other mapping sources too - especially the Online Definitive Map. Searching the web may also turn up historical records of the ferry and it's uses. These won't be enough (usually) to secure the application on their own, but they will provide very valuable context and information to add to a claim.
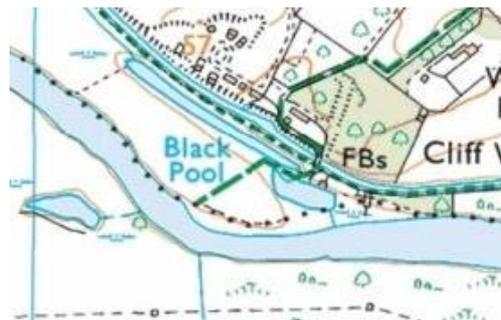
Note how in each of the three maps below the route shows differently, moving from a ferry, to a footbridge, to the stump of a path!
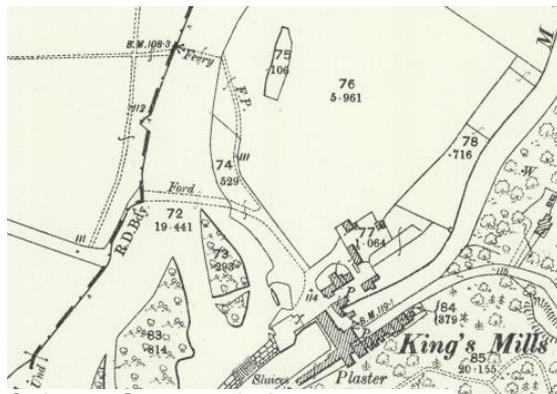

Ordnance Survey, One-inch Revised new series, 1892-1908
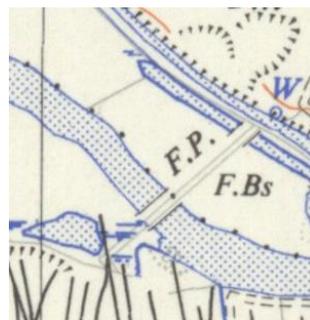
Ordnance Survey, 1:25,000 - 1937-1961

Modern Ordnance survey map (via Bing)

- Historic Fords:

Ordnance Survey 25 Inch, 1841-1952

These could be vital to this project! Fords were intended for use on foot or horseback - so the actual Right of Way would explicitly include the river bed. Log all fords, even if they appear well matched up on current Ordnance Survey or Definitive Maps. In this example (SK 41624 27534[8]) the Ferry route (see above for details on Ferry routes) does appear represented on current Rights of Way maps (but we still need it logged to check the route touches the river's edge).

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[7] Click http://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/#zoom=17&lat=52.8419&lon=-1.4177&layers=171&b=1 to see this map

[8] Click http://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/#zoom=17&lat=52.8445&lon=-1.3839&layers=171&b=1 to see this map

However - the route of this ford is not shown on either Definitive Maps, or Ordnance Survey. Maybe it was private - but that's unlikely. It could be a low priority for us if the ferry close by is well logged - but the ford runs by a better track for access than the Ferry. So still one we should investigate.

The following excerpts show the same location:
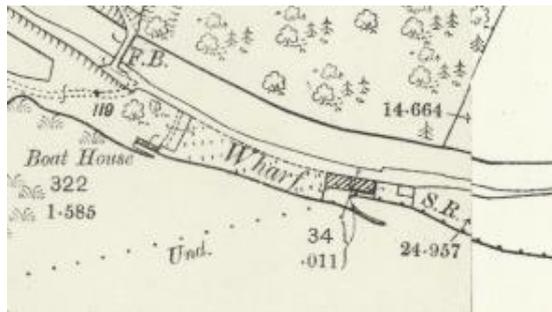

Ordnance Survey, 1:25,000 - 1937-1961

Ordnance Survey, One-inch Revised new series, 1892-1908

Modern Ordnance survey map (via Bing)

- Historic Wharfs:
This image shows an old Wharf, sitting between the River Trent and the Trent and Mersey Canal. Such wharfs may have been private - but some were public, and so there could be a Public Right of Way leading up to them. Much old infrastructure like this has now been excluded from modern mapping (see OS excerpt) as it isn't relevant anymore. But notifying wharfs like this also helps demonstrate historic use of the river - in this case much further upstream than many would accept is permitted on the River Trent.
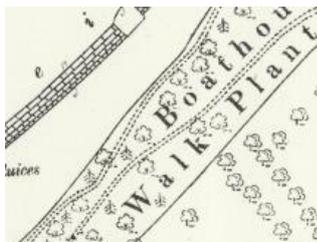

Ordnance Survey 25 Inch, 1841-1952
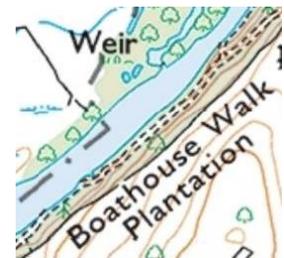

Modern Ordnance survey map (via Bing)

- Riverside Paths
Older maps show paths, tracks, bridleways in variety of ways - usually without distinguishing whether they are public or private. Some examples are below. Log any you see that run up close (within a few meters) of the riverside - but check modern online Definitive Maps and/or Ordnance Survey maps to see if they still show on maps and if they are already Rights of Way.
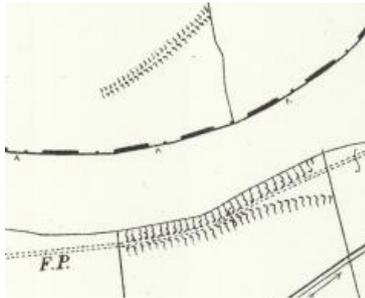

Ordnance Survey 25 Inch, 1841-1952

The dotted lines in this map (at SK 41663 27342) show forestry tracks, which are not shown as Rights of Way on current mapping. They'll likely be a low priority for further investigation - but worth us tracking recording them still.

Modern Ordnance survey map (via Bing)

This track is specifically marked as a F.P. - a good sign! It is well mapped on modern mapping as a Public Footpath. Logging it through this project will enable us to check if at any point the path touches the water's edge - and if it doesn't if it should! It's not a long distance from a lane that could be used for parking
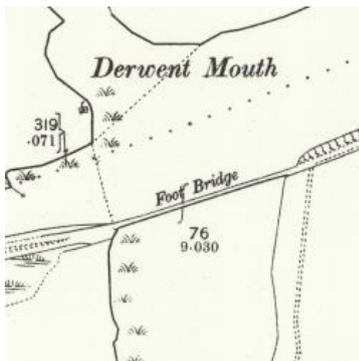
Ordnance Survey 25 Inch, 1841-1952

Modern Ordnance survey map (via Bing)

This third view of the same path shows how important it is to use a range of maps for the research – the path is marked on this map, but the scale, monotone and number of mapped features makes it hard to spot.


Ordnance Survey, One-inch Revised new series, 1892-1908

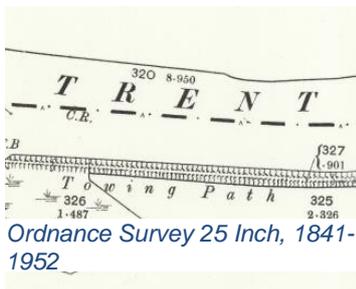

Ordnance Survey 25 Inch, 1841-1952

The modern foot bridge here is a short distance upstream - so this could be an additional route to the river. The area is very remote, so maybe it would be low priority, but if it's not logged we'll never know! The current Online Definitive Map still shows the historic rout as a RoW, not the newer bridge.
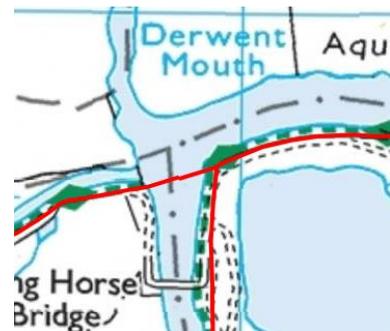
Online Definitive Map (red line shows legal RoW)

Ordnance Survey 25 Inch, 1841-1952

This route is marked as Towing Path - some of which were private and never gained public rights. However this one is a current RoW - and as a towpath likely should be defined as touching the water's edge, so worth us checking.

- Road Crossings

Many (probably most) road crossings used the same points over a river previously used for a ferry or fording point. This means there could be rights to access the water's edge alongside the bridge. So log any road bridge you see crossing a river. This bridge (at SK 44570 29872) has

Ordnance Survey 25 Inch, 1841-1952

actually now been removed - replaced by a more modern road a few hundred meters to the East. So this road bridge would not have shown up if we were just looking at modern maps for road crossings.

Modern Ordnance survey map (via Bing)

Appendix A – Glossary

We've prepared the glossary below to help describe some of the terms you may come across in the guidance to this project, or when research Public Rights of Way

Abbreviation	Full Term	Description
BOAT	Byway Open to All Traffic	These RoW are open to all vehicles. They can be popular with recreational motor vehicles (e.g. 4x4s).
BW	Bridleway	Bridleways are maintained and recorded in a similar manner to Public Footpaths, but are also able to be legally used by horses and cycles.
DM	Definitive Map	This is a key record, maintained as a legal requirement by all County / Unitary Councils in England and Wales. It shows details of all RoW in the council's area, along with other details, for example the width of the path, identifying names etc. If an historic RoW is not logged on the relevant council's DM by 2026 it will be lost forever. Only the council's hard-copy of the map, available to the public upon request, is considered to be legally definitive – online versions of the DM may miss some routes on occasion, so all routes should be checked against the legally definitive version.
IPROW	Institute for Public Rights of Way	An professional body representing those working in the field of Public Rights of Way
LA	Local Authority	The local council that is responsible for maintaining the Definitive Map. This could be a Unitary Authority or Metropolitan Authority which has no District Councils under it (such as Sheffield, or Central Bedfordshire) or a Upper Tier Authority – such as a County Council – which has Borough Council underneath it (Borough Councils are not responsible for the RoW network).[9]

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[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_government_in_England

LOS	List of Streets	A document that all highway authorities are obliged to keep that is a record of all highways maintainable at public expense. This list does not legally define status like the Definitive Map but all the routes on it are public highways so they are at least of footpath status.
ODM	Online Definitive Map	Online version of the Definitive Map. These are not 'legally' definitive – only the copies held at county hall are. They should prove a very useful resource still – and are more accurate for RoW than OS maps. Beware councils have been known to miss 'inconvenient' RoW or Streets from their non-definitive highway mapping!
OS	Ordnance Survey	The world's best mapping?! Possibly, but beware as they are not perfect – and certainly not legally definitive – for mapping RoW.
PF	Public Footpath	The backbone of the English and Welsh RoW network, and a system very specific to these countries (often to the envy of other nations). Public Footpaths can only legally be accessed by people on foot, carrying a right to 'pass and repass'
PR	Public Rights	A term used to indicate the public has rights to the route, even where it is on private property. These rights vary depending on the type of route and it's history.
PRN	Public Right of Navigation	A much contested term. A right of navigation is, like for a land-based RoW, assumed to be a right to 'pass and repass'. Sucxh a right could exist at the national level on all physically navigable rivers – but this is heavily disputed. Rights can also exist on specific rivers, but can still be open to dispute. PRNs on rivers range from the commonly accepted, such as the Upper Thames, or the Wye below Hay-on-Wye, through to the heavily contested, such as the River Rother in Sussex.
PRoW	Public Rights of Way	The term used for the study, development and implementation fo Rights of Way policy in England and Wales.
OS	Ordnance Survey	The greatest mapping in the world! But also not legally Definitive – so a RoW appearing on an OS map does not fully confirm it as a legal RoW – nor does the absence of a route mean it doesn't hold Public Rights. Modern OS maps will be useful in seeing if a RoW is listed – but the LA's Definitive Maps are a fuller record.
RoW	Right of Way	A route on land which holds Public Rights – such as a Footpath, Bridleway, BOAT or Restricted Byway