

Time running out to save lost walks

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When Chris Smith first read about Virginia Woolf's favourite walk something struck him as odd.

According to her diaries, the writer would leave Monk's House, which she shared with her husband, Leonard, and stroll down a track to the River Ouse. She would then walk along the riverbank, cross to the other side and climb up the downs to a shepherd's hut known as Muggery Pope. Mr Smith pored over a map, trying to retrace her route, and realised that anyone hoping to reach Muggery Pope from the riverbank today would risk an accusation of trespass. The track up the downs had disappeared from the map.

It is one of the thousands of historic paths that campaigners are trying to save before a government deadline extinguishes them for ever. Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, members of the public must make the case before 2026 for historic paths and bridleways that are not marked on official maps.

Volunteers such as Mr Smith, 67, a retired charity worker from East Sussex, insist that the deadline is impossible because local authorities are either overwhelmed or just ignoring their requests. He has submitted 30 applications since 2015, none of which has yet been determined.

There are more than 5,000 applications waiting to be processed across England and Wales, according to figures obtained under a freedom of information request. The nations boast a network of 140,000 miles of paths and bridleways, and government estimates suggest that a further 10,000 miles or 20,000 paths are unrecorded. Discovering Lost Ways, a £15 million government scheme to record old rights of way, was scrapped in 2008 because of the cost.

Christopher Somerville, author of *The Times* guide to Britain's best walks, said snippets of forgotten paths often linked better-known routes. Britain's public rights



Rights of Way

- England and Wales have 140,000 miles of public rights of way, including public footpaths and bridleways, marked on official maps.
- Government estimates suggest that a further 10,000 miles of rights of way or 20,000 paths are unmarked. Campaigners say the true

- figure is much higher.
- Under English common law rights of way do not expire, but the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 required all rights of way to be recorded.
- Only 22 per cent of the existing rights of way network is accessible to horses.
- Campaigners say that recording new routes

will not expose them to quad bikes or 4x4 vehicles, but to cyclists, riders and walkers.



Source: Times research, Ramblers, British Horse Society

of way were the "pride and envy of the world" he said. "It is really important that they are recorded but I shouldn't think it is remotely possible by 2026." He added: "It benefits landowners, walkers, riders and cyclists — anyone using the

paths — for everyone to know exactly where they are allowed to be." Stuart Maconie, the DJ and broadcaster who is president of the Ramblers, a charity that promotes walking, said that such paths were a "vital part of our heritage". The organisation has urged Michael Gove, the environment secretary, to postpone or abolish the

Volunteers are using evidence such as the diaries of Virginia Woolf, below left, to try to get routes missing from modern maps reinstated before a 2026 deadline

2026 deadline. Mr Gove has promised to improve access to the countryside.

"Thousands of miles of historic rights of way are at risk of being lost for ever," Mr Maconie said. "We must not miss this opportunity to put these paths back on the map, ensuring that they can be used and enjoyed by generations to come."

Christopher Price, a director of policy at the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), which represents landowners and rural businesses, said that rights of way had often been created "in very different times and for

purposes that are not always relevant in the 21st century".

He added: "The focus should be ensuring public resources are spent on properly maintaining and looking after the rights of way which are being used so that the public can continue to enjoy them."

East Sussex county council said that it was aware of Mr Smith's claims and "working through these systematically". It is not only Woolf that Mr Smith has used for evidence. One of his claims cites a painting by the 20th-century artist Eric Ravilious, best known for his paintings of the South Downs, before he died in a plane crash in 1942. Another references the biography of Elizabeth David, the doyenne of cookery books.

"It is a form of competitive history," Mr Smith said. "People like me use historical documents to try and show there is a right of way. Then the landowners hire a consultant who tries to use the same documents or sometimes different documents, to show that there wasn't. And then the local authority, at their leisure, decides who is right."

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