

The recording of rights of way on definitive maps began after the last war with the same legislation that created national parks to protect landscapes of outstanding value. Equally important to our natural heritage were the many footpaths and bridleways, alleyways, packways, driftways and forsaken roads that threaded their way through every part of our towns and countryside. Obsolescent from a practical point of view, much of this fragile network with its historic character and value for wildlife was in danger of obliteration in the modern world as a result of accelerating urban development and the intensification of agriculture. It was essential that the legislation should provide a means of identifying and protecting it before it disappeared for ever.

Although they embraced the widest possible area of landscape, definitive maps were created for the benefit of walker and rider and concerned themselves with one aspect only, that of highways trodden and ridden or which were now generally used for that purpose. By means of the maps, a complete record of proven non-vehicular routes could be assembled, preserving public access to what might be called the greatest national park of all, our countryside as a whole. In this way the most extensive and effective means of peacefully and lawfully enjoying the land of one's birth would be secured for every citizen. Fifty years on these maps are a thriving testimony to the foresight of people who realised the significance of paths and lanes, both as a way of being in the countryside and for the contribution they make to the landscape in their own right.

In 1949 roads were on the brink of modernisation and would quickly become the hostile environment non-motorised users have to cope with today. Minor highways of the kind recorded on definitive maps were old-fashioned and forgotten by practical transportation. Half a century later we have come full circle. We are looking for sustainable alternatives to the car that will be healthier for us and the environment. Fortunately through the recording process of definitive maps we have managed to preserve a ready-made network of vehicle-free routes and abandoned roads more or less intact, and can begin to realise their potential to serve again in a modern context some of the practical purposes which originally created them.

A glance at the Definitive Map for the Isle of Wight as a whole reveals that footpaths, bridleways and byways form a large and richly-interconnected proportion of the Island's transport infrastructure. In fact their total length, some 500 miles in all, equals that of the road system itself. In its complete form, the Map serves to bring this less visible 'green' network into sharper focus in the public eye, encouraging us to discover its potential not just for recreation, but for the practical daily uses which brought it into being.