

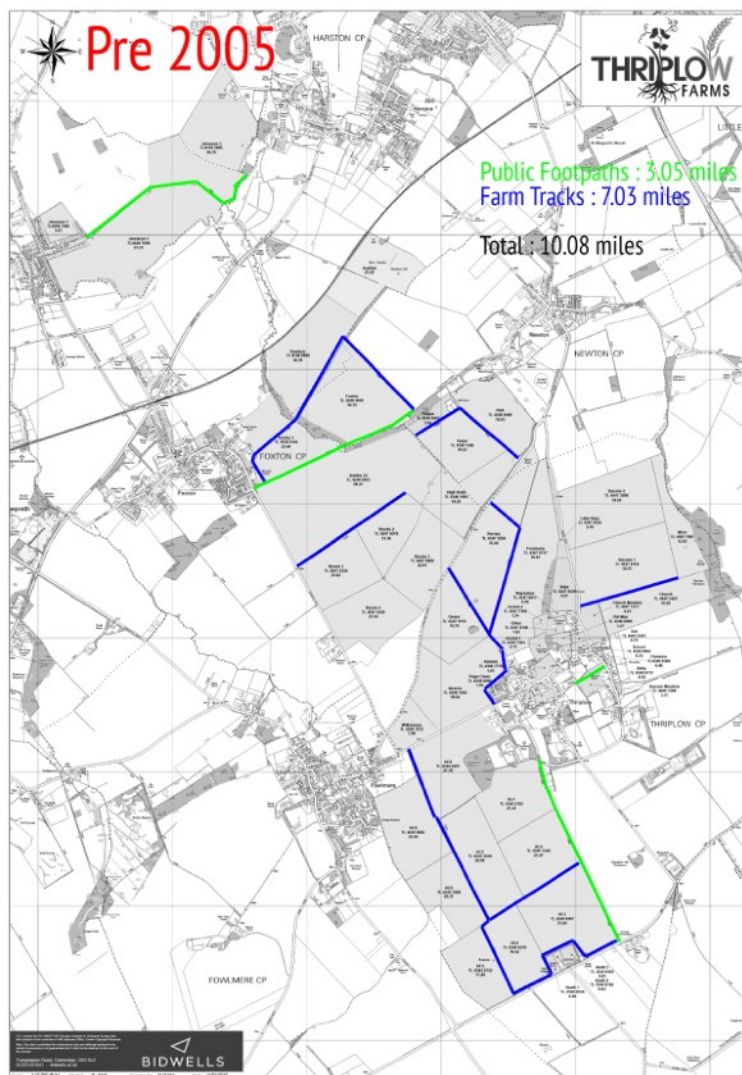
Walking on Thriplow Farm

February 2018

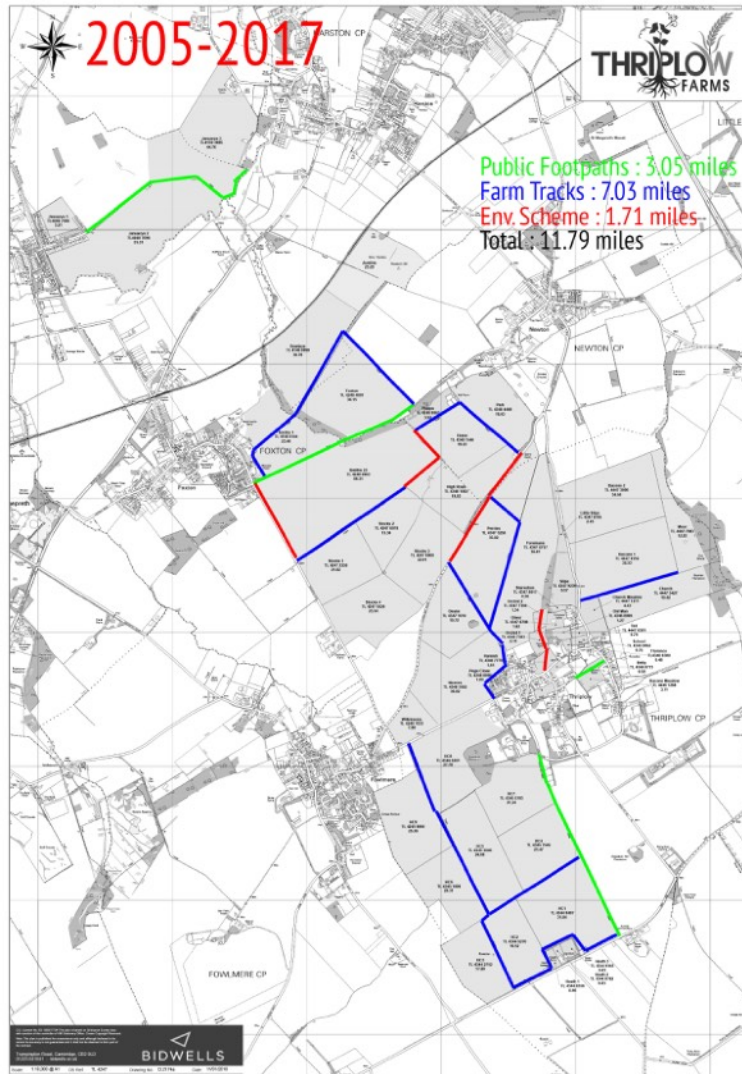
In 2017 we had a large round of changes on the farm, some of which have impacted where there is public access for walkers. This has prompted many people to ask for details of what has happened, and so here is a, hopefully, comprehensive answer.

Thriplow Farm has four footpaths which cross our land. One joins Thriplow to the A505, one is in the middle of Thriplow itself, one joins Newton & Foxton, and the other joins Barrington & Harston. These paths are always open to the public, as a legal requirement. Incidentally, whilst dogs do not have to be on a lead when using a footpath, they must be “under close control”, and they must be actually on the footpath - so please do not let dogs run on to the fields or in to the woods. In total there are just over 3 miles of footpaths on our land.

In addition to the footpaths, for as long as anyone can remember, we have also allowed access on to our farm tracks. These are not public rights of way, but we do grant “Permissive Access” to them. We do have a few rules - dogs must be kept on leads at all times, and no horse riding or powered vehicles are allowed. Prior to 2005, we had around 7 miles of these permissive access farm tracks, laid out as shown in this map:



What happened in 2005 was that we joined a government environmental scheme, called ELS/HLS (which stands for entry level scheme/higher level scheme). Something which they were very keen to promote at that time was public access to the countryside, as most farm land is kept entirely private. To accomplish this, it was decided to pay farmers to open up permissive access routes on their land. We had a good start on this as our tracks were already accessible, so the plan was to open up a few more paths on some grass strips around the farm in strategic locations to make nicer walks. Generally this was done by linking up existing open tracks to make loops.

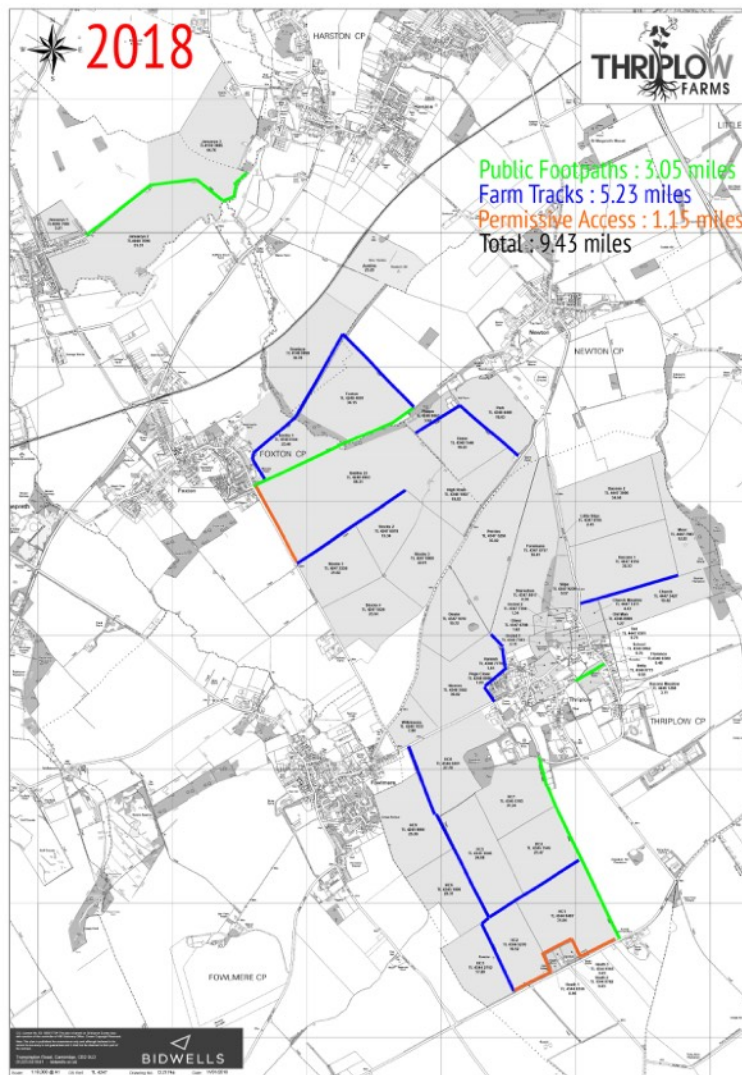


Generally this worked well, although an unfortunate side effect was that some people mistakenly believed all of the grass strips on the farm were open for public access. This was not the case, and sadly some of the wildlife areas were damaged as paths were formed. In total another 1.7 miles of access was opened up under this scheme, and it was widely used over the next 12 years.

In 2017, our ELS/HLS agreement expired. We were still keen to be in a scheme, as the benefits to the local ecology really seemed to have made a difference. A couple of years before this, the ELS/HLS programme was replaced by a new one, called Countryside Stewardship. We applied to join the higher tier of CS, and were lucky enough to be accepted into an agreement which was supposed to have started in January 2017. There were some paperwork delays, but a few months later we had joined, with a scheme designed by Natural England specifically tailored to the farm and its local setting. At some point in the process of designing the new CS scheme, the powers-that-be must have

decided that they were no longer as interested in public access to farm land, and instead wanted to focus on the ecological benefits. What this means in practice is that not only will they not pay farmers to open up their land, they will not allow any access at all on to the areas which are part of the scheme. This has the unfortunate effect of rolling back the farm access to what it was before 2005, with the walking loops that had been created ceasing to exist.

At the same time we decided, for farming reasons, to change a few of our tracks, leaving the following public access routes:



You may notice the two orange lines, which are not farm tracks, but are areas we have been able to leave as permissive access to try and keep some of the benefits for walkers which we had before. The biggest change is really the fields to the northwest of Thriplow, where the tracks have been removed and replaced with wildflower strips. These were really redundant for us, and so it made sense to put them to good ecological use.

The removal of access from this area, along with the short section making a second loop from Foxton to Newton, has caused plenty of people to voice their displeasure towards me. I can only apologise for this, and say that it is not how I would have liked the new CS scheme to be run. I have asked Natural England (who administer these schemes) on several occasions whether it would be possible to get permission to grant access to any or all of these wildlife areas - without any payments to us - and the answer is always No. Clearly the priorities have changed, and I am not able to alter

them. I would encourage anyone who feels strongly about this to write to Natural England to tell them so, I would be more than happy to sign up for access if it were allowed.

Another question I am often asked is, why did you remove tracks when you could have put wildlife strips next to them instead. This is a fair question, and the answer is that when the tracks are redundant, it makes a lot more sense for us to use these areas as wildlife areas rather than take areas out of productive fields to do the same thing. Depending on your viewpoint, you may think this is selfish. However, please consider that almost every other farm in the UK would only have access in places where it is legally required, and nowhere else. That would mean that on the map above, only the green lines would be accessible. Everything which is blue or orange on the map we are opening up voluntarily, without any payment or benefit to ourselves. I would really appreciate it if this decision was respected, and the wildlife areas were left in the peace they were designed for.

One other point that I am sometimes asked about is, “what about Right to Roam, can’t I go wherever I want?”. I must admit, that the first time someone said this to me, they said it with such conviction that it made me unsure as to if they were in fact right. It turns out that the short answer is No, there is no Right to Roam on farmland in general, it is really moors and mountains that the legislation is aimed at. There is a lot of information on the subject on this website

<https://www.gov.uk/right-of-way-open-access-land/use-your-right-to-roam>

and there is a map here which shows all the Right to Roam land in the UK (of which there is none close to Thriplow)

<http://www.openaccess.naturalengland.org.uk/wps/portal/oasys/maps/MapSearch>

Hopefully that sums it up, I am happy to answer any questions on the subject that still arise after this.

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