In this chapter we consider two modes of movement across the landscape: cycling and horse riding. Both of these are mobile relationships in which encounter and perception unfold as part of a journey. As the journeys change so do these experiential and perceptual encounters. Unlike walking both cycling and horse riding are mediated, in one case by the technology of the bike and the manner in which it is ridden, in the other by the personal relationship between horse and rider. Both involve different forms of embodied action. These mobile relationships can be contrasted with those discussed in Chapters 10 and 11. For the fishers and model aircraft flyers the relationship with landscape is considerably more static. They return to the same place time and time again and develop accordingly a different kind of relationship with that place than do the horse riders and cyclists. They experience places sequentially, as do walkers, and their relationship with these places is thus of a different character.

Cycling: an embodied identity of challenge and pleasure

During the last decade there has been a resurgence of interest in cycling in the UK, although it is still the case that only a tiny proportion of the population actually cycle on a regular basis, as low as 1% of travellers (Cox 2015: 20). Cox and others have pointed out that there is an inverse relationship between the prevalence of cycling and its significance for the formation of social identities and meanings in relation to its practice.
(Horton and Parkin 2013; Vivanco 2013; Lanting 2014). However, the heathlands constitute an important regional locale for cycling in East Devon, with the nearby city of Exeter being one of the six nationally designated Cycling Demonstration Towns in a project that lasted from 2005 to 2011. The heathland and the green lanes connecting the villages around them attract both local cyclists and others from quite an extensive area including individuals, families and cycling groups, who visit from Exeter, Sidmouth, the Haldon area to the west and the Axe Valley to the east. Some cyclists are not interested in off-road mountain biking on the heaths themselves but prefer to cycle the surrounding sweeping green lanes. Others are intrigued by what is frequently described as the ‘challenge’ of cycling on the Pebblebeds themselves. They often use the lanes to reach the heathland and it is these mountain bikers and their experiences that are the primary focus of the discussion below.

As Vivanco has noted there is a paucity of cycling studies in the anthropological literature, despite cycles’ globalized production and use (Vivanco 2013: 9). Virtually all recent studies have concentrated on cycling in urban contexts and thus have not considered how cycling relates to an understanding of and interest in the rural landscape, one of the principal concerns of our discussion here. The literature that does exist is heavily dominated by practical policy implications; issues of urban planning and transport, safety, sustainability and social change, or is primarily concerned with cycling as a specific form of technology and its history. The bicycle has more broadly been regarded as a lens through which technological change, mobility and globalization may be thought through (Bijker et al. 2012; Rosen 2002; Urry 2007).

Anthropological interest in sport includes an initial structural-functional approach to games and play from the mid- to late twentieth century, and what transpired to be a more lasting cultural, symbolic and integrative approach; Geertz’s (1972) writing on Balinese cockfighting as ‘deep play’, which he describes as a ‘Balinese reading of Balinese experience; a story they tell themselves about themselves’ (Geertz 1973: 448), is regarded as insightful and thought-provoking (Besnier and Brownell 2012: 445). However, Sands, who comes from a bio-cultural perspective, is not alone in arguing that until recently anthropologists have not been prominent in contributing to the study of sport despite the universal tendencies of play, games and sport helping to shape human evolution (Sands 2010: 5–6). Describing sports’ influence, performance and meaning to different societies around the world as pervasive and unmistakable, he writes: ‘… performance as it relates to the construction and maintenance of cultural and social markers of identity and reification of
that identity, seems to be a thread that weaves through movement patterns in many cultures’ (Sands 2010: 24). Dyck too notes the relatively scarce anthropological literature on sport but states that it is now growing. He also provides references to a number of interesting monographs on topics such as kabaddi, baseball and international football cultures (Dyck 2004: 4). Besnier and Brownell discuss how sport travels across boundaries and can illuminate issues within colonialism, globalization and sport mega-events, for example, and state: ‘The anthropology of sport is now poised to make significant contributions to our understanding of our increasingly global society’ (Besnier and Brownell 2012: 444).

Daring ‘alternative’ sports in which the natural environment, both terrain and weather, is integral to their practice have attracted some attention, including the anthropological. Such sports include rock climbing (Abramson and Fletcher 2007: 3), windsurfing (Dant 1998; Dant and Wheaton 2007), skateboarding (Borden 2001), bungee jumping (Cater and Cloke 2007) and tour cycling (Spinney 2006), as well as mountain biking. As part of his BA in Outdoor Leadership, Probert investigated whether mountain biking facilitates escapism and mental freedom and concludes that it does, with his respondents agreeing that they benefit from the therapeutic and challenging nature of this sport (Probert 2004: 40). Ethnobiologist Fowler provides us with an account of endurance mountain bikers as welding self to the landscape of Pisgah, in western North Carolina. These bikers travel down Farlow Gap, a highly technical steep trail over three miles in descent, where riders have to navigate obstacles such as fallen trees, loose boulders, creeks and waterfalls: ‘Maneuvering a bicycle through Pisgah signifies skilful authenticity. Performing Pisgah defines selves and develops social networks – through praxis and narrative both on and off bicycles – while simultaneously exploring trails and deepening local environmental knowledge’ (Fowler 2011: 11). Laviolette, who has participated in cliff-jumping, often known as tombstoning in the UK, writes that the attraction of such sports is attributed to the non-gratuitous individual confrontation of risk: ‘... the dangers of personal injury being chiefly mitigated by honing physical skills and mental preparation ... [which] helps [participants] develop personal skills in overcoming fear and managing risk self-reliantly’ (Laviolette 2007: 1–2; see also Mauss 1979; Deleuze 1992). He then argues that such risks should be comprehended in relation to other human management of risky activities, including fiscal and sexual practices and environmental catastrophes.

In their interdisciplinary discussion of cycling and society, Horton et al. divide the cycling literature into four main areas: the historical;
the sociology of sport; the medical; and the design, engineering and planning perspectives (Horton et al. 2007: 8–9). Bourdieu writes that it would be foolish to assume that everyone participating in the same sport assigns the same meaning to their practice or even that they are undertaking the same practice (Bourdieu 1984: 209–211). This is certainly true of cycling, of which there are a number of genres, including those of cycling as a sustainable global means of transport; competitive cycling; leisure cycling; and the more ‘alternative’ sport of off-road mountain biking, the latter of which is the focus of our discussion on biking on the heathland.

Rosen states that the technology of mountain bikes developed as a result of biking enthusiasts who wished to ride where conventional bicycles were inadequate (Rosen 2002: 133), and it is not surprising to find that when it comes to mountain biking there is a range of literature concerning the prevention and management of physical risk. Besides the debate over the wearing of helmets, which has a research foundation devoted to it (the Bicycle Helmet Research Foundation), other recent papers include a discussion of other risk factors such as perineal trauma (Zandrino et al. 2004) and facial trauma (Kloss et al. 2006), a large-scale detailed assessment of mountain biking-associated spinal fractures and spinal cord injuries (Dodwell et al. 2010), and studies of the physiological demands of downhill mountain biking (Burr et al. 2012) and injuries sustained therein (Becker et al. 2013), which although dealing with a more extreme variation of mountain biking, also applies to those encountering rough downhill terrain on the Pebblebed heathlands.

For some heathland riders a major interest includes the model of the bike, how this can be adapted or replaced over time and the accessories for both bike and body. There has been much anthropological interest in the material culture of ‘things’, particularly approaches that articulate their meanings and social relations (for example, Miller 1998; Tilley 1999; Buchli 2002; Küchler and Miller 2005; Tilley et al. 2006; Naji 2009; Douny 2011). As yet a lengthy study of mountain bikers, their bikes and attire has not been written but there is certainly scope to explore a number of approaches; Warnier’s praxeological approach, for example, could include factors such as the sensual and emotional; the memories each bike may encapsulate for the rider; the creation of identity that has been shaped, perhaps, by the embodied material culture of the biker; the transforming of space into a place embodied in movement; and the meaning silently conveyed by choice of bike and clothing worn. Artefacts can possess a silent form of communicative agency: ‘It follows that without an exploration of the
metaphorical power of things and the effects that these things have on people’s lives we cannot adequately know or understand ourselves or others, what makes up our identity and culture, past or future’ (Tilley 1999: 25).

Our interest here is in the relationship between people and their bicycles, their mutual interaction, and how this relates to a mobile relationship to the landscape: what bicycles do for people and what people do to them. This is an embodied relationship in which the bicycle becomes part of the body of the cyclist. In relationship to the landscape this involves ways of knowing, sensing and interacting with the world that differ significantly from those experienced by other groups such as walkers or horse riders. This general theme has been brilliantly explored by Borden in relation to skateboarding in the architectural spaces of the city (Borden 2001), but little explored in relation to cycling in either urban or rural contexts, beyond general comments about bicycling involving complex interactions between physical, social and experiential dimensions of movement (e.g. Vivanco 2013: 8; Cox 2015: 20). We start by considering the bikes people ride and their attitudes to them and their apparel. We then consider who rides with whom, before considering heathland relationships.

**Mountain bikes and riding apparel**

Several of the biking enthusiasts who use the Pebblebed heathland have more than one bike, including mountain bikes (where stability is the priority) and general road bikes or racing bikes where speed is favoured. Other bikers retain the same frame and change different parts of the bike, either through choice, such as to fit a different kind of handlebar, or for reasons of maintenance:

Your chain, and the rear cassette (where the different gears are fastened together), because it’s multiple gear, needs regular changing, perhaps once or twice a year depending on its use, and the clogs on the front chain wheels have to be replaced periodically. The wheels need replacing because you wear the wheels out when you break stones and that sort of thing. You grease the head set where the handlebars connect with the front forks; you grease the shock absorbers; you constantly buy new tires and inner tubes and new pumps and saddle bags and kit.

(Jack)
Another rider who has two bikes, one of which is eighteen years old, the other ten years, says:

Other people buy a new bike every year and in part that depends upon your view of it. I mean in my view it’s more about the sort of physical capability of the person rather than the bike; the bike’s almost irrelevant in many ways whereas other people want to have the latest and lightest and so forth.

(Kirby)

He feels that fashions come round and describes how the top tube of the bike always used to be horizontal, until about fifteen years ago ones that were diagonal were produced – ‘which means you had more clearance when you got off the saddle’. There is now a return to the horizontal tube, which he describes as creating a strong triangular shape. He goes on to say that ‘serious women bikers’ actually ride men’s bikes because they are lighter for a given strength, rather than the bikes for women, which tend to have thicker tubes to support their more open frame and shape.

The apparel worn by the riders may vary; for example, mountain bike helmets have a peak on the front – ‘to keep mud out of your face really’ – whereas the on-road bike helmets are without this feature in order for their riders to be more streamlined and dynamic. Obviously, the weather determines what the rider may wear, usually between one and three layers of clothing. Currently amongst racing bikers there is a fashion for black clothing, which other riders feel is foolish: ‘I think it’s terrible because it makes visibility, certainly when it gets dark, very, very hard’ (Kirby). This biker rides both on and off road and as he and his group come from a road background where tights are worn, he and his co-riders wear black tights and brightly coloured tops: ‘It looks a bit bizarre actually because we’re all sort of getting on a bit and seeing these elderly gentlemen and ladies in tights, er, I’m sure it gives some people a bit of a shock.’ He says that many people who do a lot of mountain biking wear fashionable things, the current fashion being baggy shorts with brand names such as Howies and baggy T-shirts. His tights are made by Altura and his jacket from a firm called Gore: ‘They use Gore-tex material so you don’t sweat too much’. Some of the mountain bikers also put on extra pads on the knees and shoulders to give greater protection.

There are four main areas in which differences between mountain and road bikes may be found; these are their shape, weight, tyres and suspension. Mountain bikes have wider handlebars that provide the rider with greater control than do the curved handles of many road bikes, which
are lower and aerodynamic, hence the hunched position of the road biker, positioned closer to the top tube and the pedals. The mountain bike tends to be heavier and the rider more upright, with the bike possessing wider, knobbly tires (an increase in friction and surface area provides more stability) in comparison to the road bike’s smooth, thin tyres. Whereas racing bikes may have no suspension, the mountain bike is constructed with features that absorb vibrations such as front shock absorbers and possibly rear suspension, which are useful when riding on the Pebblebeds. Front suspension means that when the handlebars are leant down on, the handlebars move down four inches: ‘So if you go over a bump that’s only two inches high, you don’t get a jolt on your hands and the suspension absorbs the shock’ (Kirby). Mountain bikes without rear suspension are known as hard tails, which seems an appropriate description – ‘You get less of a hammering with full suspension’ (Colm). The bikes with suspension front and rear are of higher quality and are more expensive. The range of suspension can vary also: ‘Cross country bikes generally have about four inches of suspension and some of the big jumping bikes have six, seven, or eight inches of travel but they’re also heavier’ (Colm).

It seems hard tails and full suspension mountain bikes (MTBs) require different road techniques too because of the more shaky ride on the former but both types require certain alignment skills. ‘You learn to stand out of the saddle when it’s bad … the ground is unforgiving so you have to be prepared for the bumps and twists and the turns and to avoid obstacles’ (Jack). Going downhill changes the centre of gravity and there is the danger of allowing too much weight on the front wheel, which can lead to going over the handlebars when braking. The technique here is to stand with the bottom behind the saddle and this adds weight to the back wheel. The legs are also used as springs to absorb the shocks of individual bumps: ‘There are some bits where the bike actually jumps … when you’re doing a drop the secret is to actually lift the front wheel so you fly through the air and your front and back wheels touch the ground at the same time’ (Kirby). If the drop is steep and the landing is just on the front wheel, again, a somersault over the handlebars is a likely consequence. Alignment when riding uphill also involves standing when the hill is steep: ‘As you go uphill there’s a tendency for the front wheel to lift off – as you pedal harder it lifts the front of the bike up’ (Kirby). In instances like this the front of the bike is therefore lighter, which means steering is affected: ‘The bike won’t follow the wheel and you can easily fall off so you sometimes have to move your body forward over the handlebars, lift your bum off the saddle, and stand up, so to get that weight on the front wheel so you can actually
One cyclist describes the importance of looking ahead and anticipating: ‘Particularly when going through trees and that sort of thing, you know. What’s very important is your hands on the handlebar; it would really hurt against the trees, so you’ve got to be careful’ (Jack). Some riders find areas on the heathland that are so steep that the rider has to get off and push – ‘there’s no choice’ (Kirby). An interviewee who takes children riding on the Pebblebeds says she reaches a particular gulley and thinks:

‘Oh gosh, we’re here again’, and we’ve gone quite a trek to get to that point but, like, it’s easier to go forward than it is back and luckily I always have helpers. A couple of the strong ones lift all the bikes up the gulley and I’ve got all these little children scurrying up there, they love it, they love the adventure.

(Sam)

On occasions, a certain combination of weather and terrain also means pushing rather than riding:

You’ve got more control when it’s been raining but of course it never rains but it pours and it means the peaty areas become very sticky and slow. You sink, oh yes, the tire goes under the peat. The peat is quite a strong texture and if you’ve got a good cycle tire, most of the time you can pedal through, but sometimes it’s so watery you just find yourself having to get off and push.

(Jack)

Others find the need to lift their bikes over or up terrain. And so the experience of cycling on the pebbles can vary according to the weather.

When you’ve got what I call temperate weather, not too wet and not too dry, it is best. If it’s very wet, everything becomes very sticky, although the pebbles stay where they are, but it’s more difficult for everything could be sticky, even the grass drags. When it’s very dry, the pebbles become loose and so you tend to get a skid. There are a few steep descents and there are some I just don’t do when it’s dry because the stones will just fly around and you just haven’t got any grip.

(Jack)

When describing the conditions of the terrain, another rider remarks on how it only takes about two days for the mud to go if it has been
raining: ‘The good part about Woodbury Common is the fact that because of the Pebblebed heathland it does dry up quickly compared to other places, it runs off the stony pebbles’ (Colm).

**Riding groups**

Some of the riders have been cycling on Woodbury Common for decades, one rider training there from when mountain bikes (MTB) were first

![Figure 7.1 Riding group out on the heathlands. Courtesy of Chris Warburton, Knobblies Bikes](image1)

![Figure 7.2 Riding group. Courtesy of Chris Warburton, Knobblies Bikes](image2)
introduced from the United States in the early 1980s. Other early users include the Sidmouth Valley Cycling Club (SVCC), which was formed in 1991 and has about forty members. The SVCC used parts of the heathland to promote race competition events consisting of five circuits, with a focus on the Woodbury and Colaton Raleigh Commons. A trail was marked out beforehand with flags and bunting and started from Four Firs car park; the organizer states that as the area of the quarry kept changing, they had to modify the route, particularly near the start of the race, to take in these changes and keep the riders away from any dangerous operations. It would take the more experienced riders just under ten minutes to complete a circuit, so they would be racing for about forty-five minutes before the finish. Trends have changed, however, and events are no longer organized on the Common by the SVCC because many of the current members now prefer road cycling, but individual members still participate in small social MTB cross-country rides. The SVCC racing competition remains well remembered by local cycling enthusiasts with some cyclists speaking of it as the first MTB race they had ever seen.

One cyclist we met is a former Royal Marine who took over recruit training at Lympstone in 1984: ‘I had in any one year a thousand recruits going through Lympstone; sixteen troops of fifty and they would use the Common for a lot of their training. In fact if the Common were closed to the Marines, the Marine camp would have to move. Woodbury Common is the best training’. He retired from the Marines in 1989 and was introduced to mountain biking in 1990 and, as he puts it, has never looked back. He still goes out on the Common about once a week on a Friday afternoon and although he also rides on Dartmoor, the Quantocks and the Cotswolds, he regards Woodbury Common as being as good as you can get: ‘It’s not a large area but my goodness me it’s a much easier and interesting place than Dartmoor, which can be very rocky paths and so on. Woodbury Common’s got it just right’. As chairman of the Cycle Touring Club Exeter (CTCEx) and the organizer of their off-road rides, he takes them out periodically during the year on long day rides on Woodbury Common.

The thought of mountain biking across the countryside can feel quite daunting but the Exeter Mountain Bike Club (EMBC) runs several programmes that cater for all age levels. There are Confidence Builder rides for adults, a women’s riding group and Go-Ride skills sessions for children and young people aged six to thirteen run from the Haldon site. In the summer months their coach brings the children to ride their mountain bikes on Woodbury Common and she also meets with the women cyclists there at least four times a year. For the adults, when confidence and skills have been built, there is a Wednesday night group that meets
at the Four Firs car park at least once a month for a ride on the Common. The Wednesday group is a mixed group mainly consisting of men, some of whom are ‘hardcore’ members who ride their MTB every Wednesday evening, in all seasons, in all weathers.

Another group of mountain bikers who ride fairly regularly on the heathlands are the Axe Valley Pedallers who, based in Seaton, bike on the heathlands about twice a month, either in the evenings or at the weekend. They ride throughout the year: ‘In the winter it’s great because it’s more to do with night-riding and then in the summer there are longer evenings to enjoy being out and about and it’s always great’ (Kimmo).

‘Coffee Pot Rides’ and the ‘Bike Bus’ are two other very popular organized cycle rides that often take in the lanes that traverse the Commons. The ‘Coffee Pot Rides’ recently celebrated their thirtieth anniversary. The organizer chooses a café in East Devon and usually between sixty and seventy people cycle up and meet there. Two years ago, when one of these riders noticed that although the meet-up itself was very sociable, the getting-there and return journeys were usually ridden on one’s own, he set up the ‘Bike Bus’: ‘I realized that there were quite a few people who didn’t go on them because they either didn’t know the way or couldn’t mend punctures so I started the Bike Bus’ (Kirby). A timetable is sent out every Tuesday evening showing the Thursday’s route: ‘People just join in on the way’ (Kirby). With a mailing list of over 140 cyclists, there are usually between twenty and thirty cyclists taking part every Thursday. No one is ever left behind – if someone suffers a puncture, another rider will wait with the stricken cyclist until the puncture is repaired and guidance is also given on how to mend punctures. Despite an article in a cycling magazine that stated some women preferred women-only cycling groups, when asked, the Bike Bus female participants said they preferred to ride with men, and there is a 50:50 gender ratio in this club. The organizer comments:

We tend to be very supportive in terms of getting people to ride, particularly on Thursday but on Tuesday (Coffee Pot Rides), quite to the contrary, we actually have a ride where we say if you get dropped you’ve got to find your own way back; if you have a puncture you’ve got to sort it out yourself. So we don’t actually stop for anyone and if they have a puncture, it’s up to them to get back; they know it’s going to be a more aggressive ride whereas on the Thursday it’s supportive and, you know, they make that choice.

(Kirby)
In this way people of differing abilities and motivation are catered for. A community has been developed around the Bike Bus and one female member suggested the club create its own shirt. ‘The design of the shirt includes the Devon hills so it’s got rounded brown hills, it’s got the River Otter in it and it’s got the beach huts at Budleigh, so that kind of reflects the landscape, and that’s become part of the Bike Bus’ (Kirby).

Of course, some bikers also ride alone or with just one companion and find this to be a different experience from riding in a larger group: ‘If you’re in a group you obviously tend to talk to other people and sometimes you hardly know where you’ve been because you’ve been concentrating on what they’ve been saying whereas if you’re on your own you’re obviously experiencing things much more strongly’ (Kirby). It is interesting here to compare this with those who participate in organized walks, such as the Ramblers, where a similar experience is shared. One cyclist who joined the CTC in Exeter describes how going out in a group is a fantastic experience: ‘It’s like going for a holiday every Sunday really’ (Pamela). Others find that a leader making you go a particular way is not always what they want. ‘When you’re on your own you’re looking around and in some ways it’s easier to stop as well because if you see something interesting, like a broken tree trunk or

![Figure 7.3 Bike Bus T-shirt, designed by Stephanie Houghton](image-url)
something, you can stop and have a look whereas if you’re in a group you tend to have to keep up and not get left behind’ (Kirby). Another rider describes how when he is on his own he decides he will go and cycle for an hour or two, just wandering around seeing where the paths go, but when he takes friends onto the heathland it is not such a casual experience: ‘I know the Common quite well so I’ve taken some friends from work around and I had more trouble with that. If you’re taking people with you you’re a bit more aware of not getting lost, of going somewhere that’s more difficult to get back from’ (Paul). However, one cycle leader remarks how if you go out as a group and you know what to look for, you can stop, and in the right places, learn about what is special about the heath: ‘That’s the beauty of living in a place, that you get to know it really well, you know the people who know the heaths really well, know what to look out for’ (Kimmo).

**Routes through the landscape**

Those leading the group rides, such as the Bike Bus, tend to plan their route in advance, but others without such a timetable do this also – although some changes may later be made: ‘Sometimes towards the end of the day I think, “I’ll shorten it a bit” or “I’ll lengthen it a bit”’ (Jack). This particular group leader finds it surprising how some paths have disappeared whereas other new ones have appeared: ‘I’m still finding new paths (and this after twenty-one years of riding the Commons). I go along a path I’ve used perhaps two years previously and it’s overgrown but not far away there’s a new route. It’s a constant change all the time’ (Jack). He feels that one reason new paths are created is that when a path is used a lot the surface tension is broken, resulting in a muddy area that remains waterlogged for a long period of time and prompts people to go round it. Another cause is when a route is not used very often; it becomes overgrown with gorse, and when other people start wanting to go in that direction they go round the gorse and a new path is created. He notes how volunteers cut away gorse from tracks that are used a lot and refers to the rotation in bracken-cutting too, comparing this management with that of the Brecon Beacons where he also sometimes cycles: ‘The bracken’s just been left and you just can’t see the trails, I mean, you know, it’s completely overgrown there’ (Jack).
One rider with a great interest in maps has explored many of the green lanes and enjoys sharing these discoveries with other riders. He does say, however, that for mountain biking on the Commons, maps aren’t necessarily a good guide: ‘Some of the better tracks are, you know, hidden away, and not particularly well-marked’ (Kirby). Another says, ‘You learn where you can go’, and describes how he tends to keep near trees in the winter when it is cold because there is more shelter from the wind: ‘That’s another reason to go round the edge rather than straight across the middle. I mean the Common is quite wet as well. There’s lots of low bits where you can’t go, so it’s quite difficult to go across it’ (Paul). He himself varies his route, sometimes approaching from what he calls the ‘top’ route, from Woodbury Castle, at other times going round the bottom of the Common from the Exmouth direction, past the quarries and coming into it: ‘There’s several different ways you can go in ... You go right up against the edge of the quarry and it’s quite nice starting off, it’s all downhill and you go quite quick and it’s quite a wide track so if you meet anybody walking you don’t tend to hit them’ (Paul). He goes on to remark that a new track has been put in here by the quarry and he does not particularly care for it: ‘I don’t really like that one; it’s a bit open and boring and it also keeps getting washed away so there’s some big holes. I had some friends hurt themselves down there’ (Paul). And so expediency is also a factor. Another rider often cycles across Colaton Raleigh Common but avoids that part marked as a brook because it is so marshy: ‘There are more tracks than are shown on the map but you’re giving yourself unnecessary difficulty going there. It’s much easier to go round and do more elsewhere than just waddling across here’ (Jack). He speaks of the narrow tree-lined paths on the edge of the Colaton Raleigh Common and of when a linear copse seen when coming in from near Upbury Lane, probably 20 to 30 yards wide and even wider in parts: ‘It’s very attractive and there’s a peaty part that runs all the way through there. I find that it’s one of my favourite stretches because you’re on a leafy path in the summer, that winds through the trees, but if you go off path you’ll hit a tree’, he says, chuckling.

Maps produced by cyclists not surprisingly emphasize a combination of surrounding roads, towns and villages, those crossing the heathlands, and favourite off-road tracks. One shows a wide area of the southern part of the heathlands as far east as the River Otter, along with twenty-one named places, a favourite place for bike jumps on Bicton Common, individual landmarks such as Hayes Barton house (birthplace of Sir Walter Raleigh) and local cafés.
Figure 7.4  Map of heathland cyclist
Night riders

Riding at night on the heathland is also very popular and we discuss this next. The essential piece of equipment is a high-quality night light – ‘the brighter, the better’ – and these can be very expensive, one rider describing his light as costing more than his bicycle. He has a Venture Enduro model that lasts for three hours on full beam and clips on to the bike, and he states that the technology has changed a lot during the last five years: ‘I had an old lead acid battery to start off with and I couldn’t keep up with people and I realized when I got this one it was because I couldn’t see. This makes a huge difference’ (Paul). Some riders wear a light on their head, others attach one to the front of the bike and some use both. The choice of which kind of light to use can be a matter of what the rider can afford, the lights attaching to the head being more expensive – ‘I can’t afford to get the one to go on my head yet’ (Paul), or it may just be a matter of preference. There are actual differences in the effect of what can and cannot be seen when using a head or bike light, and also the riding experience. The Venture Enduro has a 35-degree spread, which allows the biker to see far enough when going fast with sufficient time to brake when necessary, but another rider who also currently uses a bike light explains: ‘What you lose with the light being on the bike is that you can’t turn your head to see … you get peripheral vision if you do that’ (Colm). However, as one’s instincts are to ride in the direction of the light, when the light is attached to the head rather than the handlebars, and the head is turned to one side to look at something, the biker may also cycle off in that direction and come off track or have an accident. Yet other cyclists prefer the light attached to the head as it apparently helps the rider to focus more and is brighter. Although she regards head lights as preferable for these reasons, one rider uses lights attached both to her head and to the bike handlebars when she is coaching children in mountain bike riding, as she needs sufficient light in case of emergency to look after everyone and get them all back safely.

One hazard is when turning round and becoming dazzled by the light of the rider behind you. The Royal Marines have an issue with the dazzling effect of the cyclists’ lights too; their use can cause confusion during manoeuvres, as one rider explains: ‘We bump in to them and they’ve got their lights on and we’ve got our lights on … we dazzle them and they don’t really like that … they do complain every now and again’ (Cohen). The Marines are not the only ones who can be dazzled: ‘We see lots of rabbits up there and they can be a bit of a pain actually because they just stand there and look at you because they get cornered by the
lights and I’ve had a few near misses because they don’t run’ (Colm). Other nightlife on the Commons is also affected and the riders call out warning to each other: ‘Frog, frog’, for example. Owls are often seen and sometimes ‘spooked’ by the riders:

And of course if you get them spooked they then tend to spook other animals up there like deer; it can frighten you to death because you’re riding along and this deer will jump out from anywhere and run off; that’s quite spooky. You know, they’re there, sort of thing, and then, phwor, they’re gone.

(Colm)

**Differences between day and night riding**

Many cyclists do not ride at night and the reasons for this are various, including the cost of decent night lights, a fear of disorientation, and a preference for seeing where one is going. Levels of fitness and confidence may also be factors when night riding. One cyclist spoke of his caution when deciding to ride at night and of how he only went out by himself when first starting, as he was unsure as to whether he would be able to keep up with the experienced night riders who rode in groups. He now rides on a Tuesday night with the Exeter MTB Club and they often ride on Woodbury Common. Another said it was good when the RM were out: ‘It’s always quite nice and comforting actually sort of knowing they’re around really’ (Paul). Also, two riders describe their Thursday night ride as not being a club as such, chuckling: ‘It’s a kind of a mates thing, it’s by word of mouth and if people think they’re fast enough we’ll invite them along’ (Cohen).

The cyclists have spoken of their pleasure in riding the commons because they are so open and the views are beautiful, but what is it like at night when the views are no longer visible? Certain riders find that it is more of a ‘heads-down’ experience because there are no views to be looked at, and describe it as being a ‘different ball game’: ‘You can ride a trail in the day and when you go back at night it’s completely different’, said Colm. He feels this is because the trails are ridden more slowly and the riders’ perceptions are different because of the darkness. Nevertheless, the actual cycling still appears to follow a pattern of a burst of activity and then a stop – to wait for the slower riders to catch up, a pause to discuss which trail will be followed next, or a wait whilst someone fixes a puncture, and stopping just to look up at the stars. Does it still feel ‘open’? To
some it does not feel this way; the feeling of spaciousness is lost and the senses may be used differently because the rider is more alert: ‘It smells different and your eyesight has to be much better because things come at you much faster because you just don’t see them coming’ (Paul). The sense of hearing also appears to be particularly important at night: ‘You need to respond quickly to the sound of what’s under your tyres, you know, from the point of view of whether something’s loose or solid or wet’ (Kimmo). One rider feels closer to the landscape at night because he feels as if he is moving in his own space – ‘It’s like a little sphere travelling with you’ (Paul). He finds this quite comforting in what he describes as a spooky landscape: ‘It’s quite warm and friendly. It feels smaller and more like you feel when you’re at home, nicer somehow because you feel more at one with it but you’ve got to treat it with respect’ (Paul).

Comparisons with walking

Several cyclists make interesting comparisons between walking and biking:

Well, I’ve done both and I enjoy each for its own sake. Cycling is more challenging, physically more tiring, it’s exciting, and it helps to develop a degree of fitness. You can invent challenges like steep hills and sudden drops and so on as well as seeing the scenery and, you know, cycling with the CTC, you’ve got the route, reconnaiss ance, you’ve got to find your route, you’ve got the challenge, the physical challenge, you’ve got the company of the people you’re with, that’s three jolly good reasons, isn’t it, and you’ve got fitness. (Jack)

He says he sees more when walking rather than cycling but, because bikes are very quiet, he often surprises animals such as foxes and badgers while cycling quickly and quietly: ‘If you’re talking when you’re walking then you won’t see much, you’ve got to walk quietly, but if you’re cycling and you’re quiet, you catch up all sorts of things’ (Jack). Another cyclist remarks upon coming across a hare on one occasion and feels he would not have seen it if he had been walking. Others find cycling more rewarding than walking because a greater distance is covered and it is more of a challenge.

Some mountain bikers prefer this activity to walking or on-road riding:
Yeah, the big advantage of the mountain bike (as opposed to an on-road bike) is you can just go for a gap; whatever the terrain. It’s really nice, nicer than walking in that you’re higher up so you can see over hedges, you can see where you’re going to be and where you’ve been and you can go a lot further. I mean I would never dream of walking from here to here in an afternoon, and come back again but on a bike it’s not difficult.

(Paul)

He feels that he sees more of the nature immediately around him when he walks but prefers to do mountain biking as he sees the landscape from different perspectives: ‘You don’t have to be cycling fast all the time’. However, one cyclist who also does a lot of walking on the Commons says that she does not have a preference between walking and cycling as she gets a different experience every time she is up on the Commons. One of the cycle leaders also comments on speed differences when walking or biking: ‘You’re going to be moving at a completely different speed so it’s fair to say that, walking, you will see more, up close, and are more likely to see things than you would on a bike’ (Kimmo).

**Relationships with the heathland**

Cyclists discuss their feelings about the heathland and whether they find it to be a natural wild place. As will be seen, there are commonalities and differences among their viewpoints. One cyclist describes his feelings when on the Commons thus: ‘It’s a feeling of freedom and challenge I suppose. And I find it’s nice to be there. It’s nice to be free and forget the worries of the world and your age and things. It makes us young again and off you go. That becomes more important with time’, he says, laughing. He has no particular favourite route: ‘I just enjoy being there, whatever it is. I enjoy doing a long day rather than a short day because you’ve got that greater feeling of the whole day of freedom and just doing what you want to do. But that’s early, I mean I like going off early in the morning and coming back sort of late teatime’ (Jack). He says, when walking, he senses being part of nature but he also feels this when cycling too: ‘I mean we’re not going flat out all the time; I make a point of stopping and looking’. He does not feel the Commons to be a wild place, however, as ‘wild’ to him is walking in the wilderness in North America.

Another says he frequently goes out on his mountain bike on the Commons and now knows it like the back of his hand: ‘So I picture where
to go and I can work out how long it’s going to take me to go everywhere but conditions (of the terrain) make a huge difference. It’s just nice to be in the outside world and away from everything’ (Paul). He describes Woodbury Common as being a fantastic place for mountain biking because it has everything: ‘There’s flat and open wide stretches where you can go for quite a long way and there’s a single track, which is narrow and twisty, in among the trees and I like that, you can get up some speed and it’s fun’.

When he comes across paths with obstacles such as fallen trees, he removes them. He also comes across paths with holly growing across and says these can be quite hazardous, particularly when biking in a group because one can easily get holly in one’s face, and so he sometimes takes secateurs with him to remove such obstacles. He laments the cutting down of trees because although more of a view is revealed when they are cut down, he feels there is a loss of certain wildlife. This cyclist likes to be quiet and see what is going on around him but he rarely feels part of the landscape: ‘I always feel humans intrude on my view of the world’ (Paul). Although he views the contours of the landscape as being natural he knows the Commons are managed:

It’s obvious that it’s managed because there are paths everywhere and you can see where there has been intended burning and when it is accidental burning. You can see where they have been mowing down the gorse and you can’t go very far without seeing the quarry or bits that they have worked on. So, it’s natural in that it’s full of nature, wildlife and stuff, but it’s very managed.

(Paul)

And another rider states he does not feel the heathlands is as natural a place as it once was due to the expansion of the quarry: ‘Where the quarry is now we used to ride trails down through there and they’ve dug it all away’ (Colm). He finds that the trails grow over very quickly unless the growth is managed or there has been a fire. He has the sense of the heathland as feeling wild at times, although not as wild as Dartmoor, Exmoor or the Quantocks.

Mountain biking on the Commons is often referred to as having bursts of activity and this is felt to be good for health reasons. The physicality of riding is pleasurable, as is following the contours of the landscape and anticipating what is coming next:

If you don’t anticipate you certainly get to a turn and you’re not ready for it and you have to brake and just stop, whereas if you’re
anticipating you can see that the path goes sinuously through the trees, and you keep an eye for that. Your whole body is following that and your brain’s ahead of the action, working out what’s going to come next. So you notice the beginners tend to sort of just stop because they haven’t worked out what to do next; they’re afraid of going in to a tree or something.

(Kirby)

This biker describes how, when putting in the effort to get to the top of a steep incline, the view suddenly appears, and how different emotion erupts because a visual field that had been limited to twenty yards suddenly opens up, triggering thoughts in his mind, leading to a sense of connection with the landscape. He enjoys the variety of the Commons, describing some parts as bleak, and one part in particular, up above the golf course, left towards Sidmouth, as looking like a savannah (other users of the Common have also remarked on this):

I keep expecting to see elephants and giraffes there because the vegetation at ground level is sort of yellow and you have the isolated trees standing up and it’s just like a sort of David Attenborough film. You see that and then you go into this ancient fort, which is only a few hundred yards further on, with oak trees and it’s quite different. It’s quite bizarre.

(Kirby)

He himself finds the hill fort quite disappointing, particularly after he had been informed of the house that was once there. He is moved by the hill forts in Pembrokeshire but not by Woodbury, and thinks partly that the trees spoil it.

The variety of riding experiences afforded by the Commons is often remarked upon: ‘It’s a great place the Common. What I like when I take the children there is there’s so many different types of terrain; you have small wood coppices to ride in on single mud tracks and downhill places through conifers’ (Sam). This variety enables the development of a lot of different riding skills; the Pebblebeds themselves being very challenging:

The other day I thought it would be all right but it actually had been dry, and then got wet and then was really sticky, really slippery. If it’s really wet then it slugs you and that’s if you ride a mountain bike, it’s muddy and slippery. If it’s muddy and the mud slides, you kind
of know where the bike’s going but when it’s greasy … so it’s hard underneath and then wet on top, and it’s really slippy and that’s like riding on ice, so that’s quite challenging.

(Sam)

This rider actually finds it quite terrifying to ride over the pebbles but still finds the heathland a ‘brilliant, beautiful and special’ place. Unlike where she does most of her training (Haldon), where all the trails are constructed from an MTB training perspective, she finds the trails on the Commons to be more natural and the landscape to be wild, in an untamed, non-cultivated sense: ‘Yeah, it’s not groomed; it doesn’t seem to me like someone goes around with a pair of secateurs clipping it all; it’s a very natural place’ (Sam).

For many, the openness of the Commons is very important: ‘When I’m out on the Commons there’s a sort of openness; it conjures up images of the Far East to me, it’s adventure and even though it’s actually quite close (to inhabited areas) it feels remote, you actually feel as if you’re a long way from anywhere’ (Kimmo). He describes the landscape as giving a sense of being out in the wilderness and says it has a different feel to it than Dartmoor or Exmoor: ‘It’s not as exposed and in that sort of sense it’s more friendly and warming’ (Kimmo). But he does not feel the Pebblebeds are wild: ‘I know it’s looked after by quite a few different groups and interested parties and it’s used actively by the military’. He goes on to say that this is a cared-for environment that is looked after in a particular way, which helps maintain its character: ‘Because it’s such a large space there’s a little bit more breathing space, shall we say, for all those different interests – that’s the beauty of it’. For him the whole thing is about pleasure rather than a form of transport:

It’s not like you’re getting from A to B, that’s not to say that some people don’t. There are a few people I know who do actually commute across and around that area but more often than not it’s more for pleasure than reasons of transport. Going across, riding across the heaths, is very enjoyable because it’s one of the few areas where you’ll get traffic-free sections of considerable distance; real proper cross-country mountain biking.

(Kimmo)

One cyclist describes how she used to occasionally cycle across the Commons just to get to the other side rather than to enjoy it for itself,
but having joined a group she now frequently rides both on and off-road. Significantly, she describes how it depends what one is looking for: ‘Are you going up there to keep fit, are you going up there because you want a bit of solace, or, you know, a bit of adventure’ (Pamela). She states that it is a place she can be quite proud of and that it is there when she wants it:

So, if it wasn’t there, there’d certainly be something missing I think for the character of this area and your, bit of a cliché, but your kind of quality of life. From, yeah, from physical recreation but also for clearing your head or just sort of making you feel better. It has a lot of qualities; it is very important.

(Pamela)

The last time she had been up there cycling off-road she had arranged to meet with someone but they had got their times mixed up and so she made her own way round the Commons:

I had a fantastic time as I was discovering paths that I hadn’t been on before. I was following other cycle tracks, which I thought might be my friend but they would disappear and you didn’t know if you were actually going the right way and I really enjoyed that. I know the Commons reasonably well, you know, but it takes forever to actually get to know it all.

(Pamela)

This particular cyclist feels as if she is part of the landscape when she is on the Common and she enjoys the solitude it can provide: ‘There’s not many people around, it does swallow people up. Even if there’s quite a lot of cars in the car park you don’t actually come across that many people except on the main paths’. She enjoys the unexpected variety of the landscape and compares riding under trees, through bracken and over tree roots with wide paths and their vistas of the sea. Stating that she is more of a landscape person than wildlife person, she describes how going on to the heathland lifts her spirits: ‘It is stunning and of course it varies from time of year and time of day and conditions’.

Although she believes it is a big enough area to be called wild, she feels the heath is not technically wild because it is a managed landscape:

But it does have, you know, it does go away in front of you, and it sort of sweeps away and the views are fantastic and rough tracks and gorse and heather and trees and the sort of variety of the
Reflecting upon whether this is a natural landscape, she states that ‘natural’ is a good adjective but it cannot be applied to the heathland because it is managed: ‘I mean heaths at one time were pretty well self-maintained because, you know, sheep grazing or whatever it was and the commoners, and so it was like part of people’s livelihoods and the way of the world that would maintain those areas like that’ (Pamela). Thus, although to an extent natural processes once maintained the heath, with human activity sustaining rural livelihoods, that state of affairs has now passed: ‘It is more of a managed approach, which will be more regulated, have certain targets and certain aims’. She does feel, nevertheless, that the heathland retains its sense of remoteness and she finds it peaceful: ‘Yet it can be a sociable place as well; you see other people doing other things, enjoying themselves’ (Pamela).

Asked what it is like riding on the pebbles she says: ‘You notice the pebbles when you’re on a bike that’s for sure because going across the path that goes straight across and down the other side, if you haven’t got the right kind of tyres, it’s quite a steep bit and you’ll start skidding around’. She finds the texture of the pebbles against the vegetation, and the colour of the paths running through it, to present an interesting contrast.

When talking about what could impact on the heathland and how important it is that these sort of spaces are kept she speaks of the campaign to stop a golf course from being built on the Common in the 1970s: ‘The battle people put up to save the Common, we should be really grateful to them because otherwise it would be a huge golf course and that would be a dreadful thing’ (Pamela). She has noticed an increase in the number of off-road cyclists and is also concerned that there may be too many commercial businesses offering bikes for hire; she hopes that CDE offer a good choice of routes so the load is spread. Like the other cyclists interviewed, she does not wish to see amenities added to the Pebblebed environment.

**Relationship with other users**

Cyclists discuss their relationship with other users of the Commons:

I have what you would call the old fashioned type of bell that rings as opposed to bings, and I always, particularly elderly people, I give
them a good ring and quite often, sometimes they say, ‘How nice to hear a bicycle bell’. Because if you’re cycling along, you’re quiet, you come up behind a lady with her dog or whatever and shout, ‘Get out of the way’ or whatever, they think they’re going to be raped or something but if you ring a bicycle bell they immediately know what it is and they just relax and then move out of the way. Actually I always invariably stop or walk round people who are elderly or infirm or whatever. But I don’t think all cyclists are well behaved by any means. You see these young lads, the world belongs to them as they whizz past but I think, I mean most of my contemporaries are between fifty and seventy; only a couple of us are over seventy.

(Jack)

He also feels that cyclists do less damage to the terrain than horses do, except when moving uphill when the cycle tends to cut in:

But horses cut the turf and they’re heavy on one spot whereas bikers sort of even out and they have a very narrow imprint and move relatively quickly. Well, this article that I read said, scientifically, we do actually less damage to the countryside than the horses do. Which is rather relieving.

(Jack)

Another cyclist feels there should be dedicated cycle paths as this might lessen what he describes as conflict between cyclists and walkers, as well as encouraging more people to ride there. He would not want to create new paths but to install waymark posts to help people to navigate, so they do not get lost or disturb sensitive areas.

In general terms cycling is regarded as a good and sustainable form of mobility in relation to others. However, particularly in the rural context of a conservation area where wildlife may be disturbed by day and night, and in relation to historical monuments, the effects of cycling become more complicated. Potential conflict has involved not just others on the Commons but also how Woodbury Castle, the Iron Age hill fort, is used by visitors. Described as a ‘playground’ by Bungy Williams, the Senior Commons Warden, Woodbury Castle has been walked on and in for pleasure way beyond living memory. Some erosion had been caused by walkers but this has been exacerbated by some mountain bikers who use the castle to practise jumps and have fun. One cyclist said to us:
You’ll always get people using areas that you’re not really supposed to, but where the Pebblebed comes in and the information that’s posted around the car parks, that’s the opportunity to educate people really. This takes a while and also, through other user groups, it’s always easier to put good practice into peer-to-peer networks than other forms really.

(Kimmo)

But some of the bikers ignored the notices put up by CDE asking people not to ride their bikes on this ancient site as much damage was being caused – indeed, during our car park survey we witnessed a large family with their bikes get out of their very large car and then tear off up to the castle’s ramparts.

As of 2009, the damage being sustained to the castle was a situation that had to be resolved. If certain members of the MTB public were going to continue ignoring the notices, then measures had to be put in place to prevent cyclists riding on the castle. As part of the long-term management of this scheduled ancient monument, an in-depth archaeological survey of the castle took place in March 2009. This was conducted in partnership with CDE, Devon Archaeology, English Heritage and Natural England, and the geophysical instruments used showed just how deep the erosion was. A plan was drawn up. It was decided that the badly eroded scars had to be repaired, with some of them being formed into steps that would guide visitors up, over and around the Castle. Also, holly bushes and other suitable flora would be planted in order to deter mountain bikers. An archaeological observer was to be present during the construction to record archaeological features that became exposed. Master Builders A. T. Vincent and Sons were contracted to repair the erosion work. The repairs being complete, the steps were built with oak wood and in-filled with gravel from Blackhill Quarry. The site was then re-opened to visitors after fencing was erected around the more fragile scars. Bungy Williams said:

We just hope that, now the restoration work is complete, people will treat the ‘castle’ with the respect it deserves, so that it can be enjoyed by the people of Devon for generations to come. The only alternative would be to limit public access, but nobody involved in the restoration effort would want to resort to that.

(Bungy Williams)
Horse riding, co-being and the landscape

Recent research commissioned for the British Horse Society suggests that in the UK over 90% of recreational horse riders are female and more than a third of them are over forty-five years old (Maxwell et al. 2012). This is borne out by our research on the Pebblebed heathlands, in which all independent riders seen out on the Commons were women, sometimes accompanied by children. The only time we have observed male horse riders has been during meetings of the East Devon hunt. So this form of recreation is heavily gendered, contrasting with cycling and walking. Another difference is that horse riders, apart from groups of learners riding out from Daldisht stables in the far south of the heathland, usually ride on their own, in pairs or more rarely in larger groups of families or friends. The one established riding school on the heathlands at Daldisht currently has forty-five ponies and horses. Beyond that there are up to eighty independent horse riders using the heathlands on a regular basis. Almost all of them live in villages and farms in the vicinity and ride up to the heathlands and back again. Transporting horses to ride here from further afield, using horseboxes, is not commonplace. So almost all horse riders apart from those using the riding school are local people with local knowledge. Some have been riding here for twenty or thirty years, and in some cases, since they were children. They, in turn, are taking their children out to enjoy the heathlands.

One of the main attractions for all concerned is the absence of road traffic, a major hazard all horse riders have to contend with. Some say that if they did not have this area to ride on and had to use mainly roads they would probably give up horse riding altogether. Both the riding school and independent riders use the whole or large parts of the Commons. The areas they tend to frequent most are strongly related to where they live or stable their horses, to the east, south, west or north of the area.

Those riding regularly may go out on the heathlands three or four times a week for anything up to a couple of hours. Mornings, and evenings during the summer months, are favourite times. Many find riding in the landscape calming and therapeutic, as do some walkers and cyclists. Again this aspect of riding has been noted by the British Horse Society investigation cited above. Horse riding stimulates positive feelings; it may help to counter anxiety and depression and it promotes an appreciation of the landscape with like-minded people (Maxwell et al.
More generally ‘equine-assisted therapy’ has been widely promoted, stressing the physical and psychological benefits of both riding and being around horses, touching, grooming and taking care of them (Lawrence 1988; Gilbert 2014). Horses and people take care of each other through their mutual interaction.
In this section our primary concern is with horse–human relationships in the heathland landscape as a particular form of embodied relationship that differs substantially from others. While cyclists have their own particular experiential entanglements with their machines, horse riders have a rather different kind of relationship with their animals as sentient beings with an agency and intentionality of their own.

Recent discussions have indicated the importance of understanding horse riding in general and human/animal relationships in particular in terms of a shared sense of co-being and becoming, transcending nature/culture, subject/object, active/passive dualisms in social thought (Argent 2012; Birke 2009; Brandt 2006; DeMello 2012; Haraway 2003; 2008; Hunn 2012; Marvin and McHugh 2014; Maurstad et al. 2013; Davis and Maurstad 2016). Horse riders and their horses actively participate in each other’s being as part of an embodied relationship that is both physical and mental. In turn this has an intimate relationship to an experience of landscape. If riding horses may contribute to stress relief it also has another purpose for many: as a particular way to experience nature and the landscape. Horse riding provides a perfect motivation for doing so, a reason for getting out and experiencing something Other and different.

Each horse rider, like most cyclists or dog walkers, will have their regular and favourite routes across the landscape. Very few of them can be seen riding across the heathland off the established tracks and paths. They all say they prefer to keep to the tracks both because it is safer underfoot, the vegetation concealing pits and uneven ground, and because there are no adders. Such is the number and variety of potential tracks to follow that riders say there is very little reason for riding off them anywhere else. Should they leave a track it is generally because they have got lost. The horses, like dogs, don’t like picking their way through the spiky undergrowth.

Horse riders point out a number of positive benefits and things they appreciate about the heathlands: the relative absence of fences, gates and other restrictions to movement; the absence of traffic; stunning views across and off the heathlands themselves; the diversity of the terrain and the types of areas that one can ride through – high places with fine views, sheltered valleys, open moorland and wooded areas. This provides a varied and interesting riding experience: ‘It’s so diverse. One minute you can be going down a very dark overhanging track and the next minute you’re up Wheathill with clear views of the sea. And the smells up there are absolutely brilliant, the gorse, the rotting vegetation’ (Horse rider). They are also keenly aware of seasonal changes in the character of the heathland vegetation and the character of the
tracks along which they ride. They develop their own names for tracks based on their characteristics. For two of our informants, Karen and Jackie, who ride together, ‘Sandy Gallop’ is the name they give to a long, sandy track on a slight incline where the horses can safely run. ‘Two-Leg Corner’, a sharp bend around which they ride fast, marks an important turning point on a short route out before turning home. ‘Jumping Woods’ is a short stretch of track where they jump over low piles of logs in woodland. ‘Big Circuit’ is an extensive ride around the heathlands, the ‘Brick Track’ is part of the Second World War camp and part of the current RM endurance course, and ‘The M1’ is a very straight and wide track running to the east from Woodbury Castle across the middle of the heathlands. Riding along these familiar tracks is deeply significant personally because it brings back shared memories of being out together and with their children. The maps drawn by these two horse riders are utterly different from those discussed so far. On the maps produced by the RM, few or no tracks are depicted. By contrast the maps produced by the horse riders are dominated by tracks and car parks are not shown.

Figure 7.7, drawn by Karen, depicts over forty named places and many of these are personal names (e.g. Sandy Gallop, Adder Path, Bluebell Valley, Lollipop Tracks). Numerous tracks are shown crossing the heathland and areas with grazing cattle and ponies. None of these occur on the other maps. Views off the heathland are marked as are boggy areas (very significant for a horse rider). The map covers the southern half of the heathland where Karen rides. The grenade range, quarry, MAFF airfield and Woodbury Castle are shown. The only roads depicted are part of the B3180 and the Woodbury to Yettington road. Little is indicated off the heathland apart from some village names. Unlike the others this is a deeply personal map insofar as it arises almost entirely from a horse rider’s perspective, with personal names given to places and particular stretches of the tracks. The second map, drawn by Jackie (Figure 7.8), depicts a similar area of the southern half of the heathlands and is again dominated by tracks and personal names.

The quarry, grenade range and part of the endurance course are indicated together with the positions of bogs and wooded areas.

The nature of the experience of landscape from a horse rider’s point of view is very different from that of a walker. They notice different things, in particular the character of the surface over which they are riding. This is absolutely crucial for horse riders. Horse riders, unlike walkers, are much more aware and finely attuned to the manner in which different areas of tracks may change over time on the
Figure 7.7  Karen’s map
Figure 7.8  Jackie's map
heathlands, in a similar manner to cyclists. They all say that the tracks change. Through time parts of tracks that were once pebbly become sandy, or vice versa. This will make riding along that particular stretch more or less difficult and enjoyable. Sandy areas where the ground is soft are particularly important and exhilarating for horse riders because these are the areas (rather few and far between) that allow you to run or canter. On a horse it is much more difficult going down a steep slope with an uneven surface than going up one, and so particular care and attention to the ground surface is required. Weather may also alter the character of the tracks significantly. After a wet spell horse riders may avoid particular areas because they get so boggy and difficult underfoot.

On a horse you are much higher up than either a walker or a cyclist, and therefore you can see more of the landscape that unfolds before you. Horse riders also tend to go much further than most walkers in the same period of time. So the horse rider obtains an extended view of the landscape in two senses: looking down and across it, and in terms of spatial range. Horse riders say that they see more wildlife sitting on a horse than when out walking: ‘You see deer. If you walk you don’t seem to. So you see more wildlife on a horse and the horse will detect the deer before you normally’ (Horse rider). It is also in some respects less energetic and the experience of the terrain is mediated through the body of the horse: ‘You’ve got the power and the feeling of the horse underneath you and then you’ve got this beautiful scenery as well and you’re not doing all the hard work of the walking you’re just being taken through this beautiful, beautiful countryside’ (Rider). Steep pebbly slopes make horse riding difficult and challenging in some areas, as do boggy valleys. Sandy tracks without pebbles are areas where it is best to canter because the ground is soft. Favourite areas for most riders are either stretches of track where the ground is soft enough to canter or those where there are wide and extensive views across the landscape, for example, to the west of Woodbury Castle and on parts of East Budleigh Common with views east to the sea. Horse riders orientate themselves in the landscape primarily in terms of familiar landmarks such as Woodbury Castle, like others, but also in terms of the particular characteristics of individual tracks well known to them.

Independent horse riders have noted some significant changes to the landscape: the removal of a pine plantation on Dalditch Common and the restoration of the area to heathland; separately, the huge area swallowed up by the quarry at Black Hill. One mentioned the ‘unnecessarily
aggressive’ fencing now hemming in Dalditch Common restricting access to some tracks she formerly rode along.

Riding on a horse involves a different kind of exercise than walking using different leg muscles to control the horse and move forward. The rider and the horse communicate with each other through the mutual engagement of their sensuous bodies and emotions. For an independent rider this involves intimate knowledge of the horse and its capabilities, because horses may not always cooperate. Any indecision on the part of the rider is likely to be sensed by the horse. In some more difficult areas it is not really possible to look out across the landscape because the rider must instead concentrate on the terrain:

... a lot of the time you do have to concentrate and certainly when you are on the stonier places you are watching the stones and on my horse, she’s 16 now, and having a bit of joint trouble and I’m very careful where I try to ride her on the Common and I try to pick out the smoothest bits to walk down.

(Horse rider)

The horse itself, as well as the rider, will often know the track if followed many times, knowing where to turn and anticipating a canter or a run at certain points. In winter it may want to take the shortest route home: ‘The horses know the routes as well as we do I’m sure. Obviously we make decisions and they don’t know which way we are going to go but when you turn down that track they know it will be like this and then we’ll have a canter there’ (Horse rider).

Horses, however long they may have been ridden by the same rider, can always be unpredictable. Riding always involves a relationship between the person and the horse, their mind and that of the animal: it is a constant dialogue that may be relaxed and harmonious or become tense and difficult (cf. Maurstad et al. 2013; Brandt 2006). Riding a horse involves a synaesthetic engagement between their bodies, textures and surfaces, sight and sound and smell. Sometimes the rider may be able to look across the landscape and forget about the animal beneath her in the process of movement. At other times she must concentrate on the relationship with the animal and the area of the track immediately ahead. This relationship also changes with the age and physical capacity of both horse and rider. A ‘sparky’ horse may calm down with age; older horses will find it more difficult to negotiate steep slopes with an uneven surface and so on. In this way the experience of landscape is always mediated by
the relationship established between horse and rider and the duration of that relationship. There is always the danger of falling off and getting seriously injured. Horses can become spooked or frightened by things that take place in the surroundings. Horse riding may be a joy; it can also be a real challenge.

The main potential problems for horse riders on the heathlands involve the other user groups: inconsiderate mountain bikers who flash past and do not slow down, dog walkers who do not control their dogs, model aircraft flyers and the Royal Marines. Some horse riders avoid riding past the model aircraft flying field because their horses can get upset by the high-pitched whining sound of the planes. They will also deviate from their chosen route to avoid areas where they can see the RM are training and engaging in fire-fights. Low-flying RM helicopters sweeping just above the landscape can frighten their horses as do bushes that suddenly start to move (i.e. the RM), causing the horse to stop or alternatively scoot unpredictably up a track: ‘You can be going up a track quite happily and the horse suddenly stops and you can’t think why and then you look and there is a whole line of camouflaged Marines with guns pointing at you’ (Horse rider). However, experienced horse riders are aware of these potential problems of riding on the heathlands and do their best to avoid getting into situations where their animal will be frightened, perhaps asking groups of RM, if encountered, if they are likely to start firing:

Usually we will see things going on and we will always question them as to whether we are about to ride into a war zone or not because suddenly they can open up and the firing is very loud. The horses cope pretty well with the firing as long as it is not on top of them. But the horses get spooked when they are creeping around in the bushes with their helmets on and hedges growing out of their heads and they suddenly get up and walk and the horses think it’s a bush and it suddenly starts moving down the track.

(Horse rider)

**Embodiment and landscape**

Different ways of riding change the relationship between the rider and the landscape. For example, while walking the rider will typically sit upright on the saddle. Cantering involves being out of the saddle
and leaning forward up the horse’s neck a bit. This is when the rider will be looking forward rather than from side to side so the faster they move the less, other than the act of riding itself, they tend to see or experience beyond the relationship with the horse. Being on a horse means you are always accompanied in the landscape, never alone. So horse riding always involves negotiation between horse and rider and communication between the two. The two are always in bodily contact in a manner in which a walker and a dog are not, and the movement of the rider is entirely dependent on the horse. This is primarily a matter of kinaesthetics and haptics. The horse rider must, as discussed above, pay attention to the ground surface because the horse has a tendency to slip and the rider has no control over the feet of the horse. On some surfaces they will feel comfortable and may be able to canter, on others they must concentrate solely on the track ahead and move slowly. It is highly significant that all of the horse riders we talked to mentioned the changing character of the surfaces of the tracks that they followed, something that hardly registered with walkers but was also of great significance to cyclists. The rider, unlike the walker or the cyclist, needs to be vigilant and aware of factors that may frighten and upset the horse and avoid them if possible. So getting through the landscape may be a greater achievement and in this sense provide more satisfaction. Riding and controlling the horse requires a different kind of mental activity involving constant and largely non-verbal communication, mainly through the body, with the animal; being one with the animal and ideally in harmony with it and the way that it moves. There is a rhythmic activity using the thighs, calves and legs and the reins to direct the horse forward. There are always two independent minds at work and therefore the experience is completely different from walking or cycling. Horse riding involves a continuous active relationship with another being. The horse rider is always co-present in the landscape with the horse in an encounter that differs fundamentally from those of other user groups on the heathlands.

Conclusions

There are cultures of bicycle and horse riding on the Pebbled heathland that entail an understanding of the environment itself and that involve adapting riding skills according to the various surfaces, inclines, textures and widths of track. Both types of user develop kinaesthetic
sensibilities in relation to the terrain and the manner in which they can navigate through it. The relationship of cyclists with their bicycles as a fifth limb, and whether they cycle during the day or night and in what kind of social group, produces a specific sense of space-time and specific evaluations of the landscape, and in a similar manner so does horse riding. Both cycling and riding may be solitary or social but cyclists tend to be more organized and in larger groups. Horse riding is more familial and in our case heavily gendered as female. The bicycle and the horse are both inseparable from human bodily experiences, producing a sense of near/far, up/down, directional coordinates and distant horizons. Knowledge is often tacit, routinized through the medium of the reflective and pre-reflective body, both physical and mental.

The maps produced by our cyclists and horse riders differ substantially and in particular in the absence of roads or car parks for the latter. Named places are fewer and this reflects different kinds of experiences. Cyclists include areas off the heathland itself. Movement for horse riders is generally slower, especially downhill, and usually far more cautious, whereas some cyclists in their pursuit of performance can be reckless. The horse rider has an altogether different kind of relationship with the horse from the cyclist's relationship with the bicycle, as the horse rider is responsible for the horse's well-being. A broken bicycle can be replaced, a horse, with its distinctive individuality and person-like being, cannot. On the other hand horse riders can gallop in sandy stretches of the terrain where cyclists struggle. Far more physical effort is required by the cyclist and for some the effort itself physically taxes the body but may be, for this very reason, exhilarating.

‘Challenging’ is the word shared by most cyclists when discussing their activities on and around the Pebblebed heathlands. Whilst some of those interviewed cycle on and off-road by themselves, the vast majority rides with at least one other person and often in groups of three or more, especially when riding at night when it appears the focus tends to be on what is in front of the rider rather than around him or her. The sense of vastness and space that is often referred to in daytime riding is lost and the heathland can seem more intimate, which is an interesting contrast to the repeatedly cited ‘spooky’ characteristic of the heathland at night. From a distance, the cyclists can be quite impressive to watch: their lights and the trails followed are like a moving chain, a lit-up weaving pattern in the night-time. Horse riders only encounter the landscape in daylight and they are generally far more cautious.
Both cycling and horse riding involve shared acts of movement or artistry, but with horses this involves a shared mind and a kinaesthetics linking the rhythms and power of the movements of the horse to that of the rider. The relationship between the cyclist and the cycle is thoroughly mediated by the technology of the machine itself, which may be modified and thought through in various ways to produce different performative acts in moving through the landscape. By contrast a horse rider’s relationship with the horse is an intersubjective meeting of minds that, if successful, leads to an understanding between the two and a responsiveness that may heighten the pleasure of both. The emotion a bicyclist may have for his or her machine is a one-sided affair as opposed to the constant negotiation and meeting of minds involved in horse riding. The difference between the cycle as object or thing and the horse as subject and ‘person’ is fundamental and consequently the emotional entanglement is different. Embodiment is layered in different ways. The bicycle rider experiences through the medium of the bicycle, which itself has no experience or will of its own, but the experience of the horse rider is fundamentally part and parcel of the horse’s own experience. Part of this is memory for both human and horse: bad or good rides in bad or good places across the landscape, linked to particular events.

For both cyclists and horse riders there are differing connections with the textured landscape, its curves and changing surfaces. When cycling or riding there is a translation between cyclist and horse rider and landscape, a flow involving the visual and physical, and a making, temporarily, of an imprint by the tyres of the bicycle or the hooves of the horse. This can result in a mobile being-in-the-world in a landscape that can change according to terrain, weather conditions and the emotions brought to it by the cyclist or horse rider. Of particular note are the valuable psychosocial aspects of cycling or riding across the heathland, which can, as when walking, become a therapeutic landscape for many.