

HOLCOMBE HUNT – HANNAH KNOWLES

I'd never been out hunting. I'd always thought they were a death wish looking at my friend's pictures online of leaping ditches and careering over hedges! I also thought they'd be a clique, heads held high on their fancy steeds. I could have not been more wrong.

As fog clung to the hills around Manchester on Saturday morning, we were on our way to a meet with the Holcombe Hunt. We were one of the first to arrive and my friend introduced me to the other early birds. Already, to my surprise everyone was so welcoming as we chatted away all hoping the rain would move on. Before I knew it, I was donning my tweed, buckling up my hat and being thrown on to my trusty little tank for the day, Ted, a resilient - but spritely - Dales pony.

Around me the excitement of what was to come dispersed throughout the other horses, feet stamping impatiently, but Ted stood firm, "an old hand and probably conserving his energy" I nervously thought. But then came the port: "That will take the edge off," I believed, gladly sipping it down.

We all gathered around the Master of the hunt as he spoke out, but I could barely catch a thing. Luckily, I had my friend to stick by while already the others at the back seemed to take note of the newcomers', providing words of encouragement.

Out we rode with the clatter of hooves on the road, turning off into a field. Then, quite suddenly, before I had time to think, we were off at a gallop. Those three hours flew by, but what a way to see the countryside as we dashed up and down banks, hounds loping ahead.

Ted gave me all the confidence I needed; sure footed and never faltering. The only danger came from the chunks of churned up mud flying from my friend's horse with his dinner plate feet towards my head!

By the end I'd had the workout of my life. Mud plastered my beaming face as I washed off dear Ted. To top it off there was even pizza as everyone gathered in the barn and I couldn't feel more at home.

I will certainly be back if I get another opportunity and cannot thank the Holcombe Hunt enough for such a wonderful experience with the warmest of welcomes.

ROYAL ARTILLERY - KELLY MURRAY

On arriving at the Queen's Building with the Royal Artillery (RA) we had a morning filled with info on the interesting history of hunting including instruction on how to blow the horn – they made it look so simple. After a lovely morning tea we were packed off to meet the hounds and learn all about them, we also witnessed the drawing of the lucky ones to join us that afternoon. The hounds were just fantastic, each a packet of boundless energy and enthusiasm.

We returned to the RA to be paired up with our horses - this is of course the highlight of the day. The wonderful horse aroma somehow reminds me of home; it is a comfortable aroma a bit like a favourite pub. Looking around at everyone so smartly dressed in ratcatcher and happy faces, it all looked so beautiful, so timeless, and so much part of our proud heritage.

Brief introductions to our steeds kind of felt like going on a blind date - I hope we hit it off! I had a beautiful grey called Eddie with kind eyes. To the mechanics making sure our girths were tight and stirrups correct it was down to join the rest of the hunt for some port (well a few glasses to calm the nerves) and introductions. Everyone we spoke to was friendly and reassuring and we commented later how it made us feel so comfortable and welcome.

Then we were off. Under a huge sky, that liberating feeling you get on a horse in open country, pure joy. Eddie was a beautiful horse responsive and forgiving - our first date going well.

Salisbury Plain is 94,000 acres of chalk plateau sparsely populated, I feel very lucky to be here, an endless stream of beautiful scenery as we gallop together towards a distant horizon and the sounds of the hounds and the horn. All my senses are engaged, at times it seems surreal. When we cross roads people stop to take photos wave and say hello.

There was a "small" moment when I lost it, not sure what happened, I had to stop and gather myself. Everyone rallied around, re-assured me and stayed with me until I calmed down and pulled myself together, great support from everyone.

I am hooked, Eddie and I are will be on a second date for the opening meet – very excited!

NEW FOREST - JESSICA WEIDMANN (aged 11)

Arriving at the meet I had mixed feelings of nerves and excitement. I couldn't wait to get going straight away. My pony walked out of the trailer and instantly knew what was about to happen. I was to be his ninth young rider that he was to introduce to hunting.

Once mounted my pony was keen to get moving which made the butterflies in my stomach fly around even more. The deep noise of the huntsman's horn signalled that the Master had set off and the excitement bubbled as we trotted off down the road. The sight of the hounds running and tracking made the atmosphere even more electric.

We jumped cautiously onto the muddy track and then the pace increased. My pony was pulling at the bit eagerly as we cantered along. Once I released a tiny bit of contact he increased a gear and we galloped along with the Master. By this point all my nerves had disappeared and I was just filled with pure enjoyment.

Initially I held my breath as we leapt the fences, sighing with relief as we landed on the other side. We jumped over logs, gorse bushes, gates and ditches, which my pony flew without hesitation. The going became quite boggy and I had to dodge the mud flying into my face. We also crossed a river and I could feel the current pushing my pony as we walked across.

Heading back to the trailers at the end of the day my pony was covered in sweat but was as eager as when we had set off. I saw my family and felt so proud of my pony and myself. I had had the best day of my life so far and didn't want it to end.

I loved my first experience of hunting, the exhilaration, the sound of the pounding hooves underneath me, and riding my pony with others at great speed.

So would I like to go again? You wouldn't have to ask me twice, my tweed jacket would be on and the pony in the trailer before you could blink.

WILTON HUNT – JUDITH GREENHALGH

After a chance meeting in a Norfolk saddlery, I promised Oli, my 14-year-old son, to get my riding to an acceptable standard to accompany him hunting. The promise was easily made that afternoon, winding along a sun-kissed country lane with the seemingly endless summer holidays ahead.

Last winter, in the schooling ring, with the wind howling in my ears and reins threaded through numbed fingers, my resolve was truly tested. While pondering the gulf between my ability and aspirations, I snapped open my laptop and searched, “hunting for beginners”. I found myself reading an article about a newcomers’ event, which led me to Pippa Grob, a former Master.

Pippa became the bridge between the riding school and the field through her KK Events prep to hunt clinic. The weekend included a visit to the immaculate Wilton Hunt Kennels where huntsman Will Hudson and treasurer Anya Pardoe welcomed us on a tour as happy hounds lolled and played in the sunshine. While Oli stroked silky ears and whiskery muzzles, there was a dawning realisation on my part of the huge responsibility, skill and scale of organisation in running a hunt.

It was agreed that autumn hunting with the friendly Wilton, that rightly prides itself on welcoming newcomers and youngsters, would be a good place to start. When Pippa’s e-mail landed in my in-box headed “Autumn Hunting Saturday 23rd September” I couldn’t decide whether I was terrified or thrilled, although I replied immediately to confirm.

Oli and I don’t have our own horses so we were put in touch with Charlie Vivian, who provided us with two fine mounts, and made Oli’s first hunting experience exceptional. We arrived at Charlie’s stable at day break and hacked over to the meet. The excitement of the horses was palpable as we drew close; the pace picked up and their ears pricked up.

On arrival, we were introduced to the senior Master, Russell Lucas-Rowe and we paid our cap to Anya Pardoe, who was standing in for the secretary. We were given a warm welcome in an atmosphere charged with the cry of hounds with sterns aloft. Terror soon gave way to exhilaration as we moved off.

I saw glimpses of my boy that morning as he jumped fences, cantered up hills and galloped down again, laying trails with Charlie and her friends. I happily remained at the back of the non-jumping field. I had heard of hounds speaking, horn calls and coverts, however no description can prepare the observer for the deployment of the hunt staff’s expertise and proficiency at their work with the hounds set against the backdrop of the stunning Wilton country.

In what felt like no time, we had said “goodnight” and were trotting to a delicious breakfast prepared by the hospitable hunt supporters. On our way home, an animated Oli asked when we could go hunting again, “Soon.” I replied. “I promise.”

HURSLEY HAMBLEDON - KAT BROWN

Growing up, I remember the splashes of colour as the Hursley Hambledon hunt sailed off behind our house. They lit up the drab fields every Boxing Day until Foot and Mouth Disease put paid to it, and when I took up riding again two years ago, I was determined to one day ride out with them – even if they didn't end up in quite such a convenient location.

Not having my own horse, I caught the train up from London and hopped in a cab to the meet to collect my lovely bay, Vegas, from Laura and Hannah of Plantation Hirelings – they also served as nannies for me and another visitor, Sarah, which was incredibly comforting, as was the welcome from seasoned field members.

After a steady start we were soon cantering through the woods and faced with a decision. To jump, or not to jump? Sarah and I were game but decidedly wimpy, but Laura and Hannah were so encouraging we went pro-jump. I missed two logs as I didn't want to go over as a pair, which meant I didn't see the larger of two fence options until Vegas was sailing over it. I hadn't fallen off! I was still on! Thrice hurrah!

We popped a set of rails out of the wood, galloping up a hill to a check. Sarah and I high-fived each other ineptly while making the sort of excitable squeaks only audible to hounds. We were brought down to earth by a bog that seemed to have come over on an exchange visit from Ireland, but then it was back to zipping through the woods. Sarah and I suddenly found ourselves accelerating as our horses got joyously carried away – I have never galloped a jump and by the time we got out the other end my face was described as Munch's The Scream! But I did it, and crikey, I felt like Zara Phillips!

The hunt wound its way back to the meet for a slap-up barbecue and enough cake to ensure I'd squash darling Vegas if I got on her again too quickly!

I grinned all the way back to London – one of the Masters very kindly gave me a lift to the train station which is, frankly, A+ service – and as soon as my boots are clean, I'll be booking my next outing. What complete joy – with or without your own horse!

READYFIELD BLOODHOUNDS - ROWENA WHITEHOUSE

I am 39 years old and have been a bit of a happy hacker from being very young. I now have three children, two of which have special needs and most of my time goes to caring for them and putting all my energies into them and their ponies.

My partner and his eldest daughter have competitions horses and regularly show jump or hunt. A year and a half ago I got my dream horse - a Friesian. What with the kids and their ponies coming first we haven't really done a great deal.

My confidence is not the best and my 10 year old daughter struggles with her's and her special needs, so I promised myself that this year I would go to a hound exercise with my partner and his daughter. The meet was in our village, so there was no excuse.

I had put it off the previous few years due to nerves and letting my partner do it whilst I made the excuse I needed to look after the kids. This year I plucked up the courage to go and a friend offered to have all three kids! She followed the hunt in her 4x4 and as the hunt stopped half way on their farm it was ideal for the children to see me half way.

I was unbelievably calm, collected and excited. New boots, new jods and a new jacket! It all felt surreal, especially when I'm usually buying the kids show gear - I can't even remember buying myself a pair of shoes recently!

Anyway, I digress. As I hacked to the meet with my partner and his daughter I had a feeling of butterflies mixed with dare I say it "pride". I felt so smart and so proud of myself for doing this. Everyone who I am around are experienced and accomplished riders in their own preferred discipline and I always have a feeling of being inadequate and not worthy as I've always been a happy hacker.

I pushed the fleeting thoughts of "I can always hack home if I lose my bottle as I know where I am," to the back of my mind, and thought "get a grip, just go and 'do' something!" When I got there, I potted around to calm the nerves and have honestly never ever felt so welcome. Everyone was so polite and most of all encouraging...a different world from the showing I'm used to with the kids.

I was so eager to see my daughter and to show her that anything is possible while hiding my confidence issues from her as she struggles so much. I was nervous setting off but I have to say that this was one of the most memorable, exhilarating and enjoyable horsey experiences I have ever taken part in. To do this with my partner was even more special. He had been nagging me for years to do this. We very rarely get to even hack out together due to having the children so this was just wonderful.

Going across the stubble fields with the biggest grin on my face with my Friesian's mane blowing in the wind was just amazing to me. My horse was truly amazing and although strong, she behaved impeccably which made my confidence grow as we went along.

Then seeing my daughter in the back of my friend's car with the look of shock and happiness on her face seeing me gallop across was just awesome - she said she was so shocked and so proud to see me do that and that it helped her so much.

I was a mix of emotions this day. Completely on cloud nine for days after and in fact am now still, despite not being able to walk for week afterwards!

It has made me more confident in ways I never thought possible. My time with my horse has changed so much. From hacking round the block in 10 mins in walk and trot to hacking out for a couple of hours and having a good blast where we can.

As cheesy as it sounds it's brought us on together so much. She knows I'm more confident and is going so much better. I truly can't wait to go again and enjoy the company of such friendly and like-minded people in stunning countryside where we are so lucky that land owners let us enjoy.

We have some fab pics from this day of me and my partner together to remember forever – a truly amazing experience that I'm so desperate to repeat.