

## **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 23<sup>rd</sup> 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.”