

Hunting humans in Bear country



COAKHAM BLOODHOUNDS | 2 March

By William Cursham

AS I galloped through a Kent wood behind the Coakham Bloodhounds, I could not help wondering how many Sunday walkers in this part of the world had been given the fright of their lives.

One moment they would be enjoying the tranquillity of the surrounding countryside, the next an almighty baying sound would be reverberating through the trees. They might be forgiven for thinking that they had stepped into a scene from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, or that the Beast of Bodmin had descended on the Home Counties.

The sound of a pack of Bloodhounds in full cry is

something that you won't forget in a hurry. Their cry is far deeper than a Foxhound's and could be described more as a bay. They are the bass to the Foxhound's tenor and their music positively booms across the countryside.

No wonder their cry inspires fear. These big black and tan hounds have been used for centuries to track vagabonds and villains. They used to be called "sleuthhounds" and were known for their accuracy. Escaping criminals would often be wounded in the chase and the hounds would track their blood — hence they became known as Bloodhounds.

Despite their long

history of hunting criminals, it was only relatively recently that Bloodhounds came to be used for recreational hunting. As opposed to draghunting, Bloodhounds hunt "the clean boot", as no artificial scent is used.

Hounds are laid on to the runner's scent at the beginning of the day to allow them to "identify" that unique scent, which they then follow, ignoring any other scents that might cross the line.

The Coakham is one of the oldest Bloodhound packs in the UK, formed in 1976 by the late Neil Wates. Their country lies in Kent and Sussex and it was the increasing urbanisation of these counties that led Neil



Dedication: the Coakham have some Dumfriesshire blood



The Coakham in full cry across the Kent countryside



Michaela Young, Becky Wilson and joint-master Roger Manning fly a fearsome hedge



Joint-master and huntsman Nic Wheeler leads the Coakham field

to conclude that hunting an "organised quarry" would be the best way to make use of this increasingly tight country.

The decision to use Bloodhounds was made because it was felt that this was the most natural way of hunting human quarry.

The hounds that the Coakham use are not pure Bloodhounds. They have Dumfriesshire Foxhound blood in them and, although Dumfriesshire hounds have Bloodhound in them as well, this cross means that the Coakham hounds are lighter and

faster than their pure-bred counterparts.

I have not had a day with the Bloodhounds for a long time and it is probably even longer since *Horse & Hound* covered this form of hunting, so I eagerly accepted the invitation extended to me by Charlotte Blair, supporters' club chair, to join them for a Sunday meet at Booker's Farm, Chiddingstone Hoath.

I have to say that researching this pack is a writer's dream. They have one of the best hunt websites that I have seen,

jammed with information. There are pictures and accounts of the various meets, and if I had been really lazy, I could probably have done this report from the comfort of my laptop.

The website was not the only research material that was made available to me. Charlotte promised me "more useful material" and, true to her word, a large envelope dropped through my door. I was expecting a detailed history of the hunt, but out came the hunt calendar full of pictures of masters and subscribers in various states of undress.

This must be the "cheekiest" piece of research that I have ever been given.

It is quite surreal, to say the least, to see people fully kitted out for



Joint-master Alex Wheeler on her smart coloured horse

Where you go straight we have put in a few loops or zigzags to slow them down

Adrian 'Bear' Paice quarry captain





Hunt chairman James Ramus and Jack Budge



Bloodhounds used to be known as 'sleuthhounds' because they were used to track criminals

» hunting, when the only other time that you have seen them is when they are semi-naked. I am sure I had a daft smirk on my face when I turned up to the meet at Booker's Farm.

I could not help identifying the "models"; most of whom were now respresented in the distinctive hunt uniform of chestnut coat, brown collar and brass buttons. It is very smart, and blends in well with the black and tan of the Bloodhounds.

Booker's Farm commands a beautiful view over the Penshurst point-to-point course and the surrounding valley, and I secretly began to hope that we would be able to have a spin over the inviting-looking birch fences. Understandably, however, they were out of

bounds, as point-to-pointing would soon be under way on this course.

Coakham meets are very sociable and I soon met chairman James Ramus and masters Roger Manning, Jo Carr, Alex Wheeler, Sally Mack and Clare Miles. They all put in a tremendous amount of work to provide fun for their subscribers.

However, the heart of the hunt is undoubtedly Nic Wheeler, who has been master of these hounds since 1989 and has hunted them for most of that time. They are kennelled at his farm and he is an authority on Bloodhounds. As well as running the Coakham, Nic and his wife Sue breed pure-bred Bloodhounds, compete in hound trials and even provide some to police forces.

He had 11½ couple out today and they knew when things were about to kick off. Just before Nic began to move off, they began their deep, spine-tingling baying and the shout of "Hounds please!" was almost drowned.

As with draghunting, the day is split up into lines, with "checks" in between. The first line was a nice pipe-opener, with friendly post-and-rails specially built by the hunt. This gave me the opportunity to make my acquaintance with my mount, Bogie.

Bogie is a 16hh chestnut mare with a classic Snaffles head. She looks every inch the traditional hunter, so it came as no surprise to me that Mickey Few, former huntsman of the East Sussex and Romney Marsh, had hunted hounds from her. She is now owned by Belinda Whaley.

"She's a legend. Everyone knows Bogie," said Belinda when I got on.

The pressure was on to perform well, particularly as either Mickey or Belinda seemed to be behind



Nic Wheeler MH is the 'heart' of the Coakham Bloodhounds

every big fence. However, Bogie looked after me perfectly and made my riding look passable.

The first line was a good long one, but I soon noticed that the pace was not as quick as it is with

draghunting. We were always in touch with hounds and it was a pleasure to watch them hunting at close quarters.

I mistakenly thought this was due to the fact that Bloodhounds are not as

I have to know where the line starts so hounds pick up the right scent, but from then on I don't know where we're going

Nic Wheeler Coakham joint-master and huntsman

Was our photographer at your meet?
To purchase photographs from H&H
Call **020 3148 4559**



Joint-master Sally Mack tackles a hedge

Horse of the day

... Kitty

KITTY, hunt secretary Charlotte Blair's mare, was rescued by the International League for the Protection of Horses (ILPH) from some fruit pickers in Kent as a yearling, on the brink of death. She now loves life and hunting in particular.

"I got her as a two-year-old to keep a youngster that I bred company," said Charlotte. "But she was so easy to break that I kept her instead and sold the youngster. She took to hunting so easily — she was a bit weak to start, but each year she has developed more.

"They say big horses don't reach their maturity until about nine, which she is now. I often long for a speedy version that will stay at the front and jump all the hedges, but she is so comfortable. She'll close gates, lead lost horses back and we have even whipped-in once."



Before and after: Kitty as an ILPH rescue case and hunting with the Coakham today (below)



quick as foxhounds, but actually it is more down to how the lines are set.

"The hounds and I cover a third more ground than you lot do," explained quarry captain Adrian Paice, aka "Bear". "So that you can keep up with them. Where you go straight, we have put in a few loops or zigzags to slow them down."

Adrian has been running for the Bloodhounds for 17 seasons and last year ran 53 times. Between them, Adrian and Nic Wheeler have got the setting of the lines down to a fine art. Nic will only know where the line starts.

"I have to know exactly where the line starts, so that hounds pick up the right scent, but from then on I don't know where we are going," said Nic.

Indeed, Adrian will often put in false diversions or "reverse checks" — where he runs back on himself so hounds falter.

This all means that the field can enjoy the hound work, but it is equally evident that they love their jumping. There were some

pretty accomplished event riders among them. Nic and Sue have ridden round Badminton and Burghley and joint-master Alex Wheeler (née Ramus) is a former young rider European Champion.

Our field masters, Sally Mack and Jo Carr, also go like the wind and they gave us a real treat on the second line. We started out by jumping a fence into a wood and, when we emerged the other side, I was summoned to come up front with them.

We soon hit a lovely line of hedges, some with drops, and one very decent, solid one at the bottom of the valley. As I cleared the latter, I spotted Mickey Few, cheering his old mount on. I thanked my lucky stars that I had not made a hash of it.

Somewhat rashly and no doubt fuelled by adrenalin after the first line, I had offered to run the last line with Bear. I thought it would be fun to be the first *H&H* reporter to be hunted.

However, by the time we had finished the second line, Bear had already

disappeared, which was probably a good thing as running three miles in hunting boots would have been jolly hard work.

The third line went by all too quickly in a blur of grass, rails and a formidable hedge and drop that Bogie flew in fine style. I was glad I had ridden it rather than run it, and I began to wish that we could carry on all day.

Sadly, it was time to finish and, after three cheers for the landowners, quarry and masters, Nic blew for home. I felt I would have to be dragged home,

but the prospect of a huge, delicious tea laid on by Angela Boniface persuaded me to head home and hand Bogie back to her rightful owner.

The cry of the Coakham Bloodhounds was ringing in my ears for a long time afterwards. But it is not just the booming voice of the hounds I shall remember. Memories of people's upfront friendliness, the black and tan hounds streaming across the Kent countryside and a true Snaffles hunter will also remain with me for years to come. **H&H**

CONTACTS

Masters: Nic Wheeler, Roger Manning, Clare Miles, Alex Wheeler, Jo Carr, Sally Mack

Huntsman: Nic Wheeler

Quarry captain: Adrian Paice

Hunt secretaries: Sally Mack. Tel: 01342 810088; Jo Field. Tel: 01424 216 747

Young thrusters to watch: Jack Budge. According to Roger Manning, "he goes like the wind and is a pleasure to have up front". And Sophie Whaley, for giving me some great leads

Most dedicated followers: Mickey Few, who helps at kennels, builds fences and even saved Sue Wheeler's life. Angela Boniface, for her teas, and Chris Field