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Foxhunting

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Abstract

Hunting had been the foremost recreation of British kings, nobles and elites since the middle ages, but the hunting of the fox had traditionally been held in low esteem. Foxes were vermin and so lacked the status that had made hunting a noble pursuit for centuries. In contrast to other coveted quarry – deer, boar, pheasant, partridge, and hare – the fox’s flesh is unpalatable and inedible; and unlike other animals of prey, the fox poses no danger to human life. It was a simple farmyard pest of no culinary worth; hunting it was useful rather than noble or heroic. But in the eighteenth century, the sport began adopting many of the rituals and vocabulary of older hunting practices and was transformed into a fast-paced and fashionable pursuit.

Hunting had been the foremost recreation of British kings, nobles and elites since the middle ages, yet the hunting of the fox had traditionally been held in low esteem. Foxes were vermin and so lacked the status that had made hunting a noble pursuit for centuries. In contrast to other coveted quarry - deer, boar, pheasant, partridge and hare - the fox's flesh is unpalatable and inedible; and unlike other animals of prey, the fox poses no danger to human life. It was a simple farmyard pest of no culinary worth; hunting it was useful rather than noble or heroic.

Furthermore, although foxes run fast, the hunting of foxes had generally been considered slow and unexciting. The hunts were long, and the chase sufficiently slow to be satisfactorily followed on foot.

All this began to change during the eighteenth century, when huntsmen began innovating with the hounds used to hunt foxes, and in the process transformed foxhunting from a small-scale, slow-moving, low-status affair into one involving long and fast chases for large fields of mounted hunters. Much of the credit for these changes has been laid with Hugo Meynell, a wealthy Leicestershire squire with an estate in the village of Quorn in the 1750s. Meynell began breeding hounds for stamina and speed as much as for nose and had soon bred hounds that were fast enough to keep on terms with the fox when they ran at speed, as opposed to early in the morning, just after feeding, when they were unwilling to run. His neighbours began to take an interest once the excitement that could be had hunting with the Quorn became clear, and skilled riders from further afield were also keen to join the hunt and demonstrate their ability to keep up with the fast-running pack. The hunt now offered a unique opportunity for the well-connected to demonstrate their riding ability to those who mattered.

As foxhunting rose in status, so did it take over some of the rituals associated with deer-hunting in earlier times. The killing of the deer, for example, had been dignified with a degree of formality; it was an honour to be executed by the most senior person present, and the carcass of the slayed deer was dissected and carted away following strict social conventions. For the low-status fox, whilst hunted on foot and with traps and snares, such flattery was unknown, but as wealthy gentlemen turned their attention towards foxhunting the dispatch of the fox rose in importance. Being present at the kill was all important, as was the offering of the fox to the hounds. 'When he is caught' wrote Beckford of the fox, 'I like to see the hounds eat him eagerly'.¹ The huntsman's 'whoo-whoop' at the death of the fox was borrowed from stag hunting. The custom of giving the brush to the first rider at the kill was invented, and the practice of 'blooding' – daubing the faces of children or new hunt members with the fox's blood – was also developed. So too was a complex vocabulary of hunting terms, and the sporting hand books provided their readers with long lists of the correct technical terms for each aspect of the hunt, just as the earliest hunting treatises published centuries before had done.

As with all high status hunting, fine clothes were an essential part of the experience, with the fashionable Leicestershire hunts leading the way in the respect, as in so many others. A travel writer commenting on the hunt at Meynell's Quorndon Hall observed that the company on a field day 'go out with as much ceremony as to court, their hair always being dressed'.² And the post-hunt socialising was no less glamorous: the start of the Quorn's hunting season, for example, was celebrated with 'splendid entertainments' given by Mr Meynell to his friends.³

For most of the eighteenth century there was no formal dress code, beyond the need to be seen in fine attire, but in the final decades of the century, foxhunters switched to red coats that are now their hallmark. For example, the fashionable Taporley Club in Cheshire, founded in 1762, switched from blue to red coats in 1769, at the same time as they switched from hunting the hare to the fox. In the 1770s, the subjects of George Stubbs' paintings were frequently painted in red frock coats, and the following century the tight-fitting red scarlet coat, adorned with five brass buttons had become *de rigueur*. Gradually the sport was invested with the smartness and pageantry that fitted a gentleman's status. Hunting the fox had become a fashionable pursuit.

The property qualifications required to shoot game effectively shut all but the most privileged one percent of society out. But with no qualification needed to hunt foxes, the sport's defenders could legitimately claim that anyone could participate in the sport, that skilled horsemanship not wealth or status was the only qualification. The Prince Regent even claimed to have raced a Brighton butcher at a Sussex hunt for over an hour. The story was untrue - advocates of the sport frequently made bold claims about the ways in which class ties were fostered by foxhunting; but it was at least plausible.

Of course, although foxhunting was technically open to all, these proud claims of social equality need to be approached with some degree of scepticism. This is not to deny the existence of modest packs formed by small farmers and tradesmen, with low subscriptions and a relatively modest social base of support. Such packs certainly did exist, and no doubt they offered much entertainment to those who hunted with them, but a fashionable sporting gentleman would scarcely be found within their midst. Packs were not socially integrative affairs – subscriptions, dress codes, and the custom of accepting new members only by invitation all helped to ensure that every foxhunting man found his place in a pack fitting his social status. The fashionable packs springing up in the midlands were technically open to any who could pay the annual subscription, but the social obligation to turn up with fine horses and in expensive clothing considerably raised the cost of joining the hunting fraternity. The combined costs of subscription to a smart pack, appropriate attire, and the maintenance of a horse ranged somewhere around £100 a year, and sharply limited any downward drift of the sport. Indeed these requirements were considered so weighty that some commentators considered foxhunting scarcely more open than hare-hunting, despite the high property qualification needed for hunting the hare. From humble origins, foxhunting was rapidly becoming a high status pursuit, attracting fashionable, moneyed sportsmen.

One final development in the world of eighteenth-century hunting worth noting is the gradual exclusion of women, for the development of new forms of foxhunting not only made an old pastime more elitist, it also appears to have decisively pushed female hunters outside the hunting fraternity. A scarcity of sources prior to the eighteenth century precludes any detailed discussion of female hunting in the medieval and early modern periods, though it is well known that women did ride to hounds throughout this period. Records of poaching in the royal forests indicate that women were involved in hunting so far back as the thirteenth century, and estate papers from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reveal that female household members sometimes accompanied their male relatives at the hunt. The female monarchs – Elizabeth and Anne – certainly rode to hounds, and as so often in the world of hunting, the lead provided by royalty was copied in aristocratic families throughout the land. At the same time, however, it is clear that no matter to which period we turn, women occupied a marginal position on the hunting field and we should be wise to forget any romantic notions of sexual equality on the hunting field before the eighteenth century.

Despite this, it does appear that the emergence of modern foxhunting was accompanied by a discernable contraction of women's opportunities for hunting. In the eighteenth century, commentators began to declare that there was something unnatural about the sight of a woman hunting alongside men. The Scottish poet, James Thomson, captured this unease in his most celebrated poem, *The Seasons*:

But if the rougher sex by this fierce sport
Is hurried wild, let not such horrid joy
E'er stain the bosom of the British fair.
Far be the spirit of the chase from them!
Uncomely courage, unbeseeming skill,
To spring the fence, to reign the prancing steed,
The cap, the whip, the masculine attire.
In which they roughen to the sense and all
The winning softness of their sex is lost.⁴

A combination of harder and faster chases and changing notions of femininity caused ever more commentators to declare that female participation was inappropriate. The celebrated hunter and writer, Robert Surtees, opined that there was ‘a wide difference between ladies hunting and ladies coming to see the hounds off. They are as much in their place at their meet as they are out of it tearing across country’. He cited reasons such as their tendency to keep ‘the whole field in alarm lest an accident happen’, and the fact that it deprived gentlemen riders ‘of the agreeable change and variety which their society makes in the evening’ in support of his argument that the ladies should keep clear of the hunting field.⁵

But at the same time as declaring that foxhunting was not a fit sport for women these writers make it clear that women still ‘occasionally [graced] the field with their presence’, despite social disapproval and the inconveniences posed by their clothing and necessity of hunting side-saddle.⁶ Lady Elizabeth Belgrave, for example, hunted with the Belvoir during the 1820s: Captain Russell noted she was ‘out galloping about’ one fine morning. The *Sporting Magazine*, contained occasional reports of women on the hunting field. In the 1830s, for example, a correspondent lamented the fact that only Lady Kaye was out hunting – her companions Lady Suffield and Mrs Villiers being kept indoors by ill health and other commitments. Perhaps most celebrated of all was the Marchioness of Salisbury, who acted as master of the Hatfield hunt after her husband’s death in 1793. The *Sporting Magazine* enjoyed providing its readers with colourful accounts of her exploits in this saddle: ‘Out of a field of fourscore her ladyship soon gave honest Daniel the go-by; pressed Mr Hale neck and neck, soon passed the whippers-in, and continued indeed throughout the whole of the close to be nearest the brush’.⁷ The Marchioness of Salisbury continued hunting until her seventieth year, and her death in 1836 was much lamented in hunting circles.⁸ Doubtless, however, such women were very much the exception to the rule. Melton Mowbray, the heartland of fashionable hunting, was an avowedly masculine world until women and families began accompanying their husbands during the hunting season in the 1850s, and it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that women joined fathers, brothers and husbands on the hunting field to any in significant degree.

In conclusion, it is worth observing that foxhunting developed in Britain at the same time, as the population grew, the economy industrialised, and the pressure on the land increased significantly. None of these forces were favourable to the emergence of a new form of hunting. Yet by the end of the eighteenth century, the ancient tradition of hunting with hounds had found a new place in this modernising world. By importing and breeding foxes and through negotiation with landowners, foxhunting had successfully adapted to the demands of a modernising Britain. From informal, local beginnings, an organized and sustainable field sport with national appeal had been created, and foxhunting’s position as ‘the only chace in England worthy of the taste or attention of a high bred sportsman’ was undeniable.⁹

1. Peter Beckford, *Thoughts on Hunting* (London, 1782), p. 214.

2. William Bray, *Sketch of a Tour into Derbyshire and Yorkshire* (London, 1783), p. 98.

3. John Nicholls, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, 4 vols. (London, 1795-1815, iii), p. 101n.

4. James Thomson, *The Seasons* (London, 1730), p. 35.
 5. Robert Surtees, *The Hunting Tours of Surtees* (London: Blackwood & sons, 1927), p. 107; Robert Surtees, *Analysis of Hunting Field* (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1846), p. 293-294.
 6. Colonel John Cook, *Observations on Foxhunting* (London, 1826), p. 173
 7. *Sporting Magazine*, March 1795. See also *Ibid.*, June 1830, p. 98-109.
 8. *Ibid.*, Jan. 1836, p. 258-61.
 9. William A. Osbaldiston, *The British Sportsman, or, Nobleman, Gentleman, and Farmer's Dictionary, of Recreation and Amusement* (London, [1792-96?]), p. 527.
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