

The Gunners Hunt at Larkhill

By John Smith-Maxwell

The season opens with a meet in front of a famous façade, and a brace killed before lunch



Two dates I shall remember whatever else happens this foxhunting season are October 31st and November 1st, 1952. On the morning of the 31st I witnessed Captain “Ronnie” Wallace, Joint-Master and huntsman of the Heythrop, bringing the cub-hunting season to a close and the total bag to 43 ½ brace in 40 days’ hunting – no mean achievement.

I motored that evening some 76 miles through incessant rain to the vicinity of Larkhill and met for the first time the present Master and huntsman of the Royal Artillery (Salisbury Plain) Foxhounds, Colonel H. C. R. Gillman. At about 10 p.m. the Master changed into “working clothes” and accompanied by his amateur whippers-in, passed into the night to earth stop for the following day. I declined the cordial invitation to join this merry band on the basis that middle age has its compensations. Earth-stopping, which since the war has been difficult in many countries, is also difficult in this country, but it is made somewhat easier by the energies of the Master and other amateur sportsmen who are prepared to vacate a warm bed on a “windy” night to share the discomforts with the professional earth-stoppers and gamekeepers.

On the following morning I attended the R.A. Hunt’s opening meet. Colonel Gillman was hunting the mixed pack of 17 ½ couple and by 1.15 p.m. had killed a brace in two good hunts. The meet was at the School of Artillery Officers’ Mess, where a field of about 50 and many foot supporters of the Hunt were the guests of the Commandant, Brigadier Colquhoun, a keen foxhunter.

Moving off over the well-known Larkhill point-to-point course, hounds got away on exceptionally good terms from Alton Gorse, a small covert, and ran really fast for 10 minutes before killing their fox in the open. Due no doubt to rain during the night, scent was good in the early part of the day, and with no obstacles (fences) it seemed to me that the odds were distinctly against a fox saving his brush.

A good hunt of over an hour started from Newfoundland Ridge, a fox going away pointing for Robin Hood’s Ball and doubling back almost to the race course and then right-handed to Newfoundland Ridge, where it was viewed away by Mr Hiscock, the well-known farmer. Hound swung left-handed by Alton Gorse and from there hunted well but more slowly under indifferent scenting conditions to eventually kill their fox.

The next draw was Shrewton Folly, a difficult place to draw and from which it is difficult to get on good terms and over the “chosen land”. The field were most wisely placed so as to encourage the fox to go in the opposite



direction to the most frightening hunting country I have met (including the Grafton before the war). We would have been faced with shell craters at regular intervals, slit trenches, "brewed-up" tanks and tank traps – which I am told is a very usual line for foxes to take. Happily, we were spared this danger zone.

Shrewton Folly, a good covert, held a brace and half and hounds eventually forced a fox away pointing for Blackball Firs. They ran on over the top of Hawk Down to swing right-handed to Bustard Inn, and then hunting well, crossed Greenlands Road before swinging right-handed to Down Barn Plantation and on to Little Folly, where they checked. At this point Colonel Gillman scored a very fine cast and hounds again ran on, but now some way behind their fox. Scent eventually failed after an interesting hunt of 50 minutes, and because the Hunt horses had had quite sufficient, we ended a most enjoyable day. I was well mounted on a chestnut horse that in his younger days would have carried anyone over any country, and on this occasion he carried me without a qualm over a country he understood better than I.

Riding back across the Plain on a perfect evening to eventually arrive back at the stables at Larkhill gave one food for thought. The country is closely surrounded by the mechanized army of the present-day; yet in the midst of it all, the spirit of foxhunting and love of horses still flourishes, though no doubt with the odds against them. In fact the keenness and enthusiasm which prevailed was exactly the same as might be expected at the opening meet at Kirby Gate or elsewhere. One felt that Mr Hussey, who hunted this country before 1908, when the Royal Regiment of Artillery took over the pack, would be pleased to know that his country was never in better hands or in better heart.

The fact that this regimental pack has survived two world wars is amazing. It has been brought about only by the determination of those who have been quartered in the vicinity of Larkhill and the tremendous support of the farmers. During World War II the pack, which previously had been harriers well known for their hunting capabilities and their successes on the flags, were recognized for the first time by the Masters of Foxhounds Association as foxhounds. It is now, I think, the only pack of foxhounds in this country maintained by a regiment.

I am given to understand that during the last war Brigadier J. H. Gibbon, well supported by Colonel John Galbraith and Major Edmonds, carried on the hounds under great difficulties, and it is really due to their tenacity that the pack is now flourishing. The chairman of the Hunt committee is at present Brigadier Derek Tulloch. I can think of no better appointment, for he is a first-class man to hound, a good point-to-point rider and a winner over Larkhill.

Colonel Gillman took office as Master and huntsman three years ago. He was originally a keen member of the Eton Beagles and whipped-in to the Royal Artillery Harriers and the Wylde Valley before the war. He learned, he told me, a very great deal when he helped to turn hounds under the critical eye of Sir Arthur Blakiston. Colonel Gillman has shown very good sport during his three years, being ably supported by Major P. D. E. Riall as first whipper-in, Major P. D. Morris as second whip, and Major J. P. Robertson, a puppy walker of note. The arduous duties of secretary are carried out by Major G. W. P. Fisher, who has as compensation the privilege of carrying

the horn on the few occasions the Master is not out. The Hunt is lucky, too, to have Reg Mathews, who has been kennelman for nine years.

The pack is, I consider, slightly hampered for the moment because of the divided ages, and it appeared that given a good scent the younger hounds were too fast for their somewhat older brethren. But this is a question that, given ordinary luck, will right itself, but there is no doubt that young and old alike really hunt and run with great cry. The Master told me that the success of the present-day pack is due largely to the wonderful support given by Major John Morrison, M.P., M.F.H., of the South and West Wilts, and by the Tedworth. As a result of this support the R.A. Kennel to-day has behind it some extremely good blood.

South and West Wilts Dominoe (by Four Burrow Lifeguard '19, dam South and West Wilts Daylight '39), although not in his first youth, follows tradition in his ability to "mark", a trait very prominent in this breeding, while South and West Wilts Dangle (by Thoir Poacher '37, dam Dazzle '40) has proved to be not only good in the field but the dam of Aldershot winners, Cotswold Pigment (by Cottesmore Ranksborough '43, dam Cotswold Picture '43) is another bitch who has proved herself time and time again. Of the young entry, Falconer (by the Duke of Beaufort's Drover '48, dam South and West Wilts Flora '48) are unquestionably a couple of bitches of merit who may well prove themselves invaluable in future breeding.

A generous gift by Major Morrison on election day, 1951, added to the Royal Artillery Kennel the following hounds: South and West Wilts Foolish by Paragon '47, dam Foxony '46; Hollyhock, by the Duke of Beaufort's Pedlar '46, dam South and West Wilts Hawflech '45; Herretic and Hostage, brother and sister, by South and West Wilts Porlock '46, dam South and West Wilts Harmony '45; Margery and Mayfly, by Pytchley Stentor '47, dam South and West Wilts Makeshift '48; and Pelican, a dog hound, by the Duke of Beaufort's Drover '48, dam South and West Wilts Peaceful '47.

Puppy walkers in this very military zone might appear a difficult proposition, but I am told that the situation is remarkably good. Indeed, when the future young _____ are returned to kennel, the only possible criticism might be that they have been done too well, a fault – if it can be called a fault – on the right side.

The Royal Artillery's country appears to me to be in no way a huntsman's paradise. Unless one possesses local knowledge of the average run of a fox and a great "bump of locality", it seems a difficult country in which to account for your fox – there are too many unusual dens of safety in which he can get to ground and with which the average huntsman might well be completely unacquainted.

This country has, like many others, a flourishing Pony Club and the goodwill of the farmers. Moreover, the Larkhill Branch of the Army Saddle Club flourishes and the powers-that-be appreciate that although "P.T." is perhaps beneficial to the health of all concerned the outside of a _____ is still the best tonic for the inside of a man. There is no shadow of doubt that this military pack, run by serving officers will continue the great traditions of the past.



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