

It's better with the Bicester

BICESTER WITH WHADDON CHASE, PURSTON MANOR, NORTHANTS
3 December

By Lucy Higginson

If a visitor should manage to visit the Bicester without any previous knowledge of them, it wouldn't take long to mark them down as a good, goey pack just from the horsepower on view at the meet.

Gathered behind the lovely edifice of David and Annabel Barnett's Purston Manor was a smart array of beasts, none of which would have looked out of place at the horse trials held here each July.

But who hasn't heard of the Bicester? Particularly since their huntsman of 18 years, Patrick Martin, became such an eloquent media spokesman at the time of the Hunting Act. Admired both for his handling of hounds and hacks (of the notebook-clutching, macintosh-wearing kind), Patrick remains in the thick of the battle for hunting, and now sits on the Countryside Alliance's Repeal Committee — as befits a huntsman who follows in the footsteps of such icons as Albert Buckle. Three of the pack's revered former huntsmen are remembered in the names of the staff cottages newly-built as part

of a superb redevelopment of the kennels at Stratton Audley.

Resplendent in ratcatcher
SINCE I last visited the Bicester (more properly, the Bicester Hunt with Whaddon Chase) — pre-ban — they have switched their dress code to ratcatcher, with the exception of the hunt staff.

"On balance, we felt people prefer to see us in tweed," explained hunt secretary Robert Vallance, "but decided to exempt our hunt staff because if a motorist sees a huntsman in a red coat on a lane, they'd be more likely to realise there might be hounds about."

Polly Portwin, senior master, has been joined this season by four new joint masters (see side box) and clearly relishes working with them: "We have a lot of fun," she said with a grin, "and you'll quite often find us all out hunting."

I was soon to discover their playfulness as they tried to pass themselves off as each other when

Joint-master Philippa Taylor (above right) and (below right) whipper-in Tom Baker



Bicester senior master Polly Portwin leads the field



Chris Getley joined the mastership this season

Why the ban must be repealed

"It's a ridiculous act in no way passed on animal welfare grounds, and a shameful waste of parliamentary time. A repeal is the only way forward for the countryside and for future generations."

Patrick Martin, Bicester with Whaddon Chase huntsman

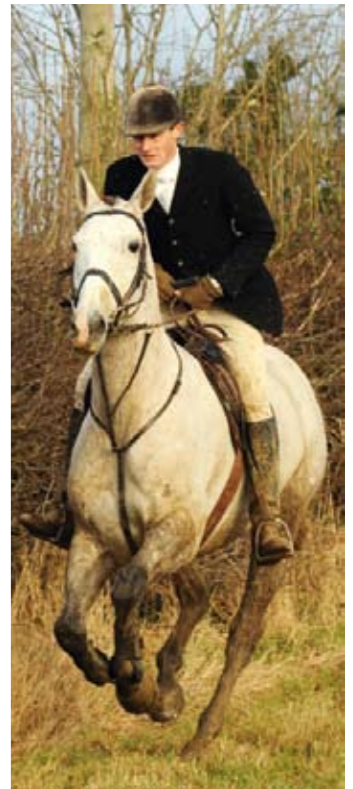
and sister were MFHs too) and who still plans the hound breeding with Patrick.

'A league of nations'

"THEY are a fascinating mix," says Patrick, proudly of his hounds. "They are what Mr Peel [Nigel Peel, North Cotswold master and H&H columnist] would call 'a league of nations', with fell and hill influences, some American blood through Mr Hardaway's Middleton hunt and, crucially, Welsh blood through the crosses made in the 1970s by Captain Farquhar. Also the New Forest Medyg influence is still evident. But it's the Welsh that really gives them the nose, voice and drive that you need."

In renting a hireling from Karen Bamford I found myself reunited with an old acquaintance. A few years ago I hired a bay called Gladiator for a cracking Christmas Eve with the Cheshire Forest during which he flew successive hedges before burying me (I'll admit it — twice) at a ditch.

Here he was again, with the same build and name but a snaffle and new stomping ground. Having clearly forgotten all ditch phobias, he's become the hireling to have — even before excelling himself in the Golden Button ride on New Year's Eve. He was a perfect gentleman.



Andrew Nicholson — not the event rider, but nearly

At the sharp end

AFTER a couple of hours I was honoured with an invitation to ride up front with Mr Martin, to watch him work his hounds at close quarters (he won the

I tried to put names to faces. Between them they have 11 hunting-mad offspring. Polly and her husband Guy retain the unusual distinction of being senior masters of two different packs. While she sets off for the Bicester country, he loads up to hunt with the Vale of Aylesbury, Garth and South Berks, which must present many practical challenges. Although it might, I suppose, prevent a post-hunting race for the bath.

Apparently oblivious to Purston's resident alpacas, the sizeable midweek field of around 60 (swollen by visitors from the coughing Warwickshire) moved off to draw Rosamond Bower and Farthinghoe Spinneys. After a wild, wet night, scenting conditions were not ideal, but our field master Christopher Getley (one of the four new joint-

They are what Mr Peel would call 'a league of nations' with fell and hill influences, some American blood and, crucially, Welsh

Patrick Martin on his pack, successful both out hunting and on the flags

masters) kept the field entertained and on the move, enjoying a variety of hunt jumps.

It also gave me a chance to meet some Bicester regulars, including Milly Soames, one of the 20-strong crowd who help run a clearly thriving hunt supporters club; Sally Rowlands, who hunts midweek since five children have her pretty much chained to sports pitches



A vision in tweed: the Bicester with Whaddon Chase field

at the weekends ("I run a spreadsheet to tell me where I should be"); and Lucy Holland, who does side-saddle what most of us would quake to do astride, and looks such a picture

in her habit she might have trotted off the canvass of a Munnings.

I also met Heather Tylor, a former Bicester master for 14 seasons (and clearly bred for it since her father, grandfather

Pictures by Trevor Meeks



Amateur whipper-in Chris Bailey

Hunting

hornblowing competition at the sadly defunct annual *Horse & Hound* ball three times) and learn first hand why he is such a natural ambassador and campaigner for hunting.

"Hunting could have stopped with the railways; it could have stopped with cars — we've got to keep it going," he insists.

His face betrayed nothing as hounds confidently sang out — with one resonating call, then a rich chorus of agreement — in Thomas Gorse. The only thing parting huntsman from his hounds was a sizeable ditch — you could have lost a small car in it; well, a quadbike anyway — between us and the Gorse. Patrick turned his horse, pushed and pummelled, and was gone, leaving me lamely finding the courage to follow suit until Mr Getley appeared to remind me how it should be done. Then followed a brisk half hour hunt, past Camp



The British show jumping team's chef d'equipe Derek Ricketts, riding Piper's Ovation



Leicestershire visitor Toby Coles with joint-master Robert Thame

Farm, over the road to Charlton Furze and on to Hinton Airfield, popping a gateside wall and an array of timber fences in our path.

Another famous bottom

"THAT was a bit sharper," said a well mounted Bicester regular and former master — British show jumping team chef d'equipe

Derek Ricketts, out on the 2009 RIHS heavyweight worker Piper's Ovation (and now joining Jim Culloty on my list of "famous bottoms I have followed out hunting").

We checked by Rookery Farm in Hinton-on-the-Hedges in clouds of satisfying steam, at which point those of us on Bamford hirelings

Hunting could have stopped with the railways; it could have stopped with cars — we've got to keep it going

Patrick Martin on hunting continuing to overcome the problems it faces



Patrick Martin, huntsman since 1992, with the hounds he describes as a 'fascinating mix' and amateur whipper-in Ben Burton

In kennels

Masters: Polly Portwin, Robert Thame, Christopher Getley, Nick Reynolds and Phillippa Taylor

Huntsman: Patrick Martin
Whippers-in: Tom Baker is the professional, while Ben Burton and Chris Bailey whip-in as amateurs

Countryman: Ben Whale, who lays the trails

Hon secretary: Robert Vallance
Assistant secretaries: Liz Thame and Rachel Atkins

Type of horse needed: one that's good over timber, gates and wire, that has some bone and can stay, according to Patrick Martin.

Quote of the day: From a male follower as we jostled to jump a fairly standard timber fence: "This is where I broke my back last time..."



Putting the rest of us to shame: Lucy Holland hunting side-saddle

Cake and crumpets

EVERYONE claims their pack to be the friendliest in the district. But it seems especially believable with the Bicester, due in part no



Gateshutters for the day were Izzy Taylor, Jenny Edwards and Emma Ellis

felt duty bound to say goodnight, our horses having served us handsomely for the best part of four hours. The line petered out just before Blackjack a short while later, after which hounds turned back to Newbottle Manor, and finished later by Astrop Ditch.

Returning to the subject of celebrated riders, I also chatted to Andrew Nicholson in the field, but not the one we see whizzing each year round Badminton — though he admitted to having occasionally basked in that Andrew's reflected glory. He answered confidently when I asked him to name the best three things about his pack: "It's well run; they go well — Patrick's really on top of his game — and they are incredibly friendly. It's exactly the sort of hunt you want to take young teenage children out with."



Christopher Hodgson, joint-master from 2003-2009 and now chairman

HUNT APPOINTMENTS

FOXHOUNDS

Blackmore & Sparkford Vale. — 14 Jan, The Red Lion, Babcary; 16, Cherry Bolberry Farm, Henstridge; 18, Highbridge Farm, Ditcheat; 19, The Chetnoe Inn, Chetnoe; 21, Southfield Farm, Bridgehampton; 23, Buckshaw Farm, Holwell, 11am. **Duke of Beaufort's.** — 14 Jan, Manor Farm, Compton Bassett; 16, Park Farm, Pinkney; 18, Beverston Camp; 20, Horton Hall Farm, Horton; 21, Cadenham Manor Farm, Foxham; 23, Ivy Leaze Farm, Acton Turville. **Fernie.** — 16 Jan, Knaptoft Church; 20, Knights Farm, Hallaton; 23, Foxton, 11am. **Four Burrow.** — 16 Jan, Nancemellin Farm; 18, visit to South Devon; 23, Stithians Showground, 11am. **New Forest.** — 16 Jan, Minstead Manor; 19, Sandy Corner; 23, Denny, 10.45am. **Oakley.** — 16 Jan, Park Farm, Keysoe; 19, Low Farm, Easton Mauditt; 23, ring hotline, 10.45am. **South Notts.** — 14 Jan, The Coach & Horses, Horsley; 18, Ye Olde Bridge Inn, Oxtou; 21, Blackbrook House, Belper, 11.30am. **Surrey Union.** — 15 Jan, Bulmer House, Holmbury St Mary; 19, Upper House Farm, Hascombe; 22, Henfold Lakes, Beare Green. **Tivyside.** — 16 Jan, Glynsaithmaen, Mynachlog Ddu; 19, Henllan; 23, Bluestone, Ty Canol Penygroes.

STAGHOUNDS

Devon & Somerset (exempt hunting). — 14 Jan, Winsford Hill; 16, Brendon Two Gates; 19,

Bicester with Whaddon Chase

doubt to the polished way in which they promote themselves through open days, Pony Club camp visits, hound parades and even their website (which is very smart and comprehensive), and their field testifies to the hunt's appeal.

"I've never seen so many people hunting as we have at the moment," said Heather Tylor, and Patrick later told me: "We had 100 out for one 6.30am Saturday meet in September — it's a real gauge of our support."

As the perfect epilogue, my day concluded with tea, fruit cake and crumpets as a guest of Ollie Carnock and Henry Bankes-Jones, people I had met only hours before but found so much in common with besides a love of hunting, two visitors from the Vale of Aylesbury and a handful of Bicester regulars.

Buoyed up by still-circulating adrenalin, satiated hunger and a rapid thawing of the toes, we shared tea and anecdotes as hunting people do better than anyone, before I had to face up to the fact this wasn't my village, my pack, my county — and set off for the motorway. **H&H**

Pink Powder



Add Value Save Money



41p Per Day

NAF
Restoring the Balance

ONLINE
www.naf-uk.com

For more details please go to your local NAF stockist, call our Freephone Advice Line: 0800 373 106 or email info@naf-uk.com
Authorized by the British Equestrian Federation.