

# THE BICENTENARY OF THE NEWRY HUNT

BY EDWIN BRYSON



***Jim Bryson and the Hounds – Trevor Hill Meet, January 1958.***

Our earliest ancestors are often described as ‘hunter-gatherers’. For them, ‘hunting’ was not a sport, it was a vital necessity – they simply had to catch food in order to sustain life. Failure to do so was a matter of life and death. Later on, when the first farmers arrived and learned to grow and store food, and their dependency on hunting was at times a bit less total, man was able to enjoy the thrill of the chase, even if the prey sometimes escaped. Traditional folktales and myths contain many stories of mighty hunters and praise the prowess of their great hunting dogs.

Following the Norman invasion hunting on horseback became the norm and by the 17<sup>th</sup> century if it was fashionable, in Ireland, for wealthy landowners to keep a pack of hounds and regularly hunt through their estates. Arthur Stringer states in his book, *‘The Experienced Huntsman’* (1714) that

he was Huntsman for 35 years to Viscount Conway of Portmor Co Antrim, hunting red and fallow deer and fox.

Many of the landed gentry like Viscount Conway had private packs of hounds, meaning that they hunted where and when they liked, mainly for their own sport but might at times have invited friends to join them.

For them, hunting had become more a sport than a necessity and subscription packs began to appear all over Ireland. The thrill of the chase was the popular reason for the success of hunting on horseback, for it involved a great deal of skill and courage. Fermanagh Harriers trace their origins back to 1760, with a few breaks, and a pack existed in Seaforde Co Down, which then became the Lecale and eventually the East Down Foxhounds.

There was hunting in the Newry area in the early years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by such landlords as Lord Kilmorey and probably Viscount Newry.

However while hunting took place regularly and there were packs on various local estates it wasn't until 1820 that the Newry Hunt was formally established with rules and regulations, and membership fees. The man responsible for bringing order to the activities was George Gordon.

### **George Gordon 1820 – 1835**

The Newry Hunt was in existence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but it was recorded that George Gordon was the first Master and the Newry Hunt was officially formed in 1820 – reported to be the oldest continuous harrier pack in Ireland. The Down Hunt is older but never owned a pack of hounds – just hunted with others.

George Gordon came originally from Killyleagh Co Down and lived in Sunnyside, Damolly. Meets were held on a Monday and Friday. He it was who drew up the rules for members and with the encouragement of local farmers hunted the lands until his death in 1835.

The kennels were probably at Sheepbridge House.

**Rule 11.** That the hounds shall meet on each hunting day at the place and hour printed on the list of Meets, when, if one Member be present, they shall immediately throw off; but if a Member does not arrive within one hour, the Huntsman shall return with the Hounds to the Kennel.

**Rule 14.** That every Member of the Hunt shall avoid doing injury or giving offence to the farmers in the hunting district.

**Rule 16.** That the field money shall be 2s. per day.

### **John Gordon 1835 - 1867**

George Gordon's brother John of Sheepbridge House took over the Mastership and was a very keen sportsman. He was also renowned for having great parties and had a ballroom in his house. He kept good horses and was said to have a great sense of humour. In later years Mr James Glenny took over as Huntsman. The Boxing Day Meet was held

first at Sheepbridge House and later at the pub where it has been held for two hundred years.

The Gordons were great landlords and as well as owning Sheepbridge House they owned Barkston Lodge, Maryvale and Mount Kearney. Anne Gordon daughter of Colonel Gordon was the last member of that family line. She was also like John, a bit wild, and had inherited the Gordon sense of humour.



**Henry Thomson**

### **Henry Thomson 1867 – 1871**

Henry Thomson took over as Master in 1867. I believe he provided the kennels at Dromcashlone and a Huntsman's cottage free for many years. He was born in Downshire House in 1840. He represented Newry as a Conservative MP from 1880 -1885. A prominent Orangeman, the local hall was built after he died and named in his memory. He married in 1866 and soon after moved to Scarvagh House. He hunted the hounds but gave up the Mastership in 1871. He continued with his own private pack which was kennelled at Scarvagh House.

It must be remembered that horses and hounds hacked to and from all meets at the time. This often required a long trek home after a day's hunting. Although electricity and the telephone had been invented between 1870 and 1880, it was in the early 1900s before they came to Ireland. In fact it was the 1950s before those technologies reached rural County Down and Armagh. Communication about hunt meets was by post in the 1800s. You just hacked the seven or eight miles to the meet,



hunted all day, hacked home and never thought a thing about it!

In 1881 an article in the *'Dublin Daily Express'* stated that a boycott of the hunt at Creevy had been a failure and the farmers gave the huntsmen a cordial welcome. There were few other activities for country folk to enjoy.



**Thomas Darcy Hoey**

### **Thomas Darcy Hoey 1871 -1883**

He had been a prominent member of the hunt for years. As well as Master he held the office of Secretary and Treasurer. He was also the President of Newry Rowing Club. He was the principal shareholder of the local spirit wholesalers 'Matt Darcy and Co. Ltd.' and a major shareholder in the Newry Navigation Company. For the last couple of years as Master he had been unwell and Mr Hunter Moore of Moore Lodge had acted in his absence, eventually being officially appointed as Master in 1886, just before Mr Darcy Hoey died.

### **Hunter Moore 1883 – 1891**

Hunter Moore was another well - known Newry man and a prominent solicitor. He was also land agent for Kilmorey estates. Hunter Moore hunted hounds and it cost you 2s 6d a day. The hunt also employed gamekeepers to preserve the hares in various parts of the country. The hunt made a profit of £11.19.6 in 1887. Mr Patrick Murphy, a very active member, was secretary and acted as chairman for committee meetings for many years. At a time when most subscriptions were £10.00, Patrick Murphy subscribed £25.00.

Funds were running low in 1887-88 and a hunt dinner was held in the Imperial Hotel on 25<sup>th</sup> March.



**Hunter Moore**

For the next couple of years hounds were hunted by either Hunter Moore, a Mr Gartlan or Robert Dempster. The meet at Greenore was always at 10.00 a.m. Why? Because of the train times.

Hunter Moore gave the lands for the band room at the bottom of Tinker Hill in 1884. After he died the band was renamed 'Hunter Moore Memorial Flute Band'. He was also Captain of Greenore Golf Club.

### **Robert Dempster 1891-1898**

In 1891 Robert Dempster, a Major in the Irish Rifles, who lived in Abbey Yard, was persuaded to take over as Master. Subscription was accepted from East Lancashire Regiment and Dublin Fusiliers to boost funds, allowing soldiers to come hunting. Mr Dempster opened a mill at Ballybot. He continued until 1898 when Mr Wickham Moorehead agreed to hunt and manage the hounds but not take on Mastership.

There was also great discussion as to whether the Hunt could continue as it was losing money. Mr Moorehead failed to attend meetings and there were some questions needing answered in the accounts. These financial difficulties continued

and some hounds were sold to the Co. Down Staghounds in 1902. The Staghounds had just been formed by members of The Iveagh Hunt, formed about 1800.

(In 1896 the 'Locomotives on the Highway Act' was passed allowing horseless carriages of less than three tons to travel at speeds of up to twelve miles an hour without an attendant carrying a red flare.)

### **Alexander Gartlan 1898 - 1905**

Nominally Master of the hunt during this time, Alexander Gartlan, a prominent Newry solicitor, resigned more than once. Mr Kelly Patterson was asked to take on the Mastership but declined as he lived too far away and James Heather, secretary/treasurer, agreed to hunt the hounds and Alexander Gartlan agreed to continue as Master.

The hunt had serious financial difficulties and when Alexander Gartlan resigned again it was proposed that Miss Browne-Lecky, Fintimorn, Warrenpoint be elected as Master. The alternative was to dispose of the hounds. She must have refused for at a meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1905 held in Newry Agricultural offices, **Colonel Carden** of the Hussars agreed to be Master (or possibly joint Master) for £150 but the hunt could not afford that. He later took it on for £90.00.

### **Major Maxwell Close - 1905-1924**

Major M.A. Close was High Sheriff of Co. Armagh in 1908; Justice of the Peace and Deputy Lieutenant for Co. Armagh. He joined the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars in 1874, rose through the ranks and transferred to the 13<sup>th</sup> Hussars in 1891. By 1896 he was second in command, served in the South African war 1899-1902 and retired in 1901. He agreed to take on the Mastership, otherwise the pack would have to be disposed of. Harry Willis agreed to be Huntsman. In 1908 Mr Stanley Howard was to be persuaded to retain the Huntsmanship and Colonel Carden agreed to take charge of and hunt the hounds despite the fact that he had received some bad publicity about his unpopularity with some local farmers. The 1907 A.G.M was held in Newry Agricultural Offices. F.B. Small was present and the accounts showed a profit of £1.12.6d.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of December 1910 during the hunt at Creevy, Colonel Carden fell off his horse and died of apoplexy. He was described as a thorough sportsman.

Mr James Treanor of Jerrettspass was appointed as Huntsman for a fee of £20.

In 1911 there was the first indication that flesh for feeding the hounds was supplied free by Mr George Kelly. Mr Henry Thomson still granted the free use of the kennels which were now looked after by Miss Greta Howe, Lisduff, and to Dr Robinson, Tremount for free fuel. But for all this generosity, the hunt would face further difficulties.



*Thomas Darcy Hoey was a major shareholder in Matt D'Arcy and Co.*

Hunting carried on during the WW1. In 1916, tributes were paid to Lord Newry, Arthur Innes of Dromantine who was awarded the Military Cross; also to Martin O'Meara who was awarded the Victoria Cross.

The 100<sup>th</sup> AGM was held on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1919 in the Victoria Hotel, now the Shelbourne.

A few years later it was decided to hold a hunt ball, and a sports and jumping competition was to be run to increase income.

### **Captain Roger Hall 1924 - 1929**

The Hall family had come to Narrow Water in 1640. They lived in the old castle until the present castle was built in 1816. In 1923 Captain Roger Hall agreed to take over the management and hunting of the hounds, as '*Captain Halls' hounds*', a private pack without subscription. The hounds were moved to Narrow Water and housed in old railway carriages, with Jack Murphy as Huntsman. Captain Hall kept hunting going through difficult

times. Having been gassed on active army duty he died at a young age and the hounds went to Captain M.S. Close, who built the present kennels at Drumbanagher in 1929.



**Captain Maxwell S. Close, Drumbanagher, c.1940.**

#### **Captain Maxwell S. Close (Mac) 1929 – 1946**

Captain Close was a true sportsman and a hunting fanatic. He introduced fresh blood to the pack and entered them in the harrier stud book in 1934, when he paraded the hounds at Balmoral show. He was very popular and persuaded many local farmers to hunt. An important development was that the first lorry transport became available around 1932 which was also the year of the first Point-to-Point, at Mullaghglass.

The hunt carried on, though with some restrictions during the war. Captain Close was a great stalwart but unfortunately died in 1946, just before the local farmers had organised an evening for a presentation of a painting in recognition of all his sterling efforts.

#### **Mrs. Alexandra Close 1947 - 1985**

Captain Close's widow Alexandra, formerly Alexandra Dorothea Anna Primrose Cramer-Roberts, daughter of the high sheriff of Kildare took over the Mastership in 1947 and although she never rode to hounds she took a great interest in the hunt. Tommy Gibson was her Huntsman.



**Alexandra Close**

In 1958 **Jim Bryson** of Fourtowns took over as Huntsman and expanded the country into South Armagh and Co Louth. A great era in hunting followed when those who attended never got home before dark. During the 1960s many fundraising activities were held including the annual Hunt

Ball, many social evenings and horse trials etc. The Hunt also ran a 'Cowboys and Indians Display' with which they travelled around the country. It was a lot of fun for the participants. 1961 saw the first running of horse trials in NI at Lisnabrague which proved a great success. Also in the '60s, Jim Bryson, George Bryson and Bill Buller

#### **Diana Cope nee Cowdy – her diary entry for Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> January 1939**

*"Went out with the Beauforts. Cap £2. Scent bad.  
Runs in 15 minute bursts.*

*Duchess very jealous – doesn't like me to pass her. The  
fences were very small. Far too many people out – got  
in your way.*

*Have had better days anytime with the Newry harriers  
on a half-broken 4-year-old."*

On a grand hunting day, George Bryson and Harry Ferris, intrepid horsemen as they were, pulled-up at a particularly difficult fence. Just then, Diana Cowdy coming behind them cleared the fence without hesitating. George said to Harry  
*"We're going to have  
to jump it now!"*



paraded the hounds at Dublin Show. For many months they had practised a training trick with the hounds, firstly leaving them in a lane, getting them to wait until summoned by a horn. Then they progressed to a field. The hounds watched Jim who could leave them in the field for several minutes before sounding the horn. When Dublin Show came around, the manoeuvre was ready. The hounds were left in a group on the double banks of the arena, Jim and George rode to the opposite end, sounded the horn and the hounds came at speed, greatly impressing the crowd.

In 1985 I was very honoured to be asked by Mrs Close to be her 3<sup>rd</sup> Huntsman and continued in that role after she passed on shortly after that. The Mastership passed to her son Maxwell Close.

### **Maxwell Close (Mac) 1985 - 1995**

Mr Close had joined the Irish Fusiliers which became the Iniskillings and served in India as a Lieutenant. He came out as Captain but never used his rank as a civilian. He took a great interest in hunting, but not as a rider. He kept the kennels and chaired the meetings for 10 years until his death in 1995.



**Edwin Bryson and Maxwell Close at the Meet, Killysavan, 1988.**

### **Mrs Joan Close 1995 – 2020**

Captain Close's widow Joan took over as Master, again not a rider but one who had a keen interest in

the hunt. She carried on in her own quiet style and attended all committee meetings while she could and as many meets as she could get to until ill-health made that difficult. Her role as Master was confirmed at the 200<sup>th</sup> AGM held in Rice's Hotel in September 2019 with James Bryson as chairman, Mark McIlroy Huntsman and Jenny Copeland secretary.



### **Joan Close**

Hunting is a very environmentally friendly sport. Horses don't produce methane; very little transport is used to get about; there are no big stadiums with floodlights. It is not expensive, is good outside exercise in which you use more muscles than are used in most sports.

Thanks to the local Farmers and to the Close Family for all their support over the years.

*"When we bid farewell to the season  
And turn out our hunters to grass,  
'Twould be surely the blackest of treason  
To go without filling the glass  
To the men who have furthered our pastime  
By lending their fields for the fun!  
Here's 'The Farmers!' Once, twice, and a last time –  
The 'Grandfather, father and son'"*  
**Will H. Ogilvie.**

**Before going to press, we are sad to report the death of Mrs. Joan Close, Master, in June 2020.**