

MEMOIRS OF A HUNTING MAN

George Bryson

HUNTING is one of man's most ancient activities dating back to the earliest times. Hunting as a sport is one of the oldest too.

I would first of all like to recommend to you one of my favourite books "The Experienced Huntsman". It was written over 200 years ago by a man called Stringer who was put in charge of the Conway Estate on the Eastern shore of Lough Neagh. Now this estate was at that time about 5,000 acres in area and a great deal of that was originally forest and bog. Stringer was involved there for 35 years and during that time he stocked the estate with every animal which could be hunted — stags, foxes, otters, hares, etc. He became an expert on all forms of wild life and anyone interested in nature or the study of animals would enjoy this book which was republished five or six years ago.

While hunting in Ireland goes back to the earliest times, it is with hunting here in the twentieth century that I want to deal.

Things have changed greatly in the last few years. There are now only two packs of stag hounds in Ireland — the Co. Down Stag Hounds and the Ward Unions. For some reason or other they have got their hounds mixed up at present and there is not a pack of pure stag hounds in the British Isles. What pass for stag hounds are really only big fox hounds trying to go a bit faster when hunting the stag. The Co. Down Stag Hounds have a park of about 40 acres where the stags are kept. It has a fence six feet high all round it to keep the stags in.

While there are a lot of packs of hounds in Ireland still, the number is very much smaller than it was in the 18th and 19th centuries. Then there were several other packs of hounds kept locally — at Lisnabrague, at Scarva and at Rathfriland for example. As well there were many small packs of hounds kept by country people who came together with their hounds to hunt. It was good fun and they enjoyed it.

When I first began hunting the sport was to a large extent reserved for the gentry — Lords and Majors and so on. Now things are totally different and like all other sports its the sport of the ordinary people.

Hunting in Ireland is controlled by the Master Hounds Association based in Dublin. Every hunt has a Master. He is the main man in any hunt. He has complete control. He decides on things such as how many 'couple' of hounds are to be kept. (Hounds are always counted in 'couple'). If anyone misbehaves or breaks a rule of the hunt the Master can send him home. As well as the Master, there is the Huntsman.

Now sometimes, not always, the Master takes responsibility and hunts the hounds himself but if not this is left to the Huntsman. Every Huntsman, or the Master if he is also the Huntsman, must know every hound in the pack. He must know not just each individual hound's name but it's character as well. Hounds like people are all different — some are fast and some are slow, some are good on the road and some are good in the bogs and so on. If the hounds check and lose the scent, it's the Huntsman's job to put them right again.

Now I've hunted all over Ireland, from Antrim to Cork but I met the best Master of the hounds and huntsman that I ever knew here at home with the Newry Harriers. The late Major Maxwell Close was an outstanding Master of Hounds. There wasn't the equal of him. He devoted his life to his pack after he left the army. His hounds were so well trained that they won first prize everywhere they went. They were really exceptional.

It takes a very skilful Master to hunt a bog to get the hounds to cover every bit of it. Sometimes you'd meet a man when out hunting and he'd say, "I saw a fox going into that bog this morning." Now the fox will usually lie in the driest spot in the bog, often on top of a bank, and he'll lie there till the hounds come right up to him before he slips away. So to move him you have to make your hounds cover all the bog.

One of my favourite moments in the hunt is when the hounds get a little bit of the scent and away goes the tongue and you hear the music and the horsemen and the blood's up and they're all ready for going. To me there's no sport like it. The thrill of going across the country with a pack of hounds a field or two in front of you, especially in a part of the country that's new to you is really tremendous. To get over the hedges and stay with the hounds is a skilful operation and you do get some tremendous thrills.

Other people get a thrill just watching a good pack of hounds at work. That is the most skilful part of the exercise. A lot of others hunt for the love of being out in the country, for the fresh air and the exercise or for the companionship, for meeting friends and neighbours and for the chat. They hunt for many different reasons, but they all enjoy it.

One of the other great pleasures I get from hunting is the opportunity to talk to farmers. Farmers are, in general, very well informed and very interesting people to talk to and can enlighten you on a lot of things.

The hounds are kept in the kennel and are looked after by the kennel-man. They are generally fed on



Major Maxwell Close, "the best Master I ever met", with the Newry Harriers outside Drumbanagher House.

fallen animals. If a farmer had an animal which died or had to be put down, he would ring the kennels and it would be collected. Feeding the hounds is another job requiring skill and experience. If the hounds are going out next day they must be given just enough to have them in fettle — ready to go and keen to hunt.

Some days are better for hunting than others. The good Huntsman will know if it's a good 'scenting-day'. The thing we look for is a bit of "a drop on the bush." If you get a warm dry day with little or no dampness it's normally a poor scenting-day. However it doesn't always apply and I've seen days when the ground was very dry and the scent was good. So there's really no hard-and-fast rule about it.

Now as well as the Master and the Huntsman we have two Field Masters and two whips. The whips' job is to keep the hounds up to the Huntsman. Sometimes the hounds would wander this way or that and it's the job of the whips to keep them in the pack and keep them up. The whips must obey the Huntsman totally. The Field Masters' job is to see that those taking part behave themselves — you don't ride over new grass, don't leave gates open, say "Thank you" to people who assist, speak to farmers etc. along the road, and ride in single file on the roadway. Manners is mostly what the Field Masters' job is and in the Newry Harriers we're very particular about behaviour.

Another aspect of hunting about which the Newry Harriers are particular is dress. If you come out hunting a time or two you will be quietly and politely told "If you're going to hunt, you must be properly dressed!"

Now the Newry Harriers, as far as is known, were formed about 1798. However the first known Master was George Gordon of Sheepbridge who was Master from 1820.

The following are the Masters since then:

Master	Dates
George Gordon	1820-1835
John Gordon	1835-1867
Henry Thompson	1867-1871
Henry D'Arcy	1871-1883
Hunter Moore	1883-1891
Robert Dempster	1891-1898
Alexander Gartland	1898-1905
Major Maxwell Close	1905-1924
Captain Roger Hall	1924-1929
Major Maxwell Close	1929-1943
Mrs Close	1947-1985
Mr. Max Close	1985-

Henry Thompson lived at Scarva and succeeded the Gordons who were father and son. D'Arcy was a famous character. A horse which he sold to Beasley of Dublin, Comeaway, won the Grand National. Altogether the Newry Harriers have had four horses which won the National, and of course Ann Ferris won the Irish National.

Mrs. Close was the longest serving master of the hunt and the Close family have had a very long innings as Masters of the Newry Harriers.

When I first started to hunt with the Newry Harriers, they usually hunted hares. Now hunting hares is a very different business from hunting foxes. You usually put a hare up in the middle of a field where it's sitting in a clump of grass and it runs. However it doesn't like to go out of its own territory and will run round in circles. This becomes more difficult when you've been round twice, and you never like that because you're on the same farm again.



The Newry Harriers pictured at Prospect Hill, Latt, Jerrettspass. Mr. James Best, his daughter Win and grandson Brian at the door. The huntsmen (left to right) are George Reid, Tommy Gibson and Barney McLoughlin (1946).



At Taylorstown Point-to-Point, George Bryson clears a ditch ahead of the gallant Sam English (c. 1950).

I remember shortly after I started we were hunting up towards the Windmill Stump when we lost the hare. Major Close tried and tried. He even walked quietly round but not a cheep. So I was watching the whole procedure going on and suddenly away in the low part of the field didn't I see the hare coming out and running a few strides and going away in again! You daren't have shouted at Major Close, I can tell you, he would have sent you home very quick. So I walked quietly over and I said to him 'Master, I'm just after seeing the hare coming out'. 'Right, George', he says, 'There's one thing I can't do, I can't lift the hounds'. Now I didn't understand this at that time but I did later on. He said 'If I lift them, they won't put their heads down again'. They still had their head down they were still looking for the scent but they were nearly ready to give up. So he quietly walked away over to where I had seen the hare and the hounds were still working round and out goes the hare. And the hounds got the scent and we were away. He was an exceptional huntsman.

Bill Buller and Tim Sinton and myself and Harry Ferris and Jim, there was about five or six of us and we gathered up and we said we would go to the Ward Unions, we did this quite often. So we arrived at the Ward Unions anyway. We had rung this fellow called 'Stickleleg' Magee for the horses. We hired the horses. Bill was very, very quick out of the car and over to Magee and the horses and he said, 'I'll have that one there.' So I looked and this was a lovely big horse, right enough. So anyway, by the time I got myself organised and round to picking my horse, I had no choice in the matter, there was only this wee mare left—not much ability looking about her. When I was getting up on her, I called Magee over and I says, "Tell me this, what is she like?" He said, "She'll take you

there, but not in a hurry!" "Just one other question to ask you, can she get over a place?" "Yes", he said, "She can get over a place."

So on we went anyway and they galloped away from me at the start, but gradually I got up, and arrived on the top of a big hill. The next fence was onto the road, so says I, 'I'll test Magee here.' Now most of the hunt had stopped and I put her at it and she cleared it well and we crossed the road and away down the field. The hounds were flying and there was only the Master and four or five of the top-class horsemen in front of me. They were near the bottom of the field when I got in and I says, "If I could slip over here by the far side, I'd be getting nearer!" So I slipped across a bit of new grass and down the far side and we all met in the corner. And I can tell you I got my character read!

Anyway a while later who did I see coming up the field only Bill Buller and I said, "I'll watch this" for he was coming to an awkward fence with a lane and a bank. Anyway the horse made a good attempt to get to the top of the bank but could go no further. So I slowed down and shouted at Bill "What's the view like up there?" and "I'll see you in the evening!" He let an oath or two out of him for he had to go away round by the gate.

There are incidents like that in hunting all the time. It's really very friendly. One thing about the hunting game is that, no matter where you go, and no matter what pack you go too, if you're never been there before you would be welcomed. You'd be as well received in Cork as you are here.

If I go to a strange-pack of hounds, the minute I go to the meet I would look round and pick a man to follow. I would know, just by the look of the horse,

the way it was turned out and the way the rider was turned out, the way he was dressed. I'd look at his boots and if his leather boots were fairly well scratched, I would pick him out and I'd say, "Well, this fellow will do me."

A good horseman and a good horse form a relationship. Now in my time hunting I've had one really outstanding horse with which I developed a great relationship. The horse would instinctively know if there was a *sheugh* behind the fence we were coming to and he would know whether to "put on the steam."

Being a farmer myself, I have a similar instinct and would have a fair idea if there was likely to be a *sheugh* behind that and of course I would know if there were posts there was most likely wire between them. A hunting farmer has an advantage over a townsman. He knows the country and he knows where to go. If I was in a field and a bit stuck, I'd look for the farmer, the farmer's tracks and I would know there'd be a way out.

In days gone by there were many characters who followed the hunt. Some of them had never sat on a horse in their life but they loved the thrill of watching the hunt. I remember Jemmy Bicker who had his own pack of hounds. He fed them by hanging up a fallen animal attached to the wheel of an old bicycle. He let the carcass down a notch or two every day and that's the way the hounds were fed.

I remember two other characters who used to follow the Newry Harriers. One of them was called 'Lemmon' or something like that. They would come to the meet in a pony and trap and they would have left the pony at what-ever farmyard was near. They would have unhooked the pony and left it in the yard.

Now I had two brothers who didn't hunt and one day when the hunt was at the Fourtowns one of them took the trap. He put the shafts through the gate, then harnessed the pony and left it there till Lemmon returned to find the pony one side of the gate and the trap on the other, and the gate well tied!

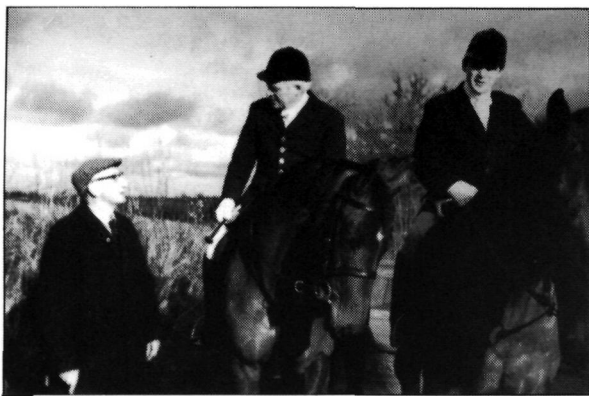
I got my introduction to hunting close to Poyntzpass and I suppose what got me interested in horses was bringing a pony we had to Loughlin's forge in the Far 'Pass to be shod. There were two ponies kept at our place at that time. One was kept for taking the milk to the depot at the bottom of the road where it was collected to be brought to Newry. The other took the youngest of the family to school every day. Well, regularly on a Saturday my father would say "Take that pony down to Loughlin's and get it shod." I loved that. There was no saddle, so I went bare-back. Loughlin's was a very busy place at that time. There would be two or three working as hard as they could go and maybe six or seven horses waiting. That was really my first introduction to riding and out of that my interest grew.

Remember that if you have a horse or a pony, you can't make friends with it, their intelligence doesn't allow that. They have no reasoning power either. They have wonderful hearing, terrific eyesight and many other great qualities, but they will not make friends with you. They will take your sweets and put their noses into your pocket but they'll do the same with a stranger five minutes later. I can take your pony into any stable and it's just the same as it was with you.

They will not make friends with you but as I have said you can form a relationship with them. I have formed a relationship with only one horse in my



A huge crowd watch a close finish at Taylorstown (in the early 1950's) as George Bryson and his brother Jim battle it out ahead of Sam English.



"I always enjoyed a chat with the farmers".
George Bryson and son Edwin pause for
a word or two with Mr. George Anderson (March 1969).

lifetime and he was an eventer. He knew what I was thinking or appeared to anyway. He was a great hunter and appeared to know what I wanted — whether to slow down or speed up. He was very keen to do exactly what I wanted him to do. When you're reasonably skilled in horseriding you might start 'eventing.' one element in eventing is *dressage*. This is all about control and you must for example, make your horse trot on a particular leg. You control the horse and change him to the other leg and so on, by using the reins and pressure from your legs — a slight pressing movement. Now, that particular horse, I could never get my leg back to press him to make him canter. he could feel my hip bone moving and before I could press him he had changed and would canter with that! That's all I had to do.

Dealing with farmers can be a tricky business. Sometimes a farmer will stop the hunt going onto his land. If a man stopped me crossing his land, I would always wait till he had got it off his chest. I wouldn't open my mouth till he had done 'tongueing.' As soon as he ran out of steam, he would look at me and I'd say "Oh, I'm very sorry. If we'd known you felt like that, we wouldn't have been here. There's no way we'll be back." But all the time he was talking and giving off, I'd be looking at his farm or at his sheep or his cattle. When I have finished apologising and he hasn't said too much, I'd say, "Would you mind telling me what bull you have in with these cows?" Well he'd say, "He's such and such" and I'd say "Oh sure that's the best herd in England?" Or maybe it would be his sheep and how well they were looking. I'd say, "You must be feeding those sheep, they're in great form." Or maybe it would be the grass, "Would you mind telling me what seed mixture did you sow? Would you write it down for me." Nearly always you have your man in your hand right away! Except the odd man!

Sometimes you meet a farmer who won't budge . . . We were going down a field one day and jumped into this wood, The rest of the horses were going straight down and I could see this field ran with the gate out on the road and the hounds were going that way. So I jumped this drop-fence — a right fence now, somebody jumped it as well, there were two of us anyway and I headed for the gate. There was a house

on the other side of the road and with his arms on top of the gate, the farmer's standing with a pipe in one hand and he says 'Where are you going?' Says I 'I was hoping to go through that gate.' He says, 'You may live in hope, you're not going through it!' He never moved, he never came over and said 'I'll not open it' or anything. So I used all the guile that I knew and I tried everything, but no, he never altered. He said 'No' Says I, 'Just before I go — do you see the fence I jumped coming down into this field? No way could I jump that up the hill' "Well' he says 'You weren't worried about me coming in, are you worrying about me now or are you worrying about yourself! Get you out of the field whatever way you like but you're not coming onto this road and you're not coming through that gate?' So I knew I had to go back. There's the odd case like that, fortunately now they are odd. How did I get out? Oh, I went down and got out someway, I got out anyway, there's never a field you can't get out of if you try hard enough. You sometimes meet a farmer like that but usually they're reasonable enough.

Now the Newry Harriers have run a Point-to-point meeting this many years. It's been at Taylorstown and now Killysavan. Point-to-points are organised by the hunts and there are different rules and regulations that must be carried out. The horses must all be registered with The Master Hunts. Now



Scarva Horse Trials : George on "Patrinia"
over the 1st fence in the cross-country.



At Scarva Horse Trials (30th September, 1972). George Bryson with daughter Edith and son Edwin.

riding the old point-to-points, when I was riding always had a 'Members Race.' That race was confined to members of the organising hunt. It was very good. I think I won that race at Taylorstown about 11 times.

The first time I won that race was on a horse of Fletcher's 'Black Knight.' He wasn't the first horse I rode in the race, he was my first winner. Fletcher sent him up and I galloped him for them. When they decided to enter him in the Point-to-point, they asked me if I would ride him and I said that I would. Now Jim McCartan was riding a horse of Cowdy's, I remember, and it was a hot favourite. But anyway, I knew when I was going out to the start that my horse was in great trim, man, he was really on his toes.

Anyway I won the race and talk about excitement! Black Knight was the first horse the Fletcher family ever owned and that was his first race. Black Knight was a really exceptional horse — he was a wonderful jumper.

The first Point-to-points would be in February and after that for about 3 months. Now point-to-points like horse racing depends on betting. The main thing is betting. They're only interested in one horse — the one they have the money on!

And I'll tell you another thing, I learned through riding at the point-to-points. If you won by a head in a close finish then you were *the* man, the best jockey in the British Isles! But let you get beaten! Well sure you couldn't sit in a cart!



George and Edwin lead in "Straight Ahead", winner of the Ladies' Cup at Punchestown, April 1970.



Lord Hamilton congratulating George on his win at Scarva Horse Trials (September 1972).



George Bryson on "Gilpin" at White Park, Ballyclare, 17th March, 1979.