

HUNTING

Now more than ever it's important for every member of the field to be aware of the rules and etiquette of a hunting day, such as keeping to the headland and riding in single file when asked



Manners maketh the meet

Courtesy and consideration are fundamental to happy hunting, and must remain as the pandemic piles pressure on us all. *Abigail Butcher* investigates

AS hunts across the UK prepare to begin their season in earnest, with Covid-19 restrictions gathering pace, attention on hunting to act responsibly and with respect is growing. Able to continue their lawful trail-hunting activities behind closed doors under a Government exception that applies to many other leisure and sporting events, the conduct and compliance with all legislation is under close scrutiny.

The countryside has never before been so widely used and enjoyed, with many discovering the delights of nature for the first time during lockdown – and they might this winter encounter a pack of hounds for the first time. We must create a lasting good impression, says Alice Bowden, director of The Hunting Office.

“The hunting world is by nature incredibly polite and courteous, but unfortunately passers-by will often only

remember those who forget to say thank you, rather than remembering all those that do,” says Alice. “So it’s paramount right now that all mounted and foot-followers are courteous to everyone at all times.

“The key word is respect; hunts must be considerate of other road users and those using rights of way, and remain respectful of other people’s sensitivities in this current Covid situation.”

After months of lockdown, when even riding your horse was discouraged, and with the looming threat of further social restrictions, hunt followers are excited to get out and about again. Hunt rides and organised hound exercise meets have received

strong support this autumn, a phenomenon likely to carry over into the main season – which means a new wave of followers who might not be familiar with hunting etiquette.

Coronavirus aside, hunting manners and “rules” are there to ensure the safety of hounds, horses, mounted and foot followers, but also for the safety of the livestock, crops and the land over which farmers are kind enough to allow hunts to ride.

While being clean and tidily turned out is important, the fact that riders smile and offer a cheerful good morning as they pass someone on foot or in a car is much more vital in making a good impression.

Shutting gates, not upsetting livestock and riding single file on headlands so as not to leave hoofprints in freshly sown crops or margins in stewardship schemes, or not tearing up precious grazing are equally crucial, not only so the hunt will be invited back but most importantly to ensure that no cattle, sheep, horses or even goats escape on to roads.

“Without our farmers, we wouldn’t have hunting, and it doesn’t matter if someone has a big estate, 50 acres or five, whether they have hundreds of sheep or one pony, everyone deserves the same respect. It’s really important that we always try our best, but particularly so at the moment,” says Nicky Hanbury,

“Without our farmers, we wouldn’t have hunting; everyone deserves the same respect”

QUORN JOINT-MASTER NICKY HANBURY



joint-master of the Quorn.

Etiquette with hounds – turning your horse's head and shoulders towards them at all times – is not only a show of respect for hounds and the huntsman as they pass, but also for safety. However safe a horse is with dogs, rarely can you trust a horse not to kick if surprised, or to inadvertently step on a hound during the excitement of the day.

Rules for jumping are the same. When hounds are running and there's a hedge in front, everyone gets excited, but it's vital to keep straight when jumping two or more abreast, to keep a poor jumper at the back so he doesn't stop in front of another rider, and to leave space for each other. That way if there's a faller, they will not be jumped on. It's the same in the field; just because a horse doesn't have a red or green ribbon in its tail, that's no excuse to use someone else's rump as your brake.

SHOWING THE ROPES

HOWEVER, if people are new to hunting, they won't know any of



Gate-shutting duty is an important role, ensuring livestock remains secure and keeping farmers and landowners on side

Always keep your horse's head and shoulders facing hounds, and avoid jumping if hounds are anywhere near a fence



the etiquette (see box, p68), so they need to be "buddied up" with someone who can show them the ropes.

Nicky Hanbury explains that it's very important masters take note of who is out, even if they have booked in correctly with the secretary beforehand: "If someone is new, it's up to us to seek them out, ask where they have come from and ensure they feel welcome and leave wanting to come back another day."

Nicky adds making speeches at the start of the day isn't the best way to go about educating.

"People can't hear and it's all rather boring... I'm much more in favour of education 'on the go' and getting children and youngsters involved with, for example, gate-shutting through the day so they feel important with a role and understand why they are doing it."

The thorny issue of educating newcomers – and children or youngsters who haven't come through the Pony Club – is one facing every hunt. Polly Portwin, head of hunting at the Countryside Alliance, says that this year, the onus is on field masters, masters, secretaries, hunt club members and seasoned hunters more than ever before.

"Because of the current Covid legislation, Newcomers' Week will not be held, so those new to trail-hunting will need help; newcomers will need to be

HUNTING

Miles Seston and Ben Hobday at the Middleton show best practice when it comes to jumping side-by-side – keeping straight to avoid any collisions



educated and offered guidance by the hunt, secretaries and masters," says Polly.

"Those interested in following hounds are always welcome at any time of the year but we recommend those with little or no experience of hunting – whether mounted or on foot – should be taken under the wing of somebody who is able to educate them in all aspects of the day.

"This is not only to ensure that they get the most out of

their experience so they feel comfortable enough to want to come out again, but also to be certain that they understand the importance of maintaining high standards of behaviour both on and off the field."

Clare Bell, secretary of the Cottesmore, describes herself as "horribly bossy", but says she believes a secretary now needs to act as a "hotel receptionist", the first port of call for anyone to speak to and an ambassador

for the hunt.

"Hunting isn't what it was, it no longer has this 'exclusive' aura it had years ago, and I believe our future is that we have to be welcoming to everybody and that anybody can come hunting. The hunts that do that will be the ones that survive," she says.

"We're not doing anything

wrong, we have nothing to hide, but being welcoming and educating is the future – if it's just us fossils who were hunting before the [introduction of the Hunting] Act [in 2005] there will be nothing left."

She explains that the masters of the Cottesmore have been "very forward-thinking" and constantly have succession in the back of their minds, eyeing up and then training up their next field masters, who use the role to "cut their teeth" before they become masters.

If problems do occur out hunting, whether with a seasoned hunting person or not, all were agreed on the importance of not "thrashing it out" in person or later on social media.

"If you have a problem with anybody out hunting, if they're rude, gallop up your bottom, stop in front of you – don't talk to them about it; go straight to the secretary or master," says Claire, unequivocally.

"Equally, I'm quite happy to go and tell a child to get off their pony and open the gate for the huntsman or master – it drives me insane that there is less willingness these days to show respect.

"Getting off your horse and showing respect for others seems to need to be taught these days, and helping open and shut a gate doesn't make you a lesser person, it makes you a better one." **H&H**

BRIEF CODE OF CONDUCT FOR HUNTING

- Remain with and follow the field master, do not pass them, and abide by his or her instructions.
- Pass down any instructions given by the field master so that everyone to the back of the field is aware of and adheres to instructions given.
- Ride at all times with care and consideration for growing crops, stick to field margins (headlands) unless told not to – single-file is often necessary.
- Shut gates and ensure you are riding at a speed at which livestock will not be upset.
- Inform the hunt secretaries, masters or field master of any damage to fences/hedges immediately, and ensure livestock are secure.
- Your horse's head and shoulders should face hounds at all times, but especially when hounds are passing the field or individuals.
- Acknowledge walkers, cyclists and other users of roads, public highway or rights of way.
- Always thank cars, and stand

no more than two abreast on the left-hand side of the road allowing traffic to pass. Stand off the road where possible.

- If necessary, apologise to traffic for causing inconvenience.
- Never jump if a hound is anywhere near the fence.
- If you need to jump two abreast, ride straight so you don't jump into anyone.
- If you know your horse might stop, let others go first and if it does refuse, move to the side quickly and safely so you don't cause a dangerous pile-up or ride in front of jumpers.
- Ride safely and with care and consideration for other riders, and with red tape on your horse's tail if its hind legs are untrustworthy or green if it is young or inexperienced.

The Little Hunting Handbook is an excellent guide to hunting terms, conduct and etiquette. It can be purchased from the Hunt Staff Benefit Society via fundraising@hsbs.org.uk or 01295 653001.

If any wire has to be taken down, it is imperative that it is put back up and secured immediately

