

Rural Voices

Dispatches from the World of Hunting



Charlie Pye-Smith

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

The **We Are Hunting** project was established in 2024 in response to the Labour Party's manifesto pledge to ban trail hunting. Its main purpose is to show the political leadership of this country that further legislation, designed to "tighten" the 2004 Hunting Act, could have a severe, negative impact on rural communities, small- and medium-sized businesses and domestic animal welfare.

We Are Hunting is giving a voice to the many tens of thousands of people who hunt within the law, as laid down by the 2004 Hunting Act, or work in businesses associated with hunting. At present, their views are largely ignored by politicians in Westminster.

We Are Hunting explores the true nature of the hunting population: real people with real jobs and real concerns. Most people who hunt, to use a phrase frequently used by PM Sir Keir Starmer, are "ordinary working people."

The vast majority of politicians who are opposed to hunting get their information from animal rights groups and anti-hunting organisations who play fast and loose with the truth. We Are Hunting dispels some of the myths about hunting, and the people who hunt, and lays bare the facts.

"Do look at a lovely little book . . . by the indefatigable Charlie Pye-Smith, just out. It is called Rural Voices and consists largely of short interviews with hunting people – including a substance misuse worker, a funeral director, a clinical geneticist, a milkman, a gardener, a lorry driver, a shepherd, a chaplain, a barrister, a philosopher, an artist, an underwriter and Sarah Jo, a friend of mine who is a special needs adviser. Their words are eloquent: the truth is great and will prevail."

Charles Moore, *The Spectator*, 20 November 2025

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Charlie Pye-Smith



country matters

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in Great Britain in 2025 by
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*I can think of no other activity that
attracts such a great range of people as
hunting. The proposed ban on hunts
following an artificial trail would be
a direct attack on communities which
bring together people of all ages, social
classes and professions.*

Kate Hoey

Baroness Hoey of Lylehill & Rathlin
(former Labour MP), September 2025

*The text for Rural Voices is taken from a book, Real Lives, Real
Voices, which features some 30 profiles of people who hunt or are
involved in businesses associated with hunting. The profiles are based
on interviews conducted by Charlie Pye-Smith and Jim Barrington.*



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FOREWORD

Professor Garry Marvin

‘Hunting’ or ‘to hunt’ refer to multiple practices. These are not simply one-off events, nor a series of unconnected events conducted in a cultural void. Over time, they become ever more embedded in particular worlds and rich in meaning. They become traditions, embedded in multifaceted and crucial ways in the lives of those who participate. This creates communities.

In *Rural Voices* we hear the rarely heard voices of widely diverse people in terms of their socio-economic lives and their commitment to hunting. Collectively, they reveal the enmeshing of lives necessary for hunting as a practice to remain alive. *Rural Voices* offers those interviewed the space and time to explore and reflect on why and how hunting has meaning for them.

‘Reflect on’ is an important term here. In the main, when hunt participants are questioned, usually by journalists, the aim is not understanding of, but a justification for, hunting. That is not the case here. Charlie Pye-Smith engages them in conversations which allow him to reveal the complexities of hunting worlds from within. I hope readers will be open to what is offered and reflect on it.

Garry Marvin

Professor Emeritus of Human-Animal Studies
University of Roehampton, London



INTRODUCTION

The Labour Party's 2024 manifesto, *Change*, contains just one paragraph on animal welfare. This includes the pledge: "We will ban trail hunting."

Labour has accepted the claim made by animal rights organisations that trail hunting, which involves the pursuit by hounds of an artificial trail rather than a wild animal, has been used by some hunts as a smokescreen for traditional hunting. Suffice it to say that since the 2004 Hunting Act largely banned the hunting of live quarry, there have been some 250,000 days of trail hunting in England and Wales. During that period, there have been fewer than 30 successful prosecutions involving registered packs of hounds.

The purpose of this document, produced by We Are Hunting, is to illustrate that a ban on trail hunting would have a dramatic and wholly negative impact on many rural communities, on small and medium-sized businesses, and on domestic animal welfare.

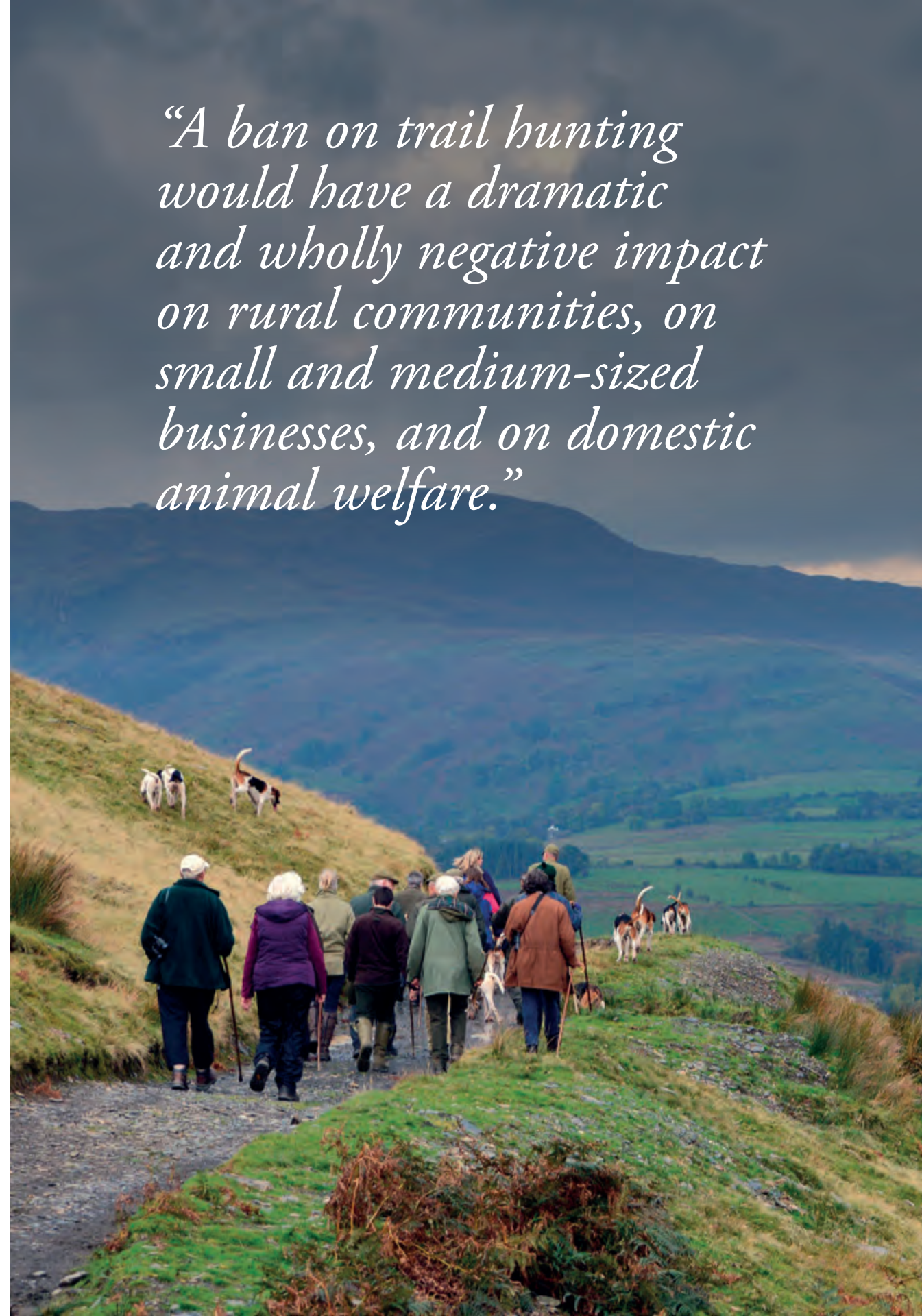
Public debates about hunting tend to be fractious, with a small number of people who represent the hunting community doing their best to counter what they see as the propaganda and misinformation peddled by animal rights activists. Seldom are the people most closely involved in the practice of hunting – the huntsmen, the kennel staff, the farriers, the vets, the landowners and farmers, hunt followers from all walks of life – given much, if any, airtime.

One of the purposes of We Are Hunting is to ensure that politicians and decision-makers hear the voices of the people on the ground, the people whose lives would be severely affected by a ban on trail hunting and the removal of exemptions which allow some limited forms of hunting to continue.

We also want to counter the stereotype of hunters as an overwhelmingly wealthy, privileged elite enjoying an arcane tradition.

"A ban on trail hunting would have a dramatic and wholly negative impact on rural communities, on small and medium-sized businesses, and on domestic animal welfare."

(© Charlie Pye-Smith)



Many of the MPs who voted for the 2004 Hunting Act saw themselves as the tribunes elected by the plebs to take on the toffs. This view, still held by many, completely misrepresents the world of hunting. The pledge to ban trail hunting has little to do with wild animal welfare and a great deal to do with false perceptions about the people who hunt.

“They came from various places, and from various walks of life, but they all had the same destination,” wrote Geoffrey Chaucer in the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. Like the 30 pilgrims embarking on a journey to visit the shrine of St Thomas Becket over 600 years ago, the hunting people whose testimony you can read here represent a great many trades and professions, from undertaker to underwriter, farrier to philosopher, groom to gardener, barrister to builder. Like the Canterbury pilgrims, they share a common purpose. Trail hunting has enabled hunts to retain their infrastructure, membership and traditions within the confines of the law. They want to save it.

If you travel around the world of hunting today you will be struck by a pervasive sense of fear and bemusement. Fear, because hunting people feel demonised. For the most part, they have obeyed the 2004 Hunting Act, yet the Labour Party has now pledged to outlaw trail hunting because some have broken the law. We don’t ban driving because of the carnage caused by drunk driving: we enforce the law and punish the guilty. Likewise, if individuals flout the Hunting Act, the law should be used to hold them to account. In addition, the British Hounds Sports Association (BHSA), hunting’s regulatory body, has been very effective in providing guidelines to registered hunts, and it has punished hunts and its members whose activities have broken the 2004 Hunting Act.

Bemusement, because those involved in countryside business ventures – and all hunts are small businesses – are already threatened

by new policies, including an increase in the national insurance contributions they must pay; the government’s decision to stop accepting new admissions for the Sustainable Farming Incentive scheme; the latest restrictions on inheritance tax relief for farmers; and plans to dramatically expand the area of agricultural land devoted to solar energy production.

People in the countryside feel as though they are being targeted by the government. A constant refrain which we heard as we travelled round England and Wales was this: surely, there are far more important issues which deserve the government’s attention than banning trail hunting.

HUNTING : KEY NUMBERS

How many hunts are there in the UK?

There are currently 219 recognised hunts in the UK, comprising:

- 142 foxhound packs
- 11 harrier packs
- 47 beagle packs
- 5 basset packs
- 3 staghound packs
- 4 minkhound packs
- 7 fell packs

How many people in the UK are regularly involved with hunting?

Approximately 40,000 people are regularly involved with hunting with hounds. These include hunt followers on horseback and on foot, as well as those who follow in cars or on bikes.

CHASING A MAN-MADE TRAIL

What is trail hunting?

Contrary to many peoples' perceptions, virtually all the hunting that takes place today involves following a man-made trail rather than hunting a live animal.

Trail hunting was introduced in England and Wales after the 2004 Hunting Act effectively banned the hunting of live quarry. Its aim is to simulate a traditional hunt. A pack of hounds follows a scent, usually made from fox urine, laid by a person on horseback, foot or quad bike. A well-laid trail will mimic the ways foxes might move across a landscape. Trail hunting enables rural communities to come together, watch hounds working and enjoy a day of exercise and excitement in the fresh air.

The British Hound Sports Association (BHSA) is the governing body for all the hound sports associations. If a hunt is thought to have broken the law, for example by pursuing a live fox, the BHSA will refer the matter to a separate, independent body, the Hound Sports Regulatory Authority (HSRA). As a precautionary measure, the BHSA may suspend a hunt while an investigation by the HSRA is ongoing. The BHSA has expelled hunts and their members when serious breaches of its rules have occurred.

What is drag hunting?

Similar to trail hunting, drag hunting is an equestrian sport where hounds and riders follow a pre-laid trail, the differences being that drag hunting uses an artificial scent, such as aniseed, often includes jumps, and the huntsman and riders are aware of the route they will be taking. Drag hunting is primarily a test of horsemanship.

“Trail hunting follows a scent laid by a person, often on foot.”

“Drag hunting uses an artificial scent . . . and is primarily a test of horsemanship.”

(© Nico Morgan)



“The main exemptions relate to the rescue of an injured or sick mammal, and observation and study.”

Hunting live quarry under exemptions

The 2004 Hunting Act banned stag hunting with a full pack of hounds. However, certain activities are permitted as “exempt hunting”, providing hunts use only two hounds. The main exemptions relate to the rescue of an injured or sick mammal, and observation and study. A huntsman can use two hounds to locate an injured deer, for example following a collision with a car, for the purpose of relieving its suffering. The observation and study exemption has helped scientists in the West Country to gain a better understanding about diseases such as bovine TB in red deer.

The 2004 Hunting Act banned hare hunting with a full pack of beagles, harriers or basset hounds. However, there is an exemption which allows two dogs to be used to rescue a hare that has been shot, but not killed. The vast majority of hare hunts now follow a trail, although they are still permitted to hunt rabbits.



(© Charlie Pye-Smith)

(© Nico Morgan)



CHAPTER I

Community matters

The lives of tens of thousands of people revolve around their local hunts. Besides the pleasure they get from riding to hounds or following on foot and by car, they are involved in a whole range of social activities throughout the year, from pub dinners to hunt balls, from bingo nights to film shows, from fund-raising charity events to puppy shows. Many hunts organise point-to-point races which attract many thousands of people who have nothing to do with hunting. A ban on trail hunting, and the abolition of exemptions which allow some forms of hunting to continue, would have a disastrous impact on social life in many parts of the countryside.



“Nobody cares about what your background is when you’re hunting.”

FRANKIE HOLDEN • TRAIL HUNTER

substance misuse worker

“I would be absolutely devastated if they banned trail hunting,” says Frankie Holden. “It’s something I wanted to do since I was a little girl and I’ve only just started. Every time I get on a horse, all I think about is staying on the horse. I find it magical. And if you’ve got a challenging job like mine, it’s so therapeutic.”

Frankie talks a great deal about the kindness of people on the hunting field. “Everybody’s always so welcoming and friendly. They want you to be happy and have a good time. There’s always been somebody who’s been looking out for me, like the secretary of the hunt on my first day with the Grafton.” When she fell off a horse and broke a finger on another occasion, one of the masters helped her to get back in the saddle.

Class and occupation simply aren’t an issue. “I know I stand out with my Brummie accent, but nobody cares about what your background is when you’re hunting. What they care about are the horses and the hounds and having a good day out.” Hunting has also been a great way to make new friends and she has joined a WhatsApp group of people like her who have recently taken up trail hunting. Her new companions include a couple of dentists, a nurse, someone in retail, a criminal psychologist, an interior designer and a civil servant.



(© Charlie Pye-Smith)

(© David Bunn Photography)

DYLAN EVANS • MASTER OF FOXHOUNDS

funeral director

If there was a ban on trail hunting, says Dylan Evans, MFH with the Tivyside Hunt in Pembrokeshire, it's not just the hunt staff and hounds that will suffer but the local community. A lot of the Tivyside followers are farmers. "Money is tight," he says. "When the hunt is meeting in a distant part of our country, some people will say they can't come as they can't afford the diesel. They are a lovely bunch of people, and some will starve themselves just so they can keep a horse."

"We've got nurses too, and accountants," says Dylan. "Then there's a JCB driver and a chap who works as an engineer in the airline business. And we've got lots of young people." Many of them hunt when they're at school, and during the holidays when they come back from university to stay with their parents. "I'd say 80% of my social life revolves around the hunt. And at least once a month, the hunt has a social event. Everyone who hunts with us will tell you the same thing – that it would be a terrible loss if they could no longer hunt."



"They are a lovely bunch of people, and some will starve themselves just so they can keep a horse."



“If trail hunting was banned I don’t know what I would do with my time.”

EMMA SUTTON • TRAIL HUNTER

groom, cooperative manager

According to Emma Sutton, the people who hunt with the Cresselly Hunt in West Pembrokeshire belong to all trades and professions. “Well, there’s Russell who owns an engineering company, there’s Paul who sells ice cream and repairs saddles, there’s Claire who works in a pub and as a cleaner. Fran’s a teaching assistant at a local primary. Kelly is a cancer care worker. Sarah breeds, buys and sells horses. Lee works at the local petting zoo.”

Many of the people who hunt with the Cresselly make real sacrifices – forgoing holidays, for example – so they can afford to keep a horse and hunt. “For most of us,” says Emma, “hunting is a way of life. If trail hunting was banned I don’t know what I would do with my time. A lot of my social life is bound up with the hunt. I hope it would survive, but I know deep down that it wouldn’t, because it’s hunting that gives you the purpose and drive to get together.”



(© Charlie Pye-Smith)

(© Sarah Farnsworth)

WILLIE REARDON • TRAIL HUNTER

clinical geneticist

Brought up on a dairy farm in the Republic of Ireland, Willie Reardon first went hunting when he was 11 years old. Between the age of 18 and 50, when he was establishing himself as one of the world's leading clinical geneticists, at Great Ormond Street in London and later at Children's Health Ireland, he didn't get on a horse, but his passion for hunting never diminished. For his 50th birthday, in 2010, he bought a horse and began hunting in Leicestershire.

By then the Hunting Act had long been in force and the Cottesmore hounds were trail hunting. "Trail hunting can be incredibly exciting. You're still crossing wonderful countryside and going through farmyards. We still see farmers and I sometimes stop and chat with them. You feel part of the community that's keeping this great tradition going and you want to share that with all those around you."

A ban on trail hunting would have a huge effect on his social life. "Nearly all my acquaintances and friendships in Leicestershire have been forged through hunting," he says. "If there was a ban on trail hunting it would completely destroy the rhythm of my life. In winter, hunting is my primary recreation."



(© Penny Fillingham)



"You feel part of the community that's keeping this great tradition going..."

ALAN STAPLETON • HUNT FOLLOWER

milkman, night-shift worker

Alan “Milky” Stapleton has organised his working life so he can follow hunts in the West Country. Half an hour before the Devon & Somerset Staghounds (D&S) set off one chilly September morning, he arrives on his 250cc Honda motorbike. He unzips his leathers and fishes out a scruffy bit of paper. “I’ve kept a record of every day I’ve been hunting since 1987,” he explains. “That’s 3849 days, not counting today and the two times I went out last week.” Of these, 2719 days had been with the D&S, with whom he averages 73 days a year.

The social side of hunting means a lot to followers like Milky. “There are hundreds of social events. We often meet in pubs for a whist drive or a meal and just the other day some old hunting films were shown at the village hall in Winsford. It was standing room only.” When it comes to people who follow the hunt – there might be as many as 100 on Saturdays with the D&S – they come from all walks of life. “There will not be one person here who has been unemployed,” says Milky. “Everybody has worked or is still working. And there’s nobody in the cars that I’d call rich-rich.”

“Everybody has worked or is still working. And there’s nobody in the cars that I’d call rich-rich.”



(© Charlie Pye-Smith)

(© Charlie Pye-Smith)





CHAPTER 2

Hunting and mental health

Many of the hunting people we met on our travels told us how important hunting was for their mental health. The activity provides solace in times of difficulty and company in areas where there are few of the recreational resources commonly found in towns and cities. Mental health is not something you can measure on a scale from 1 to 10, but we were surprised by how many people believed that hunting helps to keep them sane. Their stories provide a powerful reminder about hunting's importance.



“For many people, hunting is not just a recreation, but a palliative in times of difficulty or loss.”

TRACY WEIGHT • HUNTER

gardener

When you see Tracy Weight riding side-saddle with the Dartmoor Hunt you could easily imagine she was a member of the aristocracy in a period drama. The reality is very different. She left Tavistock Comprehensive at the age of 16 and has been working ever since in a variety of jobs: farmworker, waitress, housekeeper for a local shoot, and now gardener.

For many people, hunting is not just a recreation, but a palliative in times of difficulty or loss. “Towards the end of last season I was having a really bad week and I just thought: right, I’ll go out hunting,” recalls Tracy. “It was pissing with rain. It was foggy. But I was out in the fresh air, with friends.” A couple of hours with the hunt would blow the cobwebs away.

Or so she thought till she was accosted by two female hunt saboteurs. “One of them screamed: ‘What are you going to do next season, you bitch? Will you be boiling kittens?’” On another occasion a man came up to her daughter Emily and said: “It’s OK. I’m not going to kill you.” Tracy received similar abuse and threats when she was laying trails for the Lamerton Hunt.



(© Charlie Pye-Smith)

PAUL TULLY • HUNTING CONVERT

lorry driver

It's been a long journey for Paul Tully from being a street kid on a council estate near Liverpool to an immaculately dressed hunter, initially trail hunting in East Yorkshire's gently rolling countryside. Last season he learned to ride and bought a horse. The prospect of a ban on trail hunting horrifies him. He is particularly exercised by what this would mean for huntsmen.

"Just look at what a huntsman does for his hounds," he says. "When most people are lying in bed, he'll get up in the dark in the cold and rain to look after his hounds. If hunting is banned, they'll be taking away the huntsman's best friends. Can you imagine what it would be like one day if these kennels were empty, if there was no hounds?"

If hounds have to be put down it will be the huntsmen who have to oversee what happens to the pack that they cherish. "They wouldn't let anyone else do it. That's how much they care." As for himself, a ban would mean he would lose the greatest passion of his life. And for what? In his view, a ban will do absolutely nothing for wild animal – or domestic animal – welfare.



(© PGK Photography)

"If hunting is banned, they'll be taking away the huntsman's best friends."



ZARA BLACKMORE • MASTER OF BEAGLES

farm adviser, shepherd

“One of the attractions of beagling is that it’s very sociable,” says Zara Blackmore, who hunts with the North Devon Beagles. Compared to stag hunting and foxhunting, the pace tends to be more sedate, which means that beagling, which traditionally involved the pursuit of hares on foot, is well suited to the older generations. And it’s good for their health, both physical and mental. “In farming nowadays, it tends to be a very solitary occupation, so talking has become very important. If you’re struggling, it’s important not to struggle alone.” Beagling is one of the activities that helps to bring people together and get them out of the house.

It is also one of the cheapest forms of entertainment in the countryside. The followers pay a cap of £5 to £10 for a whole day out, walking across land to which they would otherwise have little or no access, watching hounds work and having conversations with all sorts of people. An annual subscription, even for one of the packs which employs a professional huntsman, is often £200 or less. And you don’t even need to own a horse.

*“If you’re
struggling, it’s
important not
to struggle alone.”*



(© Janet Ladner)

HUGH HARRISON-ALLEN

owner of the Cresselly Hunt

Hugh Harrison-Allen's 5th great-grandfather built Cresselly House in the Palladian style in 1769. By that time the family had already occupied this part of Pembrokeshire for some 300 years. "The Allen family wealth came mostly from building lighthouses and marrying very rich heiresses," explains Hugh. Twenty years after the house was built, the kennels were established. These have been occupied by the Cresselly hounds for the last 236 years. Hugh, who during his working life was a farmer, door-to-door insurance salesman and IT expert, served as master from 1990 till a few years ago.

When he talks about the implications of a trail hunting ban, he focuses first on the local community. "Hunting is absolutely central to country life round here. In almost every week of the year the hunt organises events of one sort or another. I think if hunting was banned, there would be mass depression. There are far more vulnerable people here than me – and to them hunting means everything. The ban would have a terrible effect on their mental health." Many local people, he adds, can't afford to go on holiday, and the hunt provides an important source of entertainment and recreation.



(© Roger Moore)



"I think if hunting was banned, there would be mass depression."

(© Jim Barrington)



CHAPTER 3

Hunting and the rural economy

The Burns Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs, which reported in 2000, suggested that around 700 people were directly employed by hunts, and up to 3000 in activities related to hunting, such as the care of horses. The majority of hunts which existed when the Hunting Act came into force in 2005 still exist, so it is reasonable to suppose that hunting's economic importance remains much the same. At the local level, a ban on trail hunting, as proposed by the Labour Party manifesto, would have a significant negative impact not just on the hunts themselves but on small businesses – feed merchants, farriers, vets, livery stables – which supply hunts with goods and services.



“Ban trail hunting and the market will be flooded with horses . . . and that would be bad news for both horses and horse dealers.”

PHILIP HAGUE • HUNTSMAN

coal miner's son

You realise, as soon as you arrive at the kennels, that the Vale of White Horse (VWH) Hunt in Gloucestershire is a substantial rural business. The hunt employs seven people full-time, five of whom live in accommodation belonging to the hunt. Then there are the kennels with 120 hounds and stabling for 17 hunt horses.

So what would happen if the government decided to ban trail hunting? “Seven full-time jobs would go straightaway, including mine,” says huntsman Philip Hague, “and the five of us who live here would lose our homes.” The hounds would have to go too. “You might be able to rehome one or two, but these are pack animals, they have lived together all their lives, they just wouldn’t make good pets.”

As for the horses, one or two might be bought by happy hackers but many are not suited to riders who want to trot around the countryside staring over the hedgerows. Ban trail hunting and the market will be flooded with horses, according to Philip, and that would be bad news for both horses and horse dealers.



(© Daniel Hague)

(© Daniel Hague)

DIANA JACK

hirer of hunting horses

If you're going hunting in the shires and you need a horse, Diana Jack's Waverley Equestrian Centre, a few miles from Leamington Spa, is likely to be your first port of call. What, I enquired, would happen if trail hunting were banned? "It doesn't even bear thinking about," she says. "A ban would deprive thousands of people of an extraordinary experience, of being part of this sport. And if there is a ban, what would happen to my horses? I'm so proud of them. It takes years to make a good hunter."

If trail hunting came to an end, it would have a major impact on local tradesmen and the people who work for her. Every month Diana pays around £2500 to the farrier, £3000 to the feed merchant, £9000 in wages, an average of £3500 for vet fees, £2000 for hay and bedding and around £800 in mechanics' bills for keeping her trucks on the road. Then there are the costs of tack repairs and replacements, and plenty of other expenses too.

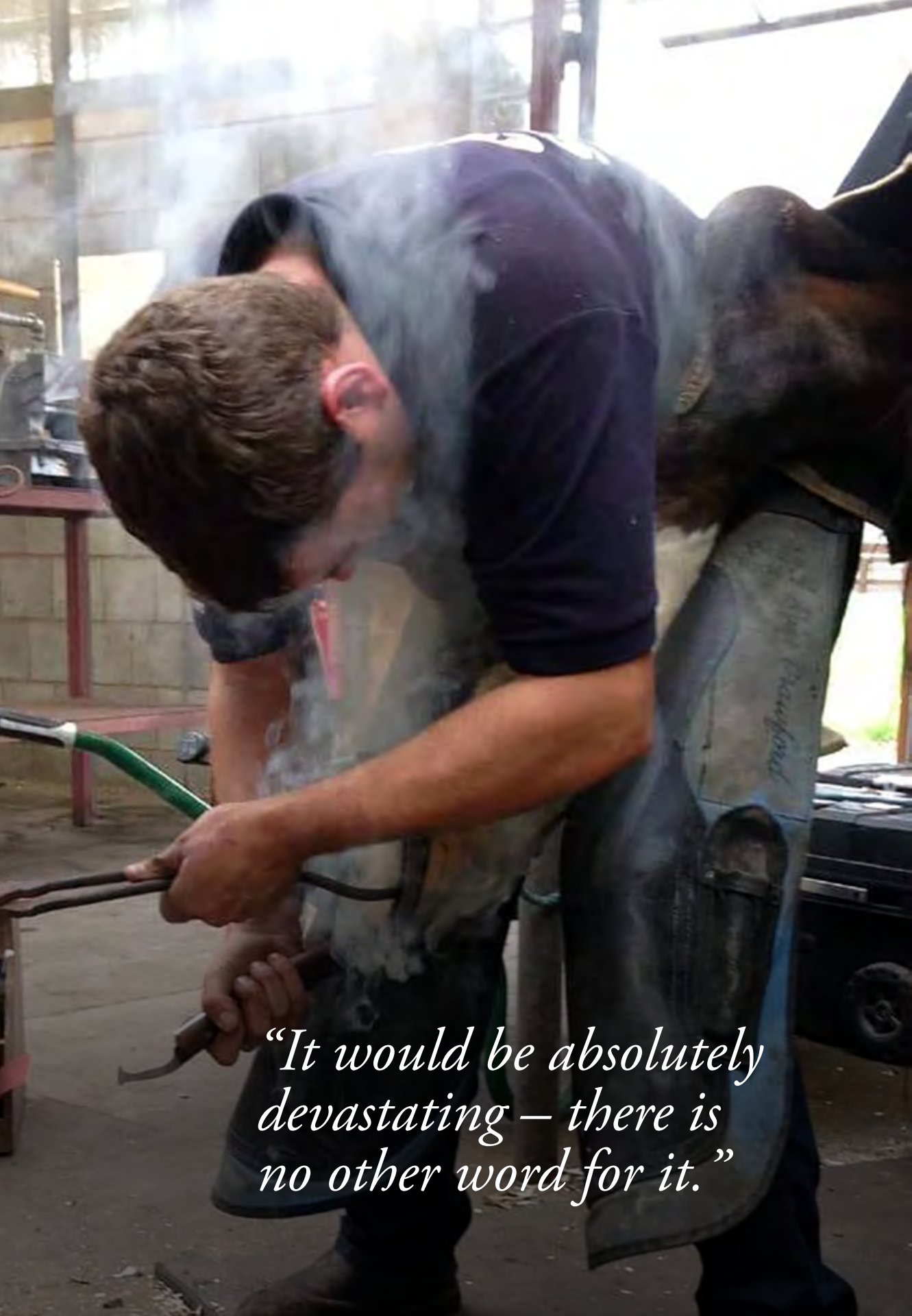


(© Jim Barrington)



(© Charlie Pye-Smith)

*"And if there is a ban,
what would happen
to my horses?"*



"It would be absolutely devastating – there is no other word for it."

ROSS CRAWFORD • AMATEUR HUNTSMAN *farrier*

If politicians vote to ban trail hunting, explains Ross, the Bedale Hunt's buildings and the kennels would have to be put up for sale and the hounds and horses would have to go. "It would be absolutely devastating – there is no other word for it," says Ross. The kennel huntsman, the young kennelman, the stud groom and a young girl who works part-time as a groom would all be out of work. Ross himself would continue working as a farrier, but he estimates that if the hunt folded he'd lose around half his customers.

A ban would also effect the local economy. There would be less business for feed merchants and vets. The hunt would no longer provide a service to farmers by picking up fallen stock. Then you have to consider all the hunting horses in livery, which costs anywhere between £150 and £200 a week. Ross himself has five horses, none of which he would keep if he was no longer hunting. "Don't get me wrong, I love my horses, but I don't hunt to ride, I ride to hunt." Most of his hunters are failed showjumpers, not the sort of horses a happy hacker would want to buy. So they would be out of a job too, making their future uncertain.



(© Ross Crawford)

(© Nina Edminson)

REV PAUL FERMOR • HUNT FOLLOWER

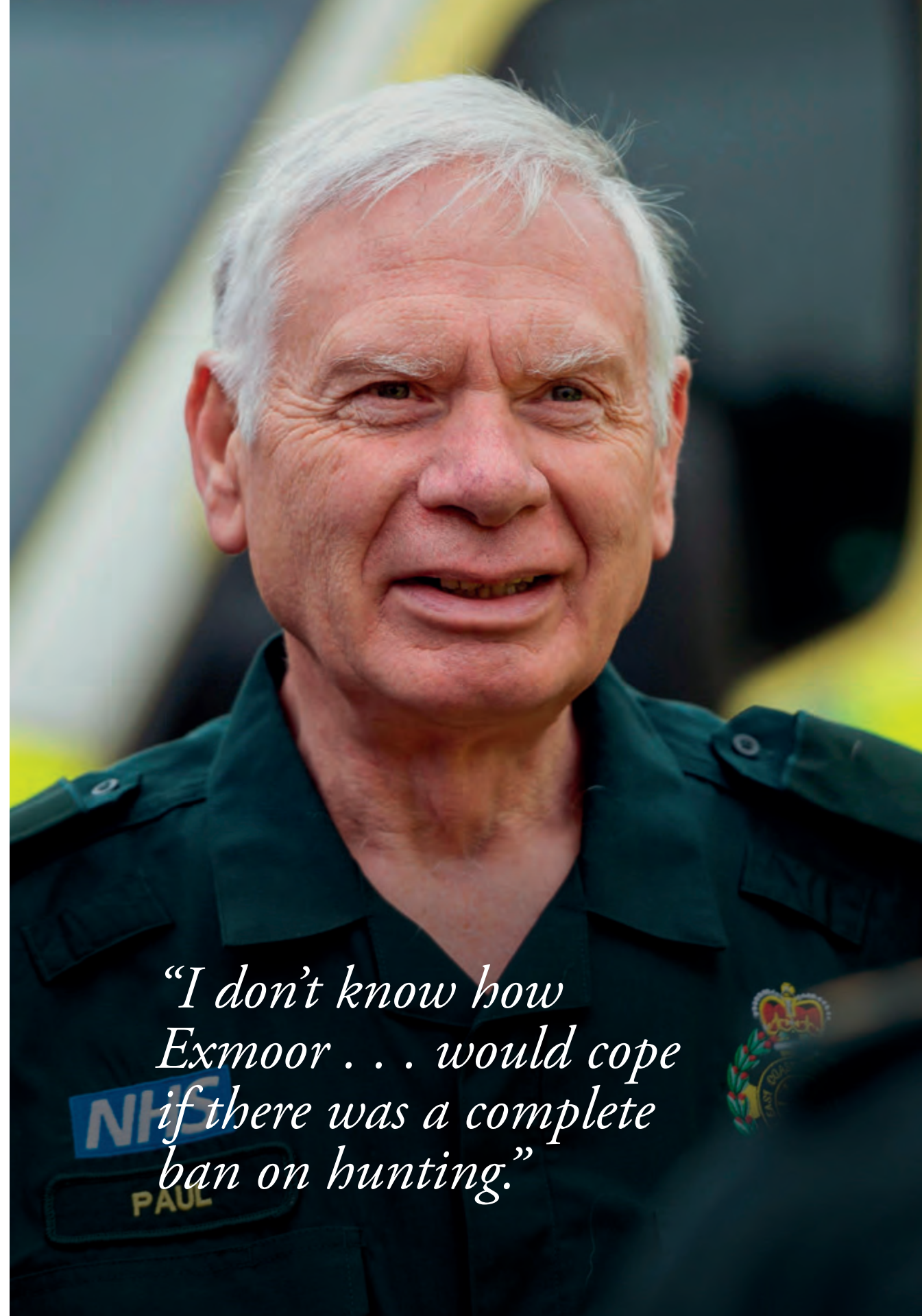
pastor, ambulance service chaplain

It is now over a quarter of a century since Rev Paul Fermor retired as a professional huntsman to become a pastor in the Pentecostal Church. However, he remains passionate about hunting and every autumn he and his wife Margaret make the long journey from Deal, on the Kent coast, to Dartmoor, where they spend a week following hounds. “I think there are now more young people hunting with the Dartmoor than when we were there,” he says approvingly, “and a lot of the social activity revolves around the hunt.”

I asked the pastor what sort of impact he thought a ban on trail hunting, or the removal of the exemptions which allow certain forms of hunting to continue, would have in the West Country. “It would destroy the fabric of the rural economy, the fabric of rural society,” he replied. “I don’t know how Exmoor, an area that has depended on hunting for so long, would cope if there was a complete ban on hunting.”



(© Margaret Fermor)



*“I don’t know how
Exmoor . . . would cope
if there was a complete
ban on hunting.”*

(© Margaret Fermor)





CHAPTER 4

Hounds, horses, huntsmen

If Labour pursues its manifesto pledge to ban trail hunting, this will inevitably have a dramatic impact on animal welfare. It seems almost certain that the vast majority of the 10,000 hounds currently associated with hunts will be surplus to requirements. A few might be drafted abroad to countries where hunting still takes place; a few might end up as pets. But the vast majority will not find a new home. Many thousands of hunting horses will also face an uncertain future. A trail hunting ban, in short, will be a domestic animal welfare disaster. This is something you never hear about from the organisations seeking a total ban on hunting.

EMMA WOOD • POLO PLAYER, HUNTER

equine vet

If Labour introduced a ban on trail hunting, says equine vet Emma Wood, it would have a devastating impact on her veterinary business. “I think we’d immediately lose a large number of the horses we regularly look after, and some 30% of our business.” It would also affect her personally. She first went out with the Beaufort Hunt in Gloucestershire when she was six years old, and she has hunted ever since.

Emma was the first person to commercialise embryo transfer for horses in England. This involves fertilising the egg of a high-performing mare with semen from an outstanding stallion and implanting the resulting embryo in a surrogate mare. Tomlinson Equine Vet Practice and Stud, which employ some 25 people, also runs a back-of-the-car veterinary business, with Emma’s team of vets providing equine care across the Cotswolds.

A ban would have a significant impact on hunting horses, she says. “The equine world is quite panicked at the moment because of the lack of forage caused by the drought. Prices have doubled recently and many people simply wouldn’t keep their horses if they hadn’t got a passionate reason for keeping them.” A ban on trail hunting would almost certainly mean that many hunting people would get rid of their horses.



(© Nick Wood)

(© Charlie Pye-Smith)



“Many people simply wouldn’t keep their horses if they hadn’t got a passionate reason for keeping them.”



“... all these wonderful traits that have come down through the generations would be lost if there was a ban on trail hunting.”

KAY GARDNER • HOUND EXPERT

puppy walker, author

Kay Gardner suggested we meet at the kennels of the Holderness Hunt, near Beverley in East Yorkshire. She wanted to see two hounds, Mullet and Muddle, who she had walked when they were puppies. When the huntsman brings them out of the kennels, they recognise her straight away. “They’ve only seen me a few times since I puppy-walked them,” says Kay, with a look of delight on her face.

The bloodlines of almost every registered foxhound in Britain can be traced back to the mid-1700s. A variety of traits favoured by huntsmen – temperament, appearance, constitution, conformation – have determined their development over the decades and centuries. “Can you imagine, all these wonderful traits that have come down through the generations would be lost if there was a ban on trail hunting,” says Kay. “The world has changed so much, but hounds provide a link to our connection with working dogs, right back to our ancestors who painted hunting scenes on the walls of their caves.”



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(© Charlie Pye-Smith)

EMILY HARLAND • TRAIL HUNTER

groom, gardener

When we meet Emily Harland and her mother, Tracy Weight, we don't discuss what would happen to the hounds in the event of a ban, but we do talk about the fate of hunting horses. At the moment, Tracy and Emily are sharing one horse. They recently gave another horse to a friend who hunts "in-country" as the horse was finding trail hunting on Dartmoor too tough in her old age.

"If there was a ban on trail hunting, they'd almost certainly give it back to us," says Emily. "I don't know what we'd do with it. Most hunting horses can't do another job, and it's not fair just to keep them in a field. They just get bored. Horses love hunting as much as we do. When they're about to set off after the hounds, their ears prick up and you can hear their hearts thumping."



*"Most hunting horses
can't do another job,
and it's not fair just to
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“Nobody is going to pay to keep a pack of hounds. I’m afraid they’d have to go.”

MARTIN WATTS • HUNTSMAN

former agricultural worker

In 2019, Martin Watts fulfilled his lifelong dream of becoming a huntsman and he’s now in his sixth season with the Quantock Staghounds. A fit, wiry man in his early 60s, he looks like someone who has done plenty of manual work. “Almost everything we do here involves manual work,” says Martin. When he’s not hunting, he’s cleaning out the kennels, skinning dead stock picked up from nearby farms and preparing flesh for his hounds.

All this will come to an end if the exemptions which allow stag hunting to continue with two dogs, rather than a full pack, are removed. Martin would lose his job and his home; his partner, who works as a part-time groom, would suffer a similar fate. The four horses which belong to the hunt would be out of a job. “And something would have to happen to all them girls in there,” says Martin, pointing a thumb over his shoulder to the kennels. “What’s going to happen to them? Nobody is going to pay to keep a pack of hounds. I’m afraid they’d have to go. It’s not often you see domesticated hounds.”



(© Lucas Pitcher)

RICHARD GRIFFITHS • MASTER OF MINKHOUNDS

barrister

When mink hunting was banned under the 2004 Hunting Act, Richard Griffiths, owner and master of the Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire Minkhounds, immediately switched to hunting the “clean boot”. This involved pursuing the scent of a person who would set off up or down the river in advance of the hunt. “The first day we went out hunting the clean boot was the day the Act came into force, and the hounds took to it straight away,” recalls Richard.

“For me, hunting has always been all about the love of dogs and breeding dogs,” says Richard. When he was establishing his pack, he cast his net far and wide to get suitable breeding stock. “I ended up with a very decent otterhound gene pool. I have loved all of my dogs, but I’m winding down.” Now in his mid-60s, he has found it physically very hard work managing the hounds.

When Richard first established his pack in the 1980s to hunt mink, then a serious pest on Welsh rivers, there were some 20 other packs in the UK. He thinks there are four left now. He has managed to find homes for all the hounds he has shed by either drafting them to other packs or letting people take them as pets. If trail hunting goes, he says, that will be the end of the breed as a working dog.



(© Charlie Pye-Smith)

“For me, hunting has always been all about the love of dogs and breeding dogs.”



SEBASTIAN MORELLO • MASTER OF BEAGLES *philosopher*

When asked about the prospect of a ban on trail hunting, Sebastian Morello's first thoughts are for the Old Berkeley Beagles' professional huntsman. "I cannot imagine the psychological crisis for him and for all those people whose entire life has been shaped by hunting. The suffering will be immense." So close is the relationship between huntsmen and hounds, he says, that most huntsmen behave as though they are half-hound.

A ban would lead to the collapse of the hunt, the loss of jobs, the fracturing of the bonds which have held the community together for centuries and an uncertain future for most beagles. "They are not pets, like my whippet, and the ones that have been hunting for a few seasons would be very difficult to domesticate," says Sebastian. Many would have to be put down.

*"...most huntsmen
behave as though
they are half-hound."*



(© Maria Morello)



CHAPTER 5

Trail hunting – a lifeline

With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that the 2004 Hunting Act has achieved the opposite of its intentions. It has led to more suffering, not less, for the three quarry species, the fox, the brown hare and the red deer on Exmoor. However, the Act did have a silver lining as it paved the way for trail hunting, which involves the pursuit of an artificial trail rather than a live animal. Trail hunting has meant that hunts have retained their infrastructure, as well as their hounds, their members and a whole range of social activities.

Critics claim that trail hunting has been used as a smokescreen for hunting wild animals. It is true that some hunts have broken the law, but the number of convictions has been tiny. Since the 2004 Hunting Act came into force there have been fewer than 30 prosecutions involving registered packs of hounds. To put this in context, there are some 12,000 days of hunting each season.



“... you still experience the joy of watching hounds work, and the structure of hunting has been kept going”

DANIEL CRANE • TRAIL LAYER

artist, hunter

According to the artist Daniel Crane, the 2004 Hunting Act has done nothing to improve the welfare of the fox. “In the past, we rarely caught a good healthy fox in his wild and natural state,” he says. “Mostly we killed sick, old or injured animals.” Nowadays, foxes are being shot in much greater numbers, and it is often the healthy and fit that are victims. Nevertheless, the 2004 Hunting Act allowed hunts to keep going by pursuing an artificial trail.

Daniel believes trail hunting provides a satisfactory simulation of proper foxhunting. “The hounds still have to have their noses down, you still experience the joy of watching hounds work, and the structure of hunting has been kept going – the kennels and stables.” He enjoys laying trails and tries to mimic the movements a fox would make across country. “It would be very difficult for somebody who was uninitiated – or even the initiated – to work out whether they are hunting live quarry or a trail, providing it’s well laid.”




(© Ali Crane)

(© Ali Crane)

PAUL SMITH • FORMER MFH
insurance underwriter

Paul Smith was in his 30s when he first began hunting. He spent two and half years whipping in for the Ampleforth Beagles in North Yorkshire before deciding he wanted to follow a hunt on horseback. He learned how to ride then joined the Middleton Hunt, for whom he became a master. According to Paul – he now follows the Cottessmore – the vast majority of people who hunt simply couldn't tell the difference between trail hunting and hunting foxes.

“You have no idea what's going on when you're trail hunting – and we didn't have any idea what was going on even before the 2004 Hunting Act. When they are on a scent, the hounds are always 100 yards or more ahead of the huntsman, and everyone else is a couple of hundred yards behind the huntsman – that's why there's a field master to keep them in order.” He believes that trail hunting, from the point of view of the vast majority of people who hunt, has proved to be a good surrogate for the real thing; and that banning it would be unreasonable and unjust.

A photograph of a man, Paul Smith, riding a brown horse. He is wearing a traditional red hunting jacket with gold buttons and a brown velvet helmet. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees. A quote is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

“...the vast majority of people who hunt simply couldn't tell the difference between trail hunting and hunting foxes.”

SARAH-JO VANE • MFH

special needs advisor

The daughter of a Kent pig farmer and one of five girls who learnt to ride and hunt at an early age, Sarah-Jo Vane is the epitome of the new generation of hunters who have happily embraced the sport of trail hunting. “I’m perfectly happy with it,” she says. “We have to move with the times and accept where we are now. Trail hunting means I can still enjoy riding across beautiful countryside. It means I can experience exactly the same excitement of hearing hounds as I did when I was a child and we were hunting foxes.”

One of the hunt’s main priorities is keeping local farmers happy. On the one hand, the hunt offers a service to remove dead livestock, which is far cheaper for farmers to use than the local knacker man. On the other, hunt staff frequently help with the maintenance of gates and fences for no charge. Were trail hunting to be banned, farmers would lose out, as well as the hunts and their followers.

“We have to move with the times and accept where we are now.”

(© Maisy Vane)



(© MaisyVane)

SUE SIMMONS • MASTER OF HARRIERS

showjumper, accountant

“A ban on trail hunting would be absolutely ridiculous,” says Sue Simmons, Master of the Holcombe Harriers in Lancashire. “We have laws against speeding and alcohol abuse, but people still speed and people still get drunk. We deal with that by applying the law.” The same, she believes, should apply to trail hunting. If hunts break the law then they should face the consequences.

At each meet, she makes a speech from her horse. For the benefit of those who have just come to watch the hunt, rather than hunt on horseback, she always explains that they will be laying trails, exercising hounds and hunting within the law. “I encourage everyone to use local pubs and businesses and tell them that when they go out to supper, they can tell their friends that they have had a great day out. We are embracing the future. If we can’t get a repeal of the Hunting Act, we will continue trail hunting within the law, keeping old traditions alive within the modern rules of the sport.”



(© Jim Barrington)



“... we will continue trail hunting within the law, keeping old traditions alive within the modern rules of the sport.”



*“We’d lose all of this.
And what would we
do? What would you
do if you were us?”*

GEORGIE COOPER • HUNTSMAN’S PARTNER *horse physiotherapist*

When we meet Georgie Cooper in early 2025, she and her partner Tom, huntsman to the Holderness, are living in Beverley, East Yorkshire. Once the season ends, they will move south to another hunt, but at the time they don’t know they will be leaving. Georgie has her hands full with three young children, but she still manages to fit in some work as a horse physiotherapist and go out trail hunting, an activity she loves.

A ban on trail hunting would have a huge and immediate impact on her family’s wellbeing. “I simply don’t know what we’d do. This is the house where we live. We have got all our animals here – including the hounds and our horses. The house and kennels are owned by the estate, not us. One of my children is already at primary school in the village. We’d lose all of this. And what would we do? What would you do if you were us?”



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We Are Hunting has received the endorsement of the Countryside Alliance and the British Hound Sports Association (BHSA). Anyone who wishes to use the information we provide is welcome to do so providing they acknowledge the source.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlie Pye-Smith



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Charlie Pye-Smith has written about ecology, conservation, farming and development issues for a wide range of publications, including the Daily Telegraph, the Financial Times and the New Scientist. His books include *Land of Plenty: a Journey through the Fields & Foods of Modern Britain* and *Rural Rites: Hunting and the Politics of Prejudice*. His most recent book, *Rural Wrongs: Hunting and the Unintended Consequences of Bad Law*, explores the impact of the hunting bans in England, Wales and Scotland on wild animal welfare. It tells a shocking story: instead of making life better for the fox, brown hare and red deer, recent legislation has often made life worse. He has never hunted.

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