

# BRITAIN BANS BLOODSPORT

Peter C. Macdonald

Athenaeum Society

April 7, 2005

Travelers in the countryside of the United Kingdom are rewarded with scenery of almost unimaginable beauty. Around almost every curve and at the crest of almost every hill comes a new panorama of landscape worthy of the canvas of a master. Depending on the location, the traveler views open fields, bordered only by well-tended hedgerows, with sheep or cattle grazing lazily in the intermittent sunlight, which serves to highlight the scenery. Other sites include water scenes, by the sea, overlooked by spectacular cliffs, or in the interior, alongside meandering streams and rivers, or beside deep lakes with water so clear and dark that it appears to be black. The animals graze on hillsides that seem to climb to the sky, and, with sunlight beaming down, the fields are almost emerald in color. In the small villages, with names like Chipping Camden, Clovelly, Moreton-on-Marsh, and Mousehole, which we Americans would pronounce M-O-U-S-E-H-O-L-E, there are delightful little cottages with small lawns meticulously maintained with splashes of colorful flowers in window boxes or in small gardens. Trash in the villages and alongside the roadways does not exist, unlike our own country and especially our county, where it abounds. Signage is virtually non-existent, except for motorway and road directions. There are not the incessant notices of food and lodging alongside the tranquil roads, and it would seem almost obscene to think that one might encounter a sign advertising chenille bedspreads, or homemade crafts, or one of the other almost infinite items one sees hawked at the side of our roads and highways.

However, in the recent past, a traveler to the United Kingdom might see every so often a green and red sign of a relatively small size, perhaps two feet square, maybe nailed to a tree trunk or a gatepost, perhaps even in a village shop window, or even around the bend of one of the many single track roads in the countryside. The signs read "FIGHT PREJUDICE" and "FIGHT THE BAN." What dreadful acts would encourage the populace to mar their unspoiled countryside with these notices? Could it be prejudice against minorities, women, or the increasingly large number of

immigrants? Could the ban refer to the long standing ban on capital punishment in the United Kingdom? Has crime become so rampant that the citizens would want to reinstate the death penalty? A little investigation reveals the signs do not refer to any of the aforementioned social or political topics, but rather the proposed ban on fox hunting by the House of Commons. The legislation, termed the 2004 Hunting Act, would ban hunting with dogs. The new law bans all hunting with hounds, including the pursuit of rabbits and deer, in addition to foxes, in England and Wales. Scotland already has a similar ban in force.

The bill was the product of years of stormy political debate that came to a head last fall in what many British remember as a pitched and sometimes bloody battle in Parliament Square between police and people, who until then had been considered law-abiding citizens, but who wanted to carry on what they had been doing for more than 300 years, hunting foxes.

But upsetting the old order is what the hunting legislation is all about. The bill became law on February 18, 2005 after the invocation of an obscure 1949 act that gives the elected lower House of Commons the final say over measures defeated, as the Hunting Act was, in the un-elected upper House of Lords. The appropriately named "Countryside Alliance" had tried to overturn the ban by questioning the validity of the 1949 Parliament Act, but in early February of 2005, the Court of Appeal rejected that argument. Hunt supporters now say that they are prepared to take their case to the European Court of Human Rights. The Hunting Act had also received the ritual royal assent, or "La Reyne le vault," which is Norman French for "the Queen wills it," though in this case it is hard to believe that she did. Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles are stalwarts of the Beaufort Hunt, which is considered to be Britain's fanciest foxhunt.

Many in Britain's ruling Labour Party have celebrated the ban as a triumph for animal rights, and, at the same time, a hobble on the ankles of the rural elite. Some lobbyists were less concerned with promoting the rights of the foxes than with

exposing the hunt itself as a ritual that, to their mind, celebrates the cruelty of people, or perhaps more accurately, celebrates the rights of privileged people to dominate their environment in a cruel way. But its opponents say that it is a sorry assault on an already threatened rural way of life. Opponents of the ban view the government as being divisive, and that it has encouraged class warfare, not between the rich and the poor, but rather between people who live in the country and those who live in the towns and cities. Lord Mancroft, a former hunt master, blamed the ban on Tony Blair, who he termed “the charlatan, the ham actor who is our Prime Minister.”

People who hunt say that foxhunting or stag hunting with hounds is about community because so much of the country’s rural population not only directly follows the hunt, but directly or indirectly earns a living from it. Labour Party backbenchers say that it is an abhorrent, elitist practice, and the last vestige of an England run entirely for the upper class. But there is still something to be said for the argument that banning foxhunting is not going to stamp out privilege or reform the rich any more than banning yachts or family boxes at the Royal Opera.

Between May of 1997, the month that Tony Blair’s landslide victory ended eighteen years of Tory rule, and November of 2004, when the Hunting Act was passed, more British citizens were said to have demonstrated for or against foxhunting, some four hundred seventy-five thousand in one demonstration alone, than over any other issue, with the possible exception of the Iraq war. Parliament has spent two hundred and seventy-five hours debating it.

There are about two hundred foxhunts and stag hunts in England and Wales, forty more if you count Scotland and Northern Ireland. Seventy thousand people, including men, women and children, ride in them. More than a million other follow the hunts. Eight thousand people work directly for them. There are twenty thousand foxhounds and deerhounds in the country’s hunting packs, and nearly sixty thousand horses in its hunt stables. While most polls showed that about sixty percent of the population was in



favor of the ban, the foxhunters dispute the results. They say that the results would have been much more accurate had the pollsters included questions about civil liberties and wise land use and the economic consequences of putting the hunt community out of work. The polls probably didn't change many minds in Parliament. Larry Whitty, the Labour peer who is Lord Minister of the agency which oversees hunting, says that "(i)n normal negotiations, each side moves slightly toward the other's viewpoint, but not here. Here, it's been Commons against Lords."

The House of Lords, including more than half of the Labour party lords, voted overwhelmingly against the ban. The House of Commons, including six Tories, voted overwhelmingly for it. The Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary, apparently no fools, abstained. The two houses were so stubbornly opposed on the subject of foxhunting that, to break the stalemate, the Speaker of the House of Commons had to invoke the earlier mentioned Parliament Act of 1949, which affirms the primacy of "the people" over the peerage.

Tony Blair has now been in power for the better part of two consecutive terms, and his parliamentary majority is so large – a hundred and sixty seats – that, until the foxes got involved, he and his small circle of ministers were able to rule England pretty much the way they wanted. Blair had invented the idea of "New Labour," which is defined as bringing the Labour Party, and England, into the modern world by introducing them both to the political center. But most of the members of Parliament who gave him that large majority were decidedly Old Labour: trade unionists, populists, and socialists – the kind of politicians who grew up on the ideology of the welfare state and the class struggle and for the most part were elected from industrial, working class constituencies.

For a while, the Prime Minister and his party got along fine. He took the Bank of England out of the hands of government, reduced the House of Lords from seven hundred seats to ninety-two by eliminating the number of hereditary peers, gave

parliaments to Scotland and Wales, supported a law that assured everybody the "right to roam" throughout the British countryside. He also, however, took many actions that were not as popular, but the old Labourites voted with him mainly because without his moving to the center on various issues there wouldn't have been a Labour government, even if it wasn't the Labour government they had expected, or that their constituencies had expected. They needed something to take home, something to let the home folks know that they were still waging the class war and looking out for the country's beloved furry population. The love of animals in the United Kingdom probably surpasses even our own obsession with them. The government, however, didn't consider the ban a high priority, and while the people agree that it is not of overwhelming importance, the fact was that the House of Commons remained almost empty whenever the debate was about anything but hunting.

In 1835, the British banned bearbaiting, cockfighting and dog fighting which had been the three blood sports of the urban working class. One of the reasons for the ban was that the rural gentry then controlling Parliament decided that killing games in small, closed, city places, like in cellars, courtyards, and back alleys, were bad for poor people and excited their basest instincts and encouraged them to lives of drink, gambling, violence and every other manner of Dickensian dissipation. Hunting, on the other hand, was healthy and uplifting, and it was fashionable. For many working class Britons the ban on foxhunting is their revenge. Many of the old Labour party simply call the ban "payback for the miners." By this they mean that the Tory Margaret Thatcher, in the early 1980's, abandoned the nation's foundering mines and did it without much pity for the communities where thousands of coal miners and their families lived and worked.

In the twenty years since the closing of the coal mines, Labour backbenchers have introduced nearly a dozen bills to ban foxhunting and stag hunting, and the fate of the miners has figured in the rhetoric of every attempt to get them passed. Eight years ago Blair promised the Labour Party a free vote on banning

hunting, but since then probably prayed that the issue would go away in light of the tremendous uproar it has generated. One observer noted "This (the opposition to the ban) is the stupidest campaign I ever saw. You don't storm Parliament with horses and dogs and pink coats. You march about child poverty. About the Iraq war."

Whatever the basis for the ban, the rich versus the poor, urban versus rural, Labour versus Tory, class struggle or not, it might be of use to give some history of the hunt for sake of establishing a reference point for this crisis in the United Kingdom.

Fox hunting is a form of hunting for foxes using a pack of scent hounds. The pack of hounds is often followed by riders on horseback. The foxhounds are of the Foxhound or Harrier breeds, specially trained for the purpose of foxhunting. In the course of a hunt, the hounds are directed, or "cast," towards areas known as "coverts" that are likely to contain foxes. Ian Farquhar, long-time Master of FoxHounds of the Beaufort Hunt, has traced the ancestry of its foxhounds back to 1743, and unearthed the records of fifty-four generations of dogs. He says that the foxhound is the most chronicled animal in the world. He can tell you how much money five "couple hound," or ten dogs cost at the time Jane Austen is said to have finished Pride and Prejudice. That amount being a thousand guineas, or more than half of what her family lived on for a year. If the foxhound pack manages to pick up the scent of a fox, they will follow it and the horses and riders will follow the hounds by the most direct route possible. The horses may jump over any obstacles in their way, and this is the origin of the term National Hunt for horseracing over jumps. The hunt continues either until the fox evades the hounds, goes to ground, or is overtaken and killed by the hounds.

Hunts are generally governed by one or more Masters, who typically take much of the financial responsibility for the overall management of the hunt. Hunts typically employ a huntsman who is responsible, along with assistants known as "whippers-in," for directing the hounds in the course of the hunt. The role of the

whipper-in in the hunts has inspired some parliamentary systems, including our own, to use the term “whip” for a member who enforces party discipline and ensures the attendance of other party members at important votes.

Hunts will also employ a kennel man who looks after the hounds in kennels and ensures that all tasks are completed when the pack and the other staff return from a day of hunting.

In addition, there are voluntary positions of responsibility that assist the Master in running the hunt. Usually this will include two secretaries who collect the money, or “cap” for taking part in the hunt and perform other administrative tasks. There will also be a Hunt Supporters Club run by a committee who organize fund raising and social events.

Mounted hunt followers typically wear traditional hunting costumes. The scarlet coats often worn by the huntsmen, masters, whippers-in and other officials are sometimes called “Pinks.” These coats help them stand out from the rest of the field. Various theories about the derivation of the term “Pinks” have been advanced, ranging from the color of a weathered scarlet coat to the name of the tailor who supposedly made the first coats.

Hunt volunteers protect the habitat of hundreds of species. They mend the fences, maintain the walls and hedges they jump, root out foxes that have gone to ground on local farms, dispose of dead animals, tend the covers in which foxes hide or dig their lairs, and most important, help to manage a fox population that has multiplied so freely since the extinction of Britain’s wolves, which were the foxes’ natural predators, in the seventeenth century, that foxes are now dug into the back yards and public parks of Central London and can be seen daily strolling around the city. On Armistice Day, last November, hundreds of people watched a fox circle the “remembrance” of poppies in the gardens of Westminster Abbey while the Queen was leading a silent prayer. A month later, a Guardian photographer who was recording a “day in the life of 10 Downing Street” snapped pictures of a fox strutting past the Prime Minister’s front door, right between visits from the Italian

and Azerbaijani Prime Ministers and the arrival of the German Chancellor. "Four old foxes in one day," observed a policeman standing nearby. Unquestionably, Britain's largest and most successful predator is not in danger of extinction. There is a stable population of about a quarter-million foxes, which produce around 425,000 cubs every year. Somewhere between twenty and twenty-five thousand foxes are killed in hunts in England and Wales each year.

Other members of the mounted field follow strict rules of clothing etiquette. Those under eighteen will wear tweed jackets or ratcatcher for the entire season. Those over eighteen will wear ratchatcher during autumn hunting from late August until November 1<sup>st</sup>. On November 1<sup>st</sup> they will switch to regular hunting kit where full subscribers to the hunt will wear scarlet and the rest black or navy. The highest honor is to be awarded the hunt button by the Hunt Master. This means that person would wear the hunt collar, which varies from hunt to hunt, and buttons with the hunt crest on them. Needless to say, this is not an inexpensive sport for those that participate in the more formal hunts. At hunts like Badminton, local farmers ride for free, but everyone else can afford the sport that often means two trained horses at the ready, your own stables, and the services of a good groom, not to mention the cost of feed, veterinarians, blacksmiths, insurance, riding boots and clothes, and the hunt itself: fifteen hundred pounds per horse for a season subscription. This is what separates the riders from so many of the hunt followers, dressed for the day in mufflers, waterproof hats, and Wellies, who will track the hunt on foot, or in Land Rovers or trucks, or on ATVs.

Using scent hounds to track prey dates back to Assyrian, Babylonian and Egyptian times, and is known as venery. In England, hunting with hounds was popular even before the Romans arrived, using the Agassaei breed. The Romans brought their Castorian and Fulpine hound breeds, along with importing the brown hare and additional species of deer as quarry. Wild boar was also hunted. The Norman hunting traditions were added when



William the Conqueror arrived, along with the Gascon and Talbot hounds. It was the French who introduced England to the mounted hunt. This is not a detail that the English usually bring up, until one hunts with them and tries to follow the hunt master's strange shouts and learn that even today that the cries are in Old Norman. "Tiaut," the huntsman's cry when the quarry has gone away, has been anglicized as "tally-ho." By 1340, the four beasts of venery were the hare, the hart, the wolf and the wild boar. The five beasts of the chase were the buck, the doe, the fox, the marten and the roe.

The earliest known attempt to hunt a fox with hounds was in Norfolk, England, in 1534, when farmers began chasing down foxes with their dogs as a means of controlling their population. By the end of the seventeenth century many organized packs were hunting both hare and fox, and during the eighteenth century packs specifically for fox hunting were appearing. The passing of the Enclosure Acts from 1760 to 1840 had made hunting deer much more difficult in many areas of the country, because that form of hunting requires great areas of open land which were now restricted by the new hedges and fences. However, the new fences made jumping the obstacles separating the fields part of the hunting tradition. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, people began moving out of the country and into towns and cities to find work. Roads, railroads, and canals further split the hunting country, but also made hunting accessible to more people. Shotguns were improved during the nineteenth century and game shooting became more popular. To protect the pheasants for the shooters, gamekeepers culled the foxes almost to extinction in popular areas, which caused the huntsmen to improve their coverts.

It is hard to imagine an event more vested in tradition than hunting foxes. Siegfried Sassoon, in his Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man said that there is "an undeniable thrill to the blast of the horn, the clatter of hooves and the splash of scarlet when the hunt begins." That when the hounds begin to "give tongue," indicating that they have found a scent, and there is a banshee-like

cry from someone who has spotted a fox slipping out of the undergrowth – there are not many more exhilarating moments in life.

The father of the modern fox hunt was probably the ne'er-do-well George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham, who combined the sport of kings with the pursuit of predators in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, when he founded the Biltsdale Hunt, the first pack of hounds kept solely for the purpose of hunting foxes. More than three centuries later, the duke's legacy is a thriving pack of sixty hounds, followed twice a week by some forty mounted subscribers as well as assorted others, who pay thirty pounds for a day of hard riding in pursuit of the Huntsman, his hounds and a fox or two across the spectacularly hilly, boggy dales that James Herriot made famous with his books.

Better known for chasing skirts than foxes, the duke may also have helped to give hunting a bad name. He seduced the Countess of Shrewsbury, killed her husband in a duel and installed his freshly widowed mistress in his household. The diarist Samuel Pepys dismissed the philandering horseman as “a fellow of no more sobriety that to fight about a whore.” He was exiled from the court of Charles II in the 1670's and died of a chill caught hunting in 1687. A century later, the Whig party lampooned the country gentry who rode to hounds as “witless toffs who were slaves to their animal passions.” A toff is British slang for a member of the upper classes, especially one who dresses elegantly and often uses affected manners. Oscar Wilde once characterized hunting as “(t)he English country gentleman galloping after a fox – the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable.” Jane Ridley, author of Fox Hunting, notes that that caricature has remained when she says, “Country gentleman equals Tory equals fox hunting equals stupid.” But fox hunters across the country haven't forgotten about being called witless toffs. Today, nobody, or nobody who knows, calls the fox the fox. He is called Charlie, or Charles James, so named after the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Whig Prime Minister Charles James Fox.



Jane Kramer, who writes for the New Yorker, makes the following observation:

“One night in London, I was having dinner with the economist Richard Portes, and he made what I thought was an interesting argument for banning foxhunting. ‘There’s an existing obsession with class,’ he said. ‘And hunting is a symbol of class. They’ve been trying to get rid of those symbols. There aren’t many of them left, and it seems to me perfectly reasonable to get rid of this one. The perception will be that they have accomplished something.’”

She goes on to add:

“Well, maybe. Sometimes perceptions are beside the point, or wrong. The toffiest toffs may be comical in their posturing; they may seem to have stepped out of a chapter of Trollope or Fielding. But they do not rule England anymore; power has shifted, moral authority has shifted. They own a lot of land - maybe too much land - but today they are marginal. England is doing quite well without them. If it weren’t, hunters might not be clinging to their hunt communities the way the coal miners, twenty years ago, clung to their pit villages. And the backbenchers would not be as punishing now as Mrs. Thatcher was then. Perhaps they all would do better, from the point of view of progress, to give more weight to reality than to perceptions of reality. The only perception of reality I would swear by, after a month in England, belonged to the fox at Badminton that got away.”

In the United States there are 170 registered packs of fox hounds in 37 states. When foxhunting in the United States the fox is rarely caught, and in fact much effort goes into training the foxes so that they do not get caught. In the summer of the year, the hunt takes the young hounds out “cubbing.” They teach the puppies to

hunt while they are teaching the young foxes to give chase. With such a foxhunting presence in our own country, perhaps a move to ban American foxhunting will be the next real non-issue to polarize our own electorate; similar to what has occurred in the United Kingdom.