

International Hunting Exchange 2017 Diary – Di Bevan

Friday: I met the British contingent for the first time at the airport. We all got on so well and gelled very quickly and by the time we knew it, we were in Ireland being welcomed by the Irish. We departed for our host families and had an afternoon and evening settling in and getting to know one another more.

Saturday: The British girls hunted with the Laois. Hunting was tricky as it was very mild but we did catch a scent and it was nice to watch hounds work. We unfortunately spent the majority of the time on the roads as we couldn't follow the hounds which was frustrating for everyone involved but we did end up jumping 3 drains in total, the first being a double one! What a welcome to Ireland. During this we crossed some very deep peat land, completely unworkable, with gorse that the younger girls wanted to jump. I was on a lovely but green 6 year old horse called Winston who was in his first season. He was very willing, brave, and polite and knew when to stop. Winston came from the master David Lowler who I am so thankful to. David Lowler knows Roger Dungworth, master of the Scarteen and former master of the Cottessmore, a very kind gentleman who has influenced me hugely growing up hunting. We met in a pub beforehand around 12 and had cold and hot port, which is made with hot water and a slice of lemon. Meeting in a pub for a drink beforehand is common practice in Ireland and we didn't move off for another half an hour as we were all chatting away. The day finished around 4.30. Lydia was very fortunate and got to go up front with the whip on her trusty steed, the super cob, Tom. Charlotte was on a 17 year old well seasoned hunter. We came back to the pub to meet the Irish PC Chairman, Mary, and had soup, a tradition in Ireland.

Sunday: Hunting with the Carlow. We met up with the Irish PC lads, Paul Hart and Ronan Moloney, and Karen and Conor from the States for the first time. We had a much better day jumping wise with a few more drains but again the actual hunting was disappointing as it was just so mild, they did a great job considering. We finished around 6pm after an 11am "lawn meet" which means coming into the house on foot and chatting and enjoying a spread of food beforehand. I was very lucky to ride a horse called Bella-Fleur who belonged to the huntsman and regularly hunted hounds. She was very adept at crossing the country but I was warned, and rightfully so, that I'd have sore arms by the end of the day! We came back for soup and sandwiches and all sorts of delights at the house we met and didn't get back till gone 10pm - the Irish are just so generous, kind and welcoming. The huntsman and the whip were two brothers who were sons of one of the masters, Jackie. The other master was David Burgess and his daughter Leah was out, who was lovely.

Monday: The morning began with a trip to Newbridge Silverware which gave us the opportunity to look round the fashion museum. We were then shown around RACE, the top racing academy in Ireland, and the Irish Farriery School, both of which were impressive. We then proceeded on to the Irish National Stud for a private tour where we got to see the famous stallion, Invincible Spirit. Here, we also enjoyed a look round the Japanese Gardens and the INS' museum which houses the Great National Hunt horse Arkle's skeleton. The afternoon was spent at the Kildare Village, a large shopping complex where I got to see my

great friend, Claudia O'Donoghue.

The team at the Kildare Village very kindly put on hospitality for us which we were hugely grateful for.

Tuesday: An extremely privileged day looking round the Coolmore Stud meeting the gorgeous stallion, Galileo, a prolific flat racing sire who is worth a staggering €600 million and a private tour round Ballydoyle, home to top flat trainer Aiden o'Brien, founded by the late great Dr Vincent O'Brien. The facilities in both were breathtaking, no stone unturned. We had lunch at McCarthy's pub in Fethard which was a great opportunity to get to know everyone on the exchange. The fascinating thing about this pub is that it's also a funeral parlor! The day finished with a look around the Tipperary Hunt Kennels which houses 120 hounds, 3/4s of which were bitches.

Wednesday: Race day! We got a behind the scenes tour of Punchestown which is preparing for its festival in April. We were very lucky to be welcomed into the Kildare Hunt Club box to stay dry on a miserable day. It was a day of small hurdles and the horses ran well despite awful conditions and heavy going. I even managed to make a bit of money with two wins, a second and a third, think I'll quit my betting days there! In the evening we were fortunate to be invited to the Masters Supper hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Moloney. It was a fabulous evening with delicious food and brilliant company. We had a little competition with a quiz on hunting then horn blowing and whip cracking. For me, this was the highlight of my trip where I felt I really got to know the others.

Thursday: An unbelievable days hunting with The Island on an awesome colored pony, Murph. We crossed the trickiest of country jumping massive drains and having a fantastic time. You get such an adrenaline rush after clearing an enormous drain, much like a big hedge. Murph was awesome, he came from a chap called Bob Kinsella and I'll be forever grateful to have such a sure footed pony underneath me for that day, he always managed to find a fifth leg and took on everything like a pro, he had a real heart of a lion. The day ended crossing some country that can only be described as terrifying. After a few big drains, we scrambled our way into a pine wood that was dark - so dense with trees and branches it blocked all sunlight. We scraped our way through to come out into a bottomless bog - quite literally. Some riders had to jump off to allow their horse to find their way through; a real Irish experience is all I can say.

Friday: A day in Dublin with the whole team. We looked round Trinity College which houses the Book of Kells and has a magnificent library, the type you'd imagine from Harry Potter. We had lunch at the famous Harry's Bar where I finally got round to struggling my way through an obligatory pint of Guinness. We enjoyed a street dance performance before heading for a Viking Splash Tour which I was a little skeptical about as we had to wear Viking helmets and roar from our bus/boat at regular points, but it really was a blast and our bellies hurt from laughing so much whilst soaking up the City of Dublin. We went to the greyhound races in the evening where it costs €10 to enter a race but you win around €800, we're definitely in the wrong sport!!

Saturday: A days hunting with the West Wicklow. Fox hunting is legal in Ireland and this day was a true show of hounds hunting. Much better weather conditions than the previous days that were mild, (cold and wet) which meant the hounds picked up scent and followed the line much more easily. It was a very different piece of country to cross, largely big hills and wetlands, similar to Wales. The pack was a real credit to its huntsman and master Rupert. We were welcomed that evening to the West Wicklow Hunt dinner dance and we received a special gift from the masters - a gold stock pin each.

Sunday: A relaxing morning very much needed after a jam packed week. In the afternoon we headed off to a former home of the late Duke of Wellington for a meet with Mr. Kerr's beagles. This beautiful property has ornate gates with W in gold apart from one, which has an A on. This little enclosed paddock was the original burial place of Arkle and his field companion Meg, a great hunter. Looking at his original grave was a touching moment, so much history steeped in one location. This pack was unusually hunted, albeit very capably, by his daughter - in my experience you don't see many female 'huntsmen'. The sun shone and we had a fantastic experience following the beagles on foot, something most of us have never done before. We came back to a real treat in the house - imagine your granny's best cooking with sandwiches, cheese, cakes galore! Some of us probably ate more than our fill but it was absolutely delicious, just couldn't be helped. We went straight onto our farewell supper which was emotional to say the least. The food was scrumptious but the company was just sublime. There were just so many people to thank that had made it such an amazing trip - we are so lucky.

Monday: The British team headed to the airport after saying our farewells to our host families and recounted stories the whole way back. There are too many people to list to thank but there are a few I must pick out

- Paula Hart, Judy Moloney and Mary Cross for essentially organizing EVERYTHING - you were amazing.
- Mary Cross for hosting the British girls all week, you were so generous
- Alice Stockwell, our chaperone who took charge of us all week
- Everyone who leant horses and the hunt staff for being so welcoming
- All other members of the IHE group, I've made friends for life

THANK YOU